YES, VIRGINIA, THERE IS DEMOCRACY: A CRITICAL ETHNOGRAPHIC CASE STUDY ON VOICE, DEMOCRACY, AND CHILDHOOD IN A DEMOCRATIC SCHOOL

by

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ABSTRACT

The goals of our current school system reflect business and political interests that have combined to promulgate and implement policies that implicitly regard students as future complacent workers (Kohn, 2014). Cultural constructions of childhood also influence the ways in which students experience school; pedagogical practices, age-based grouping, and the limited control granted to students over their own learning are all practices rooted in a western construct of "child" (Kinard, 2012). The discourses surrounding children and childhood have determined what can be said, who may speak (the adults) and rendered others (children) silent, thus mitigating the possibilities of student voice in educational decisions. Alternative, more progressive models, such as found in democratic schools, are guided by pedagogical practices that challenge long-held cultural attitudes regarding children, and thus create new spaces for student voice in education. This study examined the ways in which student voice and democratic participation were situated in democratic and schools.

Study findings revealed the possibilities and limitation of student voice at Hillview. Student participants, on the one hand and within certain constraints, were willing to express their views and voice their concerns and opinions. However, socially constructed views of children and childhood positioned the child as Other to the adult, thus limiting possibilities for student voice in the school. The study also found that many practices at Hillview, including democratic participation, were deeply entrenched in neoliberal values of individualism and personal choice.

I. INTRODUCTION

In 1897, eight-year old Virginia O'Hanlon, fearing what her friends had told her was true, heeded the advice of her father and wrote a letter to the New York Sun asking this simple question: "Please tell me the truth, is there a Santa Claus?" Lead editor Francis Pharcellus Church, a former Civil War correspondent, delivered a response that would become a perennial favorite and the most reprinted newspaper editorial in US history. "Yes, VIRGINIA, there is a Santa Claus," he wrote, reaffirming the child's belief in the mythical figure and assuring her that, "The most real things in the world are those that neither children nor men can see" (¶ 3).

It would be difficult to imagine a more apt response to young Virginia's plaintive query than the one presented by Church more than one hundred years ago. As journalism professor William David Sloan wrote: "Had he denied Santa Claus, he might have torn down the fanciful world of many youngsters and tampered with the values and traditions many people consider important" (as cited in Vinciguerra, 1997, ¶ 8). Had Church denied the existence of Santa Claus he would also have denied a conventionally accepted social construct of childhood that encourages a "childlike faith;" he would have precipitately acquainted Virginia with a fundamentally different world, one more skeptical but perhaps more rationally aware of the "truth": that of the adult.

Many would argue that Church's editorial, like Santa himself, represents a metaphoric reminder of the compassion and generosity that exists in our world, a message of hope, if you will, (at least for those who are wholesome and good enough to "earn" it), and any response to the contrary would, reasonably so, disappoint adults and children alike. Taken more broadly, however, Church's response, I would argue,

perpetuates a specific treatment of children, or childhood more generally, that is affirmed institutionally and societally as well. Through legislation, literature, religion, public and school policy, "truths" are ascribed that position children categorically as those who lack agency and require specific care and protection, or control and discipline (those who should be watched when they are sleeping and when they're awake). Within this construct of "child," it appears we have come to believe that it is incumbent on adults to shelter young, and therefore, vulnerable children, from the harsh reality of the adult world, or enforce structure and discipline so that they will conform to a predetermined standard.

Schools are especially complicit in perpetuating the myth that the deservingly good children need only believe and it is so. The idea that those who work hard are fairly rewarded in schools disregards the larger social inequities that privilege an elite few, and suggests that those who are unsuccessful are at fault (Godfrey, Santos, & Burson, 2017). It is through this pervasive rhetoric of meritocracy where "Culturally, we're conditioned from such an early age to enter the race to the top and to believe that those at the top belong there" (Etelson, 2015, ¶26).

This is not to suggest that merit and effort are not important to success, only to point out that other factors, such as class, race, social bias, social stratification, and access to resources play a major role in determining who succeeds and who does not (Godfrey, Santos, & Burson, 2017). Adults, in schools in particular, cautiously maneuver around these truths, perhaps because the myth of meritocracy is easier to rationalize than the reasons why we continue to allow such injustices to happen. Or perhaps, as Powell (2012) states, meritocracy is "important to the idea that society is a democracy. Only if

anyone can succeed by virtue of their ability and hard work can we confidently say that society is properly democratic" (¶5).

To say that democratic ideals guide the practices and policies that shape our schools seems just as difficult to believe as the idea of the man in a red suit sliding down the chimney on Christmas Eve. Public schools leave little opportunity for democratic participation: from curricular decisions to bathroom use, adults make most decisions affecting students' scholastic experience. The past twenty years, however, have seen increased interest in student consultation and participation in school-based decisions. This interest has led to a number of studies suggesting that efforts towards a more democratic approach to decision making have been promising (see Diera, 2016; Fielding, 2013; Pemia, Salmon, & Lazaro-Visa, 2012).

Though some progress has been made towards a more democratic model of representation in schools when it comes to the decisions that directly affect student learning and personal well-being, Braggs (2007) reminds us that, "Student voice is not unmediated, but guided, facilitated and supervised through specific techniques that delimit what can be said, and how speakers conceive of themselves/techniques for shaping subjectivities" (p. 349). These technologies of power not only govern what can be said and who can speak. They also exert a formative influence over the lives of children and, more to the point, how they perceive themselves as subjects in the school setting: as subjects of knowledge production as opposed to subjects essential to knowledge production. Viewed broadly, decisions such as classroom arrangement and even school curriculum influence when students can speak and govern what they are authorized to talk about in schools. On a more micro level, students are subject to

techniques of power that serve to regulate their postures and physical positioning and inhibit even their nervous movements (fidgeting) (Gore, 1995).

The field of child development in particular abounds with discourses that normalize culturally biased standards of social, emotional, and intellectual development of children and, as Canella (1997) states, are systematized without hearing "the voices of children and their families to uncover the influence of our benevolent discourse on them, or whether they agree with this discourse" (p. 46). These developmental truths not only dictate how adults understand and work with children, they also act as mechanisms of self-governance among children, unspoken rules of how children ought to behave. Much like the mythical Santa, these truths identify who is naughty or nice, capable or incapable, "developmentally" ready or not. Our schools regularly play a role not only in reinforcing but also cultivating the notion that children lack requisite skills (maturity, discipline, understanding) needed to make decisions for themselves, especially about their own learning. While the call for student voice in schools has had some impact on democratic representation, the overwhelming response seems to take the familiar tone we are accustomed to when working with children: "Yes, VIRGINIA, there is democracy in school. True, nobody sees democracy, but that is no sign that democracy is not there."

In their cynical anthem responding to Virginia O'Hanlon's letter, Mrs. O., from which this introduction took inspiration, the punk cabaret duo the Dresden Dolls, sarcastically encourage us to maintain this status quo when they sing, "you can stop the truth from leaking if you never stop believing". This lyric provides a good reminder that as activist educators and leaders, we should deliberately interrogate and disrupt these

"regimes of truths" in order to seek a more socially just and equitable educational experience for all students.

Background

> It is, in fact, nothing short of a miracle that the modern methods of education have not yet entirely strangled the holy curiosity of inquiry; for this delicate plant, aside from stimulation, stands mainly in need of freedom; without this it goes to wrack and ruin without fail. It is a very grave mistake to think that the enjoyment of seeing and searching can be promoted by means of coercion and a sense of duty.
>
> *–**Albert Einstein***

The system of public schooling in the United States suffers from a state of ideological conflict. Discourse surrounding school improvement, and school reform in particular, oscillates between skill-based standardization, with its emphasis on rote memorization and high-stakes testing and a holistic child-centered approach, with its attentiveness to creativity and the social, emotional, and intellectual needs of each child (Kaestle, 1985). The ongoing and intensifying contention over the fundamental purpose of public schooling perpetuates a sense of urgency and a concomitant discourse describing our public school system and, as a consequence, our future citizenry, as being in a state of crisis (see A Nation At Risk, 1988).

Indeed, the education system in the United States faces considerable challenges, most notably in addressing issues such as institutional racism (Resmovits, 2014) and social stratification (Garland, 2013). However, the essence of the educational crisis that predominates in the political discourse is a consequence, I believe, of a neoliberal

ideology that views education as a "corporate service station" (Seybold, 2014) and commoditizes student learning at the behest of perceived economic interests.

Since the passing of NCLB in 2001, the corporate agenda to influence public education for its economic interests has been legislatively imposed on schools in the form of standardized testing and accountability. Promoted as a means to improve schools and close the "achievement gap" between under-served racial/ethnic minority students and their White middle-class counterparts, the current system of accountability has established a gateway for big business to profit while students and schools are subjected to the collateral effects of "high-stakes" testing (Valencia, Valenzuela, Sloan, & Foley 2001).

Some opponents of the standards movement argue that schools should instead function to serve the intellectual curiosity and interests of learners and foster an epistemological atmosphere that sustains the valuable contributions of its members and prioritizes individual trajectories of learning and development (Giroux, 2010; Kohn, 2010). The current epistemic assumptions of our public schools stand in stark contrast to this principle. The educational system in the United States is currently situated within the context of a hierarchical structure where knowledge in one domain supersedes that of another. The experiences of the learner outside the dominant socio-cultural group are discounted and devalued and many institutional practices tend to perpetuate the status quo by rewarding those individuals who fit within the narrow parameters of our system Giroux, 2010). In our current educational system, knowledge is defined by the mastery of a prescribed set of skills. This definition of knowledge not only ignores the complexity of learning and thinking; it also privileges the values of assumptions of the dominant

culture. As Kohn argues, "to emphasize the importance of absorbing a pile of information is to support a larger worldview that sees the primary purpose of education as reproducing our current culture" (Kohn, 2003, ¶ 16).

My beliefs are that learning, teaching, equity, and excellence are all intertwined. Implicit in such a philosophical stance is the premise that assessment and excellence are both defined and determined by the learner. If we view education as a process by which individuals are able to pursue their interest and inclinations, then it should be incumbent upon the learner to assess his or her progress. Authentic learning, in my view, is difficult to objectively measure. Unfortunately, the current obsession with standardized measures in schools presumes a narrow and myopic understanding of learning, experience, and understanding. How individuals learn and the ways in which that learning is applied are varied and complex and cannot be measured in a standard rigid criterion. Excellence in schools begins with the understanding that individuals are diverse in talent and ability and once schools recognize and genuinely engage with this diversity, authentic forms of improvement will take shape.

Opportunities for students to exercise agency over their own learning (and thinking, to a large degree) are rare. Improving our schools must begin with the input and perspectives of those it directly impacts: the students. While there is a natural tendency among adults to see children as relatively inexperienced and in need of guidance, it is not my intent to disrupt the wisdom or responsibility of grown-ups to help children thrive. However, I do consider the overbearing and rigid instructional agenda of adults within the system to be counterproductive in relation to the goal of human enrichment. Adults disproportionally influence the structure of authority and how that

authority operates in our schools. This imbalance of power is culturally constructed and implicitly accepted by the majority of adults and children in the school community. As the proprietors of authority and status, particularly in the classroom, it is the adults who decide how and what students are learning or not learning and what they should consider important about their education.

Recent state and local school reform initiatives call for the inclusion of strategies that promote community collaboration and shared decision-making in education (see Texas Education Code Sec. 11.251). In the state of Texas specifically, legislative provisions require that all schools establish a campus-level planning and decision-making committee comprising parents, professional staff, business representatives, and members of the community (Texas Education Code 11.25). Likewise, the inclusion of student voice in conversations centered on school reform has gained traction with many researchers, educators, and non-profit organizations (Cook-Sather, 2006; Mirón & Lauria, 1998; Rudduck & Fielding, 2006). This nod towards democratic representation in the decision-making process falls flat, however, by excluding precisely those voices that should be most fundamental in our decisions: those of the students.

These efforts to include the voices of parents, community members, and even students in the conversations and debates over school reform mark a shift from the climate of control and regulation previously seen in school-related decision-making processes. Whether this move towards democratic participation will result in any fundamental change in school reform or in student achievement remains unclear. In fact, signs suggest the possibility that this latest move in the rising tide of school reform may become just another way to justify the imposition of the economic interests and ideology

of the corporate market and capitalize on public education (see campuslabs.com; My Voice. My Aspiration.; Soundout).

For example, Pearson Foundation, a non-profit arm of Pearson, the nation's largest educational publisher, has set its sights on the growing trend of including student voice in the educational reform movement. *My Voice*, a student perception survey packaged and sold by Pearson Foundation, seeks to "improve students' self-worth, engagement and purpose" with a "suite of surveys and services that help you gather and act on the perceptions of everyone at school" ("My Voice Student Voice," Pearson Foundation, n.d.). At a cost of more than four dollars per survey, not to mention the additional fee for aggregate data and professional development, Pearson's response to the call for student voice thus conforms to their familiar dictum: Education For Profit. Pearson's attempt to standardize, package, and process student perspective ignores the complexity of student experience in schools and also suggests that student voice initiatives may be less about listening to what students have to say and more about establishing a new, relatively covert method for controlling them.

Recent gestures that seem to encourage the inclusion of student viewpoints, however well intended, will not prove sufficient without reimagining the role student voice should have on school reform. We must seek a more nuanced and economically disinterested understanding of students' participation in their own education. However, such a shift in focus seems improbable given our longstanding history with traditional models of public education in the United States. As Tyack and Cuban (1995) observed, "over long periods of time schools have remained basically similar in their core

operation, so much so that these regularities have imprinted themselves on students, educators, and the public as the essential features of a 'real school'" (p. 7).

Such a construction of a "real school" is the consequence of a process of habituation in which the customary and traditional practices of education in the United States have come to seem natural and inevitable rather than merely a function of custom—and perhaps no longer effective or even expedient. Custom, as the English poet John Milton observed more than three centuries ago, has an unfortunate tendency to countenance and thus perpetuate error. The process of customary habituation produces resistance to real change or reform even in the face of changing conditions and a refreshed understanding of the liabilities of traditional pedagogical practices.

Cultural constructs of what constitutes "real school" are not alone in limiting the possibilities for children in education. In fact, our very notion of children, and of childhood in particular, constrains progress towards fundamental change because it is often a rendering of 'the child' as a universal concept that informs the decisions we make about students and thus delimits the legitimacy of their input or voice. Children are categorically viewed as a distinct group requiring specific care and monitoring. As Cannella (1997) observes, "to a great extent, we have assumed that our beliefs and actions regarding them (children) are warranted and result in benefits to them. We have created the ultimate "Other," a group of human beings not considered able or mature enough to create themselves" (p. 19).

Our public-school system is especially complicit in regarding children as "Others," incomplete beings who require care, control, knowledge and protection from their more complete counterparts: the adults. Indeed, educational policy, curricular, and

other school-related matters are all laden with the voices of adults who make decisions on behalf of the children in our schools. Such hegemonic practices stand in stark contrast to the foundational democratic principles considered an integral part of our identities as Americans today.

Democracy in America

The democratic basis of American government is a popular ideology, but the evolution of such democracy as America currently features is not widely understood. While the United States Constitution historically represents the first detailed, articulate, and premeditated document by which democracy was instituted, the degree of democracy in America and how it is exercised has changed dramatically since its adoption in 1778. Judged by twenty-first century standards, the degree of democracy permitted by the US Constitution falls woefully short in several regards, namely in its failure to guarantee the right of suffrage-specifically for women, African Americans, and Native Americas-and its failure to abolish slavery.

The Civil War was a notable and bloody turning point in the evolution of American democracy. The North's victory over the Confederacy, the abolishment of slavery, and the efforts to secure equality for emancipated slaves through Amendments to the Constitution, all "undermined the structure of one system of democracy and inaugurated another" ("Flow of History", 2013). Hence, the addition of the 15th Amendment to the Constitution in 1870 granted African Americans a voice in the voting process by stating unequivocally that "the right of citizens of the United States to vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any state on account of race, color, or previous condition of servitude" (Cornell University Law, n.d.). Despite this

apparent guarantee of full civic equality, many states deployed discriminatory practices that nonetheless prevented African Americans from exercising their right to vote. Unfortunately, women did not fare any better; the right to equal suffrage did not come until 1920 and the ratification of the 19th Amendment declaring, "The right of citizens of the United States to vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any state on account of sex" (Cornell University Law, n.d.).

The Civil Rights Act of 1964 marked another obvious watershed in the evolution of American democracy. Signed into law by President Lyndon Johnson on July 2, 1964, this piece of legislation ended discrimination in public places based on race, religion, color, sex, or national origin and prohibited practices of discrimination in employment decisions. Later expanded by Congress to include the Voting Rights Act in 1965, the Civil Rights Act also managed to accomplish what the 14th and 15th Amendments failed to do by eliminating discriminatory voting practices for African Americans.

The concept of democracy and the ways in which democratic principles are practiced in the United States continue to shift even today. Issues such as increased surveillance in the "war on terror," US involvement in the Middle East, and corporate funding of political candidates are just a few examples of the debates that contribute to the evolution of democracy in America today (Berolzheimer, 2013). Our understanding of what democracy is, and the extent to which individuals or groups of people, particularly those who are disenfranchised, such as children, have the power to make decisions about what affects their lives, continues even today to evolve in the US.

Radical Democratic Education

Dewey (2009) considered education and democracy to be inextricably

intertwined: democratic processes in our schools would nurture sound democratic practices in our societies. Dewey believed that democratic ideals and beneficial social change could be fostered only through a reformed educative process, one that saw the production of human beings—not material goods—as the primary goal:

> The ultimate problem of production is the production of human beings. To this end, the production of goods is intermediate and auxiliary. It is by this standard that the present system stands condemned. "Security" is a means, and although an indispensable social means, is not the end…The means have to be implemented by a social-economic system that establishes and uses the means for the production of free human beings
> associating with one another on terms of equality. Then and only then will these means be an integral part of the end. (Dewey 1939, 13:320)

To achieve this goal, Dewey in 1916 argued that schools must provide a curriculum that moved beyond "direct conveyance of beliefs, emotions, and knowledge" and instead engaged students "through the intermediary of the environment" (p. 22). It was through these authentic experiences with democracy, Dewey posited, that students would be empowered to maintain the ideals of a democratic way of life as future citizens.

The United States has long held democracy as its ideological compass, yet there is a cleavage from democratic control in our educational system, especially with regard to our students. The structure of authority in our schools and its operation are almost entirely undemocratic (Biesta, 2010). Through federal regulations and funding, state statutes and policies, and district board mandates, schools are held accountable to the democratically sanctioned electorate at the federal, state, and local level. But this is

where the practice of democracy formally ends in our public-school institutions. Centralized control and power over the decision-making processes in our schools is rendered autonomous within the bureaucracies that govern school districts and authority is bestowed to individuals responsible only to the hierarchical powers above them. However, these established practices in traditional schools, and the concomitant rendering of "child" that limits the possibilities for students, have been and continue to be challenged by educators, students, and parents, intent on reimagining the possibilities for a more democratic model of education.

In 1919, a group of educators and individuals concerned with the growing political and social ramifications of increasing corporate power and wealth inequality formed the Progressive Education Association in hopes of "reforming the entire school system of America" (Palumbo & Kramer-Vida, ¶4). Dissatisfied with an education system that benefited the privileged few, progressive educators, such as "father of progressive education, Francis Parker, philosopher John Dewey, and founder of the Progressive Education Association, Stanwood Cobb sought to transform schools into models of participatory democracy that cultivated the what Naumburg (1928) considered the "emotional, artistic, and creative aspects of human development--"the most living and essential parts of our natures" (p. 38). The ideological beliefs espoused by progressivists marked a significant shift from the longstanding ethos of public education that rewarded cultural assimilation and willing obedience. However, this radical departure from the rigid schooling methods and curriculum of traditional schooling were not longstanding. Fear and angst ignited by the Soviet Union's launching of Sputnik infiltrated the

American psyche and set off a storm of reappraisal and reform that targeted the public education system and, as a consequence, progressive educational practices (Cha, 2015).

It was not long, however, before education in the United States witnessed another swing of the pendulum. Emerging from growing discontent and opposition to the traditional educational practices in the United States in the 1960's, the alternative school movement endorsed a philosophy of education that centered on the child and positioned students as the decision-makers in their own learning (Ballantine, Hammack, & Stuber, 2017). Alternatives such as free schools and democratic schools radically challenged the traditional structures of schooling in the United States. Taking root from late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries anarchist Modern Schools of Spain, free schools advocated for self-governance and autonomy for all of its members, including very young children (Avrich, 1980). Most often stemming from small grass roots efforts, these "free" schools provided a radical alternative that stood in direct opposition ideologically to what was considered a rigid and oppressive educational system. These schools instead regard "the individual child's freedom from coercive approaches to learning and social development" and the pursuit of their own interests the natural pathway to learning and personal fulfillment (Graubard, 1972, p. 353). Therefore, free schools endorse a philosophy in which students learn in accordance with their own interests within an anti-authoritarian democratic community. At the height of the movement in the late 1960's, more than 600 free schools were in operation across the United States. However, the enthusiasm soon waned with the rise of American conservatism in the 1970's (Graubard, 1972).

Like free schools, democratic schools rejected the hierarchical structures of traditional institutions that granted adults the sole authority over decision-making and

student learning. Democratic schools, in part, ascribed to the same progressivist theories of free schools, specifically regarding the right for "all of those directly involved in the school, including young people…to participate in the process of decision making" (Apple & Beane, 2007, p. 10). For democratic schools, however, democracy was considered more than the process of participating in shared decision-making. Rather, democratic schools regarded democracy "as an '"idealized"' set of values that we must live and that must guide our life as a people" (Apple & Beane, 2007, p. 7). In essence, democratic schools are grounded in practices that ensure that individuals maintain a democratic way of life and work towards the "common good" of the people.

The surge in radical alternatives to the traditional system of schooling soon declined, due in large part to the education policies implemented during the Nixon administration (Kavner, 2013). However, with schools today subject to neoliberal policies that favor standardization and indoctrination over independent critical thinking and child-centered practices, a renewed interest in alternative methods of schooling among educators, students, and parents has sparked. In its article entitled, *At Brooklyn Free School, A Movement Reborn With Liberty and No Testing For All* (2013), the Huffington Post reports that the United States has seen more than 100 free schools open in recent years. Though mostly private and situated predominately in blue states, these schools call into question the assumptions made in our current educational system about children and the role they should play in their own education and learning.

Statement of the Problem

Currently, the goals of our school system reflect business and political interests that have combined to promulgate and implement policies that implicitly regard students

as future complacent employees (Kohn, 2008). Education today not only continues to serve the political and ideological interests of the elite; it also, and perhaps even more predominately, is inflected by a neoliberal agenda (Davies & Bansel, 2007). Over the last decade, public schools have encountered increasing pressure to produce workers who will efficiently contribute to what is purported to be the future economic wellbeing of the culture—as if that could be predicted and planned for. Students are viewed as future commodities, or in the more favored phrase, potential human capital, with those who demonstrate the greatest earning potential winning the most favor (mostly through access to better resources) and those who fall behind being labeled as liabilities.

Cultural constructions of childhood also influence the ways in which students experience school; pedagogical practices, age-based grouping, and the limited control granted to students over their own learning are all practices rooted in a western construct of "child" (Cannella, 1997). These notions of childhood underlie the assumptions made by adults in schools about how children develop and the specific needs of the child to which the adults must tend. It is through these 'regimes of truth' that we have come to understand and label children as dependent, lacking agency, and unable to make sound decisions without the help of the more experienced adult (Foucault, 1975). As Canella (1997) states:

> Younger human beings are not heard without the filter of those who are older. Imperialist adult practices silence children with the message that they are not competent to determine their own needs. Child knowledge is not only disqualified, but its existence denied. (p. 35)

At their very core, schools are structured to position children as 'others,' individuals who

are categorically distinct from adults, those who require surveillance, lack knowledge, and need protection. It is this child/adult binary that "predetermines people and generates power for one group over the other" (Cannella, 2002, p. 11). The discourses surrounding children and childhood have determined what can be said, who may speak (the adults) and rendered others (children) silent, thus mitigating the possibilities of student voice in educational decisions.

While the call for the inclusion of student voice in conversations on school participation and reform has been well established in the research literature (Cook-Sather, 2006; Mirón & Lauria, 1998; Rudduck & Fielding, 2006), consensus regarding the purpose and significance of student voice remains elusive. A large number of researchers advocate for the inclusion of student voice as an entirely appropriate preparation for critical democratic engagement, encouraging and habituating students to become "better citizens" in a democratic society (Biddulph, 2011; Cook-Sather, 2006; Fielding, 2004). Others suggest that the incorporation of student voice within the decision-making process imbues students with a sense of control over their own learning and validates the role of students as responsible agents of change in their own education (Ranson, 2000). However, given the prevailing practices in schools and notions of children that implicitly limit their roles in decision-making and in their own learning, such a drastic ideological shift seems unlikely in the traditional educational system.

Purpose of the Study

Alternative, more progressive models of school, such as democratic and free schools, are guided by pedagogical practices that challenge long-held cultural attitudes regarding children, and thus, create new spaces for student voice in education. In

educational theory the concept of student voice “spans literal, metaphorical and political terrains” and in institutional practice is often imbricated in highly structured regulatory environments (Britzman, 1989, p. 146). ‘Voice’ is understood literally as the production of sound or sounds by individuals for the purpose of speaking, singing, reading, and other utterances and is often a point of contention in schools. In classrooms in particular, this most fundamental conceptualization of ‘voice’ is typically modulated according to the teacher’s wishes and school standards for what constitutes acceptable levels and idioms of ‘talk.’ Metaphorically, voice encompasses a broad range of contextual and stylistic elements used to convey the intent or meaning of the words spoken and, in schools, is commonly analyzed and measured through pedagogical or curricular standards. In both its literal and figurative sense, voice is examined and contested in educational discourse but it is the political commitment to “the *right* of speaking and being represented” that has received attention in the recent literature on student voice (Butt, 1986, p. 10).

This study sought to examine the ways in which student voice and democratic participation are situated at Hillview Sudbury, a democratically-run school. I aimed to interrogate essentialist understandings of student voice and democratic practice in schools by examining the current configurations of power relations in an effort to understand “the productivity of power: how it generates actions and reactions, how it creates subjects and knowledge, and how it constructs regimes of truth” (Sintos Colma, 2011, p. 193). By employing a poststructuralist framework, I attempted to heed the advice of S. P. Mohanty (1986) and “develop a sense of the profound contextuality of meanings in their play and ideological effects” (p. 155). More specifically, this study sought to answer the following questions:

1. Do socially constructed views of childhood have an impact on opportunities for students to express their voice in democratic schools?

2. How is the notion of democratic education constructed through discourse in democratic schools?

3. How is student voice situated in democratic schools?

Overview of Research Methodology

This study employed a critical ethnographic case study approach framed by a poststructuralist understanding of knowledge, power and construction of the individual subject. My aim was to complicate essentialist understandings of student voice and democratic practice in schools by examining relations of power and its exercise—how it is validated and resisted. Critical ethnographic research as a specific qualitative design allows for the disruption of dominant discourses that marginalize social groups by understanding that truths are "discursively situated and implicated in relations of power" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2013, p. 359).

Data collection and analysis followed Carsecken's (1996) Five Stages for Qualitative Research (CQR). The Five Stages provided a framework for generating both an etic and emic perspective of the participants in the study. All study participants were recruited on a strictly voluntary basis. The primary sources for data collection occurred through participant observation and in-depth unstructured interviews with students and teachers. Triangulation, rich description, and reflexivity validity measures were used to ensure the experiences of the participants were appropriately captured.

Contributions and Significance of Study

In his New York Times article, Porter (2017) posed this provocative question: "Is American democracy broken?" (¶1). In the wake of the most recent contentious and polarizing electoral season, the perceived fragility of American democracy and decline of civic responsibility have indeed become prominent topics of discussion (Mounk, 2016). The notion that our education system holds the potential to serve as a key agent in ameliorating such civic discord by cultivating a democratic citizenry has been advanced by a number of scholars in the field (Biddulph, 2011; Cook-Sather, 2006; Fielding, 2004). However, current neoliberal policies imposed on schools that favor standardization, individualism, and competition have rendered opportunities for such practices "unprofitable." Alternative democratic schools, such as Sudbury model schools, purport to maintain a learning philosophy that adheres to the fundamental tenets of democratic participation for all its members. This study examined the ways in which democratic principles and participation were constructed and put in practice in a Sudbury school and the impact such practice had on the sense of civic rectitude and understanding among the students. While Sudbury schools have been in operation across the United States for the past forty years, they have received relatively little attention within the field of educational research (Gray, 2008). As a result, this study addresses a gap in the literature by describing the practices and identifying beneficial possibilities as well as the challenges and drawbacks that pertain to democratic education as practiced in a Sudbury school.

Within the field of educational research, the topic of student voice and agency as desiderata of democratic education has received significant attention (Cook-Sather, 2006;

Giroux & McLauren, 1986; Rudduck, 2007; Rudduck & Fielding, 2011). Certainly, a primary reason many critics of the current education system denounce school practices as undemocratic is precisely because of their *exclusion* of students' voices. In fact, the rendering of democracy "as the empowerment of the people's voice" is a common conception among many in Western society (Green, 2010, p. 3). In other words, Western notions of democracy, like much of the literature on student voice, are dependent on a voice/silence false binary that neglects the complexities of individual expression. By employing a poststructuralist perspective at key points in this study, I attempted to scrutinize received understandings of student voice and contribute to the body of work that seeks to reimagine the role students might play in their own learning and knowing.

Organization of the Study

In the following chapter, I present a meticulous review of the literature relevant to my proposed study. I begin the chapter with an overview of recent research that calls into question contemporary "truths" regarding our understandings of the notion of childhood. This is followed by an account of two distinct child development theories that have been paramount in shaping our treatment of children in Western society. An exploration into the Sudbury model of education traces the school's historic roots in the United States and details the ways in which democratic principles are cultivated. A review of the literature surrounding the topic of student voice in education is presented last. In Chapter Three I present the research methodology that was used, including research design, data collection and analysis, and validity and reliability measures, to address the research questions. Chapter Four presents the findings that were revealed through data analysis

followed by a discussion of key findings and implications for practice, policy, and future research in Chapter Five.

II. REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The view of the child and his or her individual right to expression has broadened since the adoption of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) in 1989. This international human rights treaty has been credited for expanding the level of participation a child has in decisions that affect his or her personal rights (UNICEF, n.d.,¶ 1). In the United Kingdom and other European nations, the CRC resulted in the implementation of formal policies and practices aimed at increasing youth participation and expression in schools (Mitra, 2005). With regard to the child as a citizen with a right to representation, Article 12 of the Convention maintains that:

> States Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child.

Broadly taken, this article appears to advocate for a child's right to speak freely about decisions that have a direct impact on his or her life. However, as Lalonde (2008) argues, "imbedded in this article is a complex web of adult adjudication that stands in judgment over the capability, maturity, and the age of the child" (p. 1). The conditional limitations imposed on a child's right to speak on matters that affect his or her life are often couched in a discourse of care and protection that align to Western notions of children and their perceived needs. The concept of children's "needs," and of childhood more generally, promulgated by the CRC and other interest groups to be discussed later are historically and socially conditioned. Furthermore, the standards for the child established by the

CRC perpetuate a universal understanding of childhood that undermines the diversity and complexity of the individual child.

Conceptions of children that are “based on a universal, almost natural, character of childhood are a product of this normalizing power encountered in contemporary society and reinforced by the production of knowledge by the technicians of each discipline” (Gadda, 2008, p. 5). Technicians within the fields of child psychology and childhood studies inform matters concerning children and their perceived needs and abilities. The “truths” produced within these disciplines result in a totalizing view of children as incapable or immature and thus not ready to be granted the same prerogative as adults. This notion of what it means to be a “child” holds sway over our assumptions of a child’s ability and right to participate. These long-held beliefs about children serve to rationalize the limited role student voice has traditionally had in schools. While there is a growing interest in listening to students’ voices in schools (Gerstein, 2015), attempts to include children as prominent players in their own learning without interrogating the notion of childhood and how it is constructed in Western society are likely to be only tokenistic gestures.

Despite the prominence given to practices of student voice, contesting understandings of the role student voice has in decision-making in schools render necessary the need for a more nuanced understanding of students’ participation in their own education. This chapter reviews recent relevant literature on the history of childhood and explores contemporary scholarship on the cultural and social construction of childhood, because it is often a rendering of ‘the child’ as a universal concept that informs the decisions we make about students in schools and thus delimits the legitimacy

of their input or voice. Next, I provide an overview of a model of schooling that challenges conventional thinking about children. Taking a democratic approach to decision-making regarding matters from curriculum to discipline, Sudbury schools open up the possibility for reimagining student expression. Finally, I examine how student voice is defined and enacted in the research literature and follow with a critical examination of the discourse surrounding school reform that gives rise to the rationale for listening to students in schools.

Constructing Childhood

The history of ideas abounds with theories regarding the proper education of children, but the study of childhood itself is relatively new (Matthews, 2005). In the works of Plato and Aristotle the education of children was a matter of concern primarily for the good of the state. During the Greek and Roman period, childhood, though recognized as a stage of life, was not a category to be studied and understood but rather a generational cohort requiring order and discipline necessary to become future citizens able to reason (Cannella, 1997). Drawing on Plato's Theory of Forms, Aristotle's analysis of causation and particularly his emphasis on Formal and Final Causes, tended to portray children as immature organisms with the potential to be actualized into mature, fully accomplished human adults (Matthews, 2005).

With an emphasis on science and reason, the nature of the knowing subject became more central during the Enlightenment Period. Influenced largely by the works of Locke and Rousseau, the Enlightenment Period witnessed a new image of children, and their place in their family and thus in society.

Locke: The Imperfect State of the Child

Known as "The Father of English Liberalism," John Locke (1632-1734) was perhaps one of the most influential thinkers of the enlightenment period whose works shaped new philosophies of child rearing and founding pedagogical principles in early modern England. Rejecting a rationalist thesis of innate knowledge, Locke instead believed "mind to be, as we say, white paper, void of all characters, without any ideas" (An Essay Concerning Human Understanding). This belief in *tabula rasa* assumes children as incomplete versions of adults who through experience and education are brought into reason. Locke was careful to acknowledge that though children are born with minds as blank slates, they do possess natural dispositions and specific abilities that parents should carefully watch for and nurture.

Locke also emphasizes the importance of "laying the first foundations of virtue" (Thoughts Concerning Education: ¶139). Virtue, as defined by Locke, is attained once "man is able to *deny himself* his own desires, cross his own inclinations, and purely follow what reason directs as best, though the appetite lean the other way" (¶ 33). Fundamental to the task of guiding the child towards reasoning and virtue are the parents who, Locke contends, have a duty to help their child develop a "habit" of thinking rationally as soon as possible. These habits must be instilled as early as possible because, as Locke cautions, "the minds of children (are) as easily turned this or that way as water itself" (TCE: ¶216). Thus, educating children, as Locke argues, is a matter of training their minds and shaping their natural tendencies.

Parental power over children, according to Locke, comes from their obligation to care for their offspring during their "imperfect state of childhood…till reason shall take

its place and ease them of that trouble" (Two Treatises ¶58). The jurisdiction parents have over their children, however, is not abiding. Locke argues that these "bonds of subjection" into which children are born, are mitigated: "age and reason as they grow up loosen them, till at length they drop quite off, and leave a man at his own free disposal" (TCE ¶55). Locke's ideas about parental rights continue to influence legal decisions about the rights of children, parents, and families today. As Brennan and Noggle (1997) explain, "Our view of the basis for parental rights can be seen as a development of Locke's claim that parental rights are based neither on parental ownership of children nor on the rational consent of children to be governed by their parents" (p. 11).

Rousseau and The Innocent Child

Rousseau's philosophy on childhood, *Emile*, or *On Education* published in 1762, is a treatise on the education and training of children written in the form of a first person narrative fiction that recounts the narrator's experience in educating a child, Emile, from infancy to adulthood. The text is divided into five books, the first three devoted to the fictional child, Emile. The fourth book addresses Emile as an adolescent, ready to learn sentiment, and in book five Emile's female counterpart, Sophia, is introduced along with Rousseau's theories for the ideal education for women. Like Locke, Rousseau viewed childhood as a time to develop and cultivate the qualities of adulthood. In contrast to Locke's conception of *tabula rasa*, however, Rousseau held that children were born not as blank slates but as naturally innocent, pure, and good creatures. The authorities of his day banned the book on account of its arguments against traditional religious views, particularly those expressed in the fourth Book of *Emile*, among them that state of nature is not corrupt and religion should align with natural morality.

For Rousseau, although it is impossible for man in society to return to a state of nature, education must seek to develop a child's character in a manner that would encourage its natural goodness to be expressed in relating to others in society. Information and intellectual attainments in particular fields of inquiry are not the primary goals of Rousseau's educational philosophy. The techniques of the educator should instead be directed to helping the child express natural virtue even in the artificial society that it will inevitably inhabit. In certain respects, this model hearkens back to Aristotle's notion of the child's potency and tendency to mature and become actualized according to its natural formal bent and whose natural progression "must be respected" (Boutet De Monvel, 1968, vii).

A key concept for Rousseau in this regard is *amour-propre*, which names one's love of oneself not as it is expressed in isolation, through the pursuit of individual interests, well-being, or the preservation of life. *Amour-propre* is a type of self-love that is instead fundamentally relational and social, taking into account how the individual sees herself in comparison to others. In society as artificially alienated from nature, the corruption of *amour-propre* leads individuals to seek a sense of superiority in relation to others and base their self-esteem on such superiority rather than a more naturally appropriate and healthy basis of self-worth. The educator's role is thus to supervise the child and arrange situations so that the child will lead a social life in conformity to natural morality rather than look for happiness in the perceived inferiority of others.

The Annals of Childhood

In the past fifty years the history of childhood has received burgeoning attention from contemporary social historians, due in large part to the work of historian Philippe

Ariès. Published in 1960, Ariès' seminal study, *L'enfant et la vie familiale sous l'ancien régime*, later published in English under the title *Centuries of Childhood*: *A Social History of Family Life* (1962), launched a wave of historical scholarship on childhood and family life. Ariès' central thesis was that the concept of childhood was absent in medieval European culture and developed only gradually in the modern era, starting around the fifteenth century. His work has had a profound influence on more than a half-century of subsequent scholarly writing on the history of childhood. Citing evidence primarily drawn from works of art such as pre-seventeenth century paintings, sculpture, and poetry, Ariès suggests that childhood was not recognized as a distinct phase of life in early European cultures. Instead, Ariès argued, from about the age of seven, children of the Middle Ages were thrust into adult society and were viewed as a "natural companion of the adult" (p.411). "The infant who was too fragile to take part in the life of adults simply 'did not count,'" according to Airès (p. 128). Modern treatments of childhood, Ariès claimed, did not see their genesis until the eighteenth century and the emergence of enlightenment philosophies. Even when in early modern societies childhood began to be recognized as a distinct stage of life, the thesis, based on the prescriptive religious ideological literature of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, was that children were naturally malignant and depraved agents of sin and required harsh discipline and moral reform. From this historical perspective, according to Lloyd de Mause (1974) "the history of childhood is a nightmare from which we have only recently begun to awaken" (p.1).

Ariès' thesis has, however, been challenged by a number of recent historians. Taking into account texts outside the didactic religious sphere, such as diaries and other

personal memoirs, Linda Pollock revealed that the grim representation of the original early modern conception of childhood as a nightmare of abjection and punishment was a distortion, that parental ties of affection tended to win out over theological strictures on the child (Pollock, 1983). While this dissertation is not directly concerned with the early modern origins of the conception of childhood, it is salutary to attend to the methodological lesson that the ideologically inflected art and official literature of a specific historical era is often misleading as a guide to the understanding of actual practice and behavior. Even the primary historical argument underlying Ariès' thesis—that based on evidence such as the pictorial representation of Medieval children as merely shrunken adults, wearing adult clothing, there was no conception of childhood in Medieval societies—is belied by other, neglected evidence which indicates that Medieval adults built toys for children, played with them, and even engaged in baby talk (Orme, 2001). In other words, medieval European parents evidently paid attention to their children as children, not as miniature adults, and bestowed their affection on their offspring in ways that took the "childishness" of the child into account. The debunking of Ariès' thesis demonstrates that to arrive at an accurate understanding of the past and, my dissertation will argue, also of the present, scholars must look past the distorted official and aesthetic portraits of a period's history and seek evidence drawn from everyday life and representations of behavior that are not ideologically driven.

Even if we reject the claim that childhood is a modern discovery, Ariès' work is nonetheless rightly considered foundational for its insistence that historical contingency be taken into account. It seems undeniable that in the Middle Ages and in subsequent centuries, childhood was lived and imagined in a manner that differs from our own. Nor

can we deny that a culture's religious convictions, politics, coercive practices, and material conditions deeply influence how it constructs its concept of a child. Childhood, family life, the practice of education all change with the times, and none is a historical constant or a universal concept.

Sudbury Education

Sudbury schools trace their origins back to 1968 with the founding of Sudbury Valley School in Framingham, Massachusetts. Conceived in a time of political and social unrest, Sudbury Valley School followed a model of progressive schooling that was "mobilized against an unresponsive and inequitable social system" that many felt was reinforced in the teaching and learning in traditional schools (Cagan, 1978, p. 227). This return to progressive ideals during the 1960's came on the heels of an era marked by strict authoritarianism and conservative control in public education. Sparked by intellectual insecurity in the United States following the launch of Sputnik and the space race with Russia, schools became the target of growing concern in the 1950's. Although progressive educational theory was blamed for the perceived deficient state of American public education, sociopolitical issues such as the civil rights movement in the 1960's highlighted the inequities of the system and galvanized the rebirth of progressive education.

Drawing from the work of Scottish writer and founder of Summerhill School, A. S. Neill and philosopher John Dewey, Sudbury schools embrace the notion that students hold the fundamental right to choose their own path in learning and life. Sudbury schools espouse a democratic model of education in which each child's voice holds the same influence over decisions as that of the adult's. Like democracy itself, there is no singular

definition for a democratic school or democratic education but the fundamental tenets for both are universal: "If people are to secure and maintain a democratic way of life, they must have the opportunities to learn what that way of life means and how it might be led" (Loflin, 2008, p.8).

Indeed, the Sudbury model is based on the premise that education should prepare children for their role as adults in society. Democracy, according to Sudbury founder Daniel Greenberg (2016) is an essential part of that preparation: "*Democratic schooling as preparation for a democratic society*--that was the essence of our socio-political argument against the prevailing school systems, private and public, and for the new model we were proposing" (¶ 6). The democratic process is practiced in Sudbury schools through participation in the school's governing system, the School Meeting and through its judicial system, the Judicial Committee. The School Meeting is comprised of students and teachers and follows Robert's Rules of Order: One person, one vote. It is in these weekly meetings where "all matters of consequence" including staff appointments, school rules, and the school's annual budget are determined. Violations of school rules are investigated and, if warranted, consequences decided upon democratically by the two elected officers, five students, and one staff member of the Judicial Committee are issued.

Greenberg (2016) defines Sudbury education as an "*American* Immersion school…where children grow up immersed in the culture that was created on the basis of the mission statement of this country's defining founding document" (¶ 2). In other words, Sudbury schools advance a philosophical position that considers *all,* including children, equal and entitled to certain unalienable rights. For students in Sudbury schools, that includes the right to learning that is self-determined, self-paced, and self-

evaluated (Greenberg, 1987). Guided by the Aristotlian belief that all human beings are naturally curious, Sudbury education is about "each child realizing their own unique destiny and developing something that's very much their own" (Greenberg, 2000, ¶39).

The freedom and autonomy afforded to students to determine their own learning in Sudbury schools differs considerably from traditional schooling. Perhaps most striking is the way in which the guiding principles of Sudbury schools disrupt the conventional thought and treatment of children in Western society. Based on the dominant approach to child development established within the field of psychology, the traditional school system makes age a prerequisite for the right to participate in the democratic process; the right to freedom of expression and determination. The Sudbury model of education adheres to what Prout and James (1997) consider paramount in the quest to reimagine the role of children in their education and society:

> Children are and must be seen as active in the construction and determination of their own social lives, the lives of those around them and of the societies in which they live. Children are not just the passive subjects of social structures and processes. (p. 8)

Defining Student Voice in Education

Views about the level of participation students should be afforded in school-based decisions and other matters that affect their lives have evolved over time (Mitra, 2004). School reformers have advocated for the inclusion of a broad representation of stakeholders to further their ongoing efforts aimed at improving public education. In the State of Texas, legislative provisions require that all schools establish a process for campus-level planning and decision-making in order to improve the academic

performance of all students. To ensure diverse representation in the decision-making process, section 11.251 of the Texas Education Code stipulates the inclusion of parents, professional staff, business representatives, and members of the community. However, the United States lags behind in developing policies or mandates that encourage student participation and voice in school decisions.

With its glaring absence from conversations on learning, teaching, school policy and practice, student voice has now become a point of convergence for scholars who advocate for the inclusion of students' perspectives in the decision-making efforts in schools (Cook-Sather, 2006; Mirón & Lauria, 1998; Rudduck & Fielding, 2006). Yet this unusual unanimity of scholarly opinion has nonetheless resulted in discord: concerning the very meaning of the term 'student voice' and the rationale behind attempts "to make student voice a normal rather than marginal aspect of schooling" (Bragg, 2007, p. 343).

The lack of consensus regarding the term student voice is not surprising. As Bahou (2011) explains: "Student voice is located within a complex web of school structures and cultures that are shaped by policymakers, school leaders, teachers, researchers, and students themselves" (p.3). In its most literal form, voice is an utterance of sound or sounds for the purposes of speaking, singing, shouting, etc. (Dictionary.com). Taken figuratively, voice represents an intricate array of agency, expression, and power that is situated in an historic and social context. Tracing the term student voice back to its historical origins in the research literature, Cook-Sather (2006) identifies two predominant themes that encompass the concept: rights and respect.

Like student voice itself, the term "rights" carries multiple meanings and contradictions, especially in the United States. The right to education in the United States has been guaranteed to all children under the equal protection clause of the 14th Amendment, which requires all states establish a free public schooling system. Federal legislation has further ensured the right to a free education for students with disabilities (The Education for All Handicapped Children Act in 1975) and for students of color (Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas in 1954). Nevertheless, as Mitra (2014) suggests, the "rights" afforded to students in US schools do not necessarily include the right to participation in decision-making.

The Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) is often cited as an influential source in advancing the notion of voice and individual expression as a fundamental right of young people. Article 12 of the CRC advocates for the right of free expression for children in matters that affect their lives. Many European countries have adopted formal policies in schools that are aligned to the fundamental tenets of the CRC as they pertain to a child's right to expression and participation (Mitra, 2104). However, with United States remaining the only country that has failed to ratify the CRC, a national policy or discourse reinforcing student voice as an essential right of our youth remains absent. While the term "rights" carries with it multiple and sometimes, contradictory interpretations most would concede that fundamentally the term "appeals to higher ethical and moral principles such as justice and equity and, ostensibly, suggests a certain inalienable quality" (Cook-Sather, 2006, p. 370).

There is a notable correlation between the terms "rights" and "respect." At a very basic level, the granting of individual rights implies a degree of respect for differing

beliefs and values on a social level. By the same token, respecting diverse beliefs and perspectives is a natural consequence of the concept of individual rights. Levin (1994) makes a clear delineation of the relationship between rights and respect: “If we take seriously the idea that students are people, we must respect their ideas, opinions, and desires; this in turn requires institutional structures which allow these ideas and opinions to be expressed in a meaningful way” (p. 97). Within the context of student voice, the notion of respect is not only in regards to the right to individual expression; it is also, and perhaps most importantly, about the right for students’ voices to be considered legitimate contributions to decisions that affect their lives. Rudduck (2006) regards student consultation as “one way of signaling respect for young people and inviting greater involvement” (p. 137). Involving students in the decisions that affect them personally not only engages students, it also delivers what Fletcher considers an important message: “that schooling can be a powerful, positive and motivating force when it respects and values the contributions of each and every student” (p. 24).

The relationship between rights and respect within the student voice literature can be broadly understood as a call for meaningful inclusion of student expression over matters concerning their own education and learning. When student voice is allowed to enter the arena of decision-making, it becomes what Conner, Ebby-Rosin, and Brown (2015) describe as “a strategy that engages youth in sharing their views on their experiences as students in order to promote meaningful change in educational practice or policy and alter the positionality of students in educational settings” (p. 3). While the idea of respecting the right to individual student expression in school seems

straightforward, the notion of individual rights has come to mean different things within the discourse of school reform and the positioning of student voice in practice.

Student Voice Through the Discourses of School Reform

The discord among scholars and educators attempting to reposition the role of student voice in education has led to competing narratives regarding the purpose of student voice in schools. School reform is often cited as the predominant rationale for including students in the decision-making process in schools. However, this singular focus on reform tends to reduce the inclusion of student voices to mere lip service, the equivalent of an ineffectual silence. In her report to the Stuart Foundation, Little (1996) identified two ways in which the muting of student voice occurs:

> Students remain a nearly silent voice in school decision-making, even at the high-school level. They are silent in two ways-first in their relative invisibility as participants in formal decision-making, and second in the relative infrequency with which information from or about students is made a part of decision-making. (p. 24)

Concerns over the purpose for invoking student voice are not unsubstantiated and certainly raise questions over the intentions behind such interest. In an attempt to understand the rationale behind student voice work, Fielding poses this provocative question: "Is student voice best understood as part of an essentially neo-liberal project, as part of a resurgent democratic engagement, as part of a Foucauldian furtherance of 'governmentality', a mixture of all or some of these…" (p. 198). The question is certainly worth considering especially given the competing interests behind such diverse ideological thought.

Neo-liberal Discourses

As the formation of the word indicates, the roots of neoliberalism and its various discourses lie in liberalism. Liberalism in the first century of the American republic stood on two fundamental principles prominent in the founding documents of the nation but only gradually developed during the Nineteenth Century: certain inalienable rights of "all men," per the Declaration of Independence, and the rights to freedom of thought and action as articulated in the Constitution. Liberalism in this historical perspective implies a democratic process of response to unequal social conditions involving race, gender, and the oppression of the workers. As McMahon and Portelli (2012) observe, this liberal process driving change in the social and economic relations of the citizenry also affected educational practices: "hence the nature and purpose of education were among the early issues debated in the formation of compulsory schooling as it emerged in North America in the mid to late 19th century" (p. 2). The role of education in a democracy, and, more to the point, of democracy in education has long been the subject of debate.

Neoliberalism has been broadly used to describe a variety of educational practices, and there is a danger, as Rowlands and Rawolle (2013) contend, that it has become a "theory of everything" in educational research, regularly applied to all the things researchers do not approve of in efforts at educational reform (see also Flew, 2012). Conceptually and historically, however, neoliberalism is properly characterized by its allegiance to the liberal principles of individual rights and personal liberty as shaped by the materialism of a late-stage, free-market, capitalist economic system (Monbiot, 2016). The cause of individual rights has in neoliberalism been transformed into a rigid insistence on individualism, which has promoted heightened competition,

while liberty has come to mean “any form of choice, which, in turn, has led to the emphasis of free market” (McMahon & Portelli 2012, p. 2). The ironic consequence is that the diversity of student voice has been flattened as the recognition of actual individual difference has been sacrificed to the goals of performance and a market-driven sense of profit.

Conceptually, student voice may be defined as the expression of a child subject to the educational system, and much scholarly attention has been paid to the formation of the neoliberal student subject (Wilkins, 2012; Youdell, 2004). Of particular concern has been the impact on student identity of the narrowly coercive expectations characteristic of neoliberalism within the so called “audit culture” that prevails in education (Strathern, 2000). Evaluative practices derived from business management that stress quantitative measurements and the establishment of benchmarks as indicators of school and student performance have reduced learners to labor-force products susceptible to audit according to quantifiable standards. The voices of students enmeshed in this commodifying school culture are, as it were “naturally,” valued only within certain parameters, specifically their voluntary participation in those activities and behaviors that will enhance their performance and progress toward achieving an economically viable skill set warranted by the appropriate credential (Visser & Visser-Valfrey, 2008). The neoliberal ideal of achieving a superior position through freely chosen hard work and the harnessing of individual talent obscures the advantages that class, race, and economic privileges provide the more fortunate (Nairn & Higgins, 2007). This obfuscation depends on the artificial restriction of student voice to matters of teaching and learning isolated from the

broader societal context and the student subject's multi-faceted engagement in the surrounding culture.

Student Voice and Discourses of Democratic Engagement

> No one is born a good citizen; no nation is born a democracy. Rather, both are processes that continue to evolve over a lifetime. Young people must be included from birth. A society that cuts off from its youth severs its lifeline.
>
> \- Kofi Annan 1998, quoted in WBR (2007, p. 183)

In the unrelenting focus on standards and rigor in schools, many scholars identify the work around student voice research as a return to the fundamental purpose of education: to provide students opportunities to develop aptitudes and habits needed for a democratic way of life. Fielding (2001) maintains that the inclusion of student voice in the decision-making process teaches "the dispositions and values of democratic living without which democracy itself becomes a mere mechanism that more often than we would wish turns out to betray the very aspirations that inspire its inception" (p. 138). Student engagement in the dialogic process enhances the reflective thinking and critical awareness skills students need in order to thoughtfully participate in a critical democracy.

Freire's (1970) characterization of traditional education as a 'banking' model where students are receptacles to be filled with knowledge is rooted in a hierarchical structure of power and presumption that mitigates opportunities for students' voices to be part of the education decision-making process. Within this system, the experience and ideas of the learner must submit to the authority of the teacher's. Instead, Freire (1970) conceived of a system where educators and students engage in a co-intentional practice in which "teachers and students (leadership and people), co-intent on reality, are both

Subjects, not only in the task of unveiling that reality, and therefore by coming to know it critically, but in the task of re-creating that knowledge" (p. 51). In this sense, “[T]he teacher is no longer merely the one who teaches, but one who is himself taught in dialogue with the students” (p. 67).

The dialogic structure, with its emphasis on individual autonomy and responsibility, lies at the heart of the democratic process and is where Dewey considered the experience of democracy to be practiced and refined. Student voice in education supports a pedagogical methodology based on a dialogic practice in which all voices are heard, including the voices of the students. If we are to hold education to this standard, Giroux and McLaren (1986) argue, we need to first regard schools as “democratic sites dedicated to self and social empowerment” (p. 224).

Ranson (2000) conceptualizes the inclusion of student voice in the decision-making process as a form of democratic pedagogy where civic responsibility is at the forefront and “the defining quality of citizenship will be the capability to find a voice which [one] asserts one’s claims, and enables the learner to enter a dialogue with others” (p. 268). Unfortunately, Wittes (1970) illuminates a far more bleak reality of our schools: “For the most part, collaboration between students, faculties, and administrators has not been utilized to allow students opportunities for making meaningful decisions concerning their own education” (p.2).

Student Voice Within Poststructural Discourses

The topic of student voice has been widely researched in the field resulting in numerous studies that question the purpose and, in particular, the authenticity of student voice in education (see Bragg, 2007; Cook-Sather, 2006; Mirón & Lauria, 1998;

Rudduck & Fielding, 2006). Poststructural discourses, however, remind us that, "the calls for authentic student voice contain realist and essentialist epistemological positions regarding subjectivity which are neither acknowledged specifically nor developed theoretically" (Orner, 1992, p. 75). These essentialist positions fail to acknowledge that 'voice' is never stable and is constituted and contested through the overlapping and often conflicting subject positions such as gender, class, age, race, and sexual orientation. Further, it is through this essentialist lens, where voice is held captive by those who hold power (often the teachers) and empowerment to speak is something that is granted or bestowed, thus rendering a power/powerless, oppressor/oppressor binary conception of individuals. Such a reductionist view falls short in recognizing and understanding the complexities of power relations, subjectivity, and identity.

There exists in most schools today a hierarchically unbalanced division of power between adults and children in which the authority of the adults generally takes precedent. This hierarchy of power, which places the teacher, and adults in general, in the position of sole authority in the classroom, is culturally constructed and implicitly accepted by teachers, students, and the school community (Read, 2008). As the proprietor of authority and status in the classroom, it is the teacher who decides how and what students are learning or not learning and what they should consider important about their education. In light of the power differential between students and teachers, it seems implausible to suppose that students would or could ever straightforwardly share their genuine voices in a manner that might be authentically registered by those who hold such sway over them. This fundamental difficulty also raises questions about the reliability of student voice as represented in recent efforts at pedagogical reform.

Because the authority and status of the teacher are generally accepted, the teacher ultimately is in control of what and how students are learning or not learning. Read (2008) posits that,

> Within this constructed web of power relations, the teacher's high status allows her/him not only to influence to a high degree how pupils interpret/understand knowledge, but also to constrain the choices and actions of her/his pupils, and place varying degrees of value on different possible pupil actions and behaviours. (p. 612)

Given this imbalance of power in schools, it seems difficult to imagine that students will, or even can, genuinely share their voice. It also raises questions about the authenticity of student voice in recent school reform initiatives.

Owens and Lincoln (2012) affirm that the authority teachers employ in a classroom is absolute and those positions of teacher privilege must be acknowledged. However, teachers "must admit that they are in a position of authority and then demonstrate that authority in their actions in support of students" (p. 344). Viewed from this lens, it could be argued that teachers must invite students to be part of the decision-making process in the classroom and allow students to have more autonomy over their lives at school. However, the extent to which that invitation elicits authentic forms of participation and representation remains problematic. As Orner (1992) explains:

> Educators concerned with changing unjust power relations must continually examine our assumptions about our own positions, those of our students, the meanings and uses of student voice, our power to call for students to speak, and

> our often unexamined power to legitimate and perpetuate unjust relations in the name of student empowerment. (p. 77)

Ultimately, it is the general acceptance and presumption of the teacher's or the adult's power and authority that hinder the authenticity of student voice and position student perspective outside the arena of school reform efforts. Power relations in schools and classrooms render necessary a more nuanced understanding of ways to authentically engage student voice in school based decision-making processes.

According to Rudduck and Fielding (2006), "From the student perspective, authenticity rests on three things: whether they have been involved in determining the focus of consultation; whether the interest of adults in what they have to say is real or contrived; and whether there is discussion of their suggestions and active follow-through" (p. 226). Though Rudduck and Fielding elevate the status of student voice in the literature by including the perceptions of students themselves, the ways in which that voice is authenticated is dependent on the will of the adults.

Thomas and Gunter (2005) consider the question of authenticity through a different lens, drawing the conclusion that "pupil voice is neither neutral nor 'authentic', but is produced by/within dominant discourses" (p. 852). Within this theoretical frame, student voice is yet another component of a system that both underwrites and contains it. There is little or no possibility for such situated voices to transcend the constraints of their discursive contexts.

Braggs, drawing on Foucault's concept of governmentality, (Foucault, 1991) in which power "works by producing practices for acting on the self by the self," explores the possible hidden motives behind student voice initiatives (p. 344). These bring to

question the possibility of authenticity:

> The fact that student voice now appears to be fully compatible with government and management objectives and that senior staff are introducing it with the explicit aim of school improvement, causes disquiet, even concerns that it might be cynical and manipulative, intentionally or not masking the ''real'' interests of those in power. (p. 344)

Further, Braggs (2006) challenges the claims of student voice as a liberating and empowering practice able to transcend the hierarchy of education. Instead, she argues, that student voice practices "instill norms of individualism, self-reliance and self-management, which resonate with new configurations of power and authority under neoliberalism, respond to specific debates about school standards, effectiveness and competition, and help construct young people as reflexive ''knowledge workers'' (p. 334).

Regardless of whether we suppose current interest in student voice to be legitimate or contrived, such questions of authenticity and subjective integrity should encourage those who would assess student voice in education to attend carefully to the intricacies of power relations and their tendency to deflect forthright expression. In other words, student voice in education is not simply about affording students the opportunity to speak their minds so that their as it were disembodied voices might be heard in a formal setting that brackets out their life situation. It should also be about, and perhaps most crucially, the recognition that their voices are always and inevitably socially and culturally situated and that actually hearing them requires making every effort to take that

situatedness into account, especially when what is at stake is policy that will directly affect their learning and general well-being.

Problems with Student Voice

Arguably, student voice is a complex construct resulting in conflicting viewpoints on the purpose of and best practice for including students in school-based decisions. These contesting conceptions of voice lead to problems when efforts are made to incorporate student voice in the educational setting. Czerniawski and Kidd (2011) identify the following practical issues regarding the implementation of student voice initiatives in schools. The first set of issues reflects a common and implicitly patronizing attitude toward students and the construction of those qualities that might identify a student as being qualified for participation:

- Student representation is often tokenistic and seems more about students being seen to be involved in school processes, rather than being active partners in change.
- Only some students are selected for representative activities, often those who are seen by staff as ‘good’ or as ‘gifted and talented’ or by their peers as ‘popular.’ ‘Difficult’ students are often not asked what they think.
- What students can discuss is limited. Some student councils are largely confined to discussions about fund-raising and social activities, whereas others are primarily ascribed the role of responding to policies and plans being developed elsewhere.

A second set of issues identified by Czerniawski and Kidd reflects a telling lack of support, preparation, breadth of inquiry, and follow through that frequently plagues and effectively nullifies efforts to ascertain what students might have to say:

- Students are not supported adequately in their participation in governance. They are not given relevant background information or training in meeting procedures and receive no additional support in canvassing their electorates to ensure that what they say is representative.
- There is often little follow up to student 'voice' activities. Students are asked their opinions but their recommendations are acted on in a patchy fashion. It is as if the act of speaking is all that matters. This undoubtedly leads to cynicism about the democratic processes of participation.
- Governance conversations dominate school 'voice' activities. Teachers assume that what they do ordinarily equates to listening to students. Students are more likely to be asked about their learning preferences rather than open questions about knowledge, assessment and pedagogy. Children and young people are rarely involved in substantive and ongoing classroom conversations about pedagogy and knowledge (p. 25).

Finally, as Czerniawski and Kidd also observe, because students typically do not receive a credential for taking part in "voice" related programs, they are understood to lie outside the curriculum and as being neither intellectually or practically efficacious enough to be construed as an instructional accomplishment.

Increasingly, research literature examining opportunities for student voice to be included in school-based decisions has focused on ways to shift student involvement

efforts away from tokenistic gestures, and instead move towards more authentic forms of participation and representation (Biddulph, 2011; Fielding, 2004; Mitra and Serriere, 2012). Hart's (1992) Ladder of Student Involvement in schools presents various typologies applied to student voice and the level of influence their voice is afforded (see Appendix A). Each rung of the Ladder represents the degree of student participation with the lower rungs representing a limited amount of youth participation while the higher rungs represent more meaningful forms of youth participation. Fletcher (2005) notes three important considerations when using the Ladder to inform the level of student involvement in schools:

(1) The Ladder is not designed to be applied to a whole school all at once but rather for individual activities.
(2) Meaningful student involvement should build communities in schools while empowering students, which raises debate about the placement of Rung 7 and Rung 8.
(3) The rungs are not a process that happens in order. Activities can jump from one rung to the next and back without any specific order.

Hart's Ladder serves as a useful tool for practitioners interested in addressing some of the problems identified in the literature on student voice, specifically in regards to more tokenistic gestures of student involvement. When students are empowered to take a more active role in making decisions that affect them in school, they become more invested and engaged. The literature is rife with examples of student-initiated involvement in schools and the impact more meaningful levels of involvement have on students and their roles in school (Cook-Sather, 2006; Hill, 2014; Thomas & Gunter, 2005).

With attention to student empowerment and student activism, Mitra and Serriere (2012) explore the impact student voice can have on school reform efforts. Their study examines the role of student voice from the perspective of youth development, which emphasizes youth as assets and not problems or deficient. The researchers identify the specific concepts of agency, belonging, competence, discourse, and efficacy to reflect the assets students need to be successful in schools and in their lives. By viewing students as assets with meaningful contributions to the school reform conversations, student voice brings with it a sense of agency and empowerment. This more nuanced understanding of student community in the public institution is one that seeks to challenge and dismantle dominant discourses that position students' voices outside the negotiation of educational reform, policy, and practice.

In their comparative case study of two inner-city high schools, Mirón and Lauria (1998) explore student voice as agency. These authors demonstrate the ways in which students' racial and ethnic identities are used as a means and/or accommodation to the sociocultural conditions of their schools and societies. Mirón and Lauria draw from Hirchman's *Exit Voice and Loyalty* (1970) to differentiate between "those students who chose to exit (failed or dropped out), as opposed to voicing resistance or maintaining loyalty to school values" (p, 193). Hirchman's argument for the latter resonates: "The proper functioning of democracy requires a maximally alert active and vocal public…Voice is an attempt to change rather than escape from the objectionable circumstances" (p. 30).

Conclusion

The call to include student voice in recent conversations on school reform has been echoed in the research literature (Cook-Sather, 2006; Mirón & Lauria, 1998; Rudduck & Fielding, 2006). Questions regarding the purpose and potential, however, remain unanswered. Exploring student voice as a form of critical democratic engagement has become increasingly prevalent in educational research literature (Biddulph, 2011; Cook-Sather, 2006; Fielding, 2004). Many scholars suggest (Bourke & Loveridge, 2014; Mannion, 2007; Simmons, Graham, & Nigel, 2015;) that by cultivating an environment that elevates student voice in the arena of school improvement instills in students a sense of control over their own learning and validates the role of the student as agents of change in their own education. Issues of power dynamics and authenticity disrupt these claims and warrant a deeper understanding of the complexities of identity and agency when examining student voice.

Additionally, much of the literature (Catling, 2014; Hill, 2014; Shryock, 2015) makes the assumption that students are not already "speaking" about their education and opportunities to do so should be "given" to them, implying that students rarely initiate this on their own. However, what is clear is that when students experience opportunities to engage meaningfully in the decision-making process in schools and their learning, they become more invested in their own education (Biddulph, 2011). Only when student contributions are recognized and validated does a sense of an autonomous self and an awareness of a distinctive sense of agency begin to emerge (Ranson, 2000).

Theoretical Framework

This study was guided by Michel Foucault's (1990) theorizations of power, knowledge, and the construction of the individual subject. Foucault's work has been regularly cited in the field of educational research over the past twenty years. Writing and theorizing on the topics of discipline, deviance, knowledge, power, and resistance, to name a few, Foucault offers an array of analytic tools to the field of educational research. In his thesis, Gallager (2004) presents a review of ways in which educational researchers have engaged the writings of Foucault, which he divides into three categories: theoretical, historical, and empirical works. According to Gallager, the theoretical works rely more generally on Foucault's later writings and theorizations of the human subject, while the historical studies are interested in examining the ways in which educational practices have become common and implicitly accepted. The empirical studies in educational research use Foucault's work as an analytic tool for the study of human social behavior in schools, both "at a structural level" and "within the immediate spaces of education, principally the classroom" (p. 46).

Decon (2006) also maintains that Foucault's body of work can be categorized according to three educational themes: the development of schooling (i.e. historical), its function (basic procedures of schooling), and its prospects (implications for current and future practice), all of which seek to understand the way in which the concept of education, as we know it, has been produced historically. In general, Foucault's work provides an alternative analytic insight into the field of educational research, one that "goes beyond conventional liberal, Weberian, Marxist, and revisionist approaches" (Decon, 2006, p. 178). The Marxist approach attributes the rise of the education system to

the ruling class and their use of power to exploit the working class for their own economic gain. Power, according to this model, is understood as something that can be possessed by autonomous individuals, much like a commodity, and consciously exercised over others in order to maintain class domination. In contrast, Foucault sought a non-economic analysis of power and rejected the idea that power was something that could be possessed. Instead, Foucault (1978) asserts a new understanding stating that, “Power is everywhere;” and “comes from everywhere” (p. 93). In Foucault’s (1996) conceptualization, “power is not a thing, it is a relationship between two individuals, a relationship which is such that one can direct the behavior of another or determine the behavior of another” (p. 410).

Unlike more common theorizations of power intent on defining what power is or its basis, Foucault is interested in understanding *how* power is exercised. Foucault (1998) argues that power is operationalized through discourse and is "recognized to be a core constituent of all discourses, but also it becomes a kind of 'metapower' or 'regime of truth'”(p. 63) for a cultural group or society. It is through discourse, Foucault argued, that a society, “has its own regime of truth, its “general politics” of truth: that is, the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true…” (Foucault 1980, 131).

It is for this reason that Foucault understood power and knowledge to be inextricably intertwined and always affirmed and reaffirmed through discourse. Foucault was especially concerned with the ways in which those in power maintain control over individuals and thus over the production of knowledge. Power in institutions, Foucault posited, is not maintained by direct oppression but rather by the subjectification of individuals (Foucault, 1982).

Students are shaped to make decisions from a limited number of acceptable choices that have already been decided for them. In addition, schools maintain a "general truth" that delineates the role of the teacher or the adult as the authority over what students need to know and how schools best serve student needs. These "truths" in turn become a mechanism of control over what students think about their own education. Therefore, school reform initiatives that seek student input in the decision-making process are likely to result in student responses that reflect those in positions of power in schools: the adults in defined positions of authority. However, Foucault maintained that individuals are not "standardized products, of some discourse formation" (Habermas, 1987). Indeed, Foucault argued that, "as soon as there is a power relation, there is the possibility of resistance" (p. 102). In schools "the possibility of resistance" to which Foucault refers may be specified as the possibility that students are engaging in counter-hegemonic discourses outside the purview of adults in schools.

Foucault's theory of power knowledge provides a framework to examine the ways in which students are engaging their voices in their own education. By employing a postmodern semiotic analysis of student communication, we may attempt to derive meaning from the practices of interpretative communities. Such meaning is contextually dependent and thus divorced from ontological claims of a stable or existentially grounded correspondence of sign and signified. This study attempted to capture the voices of students so that we may better understand their perspectives.

III. METHODOLOGY

> The real political task in a society such as ours is to criticize the workings of institutions that appear to be both neutral and independent, to criticize and attack them in such a manner that the political violence that has always exercised itself obscurely through them will be unmasked, so that one can fight against them.
>
> -Michel Foucault

Rationale for Qualitative Research

In general, research in the field has been subject to the philosophical assumptions of empiricism and its claim to absolute knowledge discovered through objective scientific investigation (Madison, 2012). While this method may be lauded by some researchers for its claim to objective and generalizable results, other researchers, particularly those in the social sciences, have argued that the "aim of research practice should be to focus up on understanding the meaning that events have for the individual being studied" (Tuli, 2010, p 98). Flick (2014) suggests that the discord between researchers who favor one method or the other is most often a matter of ontological and epistemological differences. According to Creswell (2013), the philosophical assumptions that guide our research methodology "are embedded within interpretative frameworks that qualitative researchers use when they conduct a study" (p. 22). These philosophical assumptions, or, to use more categorically articulate terminology, the guiding ontological, epistemological, axiological, and methodological principles, are "key premises that are folded into interpretative frameworks used in qualitative research" (p. 23). These philosophical moorings inform the research process and are in effect the platform used by the researcher to interpret and make sense of the data. The philosophical assumptions guiding

our research are articulated through different paradigms that express our views and beliefs about knowing and reality. Flick (2000) explains these philosophical differences:

> The quantitative purists articulate assumptions that are consistent with what is commonly called positivist paradigm and believe that social observations should be treated as entities in much the same way that physical scientists treat physical phenomena. To the contrary, the qualitative purist also called interpretivist or constructivist by rejecting the positivist assumption contended that reality is subjective, multiple and socially constructed by its participants. (p. 99)

In other words, the role of the researcher in a qualitative study is adaptable and open to new discoveries and understandings. Meaning is allowed to take shape based on how individuals understand social contexts (Hatch, 2002). Qualitative research seeks to gain a deeper and more nuanced understanding of how people make sense and meaning of themselves and others.

Substantial research supports the use of qualitative methodology as a means by which to study complex human experiences in the context of natural environments (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). However, many researchers argue that the research questions and the phenomenon being investigated should determine the type of research methodology being used (Creswell, 2013; Flick, 2011; Silverman, 2005). Therefore, the crucial question is not what type of methodology should be used but rather what type of methodology will be most effective in answering the research questions. Creswell specifies the circumstances in which a qualitative study is most beneficial: “We use qualitative research when we want to empower individuals to share their stories, hear their voices, and minimize the power relationships that often exist between a researcher and the

participants in the study" (p. 48). As this study sought to understand and register the voices of students, and more specifically, answer the following questions, qualitative methodology is the most ideal methodology to do this:

1. How is student voice situated in democratic schools?
2. How is the notion of democratic education constructed through discourse in democratic schools?
3. Do socially constructed views of childhood have an impact on opportunities for students to express their voice in democratic schools?

Within the realm of qualitative research, there are five central approaches used by researchers: Phenomenology, Ethnography, Grounded Theory, Narrative, and Case Study (Creswell, 2013). While there are similarities among the five, each is distinct in some way. Upon review, it was the key features of ethnography that made this approach most appealing. As Spradley (1979) contends, ethnographic research is interested in understanding how people make meaning of their lives and lived experiences. This meaning is conveyed both directly and indirectly through language and in action and is what people in a society use "to organize their behavior, to understand themselves and others, and to make sense out of the world in which they live" (p. 5). Emerging from the field of anthropology as a process towards generating an interpretative theory, ethnography seeks to uncover and to the extent possible inhabit an "insider's point of view" of the lived experiences of groups of people (Hoey, 2014, p.2). Ethnographic researchers delve into the world of the culture-sharing group and learn how they make meaning through their lived experiences. Ethnography places participants' voices at the center of inquiry and that is what initially drew me to it as a method. However, after

reflecting on my research questions in general and my concomitant commitment to social justice and change in education more specifically, I considered that a more critical approach to this study was needed.

Critical Ethnographic Case Study

Critical ethnographic case study as a specific qualitative design is an appropriate approach to this study for several specific reasons. First, case studies in general are typically qualitative in nature and attempt to provide an explanation of the phenomenon being investigated. More specifically, Yin (1984) explains case study "as an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context; when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident, and in which multiple sources of evidence are used" (p. 23). It holds merit in its emphasis on the object of study rather than the method of study (Stake, 1996). The in-depth contextual analysis of the object of study allows the researcher to establish meaning from the perspective of the participants. In addition, a case study can be aligned with a variety of methodologies since "it is not assigned to a fixed ontological, epistemological or methodological position" (Rosenberg & Yates, 2007, p. 447). Aligning this case study to a critical ethnographic methodological provided a utility for examining issues related to voice and subjectivity.

Critical ethnography's genesis within the field of education is rooted in interpretative anthropology and sociology and neo-Marxist and feminist theories (Anderson, 1989), which, as I will explain, appeals to the broader aim of this research study. Rejecting a functionalist perspective that prevailed in the field of anthropology, early interpretative anthropologist, Geertz (1983), shifted attention away from a

systematic notion of culture towards a "semiotic" understanding where "man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun," webs he calls "culture" (p. 5). For Geertz (1973) and other interpretative anthropologists of the time, analysis became a process of "sorting out structures of signification" in order to determine "what it is, ridicule or challenge, irony or anger, snobbery or pride, that, in their occurrence and through their agency, is getting said" (p. 9-10). The hermeneutic aspect of critical ethnography is especially appropriate to a study that attempts to "hear" the voices of individuals who historically have been silenced but who, perhaps outside the purview of those who silence them, are in regular dialogue if not explicitly then through significant behavior and symbolic action imbedded in the surrounding culture.

Critical ethnography's ties to neo-Marxist theory evolved in reaction to the "positivist tradition" of classical ethnography that believed in an objective reality independent of the observer (Rodriguez, 2016, p. 234). Neo-Marxist thought draws on the traditional Marxist critique of capitalist ideology and considers it an obligation to interrogate the social and cultural processes that lead to oppression and domination. Critical ethnography is instrumental for such interrogation because it contends that there is no absolute truth but instead claims of truth that are constructed through discourse and used as mechanisms of power that must be illuminated and examined (Nobilt, Flores, & Murillo, 2004). Critical ethnographers challenge "realist narrative accounts" by acknowledging larger social, political, and cultural conditions that contribute to the ways in which individuals interpret their world" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2013, p. 109). Critical ethnographic research, as Madison (2012) explains, ventures "beneath surface appearances, disrupt(s) the *status quo*, and unsettle(s) both neutrality and taken-for

granted assumptions by bringing to light underlying and obscure operations of power and control" (p. 5). With its more political and action-oriented approach, a critical ethnographic methodology will not only allow me to acknowledge and recognize the voices of students. It will and, perhaps more importantly, fulfill an "ethical responsibility" to contribute to the conversation that challenges the assumptions and limitations we as educators and, as society more broadly, impose on young people (p. 5).

In addition to its epistemological and ideological suitability to the goals of this study, the final reason that critical ethnographic case study was an ideal methodological choice is its attentiveness to coming to terms with the experiences of the participants in a culture-sharing group. The interpretive outreach definitive of a critical ethnographic case study as a method was instrumental for the goals of this study because I was interested in understanding how student voice and democratic ideals are situated within the context of a democratic school. In this case, critical ethnography is an ideal analytical companion to the poststructural theoretical perspective used to frame this study as it situates the impact of discourse and power relations within a specific local context. Ball (1994) considers critical ethnography and poststructuralism to be "interpretative resources" that are contested at times yet purposeful and effective. He compares the use of critical ethnography to Foucault's genealogical method defined as the "union of erudite and local memories…which interrupts the taken-for-granted and isolates the contingent power relations which make it possible for particular assertions to operate as absolute truths" (p. 4). By attending to the analytical qualities of both critical ethnography and post-structuralism, I was able to better understand how meaning is constructed by all participants.

The key concepts for my study are not universally defined, understood, or experienced. Rather, they are constructed through "a multiplicity of complex conceptual structures, many of them superimposed upon or knotted into one another, which are at once strange, irregular, and inexplicit" (Geertz, 1973, p. 10). Notions such as voice, democracy, and even what it means to be a child, are all located within a "socially constructed and historically transmitted pattern of symbols, meanings, premises, and rules" that must be both understood and conveyed by the researcher (Philipsen, 1992, p.7). As I will elaborate later, it is the ethnographic researcher that seeks through emic analysis to grasp the ways in which participants interpret and understand their lived experiences, and through etic analysis to provide an analytic rendering of those perspectives (Freeman, 1998; Willis & Trondman, 2000). Ethnography, using the compressed time mode (Jeffrey and Troman 2004), as an approach to this study in general, and critical ethnography more specifically in its hermeneutic stance was ideal as it attempts to understand how issues that exist in a culture-sharing group, such as power, agency, identity, race, gender, age, etc. are all interwoven in the social constructs of voice, democratic participation, and even childhood.

Sites and Participants

Understanding that student voice is often mitigated and at times stifled in more traditional school settings, this study examined student voice in a democratic school. A preliminary search on the Internet showed that there were just slightly over one hundred schools across the United States that identify themselves as democratic schools. According to the website, Alternative Education Resource Organization (AERO), a democratic school is defined as one that provides an "education in which young people

have the freedom to organize their daily activities, and in which there is equality and democratic decision-making among young people and adults" (¶ 1, n.d.). Although the majority of these schools are considered private institutions, some are classified as public alternative and home school resource centers.

From this initial search, I focused specifically on democratic schools located in the state of Texas. Admittedly, the convenience of selecting a site in my city or state was immediately appealing. The state of Texas is also a particularly apt choice for this study given its conservative political climate and the sway that conservative ideology has on school policy and also on fundamental child rearing principles. A school premised on equal representation of both adults and children in matters concerning school operations and even discipline runs counter to the family values and authoritarian parenting style found in more conservative households (Markman, 2012).

From the five schools listed as democratic schools in Texas, I visited each website hoping to learn the following:

1. What role does student voice play in the school's philosophical approach to children and education?
2. How is democratic education articulated in the school's model of education?
3. What is considered a typical school week for students?
4. What are the ages of students who attend the school?

Though the last two questions are not specifically tied to my research questions, they were important to consider for several reasons. First, inconsistency in the number of days students are required to attend school could limit the time I have to interact with the students and members of the school community. As ethnographic research involves

considerable time observing participants and becoming "immersed in the day-to-day lives of the people," infrequent school attendance would have posed a significant challenge to the study (Creswell, 2013). In addition, because I was still working in my role as an assistant principal in a public elementary school, I needed to select a school with a regular weekly schedule to avoid potential scheduling conflicts.

The final question is significant because this study sought to interrogate dominant assumptions regarding children and childhood and, more specifically, how those assumptions inform the decisions we make about a child's capacity to make decisions. While democratic schools claim to challenge long-held cultural attitudes regarding children, I was interested to learn if any differentiation exists between young students and older students. Even with a more liberal attitude regarding children, it is difficult to imagine that younger students, those who are between ages five and ten are afforded the same liberties in a democratic school as the older students, particularly given the pervasive discourse surrounding child safety (Best, 2007).

After visiting each of the five websites, I found two schools that fit the specific criteria I regarded as important for this study. That is, two of the five schools referenced student voice and its place in the school's philosophy; each of the two schools had specific examples of democratic participation and how that participation happens in the school; both schools had a five-day school week schedule; and, each school enrolled students ages five to eighteen. Another commonality between the two schools was that they both followed the Sudbury school model of democratic education. Sudbury schools differ significantly from traditional models of education by giving students the sole authority over their own pedagogical methods, assessment, and learning environment.

Since the two schools met the criteria necessary for my study, I decided to pursue the Sudbury School in Austin, Texas as the study site for two specific reasons: location and access.

As Madison (2012) maintains, critical ethnographic research requires extensive time in the field collecting data and observing study participants. Choosing a study site within driving distance from where I live was more efficient because it eliminated the additional time and expense needed to travel. With this convenience, I was able to spend more time in the field. I also recognized that access to a school site may prove challenging and "may require finding one or more individuals in the group who will allow (me) the researcher in-a gatekeeper" (Creswell, 2007, p. 94). Upon my preliminary investigation into the school, I discovered that a former school leader from my current school district was employed as member of the school staff. While I did not know this individual personally, I have close colleagues who have worked directly with him and could have served as a resource as I attempted to negotiate entry into the school. Since entry into my preferred school site was not a guarantee, I kept the Sudbury school located out of town as a potential viable option.

About Preferred School Site

As Madison (2012) maintains, a researcher's primary responsibility is to the study participants. In order to fulfill my responsibility of maintaining the confidentiality of any potential participants, pseudonyms have been used. In operation since 2009, the preferred school is an alternative democratic school located in the state of Texas. The school is situated in a residential community in the central eastern part of the city bordering a major North-South Interregional Highway. Running through the city's core since 1962,

the highway has served as a decades-old racial and economic barrier between the city's impoverished east side and its more affluent west side. The school is located across from a 711-mile Planned Unit Development (PUD) constructed in 2007 at the former site of the city's airport. Although 25% of the planned residential homes in the surrounding school community is reserved for those making 80% or less of city's median family income, Lemon (2013) observes that the neighborhood:

> has developed into a community of predominantly wealthy, white residents in a traditionally minority controlled space who have - intentionally or not - settled down in their own protected enclave and served as trailblazers for the gentrification of the surrounding East [City] neighborhoods" (¶ 1).

Indeed, the American Community Survey (ACS) estimates that the percentage of White residents living in the School's Community ZIP code rose from 26.3% in 2011 to 30.4% in 2014 while the percentage of Hispanics and African Americans declined from 43.8% and 26.7% to 43.4% and 26.7% respectively (US Census Bureau, 2016). In addition, according to Willow Real Estate Company, the median home price for that same area rose from $173,000 in 2007 to $323,000 in 2016.   However, the school's student body was comprised of individuals who lived outside of the school's zip code and even some who lived outside the city limits.

Although the school, referred to in this study as Hillview, distinguished itself as a secular institution on the school's homepage, it operated out of five rooms rented from a Presbyterian Church. The school serves students ages five to eighteen and, according to a website listing local alternative school choices, the School enrolled 50 students during the 2015 school year. Although I did not have access to demographic information, certain

assumptions can be made based on my observations and interactions and on general public information about Hillview. For example, annual tuition rates are set at $7500 with a 25% sibling discount for the second child and a 50% discount for subsequent children. While tuition assistance is available for qualifying families, with the minimum tuition being $1700, families must provide all meals for their children, transportation to and from school, and money for other incidental costs, such as field trip admissions.

The majority of the students and all of the staff members were White, and the parents with whom I spoke or learned about during participant interviews were all employed in full-time professional positions. The families I observed during drop-off and pick up did not display typical status symbols commonly accepted as a sign of wealth and status (in Texas, especially), such as luxury branded apparel or cars. However, given the financial obligations required to attend Hillview, and that low-income students account for just 9% of the private school student population (Ee, Orfield, & Teitell, 2018), I assume most students came from middle to upper-middle class households.

As an educator and researcher committed to social justice and equity, I struggled with the knowledge that racial/ethnic minority and low-income students, those whose voices often go unheard in education and unrecorded in the research literature (Kirshner & Pozzobni, 2011), were vastly underrepresented at this study site. My decision to nevertheless pursue this site was based on several important and relevant considerations. First, Hillview's commitment to student empowerment and student autonomy over decisions regarding their learning and activities at school, a focus of this study, was not present in any public tuition-free school, nor was democratic participation, my second rationale for conducting my research at this site. Additionally, from the onset of this

project, a fundamental professional goal has always been to apply what I learn to my practice. Hillview, following the Sudbury model of education, maintains that it is a:

> Democratic school, embracing the philosophy that dignity and freedom are the essential state of all humans. As a democracy, it is the purpose of our school to ensure that the rights and freedoms of School Meeting members are both protected and respected.

Hillview's democratic ideals are practiced weekly in their two-hour school meetings where students and adults vote equally, a judicial committee comprised of students and teachers responsible for rules and consequences, and a yearly assembly where students, staff, and parents make broad policy decisions and review the annual budget. In conjunction to democratic participation, Hillview considers self-determination, self-paced learning, and self-evaluation basic principles of their learning philosophy. With its emphasis on egalitarian representation and anti-authoritarianism, I was encouraged that a research study at Hillview would inform my own practice and pedagogy as a school leader in a public education school setting.

Hillview Staff Members

Unlike traditional elementary schools where adults take a primary role in determining student curricular needs and overall educational experience, Hillview staff assume a more administrative role. An attachment posted on Hillview's Yahoo discussion group on July 19, 2015, describes the role of their staff members:

> In general, the duties of staff include: instruction and assistance of students who request it; responsibility for administrative work and campus maintenance as necessary to ensure that the school runs smoothly and safely; participation in the

democratic structures of the school; outreach; parent support; and working in accordance with the Sudbury philosophy. A person accepting a staff position is agreeing to show a high level of initiative in their service to the school, even when work must occur during hours that are not scheduled (e.g., evenings, weekends, holidays, breaks).

At the time of my inquiry and throughout my time in the field, Hillview Sudbury School had a staff of five. Although the experiences of each staff member vary, it is interesting to note that three of the five staff members had previously worked in a traditional educational school setting. The following summaries of the personal and professional backgrounds of Hillview Sudbury staff members were based on the biographical information found on the Hillview website and on personal conversations I had during my field study. These synopses provide a brief introduction to each of five staff members and are furthered developed in Chapter 4:

Beth. Beth is a musician and educator who had taught in both the private and public sector for more than twenty-five years. Beth holds a Bachelors of Science degree in education, as well as a Masters degree in Music Education and a Ph.D. in Curriculum and Instruction. Beth believes that the emphasis on self-directed and self-initiated learning, and democratic participation in Sudbury schools creates an ideal environment for students. Beth seemed to be a staff favorite among the younger students. At the request of several students, Beth organized and led the Hillview choir, which performed both on and off campus.

Jude. Jude brings more than 20 years experience as a researcher in psychology, family studies, and human development. He is also one of the co-founders of Hillivew

school. Through our conversations, it was apparent that Jude saw great value in the Sudbury mode and was proud to be a part of Hillview and the learning experience his school provides. He would take any opportunity to speak to anyone he met about the merits and advantages of Hillview.

Judy. Judy, who holds a Bachelors of Science in Chemistry, is co-founder of Hillview and works to foster a school environment in which students are respected and honored regardless of age. Like Beth, Judy was typically one of the first staff members the younger students would seek out if they needed or wanted something. Both Judy and Beth were observed interacting with students on activities, such as choir practice, gardening, or cooking, more often than other staff members at Hillview.

Will. Will is a former elementary and middle school teacher and assistant principal with more that 25 years experience in public education. He holds a Bachelor's of Science in Radio-TV-Film and a Master's in Curriculum and Instruction. He values the autonomy students have in their own learning and in school decisions at Hillview. Will and I had shared many exchanges about the limited opportunities for student autonomy and choice we observed throughout our careers in public education. He considers the Hillview Sudbury school experience a preferable learning environment for students and a more fulfilling career choice for himself.

Lee. Lee co-founded the first Sudbury school in Illinois and is the founder and president of Friends of Sudbury Schooling. He holds degrees in English, History, and Education. I observed Lee very much involved in the managerial process of the school during my field experience. His interactions with students at Hillview were more formal and his temperament less tolerant of what might be considered "child-like behaviors"

than what I observed of other staff members. Nevertheless, Lee was serious about his work at the school and about following the democratic model of participation promoted and practiced at Hillview.

Participant Selection

This critical ethnographic case study was conducted at Hillview School, a Sudbury model school in Texas. As this study was focused on the educational experiences of elementary-aged students, participant selection was limited to those who fell within the target range of ages five to ten years old. While the school is open to students ages five to eighteen, overall enrollment was fewer than sixty students, with 24 falling within the target age. My decision to conduct this study on student voice with elementary-aged students was deliberately made for several specific reasons. First, data collection on student voice with younger students addresses a gap in the research literature. Many studies on student voice include the perspectives of high school and middle school students, those who are older than eleven years of age (Mitra, 2008; Stern, Romer, & Jamieson, 2002). Including the voices of younger students contributes to a more nuanced understanding of the complexities of student voice in the educational setting.

Likewise, prevailing attitudes about childhood are often dismissive of elementary students' ability to make decisions for themselves. By documenting the choices made by students in elementary school, this study attempted to negate deficit attitudes about children. Another rationale for conducting a study on elementary-aged student came from my experience as an elementary teacher and administrator. Having served in elementary schools as a teacher and assistant principal, and principal for more than sixteen years, I

feel comfortable with my ability to build rapport and trust with young students in a way that allowed me to gain entry into the culture-sharing group (Creswell, 2013).

While this study was centered on the voices of the children at the study site, it was also important for me to understand the perspectives of the other members in the culture-sharing group: the adults. An important aspect of critical ethnography is to acknowledge that representations of reality are socially constructed through discourse and enmeshed in relations of power. As a result, it was important for me to understand how the perspectives of the adults contribute to the "multiple voices within the individual and within the community struggle to control the direction of the acceptable dialogue" thus determining which "ideological expressions may be reinforced, reinterpreted, or rejected" (Quantz & O'Connor, 1988, p. 99).

Participants were selected using criterion-based and opportunistic sampling as this method allowed me to attend to the specific research questions and "take advantage of unforeseen opportunities after fieldwork has begun" (Patton, 2002, p. 240). Since this study sought to understand how issues of student voice, democratic practice, and childhood are constructed in a democratic school, specific purposeful sampling was an important consideration. Some students were more inclined to participate after they had seen their peers involved, and it was important to have had the option of adding to the study sample when these opportunities became apparent. Initially, however, I used the following criteria to identify potential study participants:

1. Student participants must willingly volunteer to participate in the study.
2. Student must have been enrolled in the school since at least the beginning of the school year.

3. Student participant must have parent permission to participate in the study.
4. Adult participant must have been working at the school since at least the beginning of the school year.
5. Adult participant must willingly volunteer to participate in the study.

The first step I took to identify study participants was to spend time getting to know the students and letting them get to know me. By establishing a relationship of trust between the students, staff, and myself, I was able to facilitate more open and authentic interactions and a willingness among the school community to participate in the study. Following Carspecken's (1996) five-stage (1. Building a preliminary record 2. Preliminary reconstructive analysis 3. Dialogical data generation 4. & 5. Conducting systems analysis) approach to critical ethnography, trust building happened during stage one, which I expand on later. Nonetheless, my primary focus was to observe and build "mindful rapport" with participants (Madison, 2012). Since my observations included all members of the school community, it was important for me to obtain informed consent from each member regardless if they participated or not. In addition, all members of the school community were given the opportunity to choose anonymity throughout the research process. A detailed introduction to the study participants is presented in Chapter 4.

Data Collection

The data collection and analysis process followed Carspecken's (1996) Five Stages for Qualitative Research (CQR). Carspecken's five-stage model incorporates the fundamental concepts of critical theory into a methodological approach for qualitative research. The first three stages "employ critical analytic models to reconstruct cultural

structures and themes" while the last two are "designed to discover how routine social actions form and reproduce systems relations that coordinate activities across various reaches of space and time" (Georgiou & Carspecken, 2002, p. 690). While Carspecken (1996) suggests that researchers generally follow the first three steps sequentially, the five stages are not "hard and fast" but rather intended to be used loosely, moving back and forth as new discoveries are made (p.40).

Stage One: Building a Preliminary Record

In this stage, Carspecken (1996) recommends that the researcher take an unobtrusive outsider perspective, compiling thick descriptions of 'monological' data to "help sharpen one's awareness of events that may occur" (p. 49). The purpose behind this outsider's view, or what Pike (1967) considered etic perspective, is to compare the initial findings with those collected later in the study. The etic viewpoint is important because it allows the researcher to maintain "some sense of an external, '"objective"' framework" and identify any potential contradiction between what is observed and the interpretative constructs that such observations are construed to justify (Whitehead, 2002, p.16). The primary methods for data collection in this stage will follow Carspecken's (1996) recommendation to produce a thick description and keep a filed journal.

I began the process of producing thick descriptions of the school environment and members of the school community by creating an observation schedule with specific dates and times and with carefully selected primary observation sites around the school. Dense record of the routines, rituals, and daily activity were kept for each observation period. Secondary, more periphery observation sites were selected and recorded less formally in a field journal. Observations took place over a two and a half month period

with a total of twenty hours in the field. Following the recommendations made by Woodsong, MacQueen Guest, and Namey (2005), I focused my attention on participants' verbal behaviors, gestures, posture, appearance, and interactions. Honing in on these general categories allowed me to capture the "same basic routines over and over again" (Carspecken, 1996, p. 49). Additionally, I was able to assess both verbal and nonverbal forms of expression, understand how students express themselves both around adults and around their peers, and develop a holistic understanding of the student participants and the culture-sharing group. This process also allowed me to become more familiar with with student participants, which helped facilitate the research process.

Stage Two: Preliminary Reconstructive Analysis

Stage 2 of the process is where a preliminary meaning of the cultural context begins to take shape. During this preliminary reading, I looked for patterns and routines and identifying themes as they began to emerge. The process began with multiple readings of the observation record before moving into preliminary coding. Carspecken (1996) considers the initial coding a reconstructive process that must be "checked, expanded, and probably changed through procedures employed in stage three" so that cultural contexts can be reconstructed "into explicit discourse" (p. 93). As a result, this step was not an attempt to make high inference reconstructions of the data but rather a process I used so that I could begin to piece together initial articulations of tacit understandings.

Stage Three: Dialogical Data Generation

The purpose of stage three is to begin the process of collecting dialogical data. Unlike Stages 1 and 2, Stage 3 is concerned with understanding the perspectives of those

inside the culture group, the emic perspective. Data collection in this stage was done through one-on-one in-depth unstructured interviews each of the five participants (Lichtman, 2006). Since I spent significant time building rapport and establishing a sense trust during Stage 1, study participants were more comfortable sharing their stories with me.

The rationale behind selecting in-depth unstructured interview techniques was to allow participants, particularly the students, the freedom to share their own thoughts and feelings without the parameters that predetermined questions would create. As Lichtman (2006) notes, the purpose behind in-depth unstructured interviews is "to hear what the participant has to say in his own words, his own voice, with his language and narrative" (p. 143). Some participants, especially child participants, might find the interview process intimidating so I wanted to create a situation where the participants felt as comfortable as possible. As a result, participants could choose where they wanted the interview to take place and whether other students were around or not. Three participants were interviewed in Room #3 and two were interviewed outside on the school's breezeway. All five interviews were conducted with other students in close proximity who would, at times, interject or just sit and watch. The casual presence and participation of other students made the process feel less formal and seemed to facilitate more willingness among the participants to share their stories.

Following Lichtman's (2006) recommendation, I began each interview with an invitation for the participant to share any information about themselves they would like. Since the merit in unstructured interviews lies in their conversational quality, interview protocol with general flexible questions for students were developed (Carspecken, 1996).

This type of interview provided a framework from which I was able to begin the data collection process while allowing for the possibility of flexibility. The interview protocol consisted of some general questions and some probing questions in an effort to understand a) demographic information of the student; b) educational information; c) how student voice is exercised in school; d) participant thoughts about democratic education. Specifically, I wanted to gain an understanding of how students were expressing their voice about their education and how the notion of democracy was constructed in their school. Participant interviews provided a more nuanced understanding of the experiences of the students in schools. All interviews were digitally audio-recorded and later transcribed so all attention and focus was on the interviewee during the conversation.

Interview protocol for the adults consisted of both general and probing questions regarding a) demographic information; b) experience in education; c) constructions of childhood; d) thoughts on democratic education. Interviews with staff members were unstructured and more opportunistic than the interviews with students. Often, our conversations would happen casually as we were getting to know one another and discussing topics related to our common interests, such as education or politics. Since my focus was on the voices of students at Hillview, interviews with staff members were documented less formally through note taking and reflection, rather than a digital record. These data were incorporated into the data analysis in Chapter 4.

Data Analysis

Stages Four and Five: Conducting Systems Analysis

Stages 1 to 3 concern the reconstruction of cultural structures and themes addressing the ways in which meaning is constituted during interactions with students in comparison with conventional expectations for such interactions. In Stages 4 and 5, the critical ethnographer moves from the relatively subjective realm of face-to-face interaction to the relatively objective realm of systemic structures (or patterns) that comprehend the particular evidence/data/examples that the researcher has discovered/constituted.

The data collected and analyzed during Stages 1 to 3 was considered in relation to broader sociopolitical contexts, by moving between the etic and emic perspectives. Carspecken (1996) linked Stages 4 and 5 to Giddens' (1984) concept of system integration. Giddens described integration as "involving reciprocity of practices (of autonomy and dependence) between actors [people] or collectivities" (p. 28) across time and space. System integration is achieved when a system (patterned relations across time and space) is established, yet human action is separated in time and space (Carspecken, 1996). Consequently, Stages 4 and 5 of a research project "are meant to focus entirely on objectively ascertainable behavioral routines locked into system relations" (Georgiou, Carspecken, & Willems, 1996, p. 320). In these last two stages, I adopted a more objective analytical style and findings were linked to general theories of society.

In short, my aim in Stage 4 was to propose or establish system relations--that is patterned relations that pertain across time and space--between classroom decision-making at the site versus schools elsewhere in Texas and the US, taking into account not

only our culture's standard educational practice but also pertinent political and economic factors in the larger society. I drew on relevant research literature as well as my own personal experience as an educator in the Texas public school system to establish these relationships between the study site and other schools.

In Stage 5, I attempted to link the findings to broader sociocultural theories in order to illuminate the "reproductive circuits of society" (Georgiou & Carspecken, 2002, p. 694). This process of understanding why individuals continue to do the same things is an important aspect of CQR because issues such as gender relations, social class, and relational inequalities are all produced by people yet often escape people's awareness. Consequently, what teachers and students say they do and what they actually do can be habitually quite different.

Reliability and Validity

In a qualitative study, as in any formal research process, reliability and validity of the study are important considerations. Researchers rely on validity measures for evaluating the quality of qualitative research. The quality of any research project is important and can elicit an understanding of a concept or situation that would be otherwise confusing or problematic. However, issues of reliability and validity are rooted in positivist perspective and, as a result, pose a methodological challenge in qualitative research in general and critical qualitative research in particular. According to Creswell (2013), there are many varied perspectives on the significance of validity and reliability in a qualitative research project. Perspectives regarding the criteria for such measures are equally as varied among researchers. According to Stenbacka (2001), "the concept of reliability is even misleading in qualitative research. If a qualitative study is discussed

with reliability as a criterion, the consequence is rather that the study is no good" (p. 552). Adversely, Patton (2002) considers reliability and validity two fundamental factors necessary to a researcher when designing a study, analyzing the results, and determining its quality.

In research that is rooted in more traditional methods, validity refers to the soundness of the study and the relationship between the findings and their claim to the truth (Seliger & Shohamy 1989). However, critical theory contends that "truth" is not universal but rather socially and culturally contingent (Carspecken, 1996). Borrowing from pragmatist philosophy, critical qualitative research considers that meaning and validity in interpretation are "grounded only in the intersubjectivity of the mutual understanding of intentions" (Habermas, 1987, p. 92). Given the eclectic theoretical underpinnings of critical ethnography as a method, it is difficult to claim sure footing or assurance with regard to one's findings. Consequently, supplemental strategies are adduced that are designed to validate insights and conclusions that follow from critical ethnographic research.

Triangulation

Triangulation is a strategy used by researchers to ensure the reliability and validity of a qualitative research study. Patton (2002) states that triangulation strengthens a study by combining methods, including the use of both qualitative and quantitative methods. Golafshani (2003) acknowledges the use of mix methods but also argues that, "triangulation may include multiple methods of data collection and data analysis, but does not suggest a fix method for all the researches. The methods chosen in triangulation to test the validity and reliability of a study depend on the criterion of the research" (p.

603). This ethnographic study of student voice at Hillview Sudbury School will draw on multiple sources of data including participant interviews and participant observations to achieve validity through triangulation.

Rich Description

A detailed description of the study participants and the study site was presented so that others could make decisions regarding the transferability of the findings (Creswell, 2013). Providing a rich descriptive account of the study site and participants adds to the credibility to the study and enables the reader to contextualize the setting and milieu in which the study is situated. The descriptions presented in Chapter 4 incorporated details that emerged through field observations, site-based artifacts, and participant interviews,

Reflexivity

When engaging in qualitative research, Creswell (2013) maintains the importance of researchers positioning themselves reflexively throughout the research and writing process. The process of reflexivity is one in which the writer makes aware any pre-conceptions, biases, and experiences he or she brings that may distort the research outcome. My experiences as an educator and parent have been fundamental in guiding my work as a researcher. My interest in student voice and in educational spaces that challenge the dominant assumptions made about children comes directly from my work as an educator and the educational experiences I have observed with my two children. In my role as a researcher, I consider it an ethical obligation not only to criticize the structures and practices that contribute to societal inequity but also to 'fight against' those injustices so all students experience a fair and equitable education.

My interest in student voice in the decision-making processes in schools evolved from a trip to Reñaca, Chile where I was able to attend the Fifth Congress of Humanities for High School Students (2012) entitled *Rebels and Citizens: Social movements and the crisis of the system, A new Spring of Nations?* The student congress in Reñaca offered me as a graduate student the opportunity to witness firsthand a model of democratic pedagogy and student empowerment. It was there I began to question the role students in my school play in their own education and the impact their input could have not only on their educational outcomes but also on the decisions we make in schools. This topic hits close to home because not only do I work as a teacher and administrator in public education, I also have children in the public school system and have witnessed and, regrettably, reinforced school practices that discount the voices and interests of students in favor of those who are far less directly impacted by what we do. It is my belief that these practices have over time become such a normalized way of "doing school" that they render difficult possibilities for real fundamental change in our current system. By examining the role student voice plays in more a more progressive school setting, I hope to inform my practice as an educator and school leader committed to socially just opportunities for all students.

Limitations

Many researchers advocate for the inclusion of young people in the research process (Kirby, 2004; Schäfer & Yarwood, 2008; Tinson, 2009). However, ethnographic research on students carries with it some possible limitations worthy of mention. First, as an adult researcher, representing the viewpoints and perspectives of young students can be problematic. Although I intend to represent the experiences of the students as

authentically as possible, interpretation of the data will be done from the vantage point of an adult researcher. While member-checking strategies will contribute to the validity of my study, there may be certain limitations to authentically representing student voice from an adult perspective.

In her article regarding ethnographic research, Knupfer (1996) identifies three challenges researchers encounter when doing ethnography with children:

> First, how do ethnographers "enter" into children's worlds? Not only do we come with our own cultural biases, but we also bring our adult-centered views of what constitutes childhood. A second, but related question, is to what extent do we, as ethnographers, participate in the children's world and thus change it? Worded differently, to what extent do we observe and/or participate? In some cultures, particular forms of social interaction and literacy events between adults and children may not be appropriate; thus, we may violate a culture-specific adult role. Third, how do we write an ethnography of children? (p.136).

As this study seeks to examine the ways in which students are expressing their voice about their own education, it must be acknowledged that certain constraints impose limitations to this endeavor. Attempts to include student voice in school-based decisions have fallen short in traditional schools and, as Cook-Sather (2008) cautions, "efforts to attend to, re-imagine, and re-position students within educational research have, ironically, the potential to reinforce rather than disrupt existing social conditions and dominant arrangements of power and participation" (p.2). The issue of student voice in education has been widely contested in the field of educational research (Cook-Sather, 2008; Fielding, 2002; Orner, 1992; Robinson & Taylor, 2012). The hierarchical structure

of schools creates an unbalanced division of power between adults and children in which the adults are considered to hold more authority. Social and cultural constructed notions of children also impose limitations on the authority of student voices in schools and in society.

As an adult researcher, I must always be cognizant of my position of power and how it may influence my study. I must also recognize the challenges of writing on behalf of others, especially children. Cook-Sather (2008) reminds us "If students' experiences are viewed from the adult perspective, it is that perspective that provides the frame of reference" (p. 17). This consequence illustrates the need to question and account for the generational and hierarchical difference between the adult researcher and student subjects and to make allowance for such differences in crafting a written account of the results of such research, as indeed in any discursive practice:

> We must also interrogate the bearing of our location and context on what it is we are saying, and this should be an explicit part of every serious discursive practice we engage in. Constructing hypotheses about the possible connections between our location and our words is one way to begin. This procedure would be most successful if engaged in collectively with others, by which aspects of our location less highlighted in our own minds might be revealed to us. (p.25)

The knowledge that derives from educational research is inevitably conditioned by the social and cultural placement of the researcher and ideally will be accompanied by a corresponding growth in knowledge about herself.

Ethical Considerations

Young and Barrett (2001) emphasize the importance of ethics in researching children and in recognizing “that childhood is diverse, with different children and their childhood experiences requiring unique approaches which often present the researcher with unexpected moral dilemmas” (p. 130). An important first step when considering ethical research with any group of human subjects is obtaining approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) from my University. Approval through the IRB process requires that the following criteria, set forth by the Office of Human Research Protections (OHRP) are met:

1. Risks to subjects are minimized
2. Risks to subjects are reasonable in relation to anticipated benefits, if any, to subjects, and the importance of the knowledge that may reasonably be expected to result.
3. Selection of subjects is equitable
4. Informed consent will be sought from each prospective subject or the subject's legally authorized representative
5. Informed consent will be appropriately documented
6. When appropriate, the research plan makes adequate provision for monitoring the data collected to ensure the safety of subjects.
7. When appropriate, there are adequate provisions to protect the privacy of subjects and to maintain the confidentiality of data.
8. When some or all of the subjects are likely to be vulnerable to coercion or undue influence, such as children, prisoners, pregnant women, mentally disabled persons, or economically or educationally disadvantaged persons, additional

safeguards have been included in the study to protect the rights and welfare of these subjects.

Approval through the IRB process provided assurance that my study would adhere to the highest standards of safety, confidentiality, and, ethical values. As such, IRB approval affirmed the validity of my study while allaying concerns to potential participants and their families regarding confidentiality and responsible research practices.

IV. FINDINGS

The purpose of this ethnographic case study was to understand how student voice and democracy are contextualized in a democratically run Sudbury model school in Texas. This study also sought to understand how mainstream assumptions of children, as were discussed in Chapter 1, are negotiated and mitigated in favor of egalitarian practices in this Sudbury model school. More precisely, this study attempted to answer the following research questions:

1. Do socially constructed views of childhood have an impact on opportunities for students to express their voice in this democratic Sudbury school?
2. How is the notion of democratic education and participation constructed through discourse at Hillview Sudbury School?
3. How is student voice situated in this democratic Sudbury schools?

This chapter presents a detailed interpretation of the themes that emerged through analysis of interview transcripts, observational field notes, and study site artifacts. It begins with an account of the structure, practice, and operation of the study site in order to provide context. This is important since the Sudbury school model is radically different from other models of both private and public schools. Finally, I introduce each of the study participants as they described themselves and through my own personal interactions with each of them, in order to provide background information.

Hillview Sudbury School

Hillview Sudbury is a secular private school that follows the core principles of Sudbury education, which were discussed in Chapter 2. According to the website, Hillview offers a “surprisingly alternative school” experience that is unique to the

philosophical principles of Sudbury models schools. Citing Hillview literature presented to prospective parents, Sudbury schools differ from other types of private schooling options, such as Montessori, Waldorf, and Progressive schools and can be distinguished from these other private school models in the following ways (emphasis added):

- The Sudbury model makes no assumptions about how individual children will learn at any age. There is no expectation that one learn multiplication before negative numbers or how to draw a circle before a square. **Interest is the only criterion for engaging in any activity**, and satisfaction the only evaluation of success.
- The Sudbury model espouses not particular path of spiritual or emotional growth. Rather than listening to children in order to better guide them, we listen to them to **respond to their self-determined needs**.
- Unlike Waldorf education, **we have no predetermined curriculum**. We trust children to make their own mistakes, work through their own problems, and come to their own solutions, with help, when it's needed, but without the assumption that we know the best outcome.
- Waldorf educators endeavor to move children, and society in general, in a particular direction, and seek to set up an environment that fosters such social transformation. By contrast, Sudbury schools seek to create an environment **where children can recognize and pursue their own agenda**.
- Children and adults together assess and modify the culture of the school through the School Meeting. The democratic process in a Sudbury school can be loud and contentious; it involves special interest groups politicking, voters

making judgments, defendants being sentenced. It is "real" and not necessarily "enlightened" (although always respectful).

- The Sudbury model simply aims to give children access to the full complexity of life, and the curiosity, confidence, and competence to participate in—and **perhaps to change—society according to their own interests, experience, knowledge, and goals**.
- The Sudbury model also rejects the notion that the alternative to authoritarianism is permissiveness—kind teachers giving kids second and third chances to shape up, trying to prevent any unhappiness, and bending over backwards to make learning fun," getting children to learn without them noticing they are learning. When kids are treated permissively they do not learn personal responsibility for their actions.
- **When a student has an interest, we believe she should be allowed to pursue it only as far as she feels necessary**. She may return to an important idea later, to deepen her interest, but forcing or manipulation her to deepen it will only serve to lessen her curiosity and sense of self-determination.
- We think boredom is a valuable opportunity to make discoveries about one's self. It is often easier to sit in classes, be entertained (maybe not as well as TV entertains, but still better than nothing), and avoid parental pressure than it is to schedule one's own life, wrestle with one's own questions, learn how to seek the answers, and master one's own destiny. (Pittman, n.d,, p. 1-3).

My first visit to Hillview was in October 2016 when I attended one of their monthly informational sessions. I, along with two prospective families and one public

high school student who could earn extra credit in a class for his attendance, toured the five rooms Hillview rents from the church and engaged in a question and answer session with Will (staff member) in Room 2. Much like everything else I had learned about Sudbury model schools through my research, the rooms were not arranged or furnished according to conventional classroom or school standards. Rather than chairs and desks or tables, rooms were furnished with oversized upholstered couches and chairs. Room 2, the largest of the five rooms, housed the school's six computers, all of which were located on one side of the room. And though the rooms appeared to serve a particular purpose (Room 1 with shelves of books like a library, Room 2 with computers and television similar to a media lab, Room 3 had art supplies and a piano for creativity, Room 4 had a refrigerator and tables for dining, and Room 5 lined with couches for lounging), students were free to engage in any activity in any room of their choosing, yet another distinction lauded on the Hillview website:

> This mode of learning looks very different from other school models. Indoors, the kids, young adults, and adults all share the same comfortable space, pursuing their activities individually and in groups. Play, conversation, and managing the school as a business all take part simultaneously in the shared space, on couches and at common tables, in an environment of people who trust and respect each other. Through the back doors is our small back yard, beyond which is our expansive 19 acre extended campus, Thompson Park (pseudonym).

The Sudbury school experience is, not surprisingly, radically different from conventional education systems. Sudbury model schools seek to establish equal relationships between children and adults. The differences between Hillview and other

school models became more apparent on my first day of field study. Other than a minimum attendance requirement of twenty hours per week and an arrival time no later than 11:00 a.m., students do not follow a set schedule. There is no required curriculum or daily activity in which students are expected to participate, nor are students expected to reach a certain proficiency level or master any particular content. Rather, learning is self-paced and each student determines how to spend the day according to his or her interests without any interference from "compelling or coercive teachers" (Hillview Sudbury School, n.d.).

Along with complete academic freedom, students at Hillview enjoy the freedom to associate with whomever they choose, whenever and wherever they wish. Unlike more conventional schools, students at Hillview are not separated or restricted from any particular school space or activity based on their age. Sudbury model schools consider age mixing "a natural result of the non-hierarchical structure of the school" where, "in the absence of unhealthy competition," young and old learn from the teachings of one another (Hillview Sudbury School, n.d.).

In fact, restrictions based on age do not apply to any activity at Hillview (including virtually unhindered freedom of expression and full access to uncensored digital content), with the exception of leaving school grounds. While older students with parent permission are free to leave campus at any time, mid-aged students must have a buddy accompany them to Thompsom Park and younger students, those who are under the age of "around nine," as Beth (staff member) reports, require a staff member escort any time they wish to leave school grounds.

Introduction to Study Participants

When I began this study, 51 students ages 6-18 with an average age of 11.8 years were enrolled at Hillview Sudbury School. Though my study was centered on elementary-aged (5-11) students, I was able to observe and interact with all members of the school community during my time at Hillview, including some of the parents. After a few initial data collection visits, I began to record in my field journal interactions with and observations of students who I thought might be willing participants. I began to compile a list of students who seemed less suspicious of my presence at the school; those less inclined to stop an activity or conversation when I entered the room. The following are examples of observations that I noted in my field study journal:

> I have noticed that Raven seems curious about my presence at the school and today, for the first time, she sat down at the table with me and we started a conversation. Many of the younger students were having their hair checked for lice and this has created quite a stir in Room #3. This situation presented the perfect opportunity to strike up a casual conversation. Raven is at ease talking with me and is willing to ask and answer questions. She is interested in why I am at the school and the notes that I am taking (Field Notes; May 19, 2017).
>
> Today Raven and Olivia began talking to me about their interest in gymnastics. I told them that I was a gymnast when I was younger and how much I continue to enjoy the sport. Raven told me about the gymnastic equipment they have at the school and asked if I wanted to watch her do some gymnastics in Room #5. A few other students wanted to participate as well but they were not yet certified to use the equipment. Since Raven was certified, she offered to train the others,

which just entails reading over the rules about equipment usage and safety. Raven had difficulty reading the materials and signing up to use the equipment so she asked me for help (Field Notes; May 24, 2017).

Soon after these and a few more interactions with Raven and Olivia, I became a regular invitee to their activities, and they became more inquisitive about my study at the school, which naturally led to an invitation to participate. And, since Raven and Olivia had been students at Hillview for over a year and had many friends at the school, they became the "gatekeepers" who gave me access to other study participants (Creswell, 2013). In addition to Olivia and Raven, three other students who fell within the target age range agreed to participate in the interview process (see table 3.1). The introductions of the five students that follow weave together personal information that the participants shared with me and observational data collected during my time at Hillview.

Table 3.1
Study Participants:

Name	**Gender**	**Age in 2017**
Raven	Female	8
Olivia	Female	9
Fynn	Male	6
Crystal	Female	10
Fletcher	Male	8

Raven

At the time of our interview, Raven was eight years old. She was eager to let me know that she would soon turn nine; she, in fact, celebrated her ninth birthday the week following our interview. Raven, an only child, lived with her parents, grandfather, and

"two dogs that kind of act like [her] brother and sister" (Interview, 5/30/17). Raven has attended Hillview since the age of five when her mom went to work in a lab and with NASA. Her father and mother both worked at a research university studying plants. Raven was more on the quiet side although she did seem comfortable interacting with both students and adults. She was noticeably less confident when it came to her reading and writing skills, which she was "kinda waiting to find out something" since she "sometimes struggle[s] with reading" (Interview, 5/30/2017). Outside of school, Raven enjoyed equestrian events and hopes to be a competitive show jumper when she is an adult.

Olivia

Olivia was nine years old during the 2016-2017 school year and was completing her second year at Hillview. She attended a Montessori school for three years followed by a Spanish Immersion school where she got "very stressed out about homework" (Interview, 5/30/2017). Olivia has one younger sister, six-year-old Ava (pseudonym), who was completing her first year at Hillview. Olivia seemed to be especially comfortable around adults and did not consider her interests in line with those of her peers. She liked to "talk a lot, especially to adults" although she was "super shy and didn't like to talk that much to anybody" when she first arrived at Hillview. Olivia was perceptive and articulate and would likely have been considered "academically advanced" in a more traditional school environment. She had a strong sense of justice especially in regards to rules and personal responsibility.

Fynn

Fynn turned six years old during the 2016-2017 school year and was one of the youngest students at Hillview. In addition to a twin bother (Oliver), Fynn had one older sister (Margaret) and one older brother (Alan) all of whom attended Hillview. Fynn and his twin brother attended a preschool until the 2016-2017 school year when they were old enough to join their older brother and sister at Hillview. Although Fynn and his Oliver spent significant time interacting with each other, it was not until my last visit to Hillview that I learned Margaret and Alan were the twin's siblings. Fynn spent a lot of his time at school playing Minecraft and was able to talk in great detail about what made it such a fun game. Fynn took his role on the JC seriously each time I observed him and, in addition to his expertise in all things Minecraft, he was well versed in the parliamentary authority of Robert's Rules of Order.

Crystal

Crystal was ten at the time of our interview and had been attending Hillview for the past four years along with her younger brother, Fletcher. At the time of this study, their mother was a foreign language instructor at a local university. Crystal attended a "stuck-up" private preschool before starting Hillview at age five (Interview, 5/30/2017). She was interested in books about mythology and chapter books such as *Harry Potter* and *The Golden Compass* even though she was "just learning how to read" (Interview, 5/30/2017). Crystal had a commanding presence and I often thought of her as a leader. She skillfully navigated the social worlds of the older and younger students at Hillview. She had many interests and would like to be a singer and a chef "with her own cafeteria where [she] can make skirts" (Interview 5/30/2017).

Fletcher

Fletcher was eight years old during the time of our interview and had been attending Hillview for the past three years along with his older sister, Crystal. Neither Fletcher or Crystal spoke about their father to me but I did learn that their mother was a Spanish teacher. I would often find Fletcher and Fynn playing together, or rather in proximity of each other, perhaps because they both shared an interest in video games. His favorite game at the time was *Subnautica,* which he purchased on a gaming platform called Steam. Fletcher is trying to learn how to read but it has been hard for him. He would like a career as a hockey player or a chef when he is an adult.

Introduction to Research Findings

The themes that emerged through data analysis are rendered through a synthesis of quotations taken directly from the interview transcripts, verbatim excerpts extracted from research field notes, and artifacts collected at the study site. A total of five themes were identified: 1) Historical Sense of Self as Child; 2) Tensions Within the Constructivist Self as Learner; 3) Self-Determination and Body Autonomy; 4) Choice Architecture; 5) Of the People, By the People, For the Individual. Quotations used throughout the presentation of themes are preceded by brief commentary to provide context and are followed by a discussion to convey relevance and meaning. Thus, the data are presented in a way that moves between the emic and etic perspectives.

Historical Sense of Self as Child

A predominant theme that emerged among study participants was a historical or developmental sense of self as a child. Participants understood this construct of "self" to be simultaneously present and yet fleeting, a temporary stage in their life history.

Participants operated on the assumption that the ephemeral state of childhood properly included certain advantages and possibilities as well as an overall freedom from obligation, and this belief in a developmentally appropriate set of privileges determined their belief about what might legitimately be expected of them as “child” within the school setting. For example, when asked about an ideal school experience, Raven suggested that school should be “A place to grow up in, and to remember having good times, and um, kind of just living. Being a kid and not having to really pay for th-taxes, or pay for anything. Just having kind of fun.” Crystal expressed similar sentiments about school when she stated that children should be “Playing freely, not-I mean yes, they should be learning but also let them be kids because you only get one chance to be a kid. And let them fulfill that, like time to be a kid.” Olivia feels like school should be a place where children are “pretty much learning what they want to learn. And not what they do not like to learn. Cause I know if I went to public school, I’d probably be like, ‘Seriously, this is so boring.’”

The notion that childhood should be a time for pleasure, whimsy, and self-direction was observed in many aspects of the school day at Hillview. Many students spent much of their day playing computer games such as Mindcraft or watching videos on laptops or tablets. The following is an excerpt of the daily activities I observed and documented:

> It is 10:23 a.m. and the majority of the students are in Room #2. Six students are on the computers creating 3-dimensional worlds on Mindcraft. Occasionally a student asks a question or mentions something they have noticed or mastered on Mindcraft. Other students may respond but they all keep their eyes on their own

> computer screen. In another part of the room three male students are on laptops, four male students are playing a video game together on the television, and one male student is watching something on his phone. A white board propped up at the front of the room has been divided into six sections—one section for each computer. Students' names and start times have been written in the section number that corresponds with their computer. The earliest start time recorded is 8:55 am. Three female students enter the room the room holding various musical instruments. One of the three informs me that they have a band, "Multitasking," and are going to play a welcome song for me. One staff member enters the room, counts the students, and records the number on a piece of paper. (Field Notes, 4/20/2017)

Staff members were the ones responsible for specific managerial tasks each day, such as routine head counts, school meetings, or organizing filed trips, while students at Hillview enjoyed a large degree of leisure and freedom to choose how they spent their day. Participants understood this freedom from responsibility as an inherent quality of childhood, which serves to demarcate the carefree child from the banality and drudgery of adulthood. According to Crystal, participation in school meetings "is important for staff to [do] so they can know what's going on. But, I think that the students—it's their choice and I don't think it's very important if they don't want to go." Olivia acknowledged that she is "one of the only kids" who participates in the decision-making processes and enforces the rules at Hillview.

Olivia also recognizes the philosophical ambitions of the school and is cognizant of the discrepancy between the participatory rhetoric and the reality of the roles assumed

each day by students and adults: "a lot of times people think the staff members are the only ones who enforce the rules and I like [unintelligible 00:05:36]. It's the way the school works, for the kids to enforce the rules also." She elaborates further on the capriciousness in which some students regard their responsibilities at Hillview:

> A lot of people—a lot of the older kids they're like, 'Do something.' Sort of okay, sort of not, and then in front of me purposely and they are like, 'Are you gonna write me up?' and I am like, 'Seriously, stop doing that, it's annoying. And sometimes they call us names and stuff like that. (Interview with Olivia, 5/20/2017)

Fletcher considers his role in school meetings a waste of time and feels he could be "doing something better than sitting in a room talking." In general, he "just likes playing," and regards student participation in school meetings only "kind of" important. When asked who makes decisions in school meetings if students do not attend, Fletcher's response illustrates his assumptions about the distinct roles adults and children should play: "Um, some kids and some—and um, all the staff members are there." Fletcher's semantic correction, signaled by the repetition of "some" in reference to kids, and the functional link of the correct statement, "all staff members," implies that it is the adults who are ultimately responsible for making decisions in the school. In his description of the deliberations that take place during school meetings, Fletcher uses semantic contrast to establish the distinction between adult and child:

> **They** just talk about like motions and stuff, like getting people suspended and stuff like that. Like Andrew (pseudonym) at the school, he's had like parent conferences five times; it's more than **me**. Well, one more time than **me**. Um and

> **they** talk about like motions like **we** should get—**we** should get more money for the sports corporations so **we** can like get some things. Or maybe like make a field trip to some place."

They (the adults) discipline (me), bring motions before the committee, or plan a field trip, while *we* (students and adults) "get things" to benefit the students.

Staff members at Hillview tend to reinforce the notion that childhood should be a time for pleasurable pursuits rather than mundane obligations. In the following excerpts from my field notes, I describe two separate events that exemplify the ways in which the desires of the child were given precedence:

> It is 2:15 and many of the students have eaten lunch or have at least had snacks. There are various food wrappers, lunch bags, and obvious food crumbs on the carpeted floor. The half-eaten apple that I noticed when I first walked into the room at 1:30 still remains on the floor. Several students walk past the apple on their way to the couch or computers, but do not pick it or any of the other trash up off the floor. After a few minutes, Lee walks into the room, picks up the half-eaten apple off the floor, and throws it into the trash. He does not address the students in the room in any way. (Field Notes, 4/20/2017)
>
> Finn, Sayer, and Leeland run excitedly into the room and circle the table, checking to see if Jude has finished his lunch. Jude has promised to take the three boys out to the skateboarding ramp for a game of Monster's Stew. Jude informs me that this is a modified version of Sharks and Minnows, and the preferred activity for the day since the playground is under reconstruction. Jude is the monster who tries to tag the boys as they run from one side of the ramp to the

> other. Jude explains that, "with certain students, especially the younger ones, the preferred approach is to 'attempt' to tag, but ensure the student can make a narrow escape." (Field Notes, 4/26/2017).

The notion of childhood as a short historical period in one's life governed the way Hillview staff understood their position in relation to the students. Primarily, staff were there to ensure the students at Hillview could experience the pleasures of childhood by avoiding the drudgery of the adult world. Indeed, this sentiment was echoed in their description of the Role of Staff in their Pre-Admissions Overview packet:

> Staff have many tasks besides working with students which include the work of keeping the school going: helping to clean it, taking care of public relations, meeting with parents, doing administrative work etc. When staff are not needed by students, they focus on making sure all other aspects of the school's operations are looked after, or [and only after a litany of responsibilities] they follow their own passions. (p. 7)

Tensions Within the Constructivist Self as Learner

The philosophy guiding Hillview School is based on the principles of "educational freedom," through which students learn: "what they want, when they want, with whom they want, for as long as they want, to the depth of their interest, and in the way that best suits them, *as long as the chosen activities are respectful, responsible and reasonable"* (*Pre-Admissions Overview,* n.d.). This philosophical approach to education reflects the broader epistemological assumptions of constructivist learning theories in which the learner individually and/or socially constructs his or her own knowledge (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Participants consider themselves creators of their own social

knowledge, a quality they attribute to the freedom and autonomy they are afforded at Hillview, which they recognize to be extraordinary and potentially problematic, at least for some.

Crystal, for example, explains that someone from a tradition school should attend Hillview only after a trial period:

> If they were happy with the school after their visiting week. But, if they were like freaked out at the school during their visiting week—I would—I would be like—I wouldn't anything like—like 'You shouldn't come to the school' because I think they would take it the wrong way, but I would—I would think that in my mind.

She elaborates on why someone might "freak out" during his or her visiting week:

> It might be different for somebody else because they're used to very quiet places. Very—like everybody's down in their noses in a book or—not, uh, noses in a book but like very structured. And they're not used to this build it yourself school like—like build your own structure around yourself.

Crystal believes that students experience learning at Hillview in a strikingly different way than they would in more traditional educational setting. Instead of being passive recipients of "very structured" learning with their "noses in books," Hillview students are responsible for creating or "building" their own knowledge. "Noses in books" evidently implies not individual agency, as if a student might become absorbed in a book by choice, but instead reading that is being enforced by assignment. Students accustomed to being occupied by assigned tasks might find the Hillview environment discomfiting. By employing a rhetoric of panic i.e., "freak out," Crystal illustrates the contrast between Hillview, where students control the production of knowledge, which for those

unaccustomed to a lack of structure might produce an initial experience of anxiety, and more traditional models of school where learning is controlled by the adults and the disquiet of choosing is not an issue.

A student like Raven, however, understands learning to be a social process. By "interacting with other people," she is "able to be the boss of" herself and the knowledge she creates. She acknowledges that in practice this process is not always easy. "I—I have to be nice to them and I have to do things—like people I absolutely hate talking to, I hate interacting with; I still have to be fair to them. It's always not very easy." Raven accepts the practical social requirement of self-discipline--of doing something she "hates" and treating others fairly--as qualities essential to a regulating "self" who is able to be in control (the boss) of herself only on the condition of egalitarian conduct within the social group.

Fletchers's ideas about learning at Hillview reflect a similar understanding that knowledge is constituted through a stable social interaction with certain defined behavioral boundaries. He believes that Hillview is "really fun, you can do all kinds of stuff and like it's—you can friends. There's a pirate ship, sand box, swings." He acknowledges that his friends "help him a lot," when he is playing games on the computer. Fletcher also considers the notion of self-discipline a critical aspect to the social processes of learning at Hillview. He believes that Hillview is not for

> everybody, but most people...Like when they have that disease that makes them really raged all the time…like once there was this kid that like just held up his knuckle to my face…I didn't really like him, that's why he got—we got him suspended.

Fletcher's constructed understanding of "student" is subject to the governing principles by which participants are expected to interact at Hillview School.

It is not only through their interactions with other students that participants at Hillview come to see themselves as social, contructivist learners. The principles that govern what it means to experience educational freedom are found in other discursive practices, such as school policy. For example, the primary role of Hillview staff is to:

> Practice non-interference with students. Staff interact with students, talk to them, play with them and care about them, but primarily staff practice "availability without continuous presence," listening and responding to students' needs as they arise, but otherwise leaving students to find and create their own way.
>
> (*Pre-Admissions Overview,* p.7)

Unlike more traditional models of schooling where students are subject to a prescribed curriculum, Hillview students are free to create their own educational paths and determine their own learning. In other words, Hillview School is "a place where each individual practices life, following their own natural curiosity, and where all pursuits are equally valued" (*Introductory Letter,* n.d.).

The values of natural curiosity and individual pursuit are reinscribed in the school's curricular standards. At Hillview, "students enjoy a rich curriculum based on their own interests and the experiences of those they interact with." Should a student so desire, he or she can "organize classes, field trips, and apprenticeships" based on his or her personal interests or experiences (*Pre-Admissions Overview*, p.2). During my time in the field, I observed several times when students organized an activity based on a particular interest, such as a cooking class or school choir. However, these activities

occurred far less often than video gaming or other technology/media usage. Students at Hillview are alone responsible for the construction of their own knowledge and understanding of the world around them. Hillview students also dictate when "they've gotten all they can from the school and want to pursue their interests in the greater world community" (*Pre-Admissions Overview*, p.2). The educational freedom afforded to students at Hillview stands in stark contrast to the model of education in a more traditional school setting.

The sharp distinction between Hillview's pedagogical model and that of a more "traditional" school was an appeal for both staff and parents (which I discuss more specifically later), and yet also a point of tension in the perhaps inevitable inconsistency of the ways in which students viewed themselves as being responsible for their own learning. The question some participants seemed to be struggling to articulate was whether a group dedicated to the principle of individual responsibility properly implied an obligation to participate in governance.

The ideas of educational freedom played a role in the ways in which participants constructed their own interpersonal knowledge. However, participants considered "traditional" learning, as opposed to "organic" learning, to be something that happens outside of Hillview (*Welcome Letter,* n.d.). Raven mentioned that she had wanted to go to public school "To learn how to read and write." When asked if she could learn to read at Hillveiw, she replied, "Yeah, but I'd rather my parents teach me. (They are) Kinda waiting to find out something, if I have a problem with reading. Because I have a little—sometimes struggle with reading." She further indicates that learning to read is not something that she associates with the learning done at Hillview when she states, "I—

I've asked my parents if maybe they'll get me a tutor." It would seem that there is something to be desired hidden in the otherwise alienating image of a student with their nose in a book.

Fletcher and Crystal similarly regard learning to read as both something to be wished and yet avoided as a laborious anomaly contrary to the spirit of self-directed learning governing Hillview. Crystal expressed a sense of angst because she is "just learning how to read even though (she is) 10." While she is interested in reading, she does "not like-not like sitting down and reading a big chapter, but, like maybe every once in a while, like maybe reading like a small book, because I'm still like that." Fletcher also conveyed a sense of worry that he does not know how to read when he stated, "I'm trying to learn but it's hard. Is it hard for you?" His appeal for reassurance when he asked if I shared his struggle suggests an awareness of the importance of the "literate subject" in educational discourse (Luke, 1992). However, learning to read is "not really" something that he does at Hillview, but rather something that is done at home with the help of his parents. Students at Hillview clearly acknowledge the value of pedagogical achievements that, like learning to read, require laborious practice but consider such labor to be something that does not fit in their school.

All three participants express a conflicting notion of themselves as learners and what exactly constitutes learning at Hillview. Their understanding of learning at Hillview is constituted by what they consider antithetical to learning in a traditional school setting. On the one hand, participants favor Hillview for the autonomy and freedom they have to learn, but on the other hand, their freedom and autonomy in learning is confined and limited insofar as it excludes, by their own constructivist choice, the pursuit of

knowledge, however attractive, perceived to demand an investment of potentially unpleasant effort or potentially perceived deficit.

School staff plays a role in how learning is constructed and what kind of learning is privileged or anomalous for participants at Hillview. During my visits to the school, staff members were often engaged in various managerial activities. Many staff members would spend time working on a laptop or tablet during the school day. Olivia explained that she would like it if the staff members spent "more time off their computers…because half of the time they're on their iPads, and computers doing school business." She recounts a time when one of her "friends (was) going to ask a staff member for something, and he was working, and I'm like, 'Ask him.' That's his job to be asked questions like that. And they're like, 'Really?' And I'm like, 'Yes.'" Staff's role of non-interference creates a sense of disorientation and confusion for the participants. In particular, the staff's appearance of prioritizing "adult" school business over availability to students, or at least perceived availability to students, suggests that the wish to seek more formative and to some degree prescriptive learning experiences, such as the disciplines of learning to read and write, is unlooked for, unencouraged, and even unwanted, while simultaneously demonstrating, through the very act of accomplishing school business by means of reading or writing, that such learning practices can and do in fact have significant utility and value, specifically for practically maintaining the very environment that seems to marginalize them.

The process by which staff member are selected to work at Hillview creates an equally conflicting message:

> Every spring, staff member's names go on a secret ballot and eligible students and staff vote to determine which staff members' contracts will be renewed for the following year. Staff are elected based on their ***usefulness to the students***, how well they fit within the school's philosophy, and how well they help to manage the school's affairs. Staff are elected because ***only the students of (Hillview) can determine who best serves them*** (*Pre-Admissions Packet,* emphasis added).

While students at Hillview determine "who best serve them," the discursive practices regarding learning and the learner, and specifically the social habituation to the unreflecting equation of autonomy and self-determination to the avoidance of potentially alienating labor, creates a sense of ambiguity on what exactly constitutes "usefulness to the students."

Self-Determination and Body Autonomy

The advantage of freedom at Hillview School is not limited to education. In fact, fundamental to the Sudbury model philosophy, students at Hillview enjoy "freedom of choice, freedom of action, (and) freedom to bear the results of action," as these are the three "great freedoms that constitute personal responsibility" (*Information Session Flyer,* n.d). In her article, which is included in Hillview's information folder given at their information nights, co-founder and staff member of Sudbury Valley School, Mimsy Sadofsky (n.d.), explains that children are rarely afforded such freedom because "most people are sure they can't handle the responsibility." She maintains that this is especially true of younger children since "most people are absolutely certain that a five-year old who is free does not have enough judgment to take care of himself" (¶ 6). In contrast,

Sudbury schools, she explains, trust children to be responsible for themselves, to make decisions for themselves, to be "in control of their own life" (¶ 27).

Participants at Hillview value the autonomy and control they have over their own lives, and understand it to be a unique quality of their school. Olivia believes that the freedom and autonomy she enjoys at Hillview is not for all students since it is "a lot of responsibility for somebody to have not—nobody is watching over you." Olivia recognizes that this responsibility is unlike traditional schools (where student behavior is monitored and regulated by the adults) because "nobody is gonna tell you if you're breaking the rules." At Hillview, "I got to have a say in everything that I do" and I "do what I want to, to figure out what I wanna be when I grow up."

Raven expresses a similar self-determination, which she attributes to the freedom and responsibility she has at Hillview:

> The fact that no one's telling me what to do, and I can kind of decide my own way… and not coming out of it like blank spaced, not knowing what to do, 'cause I've been in public school my whole life (with) people telling me what to do.

Without people telling her what to do, Raven is free to find her own way; she is able to become a future "self" that is complete and whole. This point is further illustrated through Raven's characterization of the "blank spaced" product of public education, where the adults are telling children what to do. Raven believes that the freedom to make decisions as a child is the source of a more fulfilling future adult self, whereas the subjugation of children in public education results in a life devoid of meaning and purpose. However, her argument presents an interesting paradox because it implies that self-determination and autonomy are not constituted through a sense of agency, but rather

through an external jurisdiction over her environment. In other words, Raven is able to "find her own way" only as a consequence of the choices made for her by adults who determine how she should experience school and learning.

Fletcher enjoys the freedom to "play whenever you want…with all of your friends" at Hillview. Like many students, socializing with friends is an important aspect of Fletcher's school experience. He remarks about the time he was in public school and "had a lot of friends…and like they all looked up to (him)'cause (he) was like kind of cool." However, being at Hillview is different because "you can like play with your friends any time you want." The privilege of playtime on his own terms is not the only freedom Fletcher enjoys at Hillview. Being able to "eat lunch at any time you want and…go to the playground at any time you want, play on the computers any time you want" are also important to Fletcher.

The freedom students have to regulate their own activity throughout the day at Hillview is noticeably different from the supervision and regulation young people are subject to in our society in general, and in schools more specifically. The latitude students have to conduct their day without adult supervision was something I observed during my first visit to Hillview. The following excerpt from my field notes reflects my surprise in the unrestricted authority and access students have at Hillview:

> There is a city park spanning 19 acres with a playscape, tennis courts, public pool, skating ramp, walking trails, and a community garden located directly behind the school. Some of the older female students are congregated next to a small building, perhaps a public bathroom, taking to each other. After a few minutes, the girls walk towards the tennis courts and on to the walking trail. The park spans

> at least three miles and is situated right off of a major street that is less than a mile to a major interstate highway. I notice that there are no staff members outside supervising the students, and wonder if they have any concerns about safety (Field Notes, 4/26/2017).

While it is only the older students, around nine years of age and up, who have the liberty to wander the park grounds without supervision, students of all ages are free to independently navigate in and out of the school rooms, visit the kitchen, and spend time on the front lawn on their own accord.

This freedom to regulate one's own body is a privilege many of the participants consider unique to Hillview. Fletcher recalls his time in public school when he "had to walk in a line, like a duck, to—in order to get to the playground." He appreciates the freedom he has to come and go as he pleases and regulate his own body as he sees fit. Crystal expresses a similar sense of control and autonomy over decisions regarding her own personal interests and needs:

> I like that—I like that it, um—I like that you're able to draw, I like that you're able to eat lunch wherever you wanted, like, they—you could go out to the park whenever you want. I just like the freedom in it.

Crystal draws on her personal experience in a more traditional school to highlight the advantage students have to make their own decisions at Hillview:

> Because it was just like, in the in-between I would-I would still want to eat but I would be like, 'Um, can I eat a bit of my lunch?' and they're like, 'No, we have to wait until lunchtime or snack time. Lunchtime was in the middle of the day. Snack time was in the middle of the day, but like they're apart still.

Crystal expresses a sense of frustration at the priority afforded the dictates of schedule over appetite and the simple freedom to eat when hungry. Hillview allows her the freedom to regulate her most basic physiological needs, a freedom that was denied to students at her previous school who must wait until a predetermined time to satisfy their hunger. It is noteworthy that Crystal identifies the physiological control over children's bodies through lunch and snack scheduling at her former school to delineate the autonomy she is afforded at Hillview. This rendering of freedom suggests an implicit bodily basis, at least among school children, for a broader concept of autonomy and liberty—and its limits. During the JC meeting, for example, Fynn and Sayer began to fidget and play around, at which point Lee intervenes: "You guys, do I need to separate you or something? What's going on there?" After Fynn explains that Sayer was pointing at him, Lee articulated a criterion for limiting bodily freedom as well as a social context to encourage (rather than enforce) self-control: "Hey, Fynn, Fynn, unless his hand is touching you then you don't need to pay attention to it. And, Sayer, if you could avoid interacting with the other people who are sitting there, I would appreciate it because it makes JC take longer and nobody wants that." When Fletcher expresses his resistance to such contextual conformity by putting his feet on the table, the reaction is more direct: "Fletcher, sit up, please."

Choice Architecture

Study participants appreciate the "freedom of choice" they have and consider themselves autonomous agents in the decisions they make at Hillview. As mentioned previously, the right to choose is a fundamental principal endorsed by Sudbury schools. Students at Sudbury schools "Choose their curriculum. They choose their method of

instruction. They choose, through a democratic process, how their environment operates. They choose with whom to interact" (The Sudbury Model of Education, ¶6, n.d). This contextualization of individual "choice" assumes that the decisions students make are unconstrained by wider social and discursive factors. Indeed, when asked about why they chose Hillview over other school options, most participants acknowledged that the decision was not theirs. Crystal credits her mom's friend, Denise, for her placement at Hillview:

> Her kids go to the school and so Denise knew my mom was looking for a school for—for me…Yeah. And then she brought me into this school and now I'm here. So, I guess it's all kind of thanks to Denise.

The decision to attend Hillview was made by Olivia's dad who "found it at the bottom of wherever website or something like that…but it was not intentional." Olivia's mom would have sent her to public school instead, but her "birthday was three days off the kinder—the first-grade cut-off." She remembers having "so many conferences with the um, principal, and she was mean and she said, 'Even though your kid might be smart, she can't you can't push her through this ahead.'" Displeased with the decision made by the public school administration, Olivia's parents exercised their right to choose an alternative school that was more aligned to their goals and interests for their child.

Raven's mother homeschooled her until she was five years old and able to begin school at Hillview. Raven explains that it was her parents who "found out about" Hillview and made the choice to send her when she was five years old. While Raven's parents attended "the normal public school," they never talk about it "unless I say I want to go there, and they'll be like, 'Oh, okay, we'll look,'" she explains. Although she

expressed an interest in public school (so she could learn to read), her parents dismiss her request with an equivocal response.

There is a discernable discrepancy, or perhaps irony, between the school choice imposed on the students by their parents and the freedom of choice their parents chose for them in their school. However, regardless of the exiguous role they had in selecting Hillview as their school, all participants considered it the best choice available despite their lack of or limited experience at any other type of school. Raven, who had been homeschooled before starting Hillview at age five, would not consider public school as an option because, "they make people do things and do homework" and she does not "want to be told what to do and have to do homework [because] that's just boring." Raven's criticism of "normal public school" is again evident when she states, "I'm definitely not going to be a teacher. I know that. I mean, if I was a teacher, probably be staff member at a certain private school 'cause I don't like public schools."

Crystal, who had been in a private pre-school before starting Hillview at age five, believes she "would be in total lockdown in a public school" since, according to her, "public school is for sitting in-in desks." She maintains that Hillview is a far better choice for her because it teaches her and her peers how to be grown-ups, and "at other schools, the principals and staff make the rules and if that kid doesn't like it, they just have to leave and go find another school. Or not necessarily, but just—it's not very—it's not very fair to the other kids."

Participants communicated a clear preference for the learning experience they receive at Hillview and considered more conventional educational systems ridged and flawed. Even though the participants did not choose Hillview themselves, they all

believed that it was the best choice because of the freedom they have to make their own decisions. To some degree, the participants assumed a sense of ownership over the decision to go to Hillview that not only reinforced the idea that it was the best educational experience for them; it also shaped their assumptions about other types of school experiences. The better "choice" in this case, is not necessarily based on actual preference from a given set of options, but rather is the result of the ways in which options were crafted and presented in their environment, which I discuss more in Chapter 5.

Hillview students make many choices throughout the day since they are "free to be however, wherever, whenever and doing whatever they please" (Hillview Sudbury School, n.d.). Like many students, participants at Hillview enjoyed being able to "play" at school. However, unlike more conventional educational settings, Hillview students are free (and encouraged) to play whenever they want:

> Students at Sudbury schools spend a lot of time playing. A common misconception is that play is mindless activity. Play is any activity with an indeterminate component; where not all of the boundaries are previously set. Curiosity and play propel each other, they both involve exploration of the unknown. Play is naturally fun. Why? The means by which people advance is through investigation and manipulation of that which is not yet known (Hillview Sudbury School, n.d.).

While students at Hillview certainly spent a lot of time playing, their activity of choice seemed to occupy a more determinate and predictable (virtual) landscape. Fletcher appreciates that he is able to spend his day playing video games if he so chooses.

His favorite is Steam (a digital entertainment platform) because he enjoys learning "how to like program Steam to—to like do stuff." He likes that he "can find all sorts of games…and…you can buy them with Steam money, which you could find Steam cards at like any store and…put 'em to your Steam account…and then buy the games and then play them…and stuff like that." In fact, if he could change just one thing about the school, it would be to have more computers so that everyone would "be able to play games with each other." He concedes, however, that they "would need tons of other Minecraft accounts," if they had more computers.

Having more Minecraft accounts would allow Fynn to play Minecraft anytime he chooses. Indeed, he thinks that all kids should be playing Mindcraft at school all because "there's this really fun game on it…those creepy zombies, blazes, and skeletons…and they're all attacking a wood zone and trying to hurt you. You can upgrade, like your bow and your armor and your sword."

Fletcher and Fynn were not alone in their shared interest in video games. The school's six computers and one television are located in Room 2, and upon my first visit to the school I observed a preponderance of students congregated in Room 2, many of whom were either using one of the six computers or their own personal electronic device. I documented the following observation during my first visit to Hillview:

> 10:14: Six students are on the computers playing Minecraft. Two girls on the computer occasionally ask questions about Minecraft or mention new discoveries they have made. Three male students are on laptops and four other male students are playing a video game on the television. One male student is on a cell phone

with headphones. There are currently fourteen students in Room 2, far more than in any of the other rooms in the school (Field Notes, 4/20/2017).

Later that same day, I made the following observation in Room 4, otherwise known as the lunchroom:

> 12:50: Students are sitting together at the two tables and on the couch. Some students are snacking on various items from their lunch. Four students get up and leave the room once I begin taking notes. Three students on the couch are watching something on a tablet, and another student is watching something on a cell phone.

Electronic devises were not the sole activity of choice at Hillview. Students were observed playing board games, visiting the playground, using gymnastic equipment, chasing each other with swords, drawing, singing, playing the piano, among other activities. However, all participants in this study made the choice to play games on the computer, if even just briefly, at some point each time I visited Hillview. And, this digital preference is not unique to Hillview school either. A cursory search on the Internet using the phrase, "video games in Sudbury schools" resulted in multiple links to videos, interviews, articles, and blog posts on this topic.

This consumption of videogames is not confined to Sudbury school students alone. The ubiquity of gaming has resulted in a "multibillion-dollar videogame industry that now outpaces book publishing, music, and even film" (Jagoda, 2017, p. 205). The "choice" to play video games, it would seem, is more a function of the current neoliberal capitalist environment, on which I elaborate in Chapter 5, rather than the agency of the individual.

Of the People, By the People, For the Individual

Perhaps one of the most apparent distinctions between Hillview Sudbury school and more traditional schools is the democratic process through which the school is governed. Following the Sudbury model of schooling, every member of Hillview School (adult or student) has an equal vote on all matters regarding the operation of the school. The weekly School Meeting determines how the school will operate, rules for behavior, staffing decisions, and all school expenditures. Through this democratic process "students develop the ability to make clear, logical arguments and learn how to deal with complex, ethical issues" (Hillview Sudbury School, n.d.).

The judicious adherence to democratic ideals was observed many times at Hillview. It was largely apparent that Hillview staff was genuinely committed to the notion of participatory democracy. During a JC meeting, I made the following observation about the democratic process in action:

> It is 11:13 and the JC meeting is about to begin. Several students are sent out to find another student who is supposed to be in the meeting. The JC is comprised of two staff members and two students (one below and one above the median age of the student group). Sam (pseudonym) has written a complaint against Cole (pseudonym). In room 4, Cole threw a PVC pipe or rock that hit the window, according to Sam. Cole explains that he was outside playing and it hit the roof and possibly the window. The members of the JC spend significant time trying to understand the situation and trying to determine which rule, if any, had been

> violated. After more discussion, the JC charges Cole with "Potential Harm to Property/People." Lee (staff member) asks about Cole's prior offenses (nine in all) before the JC determines his consequence. Cole's sentencing is to help set up for this evening's potluck dinner.

For the most part, students were thoroughly included in the deliberation and decision-making during JC meetings. With the judicial process being such an integral part of a democratic society, it stands to reason that every student at Hillview is "at some point summoned into a meeting of the Judicial Committee" (Hillview Sudbury School, n.d.). For what I observed, staff members made efforts to ensure students understood the purpose and procedures of the JC so that they could be a legitimate part of the democratic process. Fynn demonstrated his understanding of judicial protocol when he explained to the role of witnesses to another student:

> Basically, witnesses are for—witnesses are for because—so, who's the people that know what happened. They tell us all the evidence. And once we hear all of the evidence, but there's still more evidence, we call in the witness to find out more evidence.

Fynn often demonstrated an agility maneuvering through the parliamentary procedures of the JC and even expressed a magnanimous sense of civic responsibility during his sentencing for being too loud in Room 2:

> I have an idea and how about we can't have any contact for the rest of today and the next day for ten days, because contact includes not talking to each other, which means we would not be impeding with the children's voices.

Student representation on the Judicial Committee not only fosters a sense of personal accountability; it also embodies one of Hillview's most fundamental philosophical tenants. Sudbury Schools regard democratic representation as a means to protect individual rights and cultivate future civically minded citizens. Hillview School maintains that:

> A democratic school environment is an effective means of protecting the rights of all individuals in the school. Being a legitimate part of a democracy provides empowerment and a sense of purpose. Adults are expected to lead, set and achieve goals, and solve problems in meaningful ways. We allow children to cultivate these qualities (Hillview Sudbury School, n.d.).

Students have the opportunity to cultivate these problem-solving qualities not only in JC meetings but in School Meetings as well. The rules at Hillview are determined by students and staff during weekly School Meetings and maintained by members of the JC. Crystal explains that many of the rules at Hillview have been "made up along the way" or "tweaked…because either the wording was flawed, or it didn't make much sense." For example, she explains that, "we had to tweak the policy book just this school meeting because—well—so, um it would be specific to things."

Since all matters related to the operation of the school are made by members of the School Meeting, this unrestricted access to information and authority over important school decisions align to the goals of empowerment and legitimate participation. However, despite the apparent efforts to promote a sense of collective responsibility and democratic purpose, participants at Hillview struggled to understand or even define what, in fact, democracy means.

Raven has heard the word democracy "a little bit" and thinks that it means "being told kinda what to do." After discussing how Hillview School allows her and other students the right to vote on important decision, she concluded that a democratic school:

> Makes everything easier cause no one like, um, saying to the boss, 'That's not fair, that—we don't agree with that.' And there's no big mass of, 'We don't agree with that, we don't agree with that.' Cause you can just go, I'm calling the school meeting tomorrow and I'm going to get that rule, um, to go away. I'm going to get that rule passed.

By contrasting her experience at Hillview with other places that rely on "the boss" to make decisions and solve problems, Raven conveys her understanding of equal representation in a democracy. However, her conceptualization of democracy is based on individualistic needs and desires. Democracy is a way that she can "get that rule to go away" if she does not like it rather than having to contend with a "big mass of" disagreement or debate. If fact, when asked if she had called a school meeting or tried to pass a rule, Raven responded, "No, but one of my friends tried to get rid of JC." It is worth noting that the one instance of democratic engagement she recalls was an attempt by her friend to do away with the one place where student participation is required (the JC) rather than optional.

Fletcher explained that he does not really know what a democratic school is but thought it could be, "Like an independent school." Much like Raven, Fletcher considered the notion of democracy as a means to pursue individual goals and desires. He contended that students "should have the right to be in school meeting if they want, but I just—I just think they can do whatever they want. They want to be in the school meeting, they can.

If they don't, they don't have to." Neither Fletcher nor Raven considers democratic participation an important process unless it can fulfill a personal need or desire. Participation is not a collective responsibility in their minds and should only happen if it is something that they want to do.

Crystal has heard of the word democracy but, admittedly, "[does not] know what it means." When put into context of the decisions that they make in School Meeting, she concedes that participation in the democratic process important because "if the kid doesn't like that rule, they are able to—like they get a consequence then they can appeal it." However, she believes that it should be "up to the person to decide if they want to vote. Because I definitely don't like the idea of forcing someone to vote because that's not very—it's not a very fun school to vote at." Much like Raven and Fletcher, Crystal believes that participating in the democratic process should be an individual choice and considers the ideal of civic obligation and responsibility not "very fun."

The valuing of individual choice, especially for younger students, is perpetuated through discourse at Hillview:

> The adults, and to a lesser extent the older students, are typically the most involved in the managerial process of running the school, whether it be discussing and voting on motions in meetings, or carrying out the duties of a clerkship. When the right topic arises though, even the youngest students show up to have their opinion considered and vote for their own interest (Hillview Sudbury School, n.d.)

By their own admission, Hillview considers participation in discussions or through the voting process essential to the operation of the school and fundamental ideals of a democratic society. However, younger students are encouraged to participate only

"when the right topic arises," suggesting that the value of democratic participation is dependent on age rather than equal representation.

Participants, it seemed, were complacent in their peripheral role at Hillview and in the idea of selective participation. When asked about participating in school meetings, Crystal concedes that she does, "Sometimes. Like when they're voting, like for Jack (pseudonym). He—he was going to leave the school but now we voted him back in. I'm just for, like, those big votes." Likewise, Sayer considers attendance at school meetings important "when you have something you wanna approve." Limited participation in the School Meeting among the participants was not always due to a lack of interest in what is being discussed. Many participants considered the discussions and duties of the School Meeting inaccessible or did not feel as though their ideas would be given equal consideration.

For example, although Olivia "almost always" participates in the school meetings, she acknowledges that she does not "usually participate in the discussion" because it "doesn't really make any sense" and she doesn't "really want to know what it means." Raven participates in School Meeting "only once and a while" even though she knows that it can help her "know about the school." However, she really just sits and listens since participating in the discussion is "not fun." And, though Fynn believes the "No Fighting" school rule is "stupid" since "everyone loves fighting," he concedes that he does not really want to go to school meetings and vote to eliminate fighting rules because "probably all the staff members will vote against it and win."

The ways in which participants experienced and understood notions of democracy reflected the influence of neoliberal principles that value and prioritize individual needs

and desires. This conceptualization of democracy "for the individual" was reinforced through discourse and through practice at Hillview. In addition, discursive practices at Hillview often positioned younger students outside the purview of the democratic process, thus establishing the conditions through which participants considered their participation irrelevant.

Summary

This study presents the experiences of young students at Hillview Sudbury School, a democratically run school in Texas. Their stories were captured through unstructured interviews, which were conducted with each of the five central study participants, while ongoing participant observation and site-based artifacts provided additional interpretative context.

In this study, I examined issues related to student voice and the constructs of democracy in a Texas democratic school. In an attempt to further contextualize the findings at this democratic school, notions of childhood and the ways in which the 'child' was constructed at Hillview were also examined.

The findings of this study suggest the potential for student voice at Hillview was at times constrained by social-constructions of children that tended to romanticize the notion of childhood as a time free from responsibility. Discourses of democracy in Sudbury schools and democratic practices at Hillview reflected neoliberal ideology and values of individualism, choice, and privatization (Wilson, 2017).

In the following and final chapter, I discuss key findings as they relate to larger social and cultural contexts. Additionally, I discuss relevant implications for educational practice, policy, and research that arose as a result of the study findings.

V. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

> In our construction of the field, we have not heard the voices of young human beings. Forcing them to live within constructions of "child," "development," and "professional practice," we have denied their very existence as people living their everyday lives. We have created them as the "Other" who must be spoken for (because they are immature, incompetent, needy, and lacking) and excluded (because they are innocent, savage, and require protection).
>
> -Canella, 1997

In the present chapter, I discuss the findings related thematically in chapter four as they bear on the research questions informing this study and on broader social and political contexts within the field of education and educational research. This study has examined the positioning of student voice and the conceptualization of democracy in a Texas democratic school. Having assessed ways in which societal constructions of "the child" impose certain limitations on opportunities for children, particularly in schools, I have also sought to examine how egalitarian decision-making practices and complete intellectual freedom for children were actualized in practice at this democratic school.

More explicitly, this study has attempted to answer the following research questions:

1. How is student voice situated in democratic schools?
2. How is the notion of democratic education constructed through discourse in democratic schools?
3. Do socially constructed views of childhood have an impact on opportunities for students to express their voice in democratic schools?

Data were collected through unstructured interviews with each of the five central study participants, through participant observations and interactions, and through scrutiny of site-based artifacts. Five themes emerged through the data analysis process, which I elaborate and discuss further both in relation to relevant literature and within the context of a poststructural theoretical analysis. These five themes are as follows: 1) Historical Sense of Self as Child; 2) Tensions Within the Constructivist Self as Learner; 3) Self-Determination and Body Autonomy; 4) Choice Architecture; 5) Of the People, By the People, For the Individual.

I will begin by providing a brief summarization of the themes before linking those themes to broader social contexts. A discussion follows that is substantiated by pertinent sources from the research field and theoretical underpinnings that framed this study. Finally, I will conclude the chapter by discussing implications for education research, policy, and practice, and a personal reflection with recommendations for future research.

Key Findings

The topic of student voice in education has received substantial attention in the field of educational research over the past few years (Biddulph, 2011; Brouke & Loveridge, 2014; Catling, 2014; Cook-Sather, 2006; Hill, 2014; Luke & Gore, 1992). Proponents of student voice argue that students ought to have at least some role in determining aspects of their own education and learning, a process from which they have historically been excluded (Fletcher, 2005; Mitra, & Serriere, 2012; Symth, 2006). Prevailing views of childhood tend to justify this exclusion of students' voices because children are often considered unready for self-determination or unable to contribute anything of pedagogical value to decisions made in education.

Sudbury model schools, in contrast, provide an alternative to the authoritarian structures of more traditional schools by empowering students to take complete control over what they learn and how they spend their day. This alternative model of schooling challenges mainstream assumptions about children that in effect disregard the voices of students in decision-making processes that concern meaningful organizational and school community policies. With this counter-cultural approach to education and to children, Hillview Sudbury School presents an ideal setting for a study on student voice.

Summary of Study Themes

- *Self-Determination and Body Autonomy*

  Sudbury educators believe that "children should be accorded the same human rights and freedoms as adults" (Greenberg, 2000). Participants at Hillview valued these liberties especially in regard to the right and freedom they had to regulate and control their own bodies. Having the choice to eat when hungry, play, draw, read, or sleep according to one's own inclination, and being trusted to make such decisions independently are privileges students at Hillview are able to enjoy every day. Many of the participants articulated their understanding that their affordance of these rights as children is not only a unique quality of Hillview. It is also the catalyst for a more fulfilling adult life.

- *Tensions Within the Constructivist Self as Learner*

  At Hillview, students are given the freedom to determine their own learning and create their own educational paths. This pedagogical approach aligns with the school's basic principle that considers all of us to be naturally curious, with an innate desire to learn about the world in which we are situated. Guided by this

fundamental tenet, Hillview believes that the individual who is self-determined and intrinsically motivated to learn according to his or her own interest, will enjoy a "superior" education in comparison to the one received by an individual who is coerced to learn programmatically by adults who hold authority over them. Participants enjoyed the autonomy they had to decide what and how they learned at school. However, their understanding of what exactly constituted "learning," or rather, what was considered "learning" at Hillview was at times in conflict with their own desire to learn. On the one hand, participants viewed themselves as self-directed, independent agents responsible for their own learning and education, while on the other hand, discursive practices through which the "learner" is constituted at Hillview generated tension within this assumed identity of self as learner.

- *Historical Sense of Self as Child*

  The idea of "childhood" was understood by participants as but a brief period in time, one in which certain advantages and privileges existed. Childhood, as was constructed at Hillview, is a time for leisure, play, and freedom from the drudgery of adulthood. Adults at Hillview were responsibly for daily managerial obligations while students spent their time playing games, sleeping, or just hanging out. Adult responsibilities even extended to school meetings, where all school-related decisions are made, since all staff participate while only some students take part if the discussion is personally relevant. The idea that adults are responsible while students enjoy a carefree time is reinforced through discourse at Hillview.

- *Choice Architecture*

  The right to individual choice is a fundamental tenet of life at Hillview Sudbury School. Students at Sudbury schools "choose their curriculum. They choose their method of instruction. They choose, through a democratic process, how their environment operates. They choose with whom to interact" (The Sudbury Model of Education, ¶6, n.d). However, this contextualization of the "choice" students enjoy at Hillview seems to ignore larger social, political, and epistemological factors that constrain the allegedly autonomous choice of individuals. For example, study participants acknowledged that the choice to attend Hillview was made for them by their parents. Nevertheless, all participants considered Hillview an optimal choice over any other school regardless of their lack of experience regarding any other options available. Students and staff were critical of mainstream public education, which reinforced the notion that Hillview was the better choice. The best "choice" it seemed was not necessarily based on an actual decision made from a given set of options, but rather is the result of the ways in which options were regarded in their home and school environments.

- *Of the People, By the People, For the Individual*

  Every Hillview School member (adult or student) has an equal vote on all matters regarding the operation of the school. The democratic process through which members of the school arrive at decisions provides students the opportunity to "develop the ability to make clear, logical arguments and learn how to deal with complex, ethical issues" (Hillview Sudbury School, n.d.). Hillview, like all Sudbury schools, believes that democratic representation is fundamentally

necessary to protect individual rights and cultivate future civically minded citizens. However, participants at Hillview struggled to understand or even describe what, in fact, democracy means and why it is important. Democracy as it is constructed at Hillview, reinforces and prioritizes notions of American individualism shaped by capitalist ideology. In fact, participants believed that even participating in the democratic process should be an individual choice and not a responsibility. This conceptualization of democracy "for the individual" was reinforced through discourse and through practice at Hillview.

Discussion of the Findings

Following the school shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida on February 14, 2018, seventeen-year-old student Cameron Kasky and several of his classmates organized what became one of the largest student-led demonstrations in United States history. An estimated 200,000 to 800,000 participants took part in the Washington D.C. March for Our Lives protest and more than an additional 700 demonstrations were held nationwide (Carslen & Patel, 2018). On March 14, eleven-year-old elementary students Naomi Wadler and Carter Anderson organized an eighteen-minute walkout, seventeen minutes to remember the seventeen students killed at Stoneman Douglas and one additional minute for the school shooting in Alabama that took the life of Courtlin Arrington. And, at 10:00 a.m. local time on April 20, 2018, thousands of students across the country walked out of their schools to join sixteen-year old Lane Murdock, founder of National School Walkout, in protest of gun violence in schools.

Advocating for tighter gun regulations and legislative action to be taken to prevent future school mass-shootings, these young individuals have taken actions and organized efforts that are far from inconsequential and have indeed seemed to successfully undermine a pernicious status quo. On March 9, Florida lawmakers approved a $400 million gun control and school safety bill. And, from appearances on major cable news networks and television talk shows to countless articles and commentaries in magazines such as the New Yorker, not to mention celebrity and corporate sponsorships, the emergence of these student-led protests has not gone unnoticed. It would be difficult to argue that the attention these students have received is not well deserved. After all, activism and civic engagement are fundamental aspects of our democratic process, which is why the small percentage of young people who participate in democratic decision-making, such as voting, has seemed ominous for the future of democratic polity (Khalid, 2016).

However, a common refrain reverberating throughout the media coverage is perfectly clear; it is not the work these individuals are doing that is making headlines, but rather that the work is being done by *children*. This emphasis on “child” rather than on the values and policy changes being advocated by these students is echoed clearly in Michelle Cottle’s recent piece in the *Atlantic:*

> Possessed of that blend of innocence and savvy peculiar to teenagers, the Stoneman Douglas survivors indeed have emerged as a rare, perhaps even unique, voice in the gun debate. They are old enough to advocate for themselves, yet young enough to still embody a certain innocence, to retain a certain idealism

> about how the world should be. They come across as both fearless and fragile.
>
> And like all teenagers, they have no tolerance for BS.

This romantic characterization of the *innocent* and *fragile* yet *savvy and fearless* teenager is more than just an infantilizing idealization of these young people, it a technology of power that serves to reinforce the notion of child as "Other" to the adult. Despite numerous examples of student activism, protests, and demonstrations throughout history, we continue to respond with enthralled wonder when young people "emerge" as social actors. Children's Otherness plays out prominently in media, literature, policy, and law to name only a few societal contexts. These representations of the child allow us to view children in particular and limited ways. Indeed, gun reform opponents were quick to capitalize on modern sensibility regarding children by arguing that the age, and therefore inexperience, of these students is itself a reason to question the authenticity and the practical wisdom of their advocacy (Wilson, 2018). In other words, the "child" conveniently becomes both a poetics and a politics. Our unquestioning acceptance of these constructions of children hinders the possibilities of student voice by imposing limitations on just what we accept as "appropriate" student expression.

These limitations are especially evident in our schools, where student expression is always monitored, censored, and regulated by the adults in control. Hillview Sudbury School attempted to create an educational environment that challenged long-help assumptions about children and their role in education by making space for the inclusion of students' voice in all decisions. The merit of this resolution lies not merely in the creation of a space in which students can express their voices but rather, and more significantly from an ideological standpoint, in the value afforded the voices of these

young people within this space. Students at Hillview valued the freedom and autonomy they had over their own learning and school experience and realized that these advantages were a unique aspect of a Hillview education.

In the course of interviews and observation, it became apparent that at the most basic level the simple right to determine their own basic physiological needs, such as eating or using the bathroom when they want, provided students with a sense of self-determination and agency. In fact, many of the ways in which participants most freely expressed their voices was through somatic action and expression. Even though students are presented many opportunities to have a say in the decisions that are made at Hillview, the "body" was the foremost site of both verbal and non-verbal expression, of both liberation and resistance. It was through these bodily 'tactics' students at Hillview were able to see themselves as self-developing subjects and where students enacted political agency (De Certeau, 1984).

That the body should be the central site for discourse is not surprising. As Kallio explains (2008, p, 294), "the body always holds an unquestionable, autonomous position" where the students at Hillview could, sometimes subtlety, "reappropriate the space organized by techniques of sociocultural production" (De Certeau, 1984, p. xiv). One such moment was observed when Fynn and Sayer, both of whom seemed to reached a point of tedium, disrupted the JC meeting with their physical antics. Fletcher attempted to reclaim the space by enacting an expansive body posture (i.e. putting his feet up on the table) in response to Lee's redirection, at which point Lee asserted his positional authority by asking that Fletcher "please sit up." As the adult, Lee represents the authority to whom, according to conventional norms, Fynn, Sayer, and Fletcher must

submit. For Lee, the regulation of Fletcher's body serves to reinforce the institutional expectations for order and discipline during the JC meeting. As Foucault explained, the body is the site of regulation, "an element that may be placed, moved, articulated on others" (ibid., p. 166). Through surveillance and regulation, Foucault argued, bodies become "docile," at which point the "analyzable body and the manipulable body" join and "may be subjected, used, transformed and improved" (p.136). During the JC meeting, Lee maintained surveillance over the students, asserting control over their bodies to maintain order and discipline. In essence, Fletcher's body became the "object and target of power" (2000, p. 138) through which social relations and expectations could be shaped. Fletcher's use of bodily tactics implies an implicit understanding that, in the absence of power, the body represents the site where discipline can be challenged or rather, it represents the anti-discipline (De Certeau, 1984). It also represents the concept of "student voice" at Hillview as one that is entrenched in philosophies and theories regarding children and childhood.

The ways in which the "child" was constructed at Hillview reflected a romanticized nostalgia of childhood similar to Cottle's characterization mentioned previously. The discourse of childhood imposed certain limitations on the possibilities of student voice at Hillview. Childhood was understood by the participants as a time free from the burdensome responsibilities of adulthood. Students at Hillview believed this natural state of childhood entitled them to certain privileges, a sentiment which was reinforced by the adults. The Hillview student (child) enjoys complete educational freedom and is free to follow his or her own natural interests accordingly, while the adult is responsible for the daily managerial school duties. This conception of the child as the

self-determined learner entitled to complete educational freedom created a sense of tension within the participants. On the one hand students considered themselves autonomous agents over the choices they made, while on the other hand, the choices they made were largely dependent on choices that were crafted and manufactured for them. Because of this artificial state of affairs, students lacked a realistic cultural context within which learning about the world around them might occur. The world around them was devoid of challenges and problems that elicit invention and intellectual development.

This choice architecture, as Thaler and Sunstein (2008) explain, is used to guide or influence people towards particular decisions, often without notice. Choice architects "nudge" individuals towards the "preferable" choice by the manner in which different options are presented. In this case, Hillview was presented as the best *choice* through a discourse of "choice" and through discursive practices at home and at the school rather than by lived experience. Although many of the participants had little to no acquaintance with traditional public school, they all agreed that Hillview would better prepare them for adulthood. In public school, on the other hand, students are "sitting in desks" with people telling them what to do and, instead of a self-fulfilling educational experience, students leave "blank spaced."

While most of the participants assumed some degree of ownership over their tenure at Hillview, they all acknowledged that the choice was made for them by their parents. Hillview was the better "choice" in the sense that it was antithetical to what participants (and parents) considered the oppressive authoritarianism of mainstream public education. In contrast, Hillview's principles of education freedom allowed students the advantage of individual choice in their daily activities. These notions of

"choice" articulated at Hillview, I argue, reflect values that are constitutive of neoliberal educational reform policies.

Neoliberal educational reform policies introduced over the past few decades seek to "transform the educational system into a quasi-market" (Fernàndez, 2009, p. 31) in which privatization and completion would presumably improve the quality of public education. This claim rests on a capitalistic assumption that competition created by marketized choice will encourage the responsiveness, and thereby the effectiveness, of schools and will allow parents to choose the best educational experience for their children. Participants believed that Hillview was the best choice (made by their parents for them) primarily because it was so markedly different from the rigid authoritarian models of traditional mainstream public school. Instead of a prescribed curriculum, students at Hillview had complete freedom to "choose" what to learn and how to spend their day. Of course, with schools like Hillview, this choice comes at a cost and that cost is not merely financial.

Much like the private sector, those with financial means have more access and are thereby in a better position to succeed. Consequently, the proliferation of economic-based choice and privatization school reform policies have further increased the inequality gap between middle and lower income families (Hill, 2003). As Barrett DeWiele and Edgerton explain, educational school choice policy has resulted in more middle-class families leveraging "their greater economic, cultural and social resources to secure their children's educational advantage, in what amounted to new stealth forms of social closure and social reproduction" (p. 190).

Although Hillview does offer tuition assistance for qualifying families, it nonetheless remains a financially prohibitive choice for lower income families. The process involved in determining whether it would be the best or even a good choice would require either significant research, or preexisting familiarity with other [middle-class] families who attend. This process would involve the cost of transportation to visit the school as well as other, additional peripheral costs. Economically advantaged families, in this case, are able to make an informed decision about whether or not they wish to choose (buy) the educational freedom of Hillview for their children and forego a more repressive and regimented public-school experience. Thus, in practice, the philosophical aspirations of liberty and democracy at Hillview tend to be reserved as a choice only for those who can afford that experience for their children. To an extent, the space students occupied at Hillview had its own unique architecture, a space "to ensure a certain allocation of people in space, a canalization of their circulation, as well as the coding of their reciprocal relations" (Foucault, 1984, p. 253). In essence, Hillview was an architecture of privilege where notions of individualism, choice, and self-interest are constructed through social relations and discourse.

This is not to say that Hillview consciously operates under the auspices of an education for the elite and privileged. In fact, the impression I received through extensive conversations with Hillview staff, is that each of them may be honestly described as a compassionate and caring, educator who recognizes the constraints of our current educational system, and wishes to provide young people with a more democratic experience than to them seemed possible in our current public-school system. The philosophical tenets of Hillview are so imbricated in an ideology of individualism and

free choice, however, that there has been a general failure to examine the practice of the school critically. As Cagan (1978) suggests, "self-actualization is immeasurably more attainable in this society for the already privileged, than for those who have the bad fortune to have been born working-class, handicapped, nonwhite, or female (p. 234). An ideological shift towards a more collectivist and inclusive direction would require a critical examination of the interests and values embedded in Hillview's epistemological assumptions and a democratically based response in favor of the collective good over individual self-interest.

Yet, the ways in which democracy is constructed through discourse and enacted at Hillview reflect a similar self-interest and self-cultivation rather than a concern for the welfare of others. Like all Sudbury schools, Hillview is run as a participatory democracy, with all staff and students having an equal voice in what is discussed and decided at school. It is through participation in the school's democratic process, School Meeting and the JC, that children are supposed to "cultivate" the habitual practice of civic democratic engagement. Generally, though, participants considered it a "waste of time" to participate in the democratic deliberations of the School Meeting unless, of course, "the right topic arises" (Hillview Sudbury School, n.d.). The idea that democracy is a mechanism to serve the interests of the individual, and particularly elite individuals, is in lock-step with "dominant consciousness (that) portrays individual needs as inconsistent with collective action and well-being" (Cagan, 1978, p. 235). The rise of unenlightened, viciously self-interested capitalism in the United States has further exacerbated the influence of personal interest on democracy, especially for those with more capital since they can use their wealth for political influence. Needless to say, there is an unexamined

inconsistency between Hillview's democratic ambitions and the undemocratic privileging of those who can afford to participate that resembles the values of a capitalist society generally. Democracy for the *individual* and the "play to pay" standard at Hillview present real challenges to democratic goals and practices and to the obligations of a democratic citizenry.

Dewey (1988) considered the act of democracy "a personal way of life…it signifies the possession and continual use of certain attitudes, forming personal character and determining desire and purpose in all the relations in life" (p. 226). For Dewey, the realm education was the ideal site for individuals to develop these habits and *attitudes* of democracy. However, the ways in which democracy is constructed within our schools and our society can greatly shape the attitudes both possessed and enacted. If democracy is understood to be a process through which neoliberal values of individualism, privatization, and choice are advanced, then we will continue to reproduce hierarchies of class and race. As Bastian et al., (1985) maintain, "The possibility of democratic reform lies with citizens who choose equality as the standard of social progress and the measure of their own empowerment" (p. 122).

Implications for Practice, Policy, and Research

> The classroom, with all its limitations, remain a location of possibility. In that field of possibility we have the opportunity to labor for freedom, to demand of ourselves and our comrades, an openness of mind and heart that allows us to face reality even as we collectively imagine ways to move beyond boundaries, to transgress. This is education as the practice of freedom.
>
> hooks, 1994

Implications for Practice

This study holds implications for practice, policy, and research centered on the educational experience of young people. First, the findings from this study suggest that students in many ways have a strong sense of justice and a political inclination to advocate for themselves and for changes they feel would facilitate a more egalitarian school experience than young people are generally afforded. For example, students often demonstrated a collaborative and thoughtful process for determining a fair but just consequence for specific infractions during JC meetings. The apparent adherence to democratic ideals that I observed during JC meetings suggests that a participatory democratic process among adults and children can elicit meaningful outcomes. However, the ways in which democracy is constructed through discourse in our society largely reflect the influence of neoliberal values that favor individual interest over the collective good. If our aim is to hamper the reproductive forces of our educational system, discourses of democracy, freedom, and choice must be critically examined rather than taken-for-granted as absolute truth. Likewise, we as educators must be willing to critically examine our own practice and actively resist the appropriation of democratic ideals, such as equity and access for all students, by neoliberal policies. We must be cognizant of the ways in which institutions, such as schools, and discourse circumscribe and historically position children as Other; we must seek to mitigate the narrowing subjectivities we unconsciously impose on young people.

It is with this point that I circle back to the opening statements on the Stoneman Douglas students at the beginning of this chapter. If we are to understand the student-led movement that arose from the Stoneman Douglas survivors as an example of the

democratic and political potential young people hold, which seems to be a predominant narrative, we must also be cognizant of the undemocratic processes we implicitly accept that have allowed for the racial and socioeconomic disparities in media coverage to go mostly unnoticed. Our education system holds the potential to disrupt the patterns of reproductive social and cultural stratification if the objective "involves preparation of students to take part in changing society, and requires consideration of the defects and evils which need to be changed" (Dewey, p. 246). This study contributes insights to the larger conversation on education for a more socially just society.

This study also suggests the need for a more thorough analysis of the assumptions we make about children in the field of education. The findings reveal how socially-constructed notions of childhood impose limitations on the role of student voice in education. The romanticized construct of "child" freed students from any sense of collective responsibility and sheltered them from challenges and problems that might elicit critical thinking and engagement with the world around them. Assumptions regarding children, largely regarding their developmental "readiness" or not, abound in the field of education that limits the access to information that children are granted. That access might be more restricted to students of color and those from lower socio-economic backgrounds. To disrupt these taken-for-granted assumptions, Lenz-Taguchi (2000) calls on educators engage in 'an ethics of resistance;' to be "actively engaged in replacing the 'universal truths'…with more cooperative, aesthetic, inclusive, diverse, reflexive, and ethical pedagogical discussions and practices" (p. 272). This study has also had a profound impact on my own practice as an educator and on the leadership and professional learning I provide as a school administrator. Like Lenz-Taguchi, I consider

it an ethical responsibility to analyze and resist the ‘universal truths’ that impose limitations and inequitable access on others in our society.

Implications for Policy

The results from this study suggest the need for more thoughtful consideration of school policies regarding equity, democratic decision-making, and student voice in educational pursuits and outcomes. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), states that every child is equally entitled to a quality education committed to the “development of the child’s personality, talents and mental and physical abilities to their fullest potential” (United Nations General Assembly, 1989, Article 29, section b). However, the effects of neoliberalism and market-based educational reform have further widened the equity gap between affluent and low-income families, making access to quality education more difficult.

As this study reports, the right to student voice is reserved for those who can afford to pay. Additionally, the right to participate in democratic decision-making and civic empowerment also comes at a cost. Perhaps this is why studies show that more affluent students are more likely to participate in civic responsibilities than students from low-income households (Levinson, 2010). Unfortunately, this does not necessarily guarantee that affluent youth are more inclined to use “those skills, attitudes, and knowledge…towards deepening democracy” (Swalwell, 2015, p. 491). Policies centered on practices and instruction that deepen civic knowledge and skills should be thoughtfully considered for all students. Time during the school day (and beyond) for democratic and civic learning and practice should be increased rather than minimized for the sake of standardized test preparation.

Such a radical shift would require more than time and practice; true civic engagement would also require an openness to honest and civil dialogue about racial and economic disparities and the root cause for these inequities. As the state of Texas, in an effort to “streamline” its state-mandated social studies curriculum, moves to eliminate mention of historical figures, such as Hillary Clinton and Helen Keller, or consider the adoption of textbooks that suggest segregated schools for children of color were only “sometimes” lower in quality than White schools, the need for students to practice and engage in civil political discourse and active civic participation seems an appropriate policy consideration (Strauss, 2018).

Implications for Research

As a researcher, this study has provided an avenue for me to better understand the implications of conducting a research study with children that may be useful for future research. Most notably, this study addresses an obvious gap in the research literature on student voice by focusing on elementary-aged students. The findings suggest that even younger students quite effectively negotiate their positioning and counteract the constraints of unequal power relations. Further research with younger children would provide additional opportunities for students to share their own personal experiences of education and learning. In addition, I am in agreement with Tisdall and Punch (2012) who maintain that, “Focusing on children and young people’s perspectives, agency and participation is no longer sufficient; greater emphasis is needed on the intricacies, complexities, tensions, ambiguities and ambivalences of children and young people’s lives across both Majority and Minority World contexts” (p. 22). Future research focused on young people must take into consideration the multifaceted aspects of children’s lives

and how the complexities of childhood intermingle with broader social and cultural contexts to create meaning.

Conclusion

The ambitions of this study were relatively limited yet complex, much like the tangle of thoughts regarding children in our society. At a very basic level, I wished to document through this (arduous) dissertation process what I had observed over my many years as an early childhood educator: students regularly exercise their 'voices' in schools but, for a host of reasons, we (the adults) seem unable to decipher the meaning. Certainly, theories regarding child development and childhood play a role in what we are willing to listen to and what gets dismissed as childish immaturity. These theories also place adults in a position where they feel justified in wielding more power over the child than is called for, at least on a practical level, which might explain why the student expressions I observed, even at Hillview, were often times enacted rather than spoken. It was these moments of articulate and significant non-verbal behavior that I hoped might reframe conventional understandings of student voice in education. What complicates this objective is the complex play of social relations where voice is enacted and through which meaning is constructed (Bragg, 2012). Our capacity to recognize student voice in any register is itself conditioned by the social and economic structures in which live and move and interpret each other. The same holds true for the student voices we seek to understand and engage. The major conclusion I have come to is humble, but hard won: only by persistently and patiently striving to perceive and make appropriate allowances for the pervasive institutional habituations that form and shape our students and ourselves can we arrive at some measure of useful understanding of what our students are saying.

APPENDIX SECTION

Appendix A: Hart's Ladder

Table 1. *Hart's (1992) ladder of children's participation from tokenistic to citizenship*

	Category	Degree of Participation	Example of Practice
Rung 8	**Youth/Adult Partnerships**	**Youth initiated shared decision making**	*Youth led activities/shared decision-making between adults and youth*
Rung 7	**Youth-Led Activism**	**Youth initiated and directed**	*Youth-led activities/little input from adults*
Rung 6	**Participatory Action Research**	**Adult initiated shared decision-making with youth**	*Adult-led activities/shared decision-making with youth*
Rung 5	**Youth Advisory Councils**	**Consulted and informed**	*Adult-led activities/youth consulted and informed about how their input will be used*
Rung 4	**Community Youth Boards**	**Assigned but not informed**	*Adult-led activities/youth understand purpose, process, and have a role*
Rung 3	**Adultism**	**Tokenism**	*Adult-led activities/youth may be consulted with minimal opportunities for feedback*
Rung 2	**Adultism**	**Decoration**	*Adult-led activities/ youth understand purpose/no input*
Rung 1	**Adultism**	**Manipulation**	*Adult-led activities/youth do as directed without understanding the purpose*

Appendix B: Letter to Hillview Staff

Dear (School Staff Name),

My name is Alicia Hill and I am a doctoral student at Texas State University specializing in School Improvement in the College of Education. I am also an educator in Austin, Texas, where I have worked as a teacher and administrator for the past seventeen years. I am writing to you because I am interested in your school and the possibility of carrying out my research project for my dissertation with your staff, families, and students.

My research examines the ways in which student voice is situated in a student-centered democratic school. I am also interested in exploring the ways in which democracy is constructed through discourse in more democratic models of education. Drawing from a critical child development theory, my study interrogates dominant assumptions regarding children and childhood. This is important because it is often a rendering of 'the child' as a universal concept that informs the decisions we make about students and thus delimits the legitimacy of their input or voice. Hillview is an ideal study site for my research because the guiding principles of the school challenge the long-held cultural attitudes regarding children and create new spaces for student voice in education.

I welcome the opportunity to speak to you in person about my research and methodology and the possibility of partnering with your school community. I live and work in Austin and could arrange a visit to speak in person any day of the week.

Sincerely,

Alicia Hill
Doctoral Student, School Improvement
Texas State University

Appendix C: Interview protocol for students

Demographic Information

Age
Family members (siblings and parents)

Education

1. How long have you been a student at Hillview?
    a. Have you ever been in a different school? If so, tell me about that school.
        i. How was it different than Hillview? Similar?
2. What made you decide to come to this school?
    a. Were you able to make the decision on your own?
    b. How did you learn about Hillview?
3. What do you like most about Hillview?
4. If you could change anything about your experience at Hillview, what would it be?
5. Tell me about your role in the School Meetings.
    a. Why do you participate in meetings? If they say no they don't then ask why?
6. What would you say to someone at a traditional school who was thinking about coming to Hillview?
    a. Would you encourage them to come?
        i. If so, what would you say is the best reason for them to come?
        ii. If not, why?
7. What do you think is the most important thing you have learned so far here at Hillview?
8. What do you hope to do when you are an adult?
9. How has do you think coming to Hillview might help you in your future?

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