

STUDENT VOICE REIMAGINED: HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS CREATING A
TRUE SCHOOL DEMOCRACY THROUGH PARTICIPATORY ACTION
RESEARCH

by

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A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Council of
Texas State University in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
With a Major in School Improvement
May 2019

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DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my family. You are the most loving parents and sister I could ever hope to have. The dialogue that was so essential to this study all started with you. From an early age, I was invited to participate in interesting conversations about books, politics, education, psychology, sports, and movies. The types of conversations that other people my age were not afforded. I always felt special because you made me feel like an equal, even as a kid. You have done so much for me, so this accomplishment is for you.

Rachel,

Thank you for chasing waterfalls with me.

You never cease to inspire and amaze.

I love you like crazy!

We did it!

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I must first acknowledge the incredible students at the heart of this study. They are truly special people, and although I cannot mention them individually on these pages, I hope they realize how much I appreciate and respect them as students, thinkers, and just cool people who always *got it* and made work so much fun. I would also like to thank my superintendent and assistant superintendent for standing behind both this work and me at every turn. You understood from the very beginning.

To the committee of professors, Dr. Guajardo, Dr. Koschoreck, and Dr. Martinez, who so graciously agreed to support this study, I sincerely thank you. Each time we met, you understood my passion for this work and challenged me in all the right ways. You were always genuinely curious and interested in my work and that made all the difference.

My final and deepest thanks goes to Dr. Larrotta. Very early on during our first class together, I instantly knew that you were the perfect person to lead me through this work. I had finally met someone as stubborn as myself. You pushed me hard, but always for my own good and growth. You motivated me when I was stuck and never allowed me to settle. You are a great teacher and a remarkable person and that is the best compliment I can give.

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ABSTRACT

Employing a participatory action research methodology, this dissertation documents the work of ten students, The Student Voice Team, and their efforts to make a lasting difference on their campus. Reporting on this research through a narrative inquiry lens effectively allows for the telling of the students' stories working as co-researchers while documenting their democratic journey to school improvement. The questions guiding this research include: (a) How can students exercise democratic practice and student agency within the boundaries of their school? (b) In what ways can including student voice change curriculum choices and instructional methods? (c) What are the possibilities when students feel like true equals on their campus? (d) When acting as agents of change, how can students influence the school improvement process? Data collection sources comprise collaborative meetings with students, GroupMe conversations, student journals, researcher's journal, videos created by students, and conversational exit interviews.

Study findings chronicle the progress and accomplishments of The Student Voice Team through major themes that they established as critical for school improvement. Student agency in action describes student participation at an important annual conference. Seeking equality through dialogue follows the evolution of the relationship between students and teachers to improve teaching and learning. The final chapter illustrates how each member of the team became a student leader, ultimately changing the campus culture in ways that would empower future students and teachers.

I. A RARE OPPORTUNITY TO REIMAGINE SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

It was made clear that day that by the superintendent that every campus leader in that room was expected to allow students to pursue their passions and help them to become life-long learners in the process.

During the summer before starting my first year as a high school assistant principal, I was handed what seemed like a golden ticket. At my first leadership retreat in July, a full month before the school year would begin, the superintendent of the school district presented an open invitation to all campus leaders that would allow us to begin shaping our own collective vision of personalized learning and what it should look like on each of our campuses. It was a shocking, exhilarating, and profound moment. I found myself emotionally exhausted from battling bureaucratic learning standards and less than progressive local educational leaders who were slaves to an accountability system that demoralized both students and teachers, while producing a false narrative that this high stakes accountability was good for everyone and just what the country needed to motivate lower performing schools and students. I had endured crippling curriculum maps and timelines that were not used as tools to assist teachers in their teaching efforts, but more as shackles that prevented student and teacher individuality. There were weekly classroom visits from district officials to look over my shoulder at what I was teaching and to monitor whether I was teaching the correct English standard for that day. There was never communication, much less collaboration, from these officials, just a debriefing with the principal detailing how “off” the staff was from the exacting pace of the

curriculum maps created by district officials who had never consulted with the actual teachers.

I had shunned previous opportunities to join the administrative ranks, expecting I would be forced to hold other teachers to standards that I did not believe and resisted during my years in the classroom. I previously taught English at both the middle and high school level in Florida, California, and Texas. In all three states, the stifling of teacher creativity and student voice was the same. Testing data was the name of the game and those who did not play by the rules were overly observed and scrutinized until they either conformed or resigned. Then I discovered a school district in Central Texas where the superintendent's leadership philosophy seemed the exact opposite. I taught freshman English for one year in this district before being offered an assistant principal position at this same high school. During my single year of teaching in this district, I was granted more freedom than all of my previous twelve years combined. If I was to ever make that leap into school administration, this was the time and place. There was literally no talk of state testing during my year on campus. The superintendent was contrarian and almost irreverent in his progressive philosophy and opposition to the type of stifling testing regime that had come to dominate public education over the past twenty years (see Appendix A).

So, when I showed up that July morning for my first formal meeting in this new administrator role, my hopes were certainly high, but I still could not have anticipated the overwhelming sense of freedom contained in every conversation and activity the superintendent led throughout that day. It was made clear that day that by the superintendent that every campus leader in that room was expected to allow students to

pursue their passions and help them to become life-long learners in the process.

Nevertheless, in my experiences working with other school districts, it does not take long to figure out that the lofty written philosophies don't mesh what's actually happening in classrooms with students. However, this dissertation research study has been possible because the ostensive aspects of the district's philosophy did reflect the performative aspects in relation to the connection between this message and the superintendent's true feelings on education and progressive student rights.

Just because great freedom is granted to all teachers, it does not mean that same progressive streak will paint the daily reality for all students. Many teachers, even when liberated to do so, are still reluctant to treat students as equals, much less invite them into their sacred teacher preparation and lesson planning space. Then, there are the groups of teachers that are capable and somewhat willing to venture into a more democratic space with students, but hesitate because of the punitive accountability system that a generation of educators has now had to survive. When trained to purely obey and avoid taking risks on behalf of their students, many teachers struggle with trusting and embracing a progressive leadership vision. This dissertation documents the process and results of an invitation extended to students to exercise democratic practices while implementing a participatory action research project.

Researcher's Positionality

Students are the best part of working at a school. They inspire, challenge, and never fail to entertain. So many other obstacles try to get in the way of educators seeing school in this very simple way, and that is unfortunate because as Biesta (2013) related, "when we keep education open anything can happen, anything can arrive" (p. 23).

Educators keeping their hearts and minds open leads to a different kind of educational experience for everyone on campus. When I changed titles, from teacher to administrator, I was determined for it to be just that, a change in title only. Everyone on campus should function as a teacher and everyone who teaches should have so much fun being around students that they could not imagine living life without them. Freire (1998) understood that “Teaching, which is really inseparable from learning, is of its very nature a joyful experience” because he never lost that desire to be around students and to become immersed in the learning process (p. 125). Possessing a true love for the art and craft of teaching and an even deeper love for the students are the beliefs that guided my decision to choose a career in education. These were the core beliefs at the heart of my drive to continue working closely with students even after leaving the classroom.

I had been dogged in attempting “to create a pedagogical space in which joy has its privileged role” (Freire, 1998, p. 69). Even if that space is outside of the classroom and in an assistant principal office. An office that so many have disdained for so long because of the traditional view that the person occupying the role must be punitive and uncompromising. That they must do the dirty work and have only negative conversations when bad is done. I have been inspired to change that perception so that students see school administrators as a teacher too and an ally in advancing their democratic rights so real school improvement can become a reality. When searching for a way to contribute more as a teacher in the administrator role, I knew that finding a project that would bring me closer to the students was the only way I could be happy. Freire described a similar sentiment when he reflected, “Hope is something shared between teachers and students. The hope that we can learn together, teach together, be curiously impatient together,

produce something together, and resist together the obstacles that prevent the flowering of our joy” (p. 69).

The idea of producing something together never left my mind. It almost haunted me. I was emotionally empty at work without being able to produce something with the students I loved. There is nothing more gratifying than creating something meaningful that did not exist before, and it is difficult for students to accomplish this at school without having an educator to partner with them while having their back at the same time. Those students I taught as freshman were too brilliant and too full of life not to have a say in how school looked and felt for them. So much was expected of them each day, but rarely did anyone ask their opinions on matters that impacted school improvement and their experiences as learners. Biesta (2013) crystalized this injustice:

there is an important difference between forms of collective action in which people work toward a common end but have no stake in it—where, in other words, the agenda for the activity is already set by others—and those forms of collective action in which all who take part have an interest in the activity and can contribute to decisions about its direction (pp. 33-34).

Students had been expected to sit as silent spectators in the agenda making process for too long. Their voices deserved to be heard, and not just as token contributors, but as leaders in the school improvement process.

Students are often more qualified than any other group to lead discussions and implement change. They want to do the work, and if others support their efforts then there is no limit to how dramatically or quickly schools can improve. Adults also must remain mindful of the educational journey and the powerful ideal that school can change

lives. If we believe that positive and rich experiences help develop good people, then school should be a place that respects student growth. Freire (1998) articulated the trials of this student journey as “people in formation, changing, growing, redirecting their lives, becoming better, and, because they are human, capable of negating fundamental values, of distorting life, of falling back, of transgressing” (p. 127). Missteps and successes are part of student growth just as they are part of other democratic practices. However, both students and schools are denied the chance to reach their full potential without a collective effort from the adults on campus and the courage to let student voice reverberate for all to hear.

Statement of the Problem

The current public education model in the United States, both in policy and practice, aggressively ignores the role students could play in curriculum and instructional decisions. To make matters even worse, teachers have also lost their voice and therefore the leverage to initiate any real change in conjunction with their students. Simply put, “If presented with long lists of standards to cover and batteries of tests their students will be taking, many teachers turn the standards into the curriculum itself” (Sleeter & Carmona, 2016, p. 44). It is as if teachers have been beaten down for so long that they have become more police than advocate. In fact, “Although 97% of teachers believe they tailor their teaching to their students’ needs, 29% of students do not perceive this to be the case” (Beattie, 2012, p. 159). When teachers fail to realistically recognize the needs and perceptions of their students, the entire educational system must be examined and teaching philosophies must be questioned. It is not sufficient to provide modest tweaks of the already existing testing model.

The fact that every child is deserving of a free and public education is one of the most profound pillars of this democracy and when that is in jeopardy, as it most definitely is today, it should be treated as a crisis of the heart and the soul. Students should serve an integral role in their own education. As Biesta (2013) stated, “a cohesive society is not necessarily or automatically also a democratic society” (p. 68). The same could be said of high schools. While many tout all time high graduation rates and the percentage of graduates attending college, this does not translate to a democratic learning experience. Students deserve the right to participate in school as equals with their adult educators, each working collaboratively as democratic practitioners in the vital act of school improvement. However, a series of complex obstacles often intrude, preventing democratic collaboration from becoming a reality. The review of the literature further investigates the issues and history relating to student voice and agency in the United States (see Appendix B).

How it All Began

Moving into campus administration, I had wrestled with how to incorporate student voice into major educational issues in ways that avoided the typical student council or youth government approach that only appeased students without truly inviting them to discuss real philosophical quandaries. I had consistently accomplished this as an English teacher, but I recognized the potential obstacles an administrator would face trying to empower students to become agents of change. It was quite possible that other staff members might interpret student involvement of this kind with wariness because “it presents challenges that some may not be willing to face, particularly listening to things we don’t want to hear” (Cook-Sather, 2006, p. 368). So, all during my first year as

assistant principal, I brainstormed ideas for how to begin collaborating with students in a way that I could leverage my new leadership position to accomplish changes that might not have been possible as a teacher. Then, in January 2017, I began taking my first qualitative research course, so my motivation to make a bold move and begin digging into real work with students was constantly on my mind. I began to visualize how I could combine my growing knowledge of qualitative research with the desire my former English students and I had for school improvement. The initial aim of this early pilot study sought to begin a collaborative relationship with students that would, through their efforts, work on some aspect of school improvement. What it encompassed and the engineering of that process would be for them to contemplate. I imagined it as something we would both now wrestle with together. The following sections explain the process for how this school improvement collaboration came to fruition. Figure 1 below outlines the four major steps involved in this process at the outset.

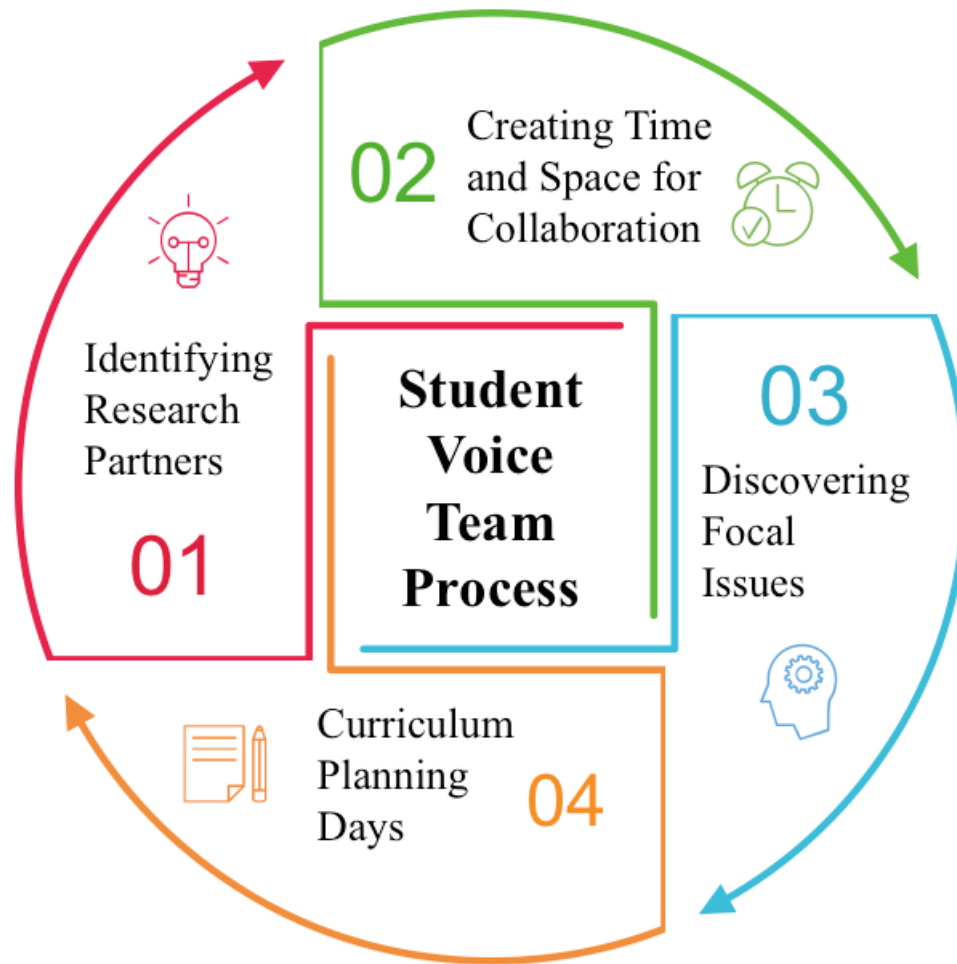


Figure 1. The Process of Establishing The Student Voice Team.

During the first meeting the team was established, remaining consistent throughout, and meetings times and locations were set. The end of the first meeting and the beginning of the second meeting brought clarity to the team's work, with clear decisions about focal issues and collaborating with teachers during curriculum planning days as part of teacher professional development. These steps did not require repeating, so they served as a one-time process.

Identifying Research Partners

While having only taught for one year at this high school before stepping into the assistant principal role, I had established tremendous student relationships in that single year teaching freshman English classes. Because of the teacher autonomy in the school district, that year had almost been like a rebirth for me, restoring hope for what was possible in this career. Those freshmen I taught were now juniors in 2017 and with many of them, the types of conversations we enjoyed in class each day just two years earlier had continued. We still frequently spoke in the halls and during lunch about their classes, grades, and future plans. They would share in their accomplishments with me and often lament how their other classes lacked the sense of family that buoyed our freshman English class. So, while I was not seeing these students in the classroom each day, the essence of our relationship never really changed. Many of these former students thought deeply about their role in school and how they could affect school improvement.

However, there were some students that would regularly discuss substantial issues from their current classes. Issues that they felt rose to the level of being unjust. Some might chalk this up to customary teenage complaining and angst, but I knew better. These were thoughtful and self-aware young adults who recognized that their school experience could be different. They hungered for a school reality that presented a sense of community, fairness, and the opportunity to alter their classroom environment and learning experience. They expressed the existence of this ideal in some areas of campus, but the absence of those qualities in others. Student research partners gradually emerged, based in large part on these continuous school improvement conversations, but also because of this group of students' exceptional character attributes. Their temperaments

seemed especially conducive to working with others on a team dedicated to student voice and agency.

These students were from diverse backgrounds, possessed emotional maturity, a passion for school improvement, and truly listened to others with interest and compassion. Constructing a diverse student team means having multiple perspectives for important issues rather than a group think kind of mentality. Biesta (2013) noted that a “reduction of diversity erodes the ability of a system to respond effectively and creatively to changes in the environment” (Biesta, 2013, p. 123). There could also be no question about the team’s ability to remain loyal and committed to one another over the long-term. The expectation was to raise issues that could become contentious, which demands exceptional emotional maturity. It was important to keep in mind that these students were coming to talk with me in the cafeteria, hallways, and before school about school issues that ignited a passion and intensity in them. So, while this team was about democratic practice and student agency, it was ultimately about how to make the school better. Those students capable of seeing issues from a school perspective instead of just the individual view were essential to this improvement process. The final component seemed simple, but rare. The students on this team had to understand that listening was more important than talking because “good listeners can speak engagedly and passionately about their own ideas and conditions precisely because they are able to listen” (Freire, 1998, p. 107). An emphasis on a listening first mentality is fundamental in achieving productive dialogue and creating a space where all members experience mutual respect and value.

Aside from character traits, there was also the matter of striking a balance with the size of the student team. A team with too many students would make it impossible for each student to speak and be heard. Listening and individual comfort in speaking should be prioritized on a team where democratic practice is valued. A team of ten seemed the largest number possible while still not compromising the intimacy required for each student to feel they could speak and contribute during each gathering. Having a group of ten students would also allow for five females and five males, creating a democratic balance. It would enable them to work in a larger group or in pairs when necessary. Ultimately, ten students allowed for flexibility while still seeming substantial. These ten students wanted to know why teaching and learning looked the way it did in their classes. They thought about these issues frequently and it mattered to them. They questioned the system and wanted to know the “why” behind decisions that determined how and what they learned. While so different in their backgrounds, interests, and emotions about school, they all shared a hope for positive change. This same group of ten stayed together throughout the duration of the project, from the inception of the team until their high school graduation sixteen months later.

Creating Time and Space for Collaboration

High school students lead incredibly busy lives. Many play sports or participate in various fine arts activities, like band or theatre. Many have jobs that begin directly after school. Some might be relied on to take care of younger siblings. That is not to speak of the daily routine of homework, studying for tests, and for these juniors, beginning the arduous task of figuring out their college options. It is a stressful time, so adding another commitment, even if it is one that they are passionate about, warranted

thoughtful consideration to their availability. This is where many projects of this type go astray before they even really begin. Being mindful that “lack of time is likely an issue for nearly every PAR project . . . the academic calendar and competing demands represent formidable challenges for school-based PAR” (Ozer, Ritterman, & Wanis, 2010, p. 160). Requiring students to meet before or after school just is not feasible, much less fair, considering time is their most precious resource.

Thus, lunchtime would be the most opportune time to bring all ten students together for the first time. They received fancy invitations that were delivered to them in class the day before the first meeting, requesting their presence in the counseling center conference room. The counseling center had become in many ways the hub of the school, with the generous temperament of the counseling team and spacious layout of their office space. It was inviting and all students were familiar and comfortable with those surroundings. The reason for our meeting was kept a secret. I purposively wanted them to enter with an open mind, but I knew the trust we had established with one another over the previous three years would give them the comfort they needed to attend this initial meeting without worrying about what this was all about.

Discovering Focal Issues

During the first Student Voice Team meeting in February 2017, all ten students were present and on time and there was a certain buzz about the room. Everyone was excited and curious. I began by telling them that they were all invited for a very specific reason. I told them this was an opportunity for them to begin doing the school improvement work they had all talked to me about in their own way so many times before. I explained they shared a passion for making classroom learning more engaging,

fitting to their needs as students and people, and democratic. At first, they just looked at one another almost incredulously, like they could not believe this was actually happening. But their expressions and kind words also let me know they felt honored. Some even thanked me right there on the spot for inviting them out of all the possible students.

The team wasted no time getting to the heart of what was on their mind. Their intensity and hunger for dialogue was immediately recognizable. They wanted to get right to what was happening or not happening in the classroom, focusing on teaching techniques, instructional materials, and the overall learning environment in each of their classes. The conference room contained three white board spaces, so they were immediately able to document their ideas (see Figure 1). They broke up into three smaller groups and got to work writing their observations and suggestions for how teachers and the school could improve teaching and learning, while reflecting on their own classroom experiences. They recognized this was an opportunity to make real change and the seriousness of the conversations reflected this attitude. There was nothing frivolous or utopian about their ideas or suggestions. These ten students, because of their deeply thoughtful meditations on school, represented the seeds of promising participatory action research through their willingness and motivation “to build communities of people committed to enlightening themselves about the relationship between circumstance, action, and consequences in their own legitimate educational and social values” (McTaggart, p. 176). The students had accumulated a wealth of insight over the years about how they learned and a clear realization of the lack of say they had in the daily construction of the typical class. The outpouring of reflections on past and current classroom experiences on the whiteboards told a greater story than their bulleted lists.

These writings spoke to a team that could articulate the past with an eye toward the future.

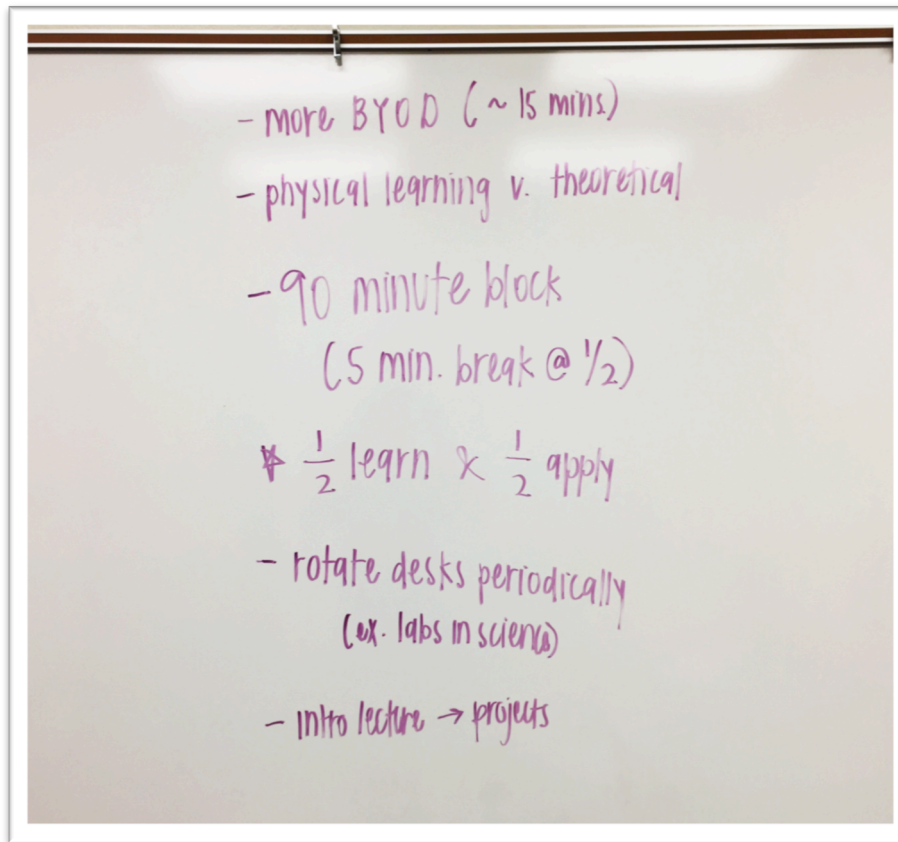


Figure 2. Application of Classroom Time.

Several prominent themes immediately emerged when groups of students went to the whiteboards. The first group argued that teachers should be more mindful of the lengthy amount of time students are in class, 90 minute class periods, by incorporating physical as well as theoretical learning (see Figure 2). Similarly, they acknowledged that lectures do not always serve a greater purpose. They proposed a lecture that leads into something significant later in class, like a project. This is even more clearly communicated in their one starred item where they recommended dividing the class into

two equal halves, one for learning and one for application. The group mentioned breaks two different times, one five minute that would simply break up the class and one longer break so that they could be on their electronic devices.

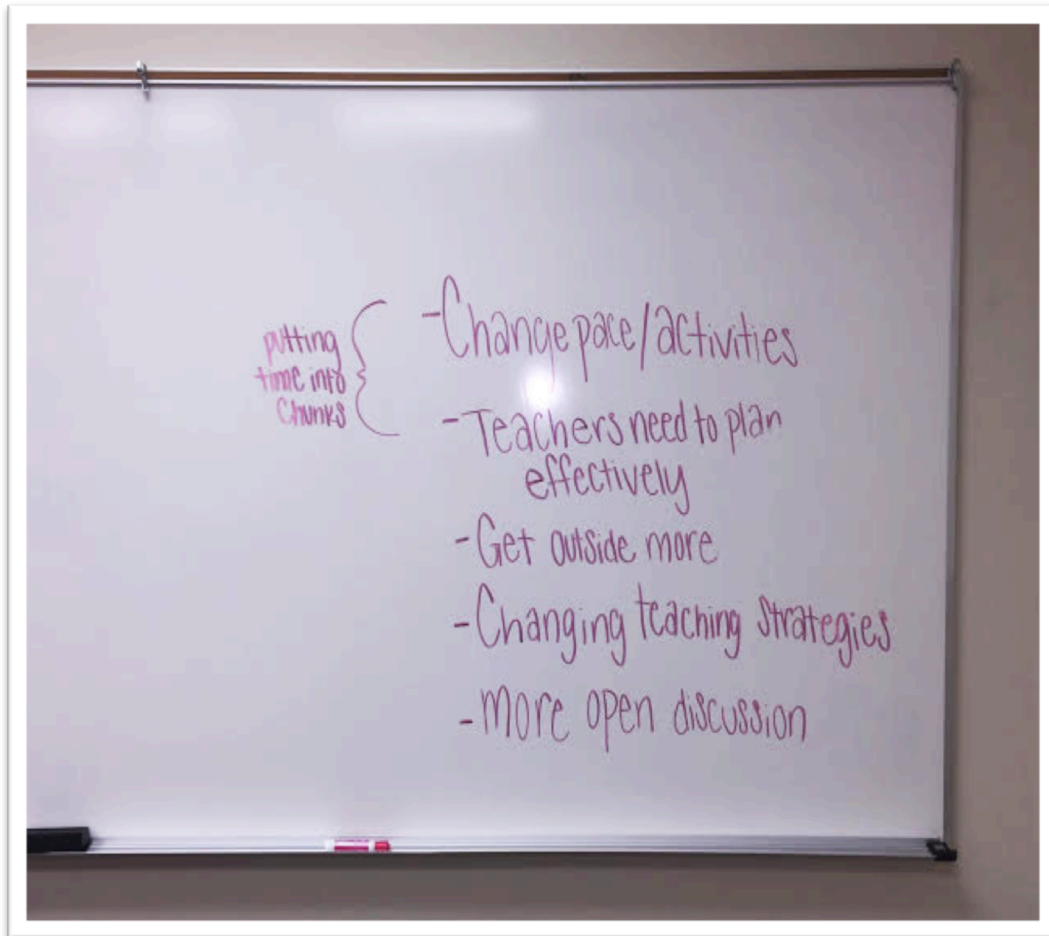


Figure 3. Classroom Look and Feel.

While the second group's ideas corresponded closely with the first group, they desired movement and change within the class period (see Figure 3). Clearly, they connected effective teacher planning with movement and change. Change in their view equals doing more and sitting less. Their use of the term chunks to the left of the list spoke to their familiarity with educational lingo. Their open concept, free range type class is reflected not only in ideas like getting outside more often, but also with the

recommendation for teachers to allow for more open discussion. Reading this list, one would get the sense that the pace does not change as frequently as it should for the ways they learn best. The students also seemed hungry for a certain physicality, which is at odds with the traditional classroom configuration where often there is just enough space to fit all of the desks.

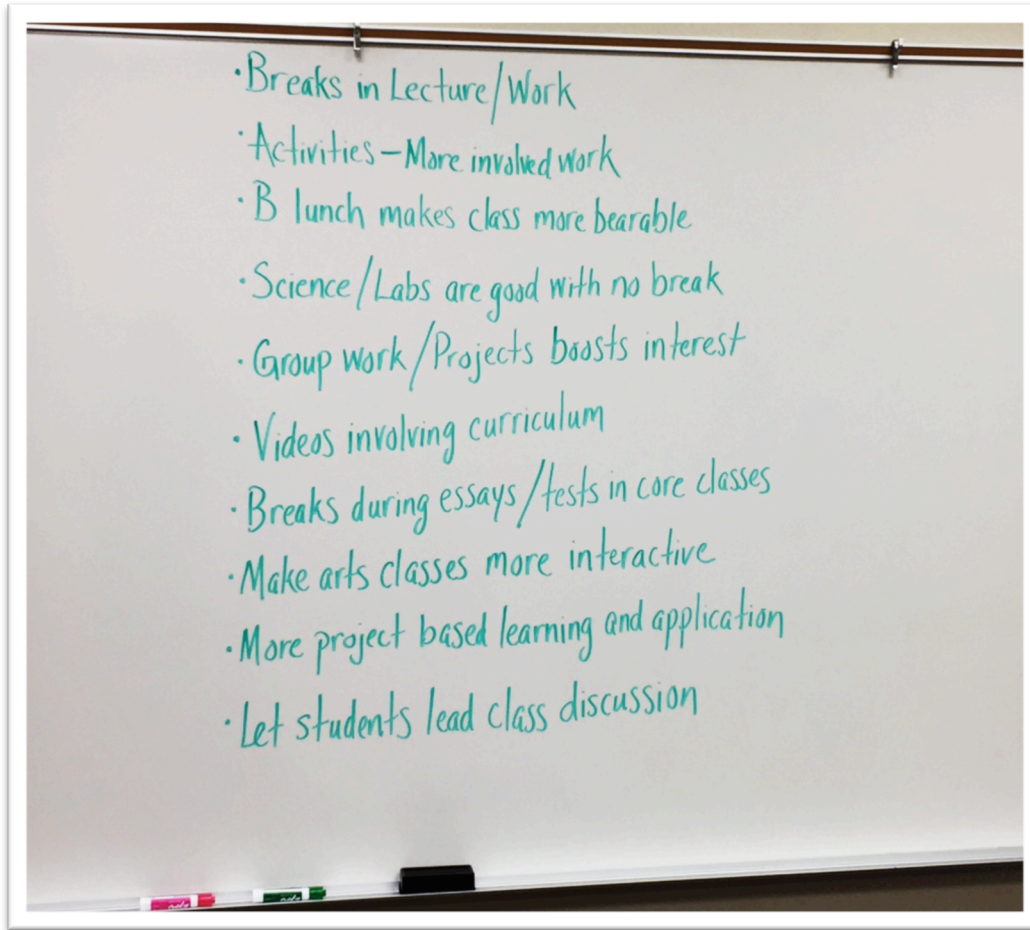


Figure 4. Restructuring Learning.

Once again, the notion of an active, application-based classroom dominated this final group's list of recommendations. They noted how when lunch comes in the middle of class rather than at the beginning, class is more bearable (see Figure 4). They also witnessed a boost in interest from students when they were permitted to work

collaboratively and on projects. The connotation of their word choice was not so subtle. And despite the mention of breaks, they specifically conceded that they are not always necessary as evidenced by qualifying that science labs are fine to continue on without a break. Class discussion was singled out again, but it was interesting that this group encouraged students leading the conversation. Clear themes emerged from this activity. The Student Voice Team consistently communicated a desire to apply their knowledge in a physically active environment where the structure of the class was varied enough so not to become stagnant.

After each group explained their work on the whiteboard, we then discussed next steps. The team decided to meet the following month, and I encouraged them to let all of the ideas on the whiteboard marinate. The meeting concluded with the team agreeing asked to weigh various plans of action, with the goal being to decide how they could strategically devise a plan so that what was important to them could be heard and seriously considered by others on campus, students and teachers alike. All ten students definitely wanted to come back and do it all again. We then determined the best day and week to meet for the following month, based on all of their schedules. This took time because some played varsity sports and others were involved in volunteer projects during the school day. We finally found a time that worked for everyone, but the team also wanted to use the GroupMe phone app so that we could communicate just amongst the team whenever something came up. The students then quickly created a group on the app, calling it the Power Team. They already had so much affection for the idea of this team after just a single meeting, as if they had just been waiting for this opportunity because they seized it right away. They also quickly carved out their own identity within

the larger group dynamic. Avoiding a homogenous group of students proved the correct choice because each person brought their own style and creative voice. The students received journals that first meeting and began taking notes. As their former English teacher, I was comfortable emphasizing the advantage of writing and documenting progress, setbacks, and individual feelings as we navigated through mysterious, yet promising exploratory trails. During the course of the team meetings and journaling, personalities, identities, and leadership qualities emerged (see Table 1). In an effort to protect student identity, but still reveal insights into their distinct and contagious personalities, each student has been given a pseudonym, a kind of personality identifier, based on their strongest character traits. These will be used throughout the dissertation document.

Table 1

Study Participants

Study Participants	Quote
The Activist	<i>I am a very vocal student. Socially, my ability to express myself has been limited in some areas at school, but I have still explored my interests, such as my love for political activism.</i>
The Adult	<i>I am a very organized person, therefore keeping up with my classes and work was pretty easy. I've built relationships with my teachers, former and current.</i>
The Artist	<i>I have been most able to express myself through my artistry and my means to work in the art room.</i>
The Contrarian	<i>I feel like school projects don't do enough to express individuality or get students interested in the subject. I feel like I've become more of a</i>

	<i>leader in high school, but it has also limited my willingness to open up with people.</i>
The Critic	<i>Knowledge is measured through homework, online assignments, and tests. I believe that this way of learning limits some students' abilities to learn because each person learns in a different way. In addition, it makes us feel as though the school is just trying to produce hundreds of cloned students.</i>
The Educator	<i>Teachers and students have different perspectives, but teachers are very open and willing to change and modify plans when they know it will help their students.</i>
The Gentleman	<i>All in all, I think the voice team is a great program. It does help. It helps a lot. I appreciate y'all for it.</i>
The Governor	<i>The school could include a wider variety of student groups on various advisory councils. This would allow for more students to have an input in their daily lives in school and shape the environment around them.</i>
The Outsider	<i>During the first meeting I honestly did not know why I was being selected for this team. People are still shocked when I tell them that I'm taking dual credit classes for college credit in high school. They do not believe that I would do something like that.</i>
The Throwback	<i>High school has provided me ways to build work ethic and develop a sense of community.</i>

The writing connected to their pseudonym comes from their own journals. Specific quotes have been selected to associate each individual with their outlook on the work the

team undertook and to establish a sense of their own individual voice and the tone of their writing.

Curriculum Planning Days with Students

The second team meeting was held in March 2017, and this time I provided lunch for everyone. I realized after the previous meeting that some students sacrificed eating lunch in order to attend. Most high school students have snacks on them at all times, but not everyone had a real lunch. Since they were giving up their lunchtime, I bought pizza for the group. Leading up to the meeting, some students took to the GroupMe app to send meeting reminders. The morning of the meeting, I asked if anyone was a vegetarian before I ordered the pizza. They were so excited about the food. Some of the comments on the GroupMe included, “This meeting is going to be exciting and it includes food” and “T-minus 3 minutes to chow time.” The app had provided another layer of communication and almost a family dynamic. The students loved providing updates and expressing their own personal excitement. As we gathered in the counseling conference room, the dialogue picked up right where it left off. Despite the clear personality differences on the team, they loved talking with one another, and those conversations were pivotal in parlaying their energy for change into a concrete plan of action. In *Gracious Space* (2010), Hughes and Grace elaborate on the liberating power of dialogue because it “provides a space for reflection for all types of people . . . in dialogue we ‘suspend’ judgments” (p. 75). The connection here between dialogue and trust is readily apparent. Dialogue speeds up the process of a group learning to trust one another and The Student Voice Team embodied authentic and open conversations, without judgment. “Trust can spread through a group like ripples on a pond. When one person demonstrates

trust, others will respond. People feel freer to take risks and be creative” (p. 67). In many ways dialogue and trust are dependent qualities, without one the other cannot exist. Dialogue and trust were the pillars of those first two meetings and would guide the work we did together from those moments forward.

The agenda for the second meeting contained a list of the major themes they produced on the whiteboards the meeting prior. As each individual took turns explaining the rationale behind their ideas, the conversation became about how students and teachers could collaborate to improve daily instruction while incorporating student voice. One student, The Critic, asked about the team meetings teachers attended every so often when they had a substitute in class. She was referring to the on campus professional development curriculum planning days each individual teaching team held once per semester. For example, all teachers who taught English I would assemble as a team for a full day in a campus conference room to discuss topics relating to curriculum and teaching methods for that particular course. The team quickly became intrigued and motivated to make this happen, but they also looked to me to see if that was possible, with expressions that seemed to be asking if it could indeed become a reality. The decision to collaborate with teachers while continuing to meet as a student team meant the locus of research would remain on student voice and agency, but the actual work needed to infiltrate the teacher community for the students to feel valued.

This new narrowed, yet ambitious focus of the voice team reflected Fielding’s (2004a) argument for inviting teachers to participate:

the potential for transformation is more likely to reside in arrangements which require the active engagement of students and teachers working in partnership

than in those which either exclude teachers or treat student voice as an instrument of teacher or state purposes. Initiatives that either exclude teachers or seek to engage them in less than central ways, often late on in the process ... are unlikely to have anything other than limited success and stand little chance of sustainability, let alone transformation (p. 306).

The connection to teachers that the students made was promising on two fronts. First, they demonstrated such maturity and foresight in their ability to recognize that collaborating with teachers possibly held the answer to many of the issues they had raised. Secondly, these curriculum planning days were far different than what normally constituted professional development.

Typically, professional development means going off campus to some large training that teachers had no say in choosing, one that inevitably does not end up benefiting their teaching nor the learning experiences of students. These curriculum planning days, on the other hand, were personalized because the teachers on each team determined the day's agenda from beginning to end. For example, freshman English teachers would all take the same day together and might discuss something similar to the following:

1. Reexamining the curriculum calendar for the months ahead
2. Analyzing teaching methods that had either been successful or lacking so far
3. Future ideas regarding projects, readings, and pacing
4. Gathering input and insights from colleagues to help with instruction

Teaming up these ten students with the right academic departments was the ticket to a potentially revolutionary type change in the culture of how teachers planned and students

learned. The second Student Voice Team meeting concluded on a high. Because of my familiarity with the English department, the team was in consensus that we should present them with the chance to be the first to collaborate with students in this way. We agreed to meet again after the English team had decided whether to accept the team's plan. Because it was still early enough in the spring, teaching teams had not yet held their spring professional development meetings.

This idea to bring students and teachers together on these professional development planning days represented the embodiment of what's necessary for school culture to dramatically shift because "students ... forming alliances with more powerful stakeholders such as teachers and administrators and getting them 'bought in' early on thus improves the likelihood of having a positive impact (Ozer, Ritterman, & Wanis, 2010, p. 160). Using this politically astute strategy, a meeting was arranged with the English department chairperson, rather than all twelve English teachers, to see if she would like to be the first to include students in their curriculum planning days. Because the English department, and in particular their chairperson, carried more clout than any single person or department on campus, I knew once that department committed every other department would respond competitively and want students in their meetings as well. The idea of students collaborating with teachers was pitched to her not just as an opportunity to be at the forefront of a new campus innovation, but also as the chance to be the first department on campus to participate. This aspect was deliberately spoken about at length, stating that we thought she would appreciate being the first and talking up the fact that her team could establish a new standard on campus. This went precisely as planned with her accepting the offer. The team's steady progress allowed for natural

research questions to emerge and convinced me that this had the potential to become not only an interesting dissertation topic, but one that could yield a dimension to student voice that did not currently exist.

Research Questions

The goal of this study is to propose a more democratic education model where the relationship between teacher and student becomes dynamic and progressive. Only through authentic democratic practices and teachers' treating students as partners and collaborators is true learning and growth possible. Crotty summarized this ideal well in his reading of Mead's interpretation of empathy: "We have to see ourselves as social objects and we can only do that through adopting the standpoint of others" (Crotty, 1998, p. 128). Therefore, the research questions guiding the study include:

1. How can students exercise democratic practice and student agency within the boundaries of their school?
2. In what ways can including student voice change curriculum choices and instructional methods?
3. What are the possibilities when students feel like true equals on their campus?
4. When acting as agents of change, how can students influence the school improvement process?

This study would increase student dialogue much how Freire discussed: "Where humans meet to reflect on their reality as they make and remake it" (Shor & Freire, 1987, p. 98). This collaborative effort with teachers is reflected in Freire's sentiment that, "Thought is dependent on the revelation of real problems and needs" (Grollios, 2015, p. 64). In this era of high stakes testing and accountability, students have lost out more than

anyone. Many students have been deceived their entire lives, some even believing that constant test preparation is reflective of what education should look like in a democratic society. This study would unabashedly challenge systems of thinking that have viewed students as not worthy contributors to conversations on education policy and school improvement efforts.

Study Design and Methods

This study incorporated a participatory action research methodology to document the journey working alongside the high school students as co-researchers. McTaggart (1991) recognized that “People are often involved in research, but rarely are they participants with real ownership of research theory and practice” (p. 171). He later added, “Participatory action research is concerned simultaneously with changing both individuals *and* the culture of the groups, institutions, and societies to which they belong (p. 172). The idea of working as co-researchers and true collaborators with students was the most authentic method for conducting research on student voice. Because the idea of student voice intertwines with every aspect of school culture, PAR was not only the logical methodology for this study, but also the one that could most legitimately serve the students in an effort to improve their educational experiences.

For public education to experience a democratic transformation, it must be done so through a collective effort. Students and even teachers to a large extent have been deprived of this ownership. Adopting a participatory action research relationship amongst the entire school community is the most democratic method for ensuring that students and teachers become “producers rather than receivers of history” (McTaggart, 1991, p. 178). PAR actively resists allowing opposing backgrounds or viewpoints to

undermine progress. Through creative collaboration, PAR allows for “new ways of relating to each other to make the work of reform possible” (McTaggart, p. 176). PAR essentially prioritizes empathy so that participants can work together effectively without allowing the past to obstruct the hope and potential of the future. After all, “Authentic participation ... means ownership—responsible agency in the production of knowledge and the improvement of practice (McTaggart, p. 171). Appendix C presents a list of relevant terms to describe some of the concepts discussed in this dissertation.

The ownership and agency components are crucial because they reveal democratic processes at work. Reason (2006) framed this type of action research in democratic terms because it “seeks to do research with, for, and by people; to redress the balance of power in knowledge creation; and to do this in an educative manner that increases participants’ capacity to engage in inquiring lives” (p. 189). Elaborating on Lewin’s action research cycle, McTaggart explained PAR as a process that builds and grows in scope (see Figure 5). “Participatory action research starts small and develops through the self-reflective spiral: a spiral of cycles planning, acting, (implementing plans), observing (systematically), reflecting and then re-planning, further implementation, observing and reflecting” (McTaggart, 1991, p. 175).

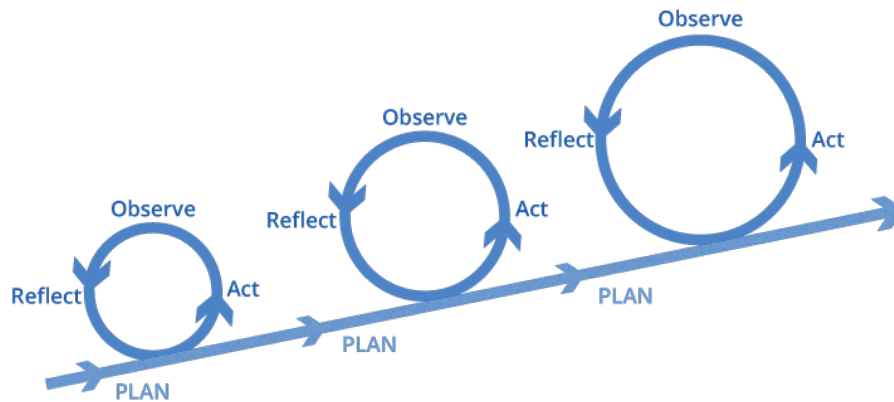


Figure 5. PAR Cycle. Downloaded from <https://wiobyne.com/action-research/>

Each stage essentially presents the opportunity for a new narrative to unfold. These stages also provide opportunities for student growth because these “small cycles of planning, acting, observing, and reflecting which can help to define issues, ideas, and assumptions more clearly so that those involved can define more powerful questions for themselves as their work progresses” (McTaggart, p. 178). The Student Voice Team exemplified how the cycles can quickly progress from exploratory observations and reflections to ambitious planning efforts where action is at the heart of those plans.

Data Collection

Working with students provided the luxury of collecting different types of really interesting data. Being young and adventurous, the team of students had already proved willing to exert full effort, especially in the area of self-expression, which gets to the essence of this study. Creating videos on their iPhones, typing into a Google Doc on their phone, and sending updates and messages via phone apps like Group Me were not seen as tasks, but something that was part of their daily existence. Openly accepting technology, rather than resisting the natural role it plays in their lives would be pivotal in

maximizing the type of data they could produce and would want to produce. Therefore, data collection sources for this dissertation include: Student Voice Team meetings, GroupMe app, student journals, researcher's journal, student videos, and exit interviews with each of the ten participants (see Table 2).

Table 2

Data Collection Sources

Student Voice Meetings	GroupMe App	Student Journals	Researcher's Journal	Student Videos	Conversational Exit Interviews
Student led dialogue on curriculum, instruction, and democratic process	Student suggested and school district approved communication app	Observations, reflections, and ideas	Record critical events, field notes, and emerging themes	Observations, reflections, and ideas	Interview with each student participant
Reflect collectively on PD sessions with teachers, special events, and next steps	Communicate meeting time reminders, feedback after meetings, and new ideas	Detail individual feelings and ideas in PD sessions and student voice meetings	Student input and ideas for change in PD sessions and in student voice meetings	Detail individual and collaborative experiences for school community	Conversation documenting their experiences on The Student Voice Team and the its value to the school
Face-to-face meetings in school conference room	Cell phone application that each student downloaded	Google Docs and composition book	Google Docs and composition book	Cell phones and iMovie	Recorded and transcribed

The above table illustrates the how, why, and where behind each data collection source.

In the following pages, there is a detailed description of each of these data sources.

Student Voice Meetings

The Student Voice Team met only once per month, for a total of three meetings during that first spring semester in 2017. Even though meetings were infrequent, from

the very beginning the group set out to get things accomplished. They capitalized on McTaggart's (1991) advice that "One good way to begin a participatory action research project is to collect some initial data" (p. 177). The meetings with the students increased to one meeting per week once the study had progressed beyond the pilot stage and received IRB approval in Fall 2017. In these meetings, there was an official agenda, but topics and discussion remained fluid (see Appendix D for a sample meeting agenda). It was important not to become overly structured, preventing ideas or voices from ever being heard by the group. Photos were taken of the whiteboards containing the team's work when they collaborated in small groups and important decisions or comments made in meetings were recorded separately in the researcher's journal to capture those moments as they were happening.

Group Me

In line with the principles of PAR, during the first meeting, when the students suggested using the GroupMe app, they already knew it would allow for group communication in a forum approved by school district policy. The students were savvy to the fact that texting was not a legitimate means for communication since I was part of the team and school employees could not text students. The Group Me app would include only group members and when someone sent a message the app would notify each person. This immediately came in handy. If meeting times changed or someone had a scheduling conflict, they would use the GroupMe app. However, it was most useful in communicating other key information. If someone had an idea that related to our work, they could communicate it at any time knowing that the entire team would read it. Similar to regular texting, the app also saved all previous conversations, which proved

convenient for data collection.

Student Journals

During the first meeting with students, we established the expectation that all ideas, goals, and critical moments in our conversations would be documented and everyone would participate in that activity in order to help provide an accurate record of our work. It is in this space where the principles of participatory action research and narrative inquiry first crossed paths. Documenting meaningful dialogue was an impossible task to coordinate alone, and besides, the students were co-researchers in this project, so them sharing in the data collection process was appropriate and fitting. “An action researcher . . . gives space to different voices and interpretations of the same events” (Heikkinen, Huttunen, Syrjala, & Pesonen, 2012, p. 9). Students were presented with various options for documenting these meetings.

Composition book style journals were supplied for those students who were more comfortable writing by hand. Others had their own laptops and used Google Docs to type their entries. While the journals were not read aloud before the entire group, they were all shared with me and quite often their entries furnished topics to address in future meetings. And as was the case with our first meeting, we occasionally used whiteboards when working in small groups so that everyone could easily present and share their team’s ideas before departing the conference room. This type of in-the-moment documentation would also lead to the research study being able to “reproduce the voices of different people as authentically as possible – and to keep them so genuine and original that the informants can recognize their own thinking in them” (Heikkinen, Huttunen, Syrjala, & Pesonen, 2012, p. 9). The main goal of the journal was to allot both

time and an outlet for students to reflect and to say whatever they felt needed to be said.

However, solid participatory action research is not simply about the leader of the team being capable of reproducing diverse voices, it is equally about the student contribution as a co-researcher. McTaggart found that good participatory action research is “open minded about what counts as evidence (or data). It involves not only keeping records which describe what is happening as accurately as possible but also collecting and analyzing each researcher’s own judgments, reactions, and impressions about what is going on” (McTaggart, 1991, p. 177). He also detailed the importance of participants regularly documenting their experiences:

The participatory action researcher allows and requires participants to build records of their improvements: (a) records of their changing activities and practices; (b) records of the changes in the language and discourse in which they describe, explain, and justify their practices; (c) records of the changes in the social relationships and forms of organization which characterize and constrain their practices; and (d) records of the development of their expertise in the conduct of action research (McTaggart, 1991, pp. 178-179).

A journal by its nature elicits a more personal style of writing. The journal is then ideal for documenting student growth, both individually and within the team concept. This type of writing has the power to evoke meaning that might not surface without the journal.

Researcher’s Journal

Just as The Student Voice Team actively documented their ideas, goals, and findings, I also kept a journal that served two purposes: My reflections as a researcher

and field notes. In the field notes, it is crucial to capture detailed descriptions so that nothing is left solely to memory. Patton (2002) defined field notes as “the description of what has been observed. They should contain everything that the observer believes to be worth noting” (p. 302). However, considering the participatory aspect of this study, it was necessary to dig even deeper and introduce a more creative fieldwork approach, which Patton described as “using every part of oneself to experience and understand what is happening. Creative insights come from being directly involved in the setting being studied” (p. 302). In other words, the journal also served as a space for analysis and reflection. Borg (2001) discussed the researcher’s journal in terms of its product benefits (see Table 3), which he defined as a type of retrospective analysis tool to assist with looking back on all that had been accomplished or even contemplated during the course of the research (pp. 171-172).

Table 3

Researcher’s Journal Product Benefits

Reminder of past ideas and events	Precise information could be retrieved at a later date
Record of plans and achievements	Facilitates the task of evaluating progress and, in the case of lack of progress, of reviewing possible reasons for it
Account of events and procedures	Compensates for what would otherwise be gaps in the description of what was done
Recall and reproduce the thinking behind decisions	Conveys to readers how specific decisions were made, particular problems overcome, or specific events perceived
Instructive narrative	Documents changing perspectives on the research process throughout the project
Physical evidence of progress	The mere activity of reading through the journal and acknowledging the work being done can be motivating
Spark further insights	Captures and freezes thoughts which, when revisited, may in turn provide the springboard for further ideas

Utilizing the journal in this way could help provide detailed observations from The Student Voice Team meetings when at times there was so much happening that taking the time in that moment to document the activity would be the only way to preserve all of the changes, ideas, and growth.

When deciding what is worthy of documenting or what should be classified as noteworthy, I used the concept of a critical event as the benchmark to assist me in making that determination. Mertova (2013) wrote that a critical event is one that “has been selected because of its unique, illustrative and confirmatory nature in relation to the studied phenomenon” (p. 119). Incorporating this standard while also habitually documenting my “own feelings, reactions, to the experience, and reflections about the personal meaning and significance of what has been observed” (Patton, 2015, p. 303), assured that nothing was left to chance during the valuable time I had with the students. From the researcher’s perspective, journal writing is the most versatile form of data collection because it provides both a reflective and analytical approach to gathering data while retaining the urgency of the moment for later analysis.

Student Videos

Schools are inseparable from the community to which they belong. For that reason, it is important to document student voice and agency in a way that welcomes outside viewership. Each member of The Student Voice Team created a couple videos in which they discussed and expressed their ideas, progress, and honest reflections on the student voice project. The freedom associated with using their own phone on their own time demonstrated that “participants can be spontaneous with what they record” (García,

Welford, & Smith, 2016, p. 520). They creatively crafted their videos in a style that served as mini movie journals tracing the path each of them traveled, archiving their journey in an attractive visual narrative form. Thinking ahead to various community forums, such as school board meetings and leadership gatherings with campus and district leaders, the video documentation is a potentially persuasive tool because others gain access to the group experience in a way that does not require reading or attending a meeting in person. The videos were transcribed to allow for inclusion as data in this study, but The Student Voice Team also discussed their future use as convincing proof for new staff and students as to the impact of the study and to highlight the meaningful collaborations with teachers and students. It is possibly the most influential tool in allowing both the high school community and those outside the school to understand, appreciate, and most importantly, relate to the students and their participatory work.

Conversational Exit Interviews

These conversational exit interviews were conducted with each of the ten student participants at the conclusion of the study. They actually serve more as a final dialogue with the students rather than a question and answer session. The tone that was established throughout the team meetings with the students did not change. As co-researchers, they had always spoken freely around me and in staying true to the tenets of participatory action research, the tenor and authenticity of the dialogue in these exit conversations remained free of any sort of formal constraints. Patton (2015) described the purpose of interviewing as something that, “Allow[s] us to enter into the other person’s perspective” (p. 341). There are simply constraints with other qualitative research methods, such as observing, where interviewing is liberated from these same

limitations. In a sense, it is not just about the information that interviewing provides the researcher, it is what it provides that other data cannot provide. “We cannot observe feelings, thoughts, and intentions. We cannot observe behaviors that took place at some previous point in time” (Patton, 2015, p. 341). While the students were asked specific questions, they were also encouraged to direct the flow of conversation and both ask and answer questions that were not on the sample questions list. Ashworth and Lucas (2000) stated, “In essence, the interview should be regarded as a conversational partnership in which the interviewer assists a process of reflection” (p. 302). This conversational technique produced honest answers and eliminated the stuffiness and lack of flow that often characterizes interviews working exclusively with prescribed questions. Each interview was also mindful to “engage in empathic listening to hear meanings, interpretations and understandings” (Ashworth & Lucas, 2000, p. 302). The dialogue was guided by questions as illustrated in Appendix F. Once the interviews were transcribed, it became evident that the conversations were organic in nature and reflected an open-ended quality where students were expected to take equal ownership in the conversation just as they did in the team meetings. Each student interview took on its own personality and tone. Some students chose to discuss The Student Voice Team’s efforts through a political lens, where others devoted more time to the concept of community and family.

Data Analysis

Empowering The Student Voice Team to speak as individuals and a group was essential to the study, so implementing a narrative inquiry approach was significant. Through the narrative inquiry process, consistent themes emerged directly from the

students, both through their speech and writing. Through the careful coding process, these distinct themes not only emerged, but also revealed the thinking and developments that led The Student Voice Team to value certain elements of the process more than others.

Narrative Inquiry

Working as a co-researcher with high school students presented a valuable opportunity to inhabit their lives at a time when so much was uncertain, yet what was to come held such excitement and promise. Experiences are essentially stories waiting to be told, so employing a narrative inquiry approach was the perfect compliment to the co-researcher relationship that had already been established. Bruce (2008) alluded to a sort of prerequisite of trust in this type of analysis because “researchers listen to participants' stories about their lives and engage with them in reflective dialogue” (p. 323). The fact that narrative analysis is an “ethical and empathetic research method that is oriented toward emancipatory, social, professional, and personal change” (Bruce, 2008, p. 335) took on added meaning when considering the educational setting and student population in this study. Narrative inquiry also works in tandem with a participatory action research methodology. Clandinin (2006) noted that “As research puzzles are framed, research fields and participants selected, as field notes are collected . . . narrative inquirers work within that space with their participants (p. 47). Working with high school student participants, and the varied, yet strong opinions they possessed, it was important to capture their “diverse kinds of texts, which have in common a storied form” (Riessman, 2005, p. 1). This idea of the research eventually lending itself to story form is essential for any project that hopes to achieve lasting change.

In many communities the schools are the hub of activity and serve as part of the fabric of that town. Considering the community-school dynamic, this particular school improvement project kept in mind Guajardo and Guajardo's (2010) specific narrative advice that "Using storytelling as a process for community change requires imagining the future while we also share the past and frame the present" (p. 97). To ensure that as McTaggart (1991) stated, the "record" piece of the study received ample time and effort, elements of narrative inquiry and analysis were utilized to tell the story of these students and their journey to make a lasting difference on their campus (p. 178). Having a strong past relationship with the participants also made a real difference in both sides feeling comfortable telling their stories. I was already used to telling stories about the accomplishments of these students to family and friends, so in a sense this form of recording their thoughts and passions had been ongoing since I first met them. Our relationship has embodied the narrative inquiry mantra to "stay as close to people's experiences as we can" (Caine, Estefan, & Clandinin, 2013, p. 578). The Student Voice Team became like a school family, so it felt easy for all of us to stay close and connected to the experiences of one another as each person evolved through the experience.

Preset and Emergent Themes

Due to the heavy emphasis on student participant writing and interviews in the collection process, narrowing down the quantity of themes and efficiently labeling content to avoid overlap from the participants was crucial (Creswell, 2015, p. 154). With so many interviews, it was also important to keep in mind Creswell's advice that "The researcher should not be reporting extended passages, but should instead successfully analyze what the interviewee is expressing" (p. 155). Utilizing a combination of preset

categories, a list of themes or categories that are created in advance, and emergent themes, issues or themes that continually appear in the data, proved most fitting considering students outlined their priorities early in the process, but then entered into a new relationship with teachers where preset categories were not always applicable (Renner & Taylor-Powell, 2003, p. 3). The frequent journal contributions also meant that themes continuously emerged and while some of the preset themes remained, those themes also morphed into new or slightly altered themes through the writing process.

Creswell (2016, p. 158) produced an eight-step process for coding (see Table 4), which translated effectively in organizing the layers of written and interview materials from students. His systematic approach to coding also aligned well with this study considering the hundreds of hours spent with students.

Table 4

Eight-Step Data Coding Process

1. Transcript Set Up	Create a heading on the left side for “Codes” and one of the right side for “Themes”
2. Read Through Each Text	Record notes in the margin to answer the question: “What are people saying or doing?”
3. Code Each Text	The best code label would be “in vivo codes” or the exact words of the participant because they capture the voices of the participants
4. List All Codes	While self explanatory, this step does allow to review all of the codes before grouping them to ensure that nothing was excluded.

Table 4 continued

5. Group the Codes	This is where checking for redundancy is important. Because this research will inevitably yield many codes, editing to eliminate repetitiveness will allow the research to elaborate on those student codes that were most relevant in their writings and interviews.
6. Write a Theme Passage	This passage should consist of direct quotes from multiple people.
7. Create Conceptual Map of Themes	The map simply organizes the themes into a logical flow for the upcoming narrative.
8. Develop Narrative Story	The implementation of all the previous steps help to provide a thematic structure and ultimately a more cohesive narrative.

For this dissertation, the first step included converting all data into text. Because of the large amount of textual data collected, MaxQDA software assisted in organizing codes and themes efficiently. While this could potentially be done by hand, MaxQDA organized and saved themes and codes in a style that proved easy to read and also simple to revise. After reading through each text at least twice, the next step should get to the heart of what the participants were truly saying or doing. Once again, MaxQDA easily stored these margin notes and memos in a way that did not clutter the page as it might in a regular Word document. My close relationship with the participants was crucial here because I recorded additional notes in the margins beside what the student said. The next step called for coding the text. Creswell (2016) advised using an in vivo method to capture the actual words of participants. That approach was ideal for The Student Voice

Team because of the many quotable lines the students offered about school improvement. Staying true to their own language and wording was fitting for this study. In the end, the study produced many codes, so listing all of them before the grouping process yielded the opportunity to ensure that nothing was overlooked or omitted before the grouping process.

While the quantity of codes was plentiful, Creswell (2016) also warned against redundancy. This is where the importance of reading through each text and producing accurate notes of what people said and did benefited the grouping process. Key terms, such as democracy, agency, and voice inevitably created some overlap, depending on how students communicated those terms and their thoughts. Crafting a theme passage allowed the combining of multiple student voices based on similar thematic quotes. The next step, creating a concept map for all of the themes, built on the numerous, quote-filled passages. This organizational structure of writing vignettes and then constructing a map demanded that the student voice themes were streamlined so that clear distinctions existed among the different themes. Based on the amount of time The Student Voice Team met, this eight-step process supplied necessary checks and balances before penning the narrative. The coding steps along with the theme statement and map that followed, assisted in distinguishing not just what the students were saying, but how they were saying it. Their tone and personality were important aspects of this study, so that element was deservedly valued and accentuated.

Ethical Considerations

Careful ethical precautions were taken well before submitting an IRB for this study. Freire (1998) stated about teaching, “Because my profession is neither superior

nor inferior to any other, it demands of me the highest level of ethical responsibility, which includes my duty to be properly prepared professionally, in every aspect of my profession” (p. 127). Despite knowing these ten students really well, the work was approached with sensitivity and a serious regard for the fact that they were still high school students and minors when the study began. Their families received phone calls and emails, informing them about the nature of the study, but also keeping them updated on the team’s progress. Total transparency existed with the student’s parents, even during the initial pilot study, and this same honesty was an integral part of the working relationship with the students. As soon as this school improvement study also gained traction as a dissertation topic, it was communicated to both students and parents. The student and their parents needed to trust that the study was in no way an opportunistic act arranged to use them for selfish research purposes.

Having previously taught these ten students during their freshman year was without a doubt the most influential piece in building trust with students and their families. Having met all of the participant’s parents before at various school events and wrote weekly email updates when teaching their children. This level of previous in-person and written communication made me kind of a known commodity to each of the families. In addition to my existing relationship with the participants and their families, both groups received an IRB consent form (see Appendices F and G), even those parents with students who were already eighteen and therefore considered a legal adult. However, before mailing the IRB, parents were contacted to explain to them the benefit this study would have for their child and the school while also detailing how this would

eventually turn into my dissertation. For confidentiality purposes, identifiable information has been omitted from appendices F and G in the dissertation.

This study was personal because of the passion the entire team had for the work we were doing, so parents needed to fully understand my commitment to improving the school with their children was the reason for the study, not my dissertation. Parents were overwhelmingly supportive and in many cases they went out of their way to let me know how honored they were that their child was able to participate in a study that so valued their worth as a student and person. Freire (1998) made a profound statement regarding the ethical duties of educators that spoke to my sentiments about this group of student's throughout the research process:

A profession that deals with people whose dreams and hopes are at times timid and at other times adventurous and whom I must respect all the more because such dreams and hopes are being constantly bombarded by an ideology whose purpose is to destroy humanity's authentic dreams and utopias (p. 127).

Assisting the students in achieving their own dreams and utopia was part of my ethical responsibility. We entered this study together as co-researchers so it was only fair they were treated as equals each step of the way.

Dissertation Roadmap

This dissertation reflects the progressive nature of The Student Voice Team and the flow of our work together as co-researchers in participatory action research. The early manifestations of student agency demonstrated in those first two team meetings gave birth to a kind of backward planning trajectory for this study. The inverted dissertation style aims to illustrate how information should be prioritized and structured

in the written report (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005). This is a way to communicate the most meaningful information up front and without delay. This structure allows for the telling of a collective story from beginning to end without interruption. The classic dissertation format contains a literature review chapter and a methods chapter in the beginning. However, in an inverted dissertation any information that disturbs the flow of the narrative is moved to the appendix section of the document (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005). It is a testament to those ten students that the dissertation can be written in this style, with research findings and shifts in school culture coming so soon in the process.

This dissertation contains five chapters. Chapter one introduced the topic of the dissertation and relevant information regarding the study design. This is followed by three chapters presenting study findings. Chapter two, Student Agency in Action, describes The Student Voice Team's pilgrimage as presenters at the annual conference for the Texas Association of School Administrators (TASA). Chapter three, Seeking Equality Through Dialogue, examines how the dialogical curriculum meeting with teachers led to each side gaining perspective that resulted in a more respectful and balanced relationship. Chapter four, Becoming a Student Leader, discusses the evolution of The Student Voice Team and their ascension to fulfilling more of a leadership role on campus. Chapter five, Realizing a Hopeful Future, presents highlights of the study, implications for practice, as well as future research opportunities. Since this is an inverted dissertation, the appendix includes eight sections. For example, Appendix B presents a review of the literature. Also included in the appendix are other relevant documents, such as the consent forms and the interview sample questions.

II. STUDENT AGENCY IN ACTION

I've oftentimes thought about how I can impact my community in real ways and this was a way for me to actually change the curriculum for years to come.

—The Throwback

This chapter is dedicated to student agency playing out on a major stage, while also chronicling the politics of change that led to this opportunity. The chapter opens with a brief history of this type of agency before telling the story of how The Student Voice Team garnered an invitation to present at the annual conference for the Texas Association of School Administrators. The chapter then details the research findings, from the team's preparation for the conference, their collaborative effort to present in pairs, and the reception their presentation received from education leaders across the state.

Although a relatively modern term, student voice has come to mean many different things, depending on the age of the students, the country of the school, the political landscape of that country, and the ultimate desired outcome and change initiative driving the process. One way to categorize student voice is by discussing it as a bottom-up approach. “Three types of bottom-up participatory activities that occur in the United

States [are] youth activism, youth leadership, and carpettime democracy” (Mitra, Serriere, & Kirshner, 2014, p. 294). Age and the purpose of the change initiative are largely at play in these three broad terms. Because the focus of this review is on secondary school students, carpettime democracy will not be included in the discussion, based on its history of existing only in elementary school classrooms (p. 294). In the youth activism model, “young people take collective action to challenge injustices that they experience in their schools or neighbourhoods” (p. 294). The connotation being, some social wrong must exist in a very real way for this type of activism to become necessary.

Youth leadership allows for students to “have the agency to participate in discussions on the core operations of schools, including teaching, learning, and class or school-wide decision-making practices” (Mitra, Serriere, & Kirshner, 2014, 294). While this is certainly plausible at the elementary level, it does not seem to currently exist at the younger grade levels in the United States. And while, youth leadership does occur on middle school and high school campuses, “Few such activities are youth-led or youth-initiated” (p. 297). Fielding (2004b) framed the student voice categorization differently. He chose to examine what he called the “person-based approach to student-voice” (p. 208). Fielding argued that “we face a crisis of civic renewal, but that crisis is part of a much deeper malaise we need to name much more clearly. Our crisis is a crisis of the human person” (p. 208). Creating a space for authentic student agency is one way to strongly address this crisis.

It is uncommon for a public school employee, regardless of their position, to feel comfortable enough with the district superintendent to schedule an individual meeting

about the work of a select group of students. However, it is also uncommon for a superintendent to care about student voice in a way that is not politically motivated, but authentically personal. Past conversations with the superintendent gravitated toward philosophy, related to both learning and leading in schools, and the talks consistently came back to how different views on these topics impacted students. The superintendent was outwardly irreverent, a contrarian not for show, but because he was on a mission to alter the landscape of a broken educational system, full of deeply flawed thinking and fears. So, when I arranged a meeting with him in June of 2017, after The Student Voice Team had hit their stride, I did so feeling he would want to know that his was happening in his district. This presentation was a way to report on student progress while also being transparent about the student voice process. After presenting several slides containing an overview of the work The Student Voice Team had been up to, he looked at me both with curiosity and determination. He then asked that I present this work to the district leadership team at their annual summer retreat. And following a brief pause, he requested that these all ten of these students represent the district at the TASA, Texas Association of School Administrators, Midwinter Conference to be held in February 2018.

Much was revealed about the superintendent's character in that brief moment. First, he valued The Student Voice Team's dedication to improving instruction and learning. But even more importantly, he did not mind that their work could be viewed as disrupting the status quo within the school community. And most importantly, he made it clear that he wanted them to present at TASA. He explicitly stated that he wanted all ten in attendance and that it would be their show to run. This was after all a conference for

school administrators, so his willingness “to create wherever possible the conditions for dialogue and the practice of speaking with and to rather than speaking for others” was incredibly refreshing for someone in his position (Alcoff, 1991, p. 23). Leaders holding positions of substantial power and influence rarely step completely aside to shine the spotlight on others, especially when those others are students.

Alcoff’s (1991) maxim that “Who is speaking, who is spoken of, and who listens is a result, as well as an act, of political struggle” (p. 15) had been repeatedly reaffirmed by these previous personal experiences, thus elevating the superintendent’s offer to our team as something beyond just generous (p. 15). It was a political act of courage and kindness. It also represented a milestone for The Student Voice Team. The successful partnership and political victory with the English department and now the superintendent had created an earned optimism and reflected McTaggart’s (1991) observation that “As confidence and theoretical understanding develop participatory action researchers begin to engage the ways in which understandings are shaped (and distorted) by power relations (p. 178). Even though the superintendent’s reaction and interest in the team’s progress was genuine, his willingness to showcase the entire team and stand behind their work represented substantial political capital.

Preparing for TASA

In the months leading up to the TASA conference the team continued to write in their journals, but as the conference drew nearer I asked them to reflect both on their experiences working with teachers and what being part of the team meant to them. These journal entries then formed the organizational structure for the TASA presentation. Because so much of the team’s time together was rooted in writing and dialogue, it was

only fitting that the presentation be constructed in a way to illuminate their skills in those areas. As the team leader and co-researcher, I conducted a preliminary analysis of the student's journal entries. After reading over the entries, they were coded using key phrases, and as a result, clear principles of democratic practice emerged (e.g., equality, empathy, collaborative relationships, student agency, and dialogue). After noticing trends in their language, rather than eliminating redundancy, it was more practical and representative of their writing to pair those students who wrote about similar themes and feelings (see Table 5).

Table 5

Student Pairs and Democratic Practice Principles

Student Pair	Democratic Practice Principle
The Contrarian and The Governor	Equality
The Outsider and The Critic	Empathy
The Gentleman and The Activist	Collaborative Relationships
The Throwback and The Artist	Student Agency
The Educator and The Adult	Dialogue

For example, one of the students, The Outsider, spoke about having “a new perspective on the English curriculum and how other teachers and students experience school.” This sentiment seemed to naturally accompany another student's, The Critic, revelation about seeing “the teacher's side of the curriculum.” This led to those two students being paired

together to talk about empathy. Table 5 captures the team's shared principles and the structure used to present their findings to the conference.

Because the team's writing also mirrored their talk in the meetings, the presentation slides and student pairings did more than capture just a moment in time, they were emblematic of the thinking of those individuals over an extended time. Ultimately, the team decided to present in pairs and the five themes that emerged from their writing were labeled as democratic practice principles. The conference permitted presenters to upload one slide presentation and one handout (see Figure 6) to the portal system. The student team all had a say in the design and content of both.

At the Conference



Our Principles:

- Equality
- Empathy
- Collaboration
- Agency
- Dialogue

Strategic Plan:

- 2:1 student / teacher ratio
- 31 teams with average of 3 teachers per team
- 180-200 diverse student representatives
- 90-minute PD sessions
- Teachers submit a proposal in conjunction with students prior to meeting
- Feedback collected from students and teachers

The Research:

"Students and teachers need each other, need to work as active partners in the process if it is to be either worthwhile or successful" (Fielding, 2004, p. 307).

Rudduck and McIntyre (2007) noted that student participation in curriculum and learning was not enough because "Participation may or may not involve pupil commentary" (p. 6).

"A simple focus on 'being heard' can merely serve to make it appear that young people are active participants; this may, in reality, act as a 'safety valve' to ease pressures for real changes in decision-making or simply be a way of letting decision makers feel as if they are 'doing the right thing'" (Holdsworth, 2000, p. 358).

Figure 6. TASA Handout.

The TASA handout depicts the information distributed to the conference attendees upon them walking into the student voice conference room.

The Student Voice Team boarded a school bus for the Austin Convention Center at 7:00 a.m. the morning of the TASA conference with the presentation scheduled to begin at 9:00 that morning. After checking in and receiving their official conference badges, the team wanted to get to the third floor so they could check out the layout of their assigned room. With so many presenters, details like being able to sit together as a group and having an easy pathway to the microphone were not lost on them. Upon arriving in the room, it was indeed arranged with just a smallish rectangular table and a few chairs at the front, beside the podium. The team quickly went to work, removing the entire front row of seats, which just happened to number ten, and making their own row so they could face the audience side-by-side. As the start time approached, two students from the team, The Gentleman and The Governor, volunteered to stand at the entrance to our conference room and distribute handouts as school and district administrators from across the state entered.

As with most major conferences, the entire floor was filled with people, most deciding that morning which session they would attend. There were well over fifty conference rooms on each floor, and almost each one had a presentation slated to begin at 9:00. However, there were no other sessions with student presenters, so it was interesting watching those uncommitted attendees as they scoped out various sessions before ultimately being drawn to The Student Voice Team because of the two students welcoming them at the door with information. One school principal even approached them and said, "I'm not sure which one to attend, so sell me on why I should come in here." As they gave her a handout, both students took turns talking passionately about their collaboration with teachers, and then she cut them off. "Say no more. I'm sold,"

she said. There were sixty handouts and they did not have any left as we closed the doors and walked to the podium to begin.

After a brief introduction, I then turned it over to the students. They were more than capable and ready to narrate their journey and lead the discussion. The student quotes on each of the student slides (see Figures 7-11) served more as a springboard for them to discuss any aspect of their core principle. Recognizing they would be presenting before a roomful of adult strangers, having the slides projected behind each pair provided comfort if they needed help finding their footing as they spoke. Each pair of students had approximately ten minutes to discuss their slides.

Equality

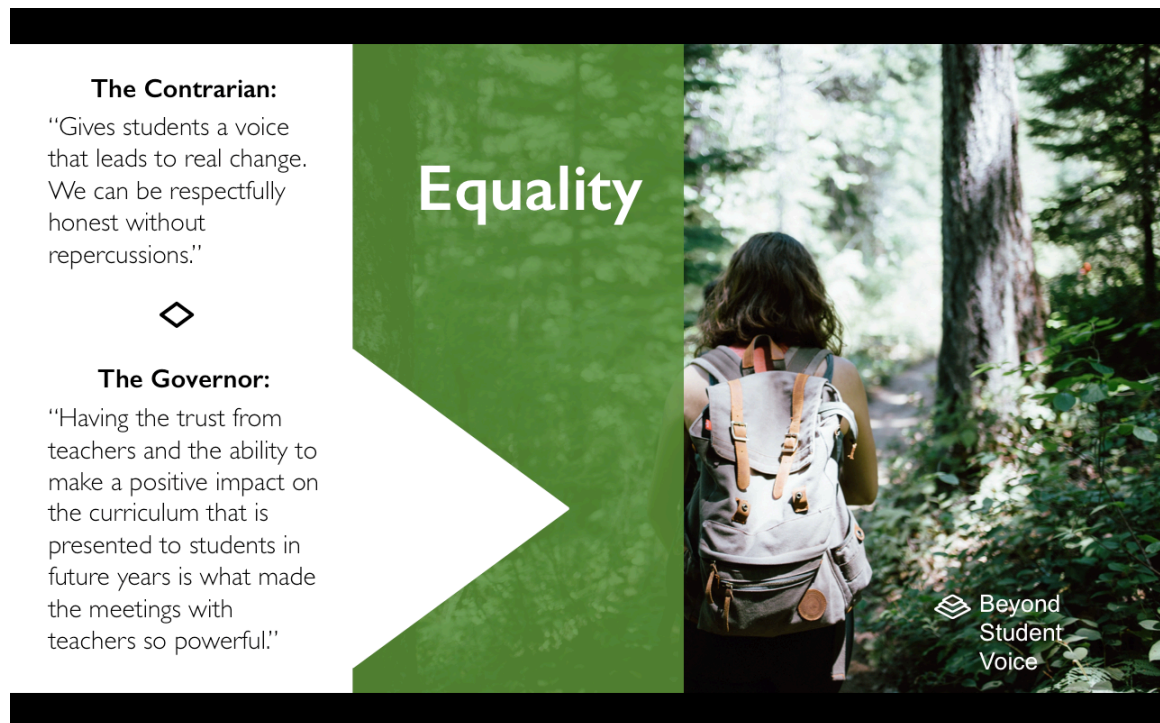


Figure 7. Equality.

Both of these students, The Contrarian and The Governor, said that “the teachers treated us as equals” in the professional development meeting. “We felt empowered to

“speak honestly and in return established trust within the room.” Interestingly, The Contrarian revealed that speaking the truth “did not come without some hesitation because the truth can be difficult to hear sometimes.” However, The Governor added that “trust was a big part of the meeting because they each valued their time together. We were like co-workers.”

In his answer to how equality of intelligence is achieved, Rancière (1991) continued coming back to the student-teacher relationship and the necessity for the teacher to maintain not just an open mind, but also to reach a type of intuitive relationship where there were no limits to the amount of intellectual growth that both the student and teacher could achieve together. Rancière’s conclusion on the matter read, “And only an equal understands an equal. Equality and intelligence are synonymous terms . . . The equality of intelligence is the common bond of humankind, the necessary and sufficient condition for a society of men to exist” (pp. 72-73). This type of relationship reflects The Contrarian’s ultimate summation of his time meeting with teachers. He said, “They truly listened to us about deadlines and valued our experiences and opinions, enough so to make actual changes to their classroom.”

Empathy

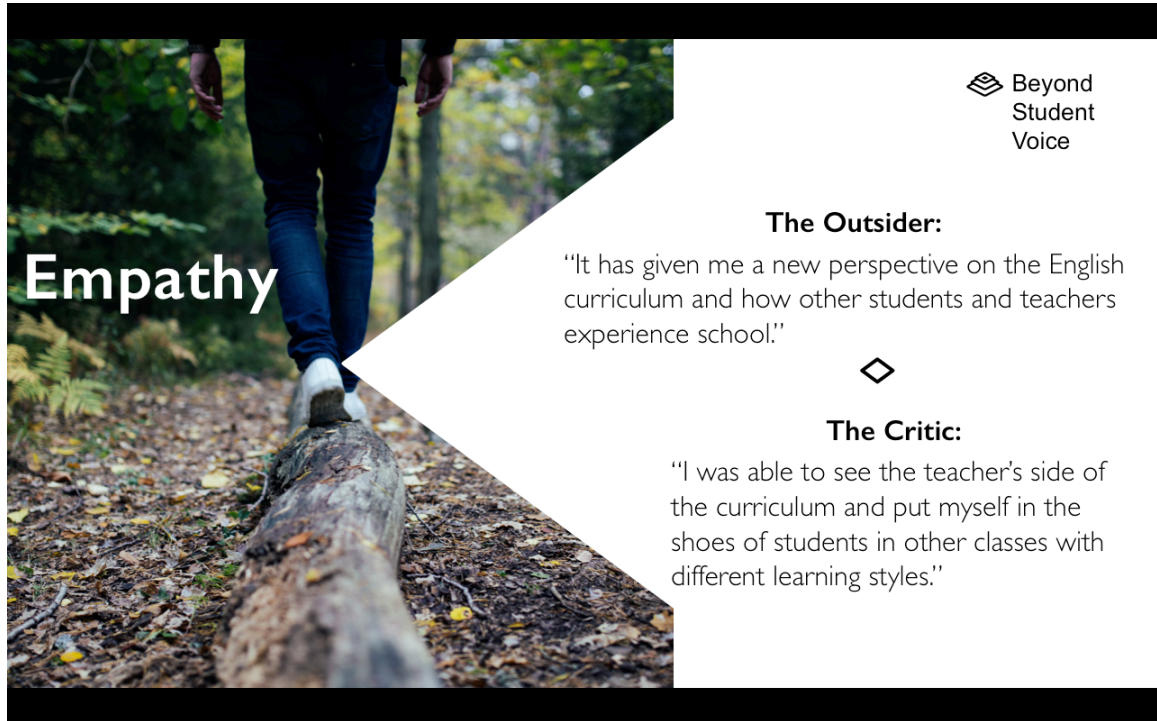



Figure 8. Empathy.


These student gained a more profound understanding for what teacher planning looks like in action. The Critic said, "I was able to see the pressure that is put on teachers." She also discussed "being able to see learning from other student's perspectives" through watching how the teacher's plan. The Outsider found "The teacher's attention to detail amazing." He also noted what it was like to watch a teacher think through a lesson and "The time that teachers pay, mentally, to thinking about each student when making these lessons." The pairs ability to conceptualize school from the perspective of other students and teachers reflected how "empathy aims at the development of common understanding, often informed by the idea of a common human identity and the possibility of consensus" (de Oliveira Andreotti, Biesta, & Ahenakew, 2015, p. 255). This pair spoke about hearing for the first time "Why certain math

teachers do or do not allow calculators for specific problems, and how it all makes much more sense now.” They said, “honesty was expected” and even though several of the teachers seemed nervous about negative feedback, the meeting was “never uncomfortable and we could always speak our mind.”

Collaborative Relationships

 Beyond Student Voice

The Gentleman:
“Students can collaborate with teachers face-to-face and know that their thoughts have real implications.”



The Activist :
“We were asked to speak honestly and in return our opinions were valued. Teachers were equally eager for changes and willing to explore ways to improve.”

Collaborative Relationships

Figure 9. Collaborative Relationships.

Similarly to the previous slide on empathy, the fact that teachers were “willing to explore ways to improve” came as a pleasant surprise to this pair. They spoke eloquently about how “uninterrupted and extended face-to-face communication is far more valuable than simple surveys or brief check-ins at the conclusion of class.” Sitting across from the teachers at the same table “gave us a sense of equality because real changes were made to the curriculum.” The Gentleman said he left the curriculum meetings with the realization that there were “real implications” to their collaborative meetings and “proof that it was

not just for show.” Their meeting with teachers was the embodiment of Fielding’s (2004b) portrait of a student-centered learning community where “students and teachers develop more exploratory forms of pedagogy together (p. 212). The Activist said she loved that they were both “being asked for honesty.” She added that they were able to “explore faults in the classroom and brainstorm together the ways to improve upon them.”

Student Agency




Figure 10. Student Agency.

The Artist offered concrete examples of how her own sense of agency could influence classrooms, beginning with her experiences in the arts. She strongly encouraged traditional academic classrooms to “take note of the creativity in fine arts classrooms.” She then relayed that innovative theme to the entire educational structure, stating that when student agency is at work and “people can actually see the growth, then

students and teachers are likely to act as change agents rather than passive spectators.” She added, “Students from all groups in our high school have expressed interest in actively making decisions for the school.” The Throwback spoke about “how I can impact my community in real ways.” He then added that he was “actually able to discuss specific things in school that were helpful and those things that weren’t.” Watts (1995) stated, “Agency is about ensuring that people can work collectively with those who matter in their lives to prioritise and make decisions (p. 101). This idea of working collectively with the teachers allowed for the students to feel like real contributors to future change.

Dialogue



Beyond
Student
Voice


The Educator:


“The student voice panel has been pivotal to allowing open dialogue between teachers and their students. This open communication promotes change within the classroom and strengthens the symbiotic relationship between teachers and students.”

◇

The Adult:

“Instead of the teachers just talking at us or us talking at them, it was a conversation. Both sides were interested in learning how students felt about their classroom experiences.”





Dialogue

Figure 11. Dialogue.

In this environment where dialogue was the only method of communication, The Adult said, “each side let down their guard and simply shared perspectives.” And they

listened. The Adult's quote about it being a conversation without "teachers just talking at us or us talking at them" captured the power of dialogue. Freire (2000) described dialogue as "an act of creation; it must not serve as a crafty instrument for the domination of one person by another" (p. 89). The Adult's takeaway that "I left the meeting feeling like my voice does matter" supported Freire's claim for what dialogue must accomplish. The Educator talked again about how "dialogue can really change a class." She spoke to the "appreciation students have when they know they can honestly talk to the teacher. This was followed by her observation that "students really enjoy when they can learn through talking and expressing themselves."

Summary of Principles Presented by the Students

As participatory action research often goes, unintended themes emerged throughout the student meetings with teachers, and this was a prime example. While the students entered the curriculum meetings with the expectation to improve teaching and learning, they gained tremendous empathy for the pressure and detailed preparation that teachers face each day. This also occurred with how they viewed other students. Hearing from teachers, and not just their friends, about where and how students typically struggle and the additional time that is invested in those areas added perspective on the job and the difficulties of meeting each student at the right place, intellectually and emotionally. Learning style also played a consistent role in their meetings, so while they spoke freely about how they learned and relayed anecdotes about their peers, they also gained behind the curtain access into how and why teachers make the decisions they do.

Having two students rather opposite in personality present on the collaborative relationships principle made for an interesting dynamic. One was soft spoken and the

other politely outspoken, but they arrived at the same conclusion: When approached correctly and with tact, teachers will listen and make changes based on honest, yet strong student opinions. However, of all the slides, the student agency pairing delivered the greatest revelation. The Throwback was the first student to publicly speak about how this process does not simply impact students and teachers, but the entire community. When he made that connection and then elaborated on exactly the ways this work could reverberate in other places and alter the future lives of all participants, the audience took note. The final pair discussed what could be the most crucial component of the entire student voice effort: dialogue. Both students communicated the joy of being afforded the opportunity to exchange ideas and past experiences with an openness that striped away the veneer of titles like student and teacher, creating a picture of people free to have a conversation. The simplicity of their presentation made it seem strange that this does not happen routinely. The heart of their message revealed that when people are placed in settings where they can speak without judgment or time constraints, then the dynamic and tone of the student-teacher relationship could be changed forever.

At the conclusion of the meeting, when the audience had the opportunity to ask questions, one district administrator asked about the level of parent involvement and the team's efforts to include parents, The Critic did not hesitate to offer a blunt retort. She spoke about how "This is our journey. This team empowered us to act independently, without the need for additional adult support." She was quickly supported by both The Educator and The Adult, as they substantiated her view that "If parents get more involved it would take away our ownership and limit our role to change things the way we already have." While the question was delivered somewhat critically, it granted the opportunity

for them to demonstrate what McTaggart (1991) called “a reasoned justification of their social and educational work to others because they can show how the evidence they have gathered and the critical reflection they have done have helped them to create a developed, tested, and critically-examined rationale for what they are doing” (p. 179). No other questions followed, just a wave of generous compliments with many expressing almost a disbelief that a program like this existed, much less was able to thrive.

After the presentation formally ended, nearly everyone in the audience stuck around to speak with the students individually. Two different district administrators asked if the team could come to their district and present to all of their teachers. Her comment that “We need you to tell them exactly what you said here today” prompted looks of surprise from the students which quickly turned to them asking for permission to take the presentation on the road to other campuses.

When viewed through the school improvement lens as an equally shared collaborative endeavor between student and teacher, we can begin to see the potential for change in classrooms throughout the United States. However, to get to the real change that needs to occur, to have the hard conversations about whether students are engaged in what and how they’re learning and how they envision their role in that change process, there must be an acknowledgment that what has constituted student voice in the past is simply a charade. Fielding (2004a) wrote about calling things for what they are and fooling ourselves into believing that traditional forms of voice are doing the real work of school improvement:

Students have student councils and other arrangements within which they pursue their joint interests. Teachers have team meetings, faculty meetings and so on.

Occasionally, students are allowed to present issues in faculty meetings and staff attend student council meetings (p. 309).

He gets at something that the educational system seems fearful to talk about: Students and teachers must work together in a democratic setting in order to achieve substantial change. By defining this work as collaborative and participatory with action as the ultimate desired result, educators then have a vision for the work that must be done and how it can be achieved.

The challenge then becomes whether teachers and school and district administrative leaders have the capacity to enter into this type of work with students. If so, Fielding (2004a) got to the heart of how this could become the transformative school improvement project of our time:

If we see and relate to each other within the context of a reciprocal responsibility we will indeed transform what it is to be a teacher, what it is to be a student, and the spectre of schools as nineteenth-century institutions will begin to fade (p. 308).

The optimal place for this reciprocal responsibility to begin is with students and teachers meeting in the same location, outside of class, to engage in an ongoing dialogue about how best to update this antiquated nineteenth-century model. The TASA experience was what a participatory action researcher dreams of when the idea for collaboration like this first comes to life. The students had managed to “prefigure, foreshadow, and provoke changes in the broader fabric of interactions which characterize our society and culture” (McTaggart, 1991, p. 175). They had transcended their own campus and impacted educators from across the state of Texas that morning. These were educators that had

now possibly had their minds opened to a new way of thinking about student voice and school improvement.

The following chapter chronicles how The Student Voice Team came to arrive at a place where they could contribute to a major conference like TASA. The chapter begins by detailing the dialogical approach the team took and how that core philosophy was so intrinsic in reimagining their roles as students and their relationships with teachers and administrators. Through dialogue, The Student Voice Team's interactions with teachers evolved from a hierarchical model into a more balanced working partnership. In a sense, narrative constructed from their own words reveals how much hard work they invested to move their relationships with these adults to a point where the term equality could be rightly used.

III. SEEKING EQUALITY THROUGH DIALOGUE

A lot of kids feel that their teachers don't see them as an equal, that their teachers are not on their side, and do not care about them, at least not a real person. So being in that conference room with the other teachers, sitting at the same table with them, talking about something that affects both of you, really establishes a relationship and a trust that can affect the interactions in the classroom.

—The Artist

As The Critic and The Governor entered the conference room, it felt like there was something really important on the line. Three algebra teachers sat around an oversized oval table with the math department chair in the head seat. Partnering with the English department first, The Student Voice Team had created a sort of kinship with those teachers. However, the math faculty was more of an unknown. Yes, they had agreed to collaborate with the students on curriculum and instruction, but there was a sense of mystery surrounding how the dynamics would actually play out when those deeper discussions were had. The Critic and The Governor had taken their last algebra class two years earlier, but both had witnessed how those foundational algebra skills kept resurfacing over the years, even as they had progressed through calculus. Meanwhile, the algebra teachers were somewhat hesitant. One of them even openly expressed whether she was too sensitive for this type of dialogue. She wondered, “What if they judge us too harshly and I can’t handle the criticism?”

Right from the start, that question would be answered. Rather than immediately dig into mathematical concepts and units of study, the teachers asked more open-ended

questions about their own instruction, almost as if probing to see how this whole experiment working with students would work. As The Critic remembered, “At least in the beginning, there was still a barrier.” The teachers asked about what they saw as some of the more creative and engaging activities in their classes to which The Critic responded, “Well, we appreciate the effort behind it, but these activities, like doing scavenger hunts in the hall, that you think are going to be fun, are not viewed that way by the students” (exit interview with The Critic). The teacher who minutes earlier worried about the level of criticism, responded, “Oh, well, we had never known that before.” Despite this truly authentic and possibly jarring feedback, something surprising happened. Rather than turn negative or quiet, The Critic’s honesty inspired the teachers to ask even more. Her truth was their epiphany.

The teachers suddenly began asking all kinds of questions about the way they taught math and how the students perceived their style. The Governor remembered it also turning into “more about how the teaching part was going to be presented to the students. It was more about the interaction” (exit interview with The Governor). When the dust settled, The Critic summarized, “They took it as well as I could have expected them to, but I feel they were very open to trying to restructure the activities in the class based on what we had to say. So I appreciated that” (exit interview The Critic). In fact, they were so open that the meeting took a surprising and unpredictable turn after an entire morning session with the two students ended and they had returned to their own classes. The teachers instantly reflected on what had just occurred. Along with the math department chair, the more sensitive teacher asked if they could pull students from their current classes. Each of them threw out a student name, asking for permission to pull

current students. There was still an hour left in that class period before lunch began. So, they each walked back to their own classes and told their respective substitute teachers that they needed to take some students back with them to the meeting. They had definitively decided they wanted the perspective of current students in addition to those who had already taken the course. This development proved a pivotal event in the maturation of The Student Voice Team's impact across campus. Acting on pure instinct, the math teachers had just expanded the scope of The Student Voice Team initiative.

Working in a narrative form, this chapter combines two major themes, dialogue and equality, from the study to demonstrate how these foundational pieces were instrumental in supporting all of The Student Voice Team's accomplishments. The order of these themes have been arranged purposefully to reflect the team's journey. For example, in order for any substantial change to occur, dialogue between the students and teachers was a necessary precursor. Successful dialogue then permitted a more equal relationship to prosper. The chapter ultimately maps out the early victories of The Student Voice Team, from their first conversations in curriculum meetings to the shifts in leverage that occurred as students gained confidence in their ability to influence change across the entire campus. This chapter also highlights those smaller, but deeply meaningful details that allow for greater school improvement changes to unfold. Details like the dynamics of how and where the students and teachers met and the symbolic physicality of those spaces. Finally, the chapter establishes what was most important to the students, which was not necessarily gaining power on campus, but literally having a seat at the table for conversations about change and feeling welcome and respected throughout the process.

Dialogue

Beginning first with the English department before spreading out to other subject areas, The Student Voice Team was prepared to engage in serious dialogue with the English teachers. As previously noted, the English department was viewed by faculty and students alike as the most entrenched in the school, especially when it came to their curriculum and culture. There had been little pedagogical change in the department over the years, partly because of the same department chair remaining in place for nearly a decade and in equal part, their perceived success and a reputation for uncompromising standards that yielded high student achievement. The Student Voice Team was all too aware of this reputation as they entered those first meetings, but nonetheless they were undaunted in their own expectations. The students went in with an open mind and the hope that they could arrive at real change.

Before discussing some of the positive changes those and other subject area meetings produced, it is worth pausing to investigate why dialogue lies at the heart of any successful change initiative. Lodge (2005) described dialogue as:

More than conversation, it is the building of shared narrative. Dialogue is about engagement with others through talk to arrive at a point one would not get to alone. It is not the same as debate where there is confrontation and a suggestion of winning and losing. Relationships are important in dialogue, because they must be able to produce engagement, openness and honesty (p. 134).

This definition also accurately portrays the hopes of the curriculum meetings with teachers. While the students had real differences going in, they were also fully willing and expecting to compromise. It was never about winning or losing for them. In his

interview, The Outsider expressed, “Just being able to speak back-and-forth and understand each side, it is very important. That back-and-forth between teachers and students is what really needs to go down. I think a lot of us have important things to say, but we don’t have the means to say it.” For a student like him, one that many teachers would not think about for a project of this nature, having the means was all that was needed. He used the opportunity to honestly discuss how he had experienced Shakespeare in English class, specifically how it was taught in a boring style, even though he enjoyed poetry and writing his own verse. This discussion about Shakespeare comes up again, with a surprising conclusion, in the negotiating curriculum chapter.

The Throwback, in his video, said, “It was a great opportunity for us to reflect on our experiences and for teachers to understand how we feel about what we learn and how we learn best. It really allowed me to realize that my opinion was valued.” Watching his entire video, it became evident that he had never truly felt like his opinion had mattered before, at least in discussions of teaching and learning. Despite being an intelligent student, he simply did not fit the traditional student leader profile. While The Throwback expressed a quiet appreciation for finally feeling valued, The Activist, in her student video, expressed, “We [students] need to feel free to give our honest opinions and unfiltered advice and we did that. They [teachers] listened and took notes. They asked us for clarification on points when they didn’t agree with us and with points they did agree on.” Because she was in the first curriculum planning day meeting with the teachers, everyone else on the team was able to take note of her overwhelmingly positive experience. She had also grown increasingly vocal during her high school career, so her outspokenness was ideal for the first meeting. She glowed about how respectful the

teachers were to her. This captured Freire's (2013) belief that in dialogical relationships, "The flow is in both directions" (p. 109). The Activist was also able to foresee that "When you open up dialogue in high school, you're creating students and learners who are more vigilant about their own success." She understood that this was not just beneficial for students, but could potentially make teaching less combative.

Eventually The Student Voice Team began meeting with other academic teams. Math was the first to follow English and because the material was so different than the literature and writing that had been discussed in English, everyone was curious how the dialogue might develop. In his exit interview, The Governor said his meeting with the algebra teachers was "About more than just a conversation because it was collaborative. They were working with us and we were working with them to make change" (exit interview). Fielding (2011) described the type of experience The Governor had as containing a "genuine openness towards each other, a reciprocity that is interested and attentive" (p. 79). The algebra teachers were slightly more reluctant to conduct meetings with The Student Voice Team, but they had also heard positive comments from the English department, so they agreed to meet, partly based on that and also not wanting to feel excluded. Several of the teachers in the meeting were known to be sensitive, but the students found within them, "a willingness to be surprised, to welcome the unanticipated" (Fielding, 2011, p. 79). This type of openness to student ideas from reluctant teachers was proof that a more democratic model was possible in each classroom across campus.

Finally, an unexpected trend developed amongst two of The Student Voice Team members during their reflections on dialogue in their exit interviews. Both The Educator and The Adult referenced the necessity for dialogue as opposed to the common practice

of surveying students for feedback. This stemmed from when The Student Voice Team spoke at a faculty meeting, telling all of the staff about their experiences in the curriculum planning day meetings. When the students mentioned how crucial it was for teachers to understand how it really feels to be a student in their classes, several teachers said they were already doing this. They added, “We frequently elicit student feedback via surveys about a particular unit of study, and at the end of the semester, we issue another survey garnering feedback about the entire course.” Reflecting on this exchange, The Educator said:

Right now we live in a world of technology. And I think the value of the spoken word is going away. Everyone thinks you can text it, you can write it, you can tweet it. But the tone that you speak with is completely different than if you were to put it in a survey (exit interview with The Educator).

Even in the faculty meeting, members of the team were outspoken about the inferiority of a survey when compared to student-teacher dialogue. They took turns pushing back against the notion of a survey serving students and teachers just as well as a conversation. The Educator added:

You put an imaginary line between the person receiving the survey and the person who's writing the survey. The teacher is again, above you, they have all this power when you're just answering a survey. You don't even know if anyone is reading that survey for all you care. You can't ask follow-up questions on surveys. And body language is a big thing (exit interview with The Educator).

She articulated the value of the personal elements they enjoyed in the face-to-face dialogue with teachers. They needed to actually see it to know that it was real, hence the body language comment.

In a closely related discussion, The Adult was even skeptical of the practice of teachers gathering feedback in the classroom setting, in a whole class conversation. She said, “I don’t feel like a constructive conversation can be had with a class of 25 or 30 students because everyone starts to talk over each other and things just don’t get done. Having a small number of students is needed” (exit interview with The Adult). In the conference room setting for the teacher meetings, there were two students for each adult. At the most, this meant six combined people in the conference room. She also pointed out limitations to how far and to what depth a whole class conversation might extend. Based on her own experiences, she said:

If you’re in a class and your teachers asks how you enjoyed this subject or this lesson, you talk about that and then that’s where the conversation ends or your opinion ends. But The Student Voice Team was open to any subject any lesson, any type of learning. I feel like I was definitely heard over these past two years, which has been great (exit interview with The Adult).

This dramatic difference between feeling truly heard versus just being another face in the crowd can make all the difference in the world to anyone, but especially with students who are not accustomed to being heard by teachers in more serious professional matters, like teaching and learning. Throughout the student interviews, there is a common belief that all students have something meaningful to contribute in the school improvement conversation.

Equality

After gaining the opportunity to engage in dialogue with the teachers, the next logical progression for The Student Voice Team was to attain a sense of equality as they sat across the table from these professionals. For equality to develop it would require a sort of reimagining of roles and a willingness to become blind to the traditional and deeply cut lines separating the teachers from the students. Fielding (2011) noted that when this does occur:

Such relationships enable us to ‘re-see’ each other as persons rather than as role occupants, and in doing so nurture not only a new understanding, sense of possibility and felt respect between adults and young people, but also a joy in each other’s being and a greater sense of shared delight and responsibility (p. 79).

The ability to “re-see” might seem simplistic, but in public education, this has often proven insurmountable. Student and teacher roles are defined early in school and despite a student’s age, the roles change very little as students progress through school. For The Gentleman, this meant more authenticity from the teachers. He said, “I think the whole democratic process and the exchange between students and teachers really relies on trust. I think this means just being brutally honest.” For others, it might mean something as simple as being complimented by a teacher where no prior relationship existed before, but in both cases the relationship and the feeling of equality is important and real.

An account The Artist gave in her exit interview helped to capture how easily teachers could “re-see” students in a way that made students excited about the possibility of equality. The week after The Student Voice Team shared their experiences in the faculty meeting, The Artist was walking down the science hall before being identified by

a physics teacher who had never taught her. It was the teacher who taught college credit physics and The Artist never considered science a strong subject, so they had never encountered one another before. After recognizing her, the teacher told her that she admired the curriculum work she had been involved with and that the experiences she recounted to the faculty made her want to do something similar with several of her physics students. The Artist is naturally shy and unassuming, so being recognized was almost overwhelming for her, but to be approached in such a complimentary and professional way by a teacher she had never spoken to, and who just happened to teach a class that was never a particular strength, was monumental for her. The Artist told me this story the very next time she saw me in the cafeteria and then retold it again in her exit interview. She recognized the teacher treating her as an equal in that moment and also noted that it was something she will probably never forget. Later in her interview, she said:

A lot of kids feel that their teachers don't see them as an equal, that their teachers are not on their side, and do not care about them, at least not a real person. So being in that conference room with the other teachers, sitting at the same table with them, talking about something that affects both of you, really establishes a relationship and a trust that can affect the interactions in the classroom
(exit interview with The Artist).

Interestingly, she was not the only student to mention the location of the meeting and a physical description of the conference room. It played into the students feeling like they had transcended the traditional student role.

In mapping out how schools achieve radical democratic practice, Fielding (2012) stated the need for the “spatiality of democracy, on interpersonal and architectural spaces that encourage a multiplicity of different forms of formal and informal engagement” (p. 61). The Adult went even further, emphasizing, “There’s nothing in that [conference] room that says I’m the student and I’m listening to my teacher because my teacher’s the superior in this situation. I felt like that really established that level playing field of, you’re individuals and you’re having this conversation. There is no, someone’s on top of the other in power or authority.” Specific qualities like the location of the meeting, the furniture, and the seating arrangements were noticed by most of the students.

The Educator also noted that when physical barriers are eliminated students feel at ease and more like an equal. She spoke about this connection:

I think when everyone becomes a true equal, that’s when real change happens.

When I sit down with a teacher in a professional environment, then we are equals, and that’s when I’m able to communicate change, and communicate differences.

That’s when I don’t feel like I’m being talked at. I’m being talked to

(exit interview The Educator).

The conference room was selected for this very reason. The Student Voice Team decided that it was important for them to venture behind doors that had always been locked to them before. In a sense, the conference room became a symbolic place where “young people and adults make meaning of their work together (Fielding, 2012, p. 61). The Adult went so far as to say, “When we met in the conference room, it was at a neutral location where you’re on equal platforms. Personally to me it was nice to have that moment in those meetings, but outside that door and outside that room, it was back to

being only a student in my teacher's classroom." She did not mean this as a slight to the process or the teachers. It was more like going back to class after her experience in the curriculum meetings was a little underwhelming. It was both less professional and important.

One of the more interesting aspects of the curriculum meetings was witnessing the newfound respect the students gained for the teachers. This resonated strongly with The Critic and repeatedly came up in her interview. Recognizing both the local and national perception, she observed:

One of the main things, not just from our school, but probably across the nation, I think one of the things I really took from this whole process is the teachers are also put in a challenging position. I can't even imagine the challenge it is to try to teach hundreds of students a day, with each student learning in a different way. Bringing both groups together gives each side more understanding about what the other is going through (exit interview with The Critic).

Empathy can often lead to truer equality and while many students might not have predicted they would leave the process with greater empathy for the teachers, and that was exactly what occurred.

The Educator was also enlightened by the behind the scenes look the students received into the planning and preparation that goes into teaching. She said, "Participating in this meeting with the teachers also allows the student to respect the teachers more. One of the things that really hit home was that the teachers are doing what they do for a reason. And you don't see that as a student all the time. You respect the teachers more because there are reasons behind everything they do" (journal entry by The

Educator). The students did not simply offer feedback on various lessons and grading in these meetings, they went far deeper. The teachers delved into curriculum calendars, the chunking of a class period into appropriate segments for specific lessons, seating arrangements, and even final exam preparation.

To conclude this section, it only seems fitting to tell a story from The Educator about how her vision of equality evolved during the course of her four years at the high school with the support of The Student Voice Team. Going back to her freshman year, she said:

I would not have ever walked up to the principal and just had a conversation with him. He was a principal, not a human. He doesn't have enough time. He doesn't care. There's no way he would accept my thoughts or ideas. But as I've gone through The Student Voice Team, my principal has become less of a principal and more of a human. I still respect him as a principal. I still know he's my principal, but I know that my opinion is just as important as his
(journal entry by The Educator).

I watched both her courage and this relationship develop over time. The high school administrators eat lunch together each day with the students in the cafeteria. As students enter or leave, the table where the principal always ate was positioned to where students passed right in front of him both entering and leaving. In those early days of The Student Voice Team, The Educator would occasionally strike up a conversation with the principal or offer a quick comment as she exited. However, as the team became more engrossed in voice work and she entered her senior year, she would humorously challenge him on issues like seniors with good grades having to take final exams. These jabs were usually

light-hearted, but as her sense of being his equal grew, she would offer challenges to real school issues. She would approach his table with topics like students teaching classes and students conducting interviews for teaching candidates became commonplace. Her growing self-confidence was so rewarding to watch and even more so because it never compromised the respect she referenced. It was proof that both qualities can coexist and that nobody should ever feel less important just because of their age or position. Her story of a slowly developing self-confidence reaching a crescendo with healthy debates at the administration table reflected the rich and moving power of dialogue leading to the dissolution of hierarchies and a level playing field for all.

The next chapter tells the story of how the foundational work achieved through dialogue then translated into curriculum changes and The Student Voice Team developing into campus leaders. Utilizing data from the study, the chapter illustrates how without dialogue and equality, substantive change would not be possible. The chapter also describes the growing sense of ownership the team came to experience as their work collaborating with teachers progressed into something lasting, leaving a legacy for future students to carry forward.

IV. BECOMING A STUDENT LEADER

We tried to, from the very beginning, to just think about how we could reach each student, and how we could help teachers reach each student, so that everyone felt included. —The Critic

By the time the day of the protest had arrived, considerable time had been spent organizing the event, but nobody really knew how many students would just stop what they were doing, get up, and walk out of their classroom doors. To make matters even more uncertain, the weather that morning had become quite nasty. Along with a steady rain, the temperature had dropped into the thirties, so it was unclear even minutes before the designated walkout time was about to strike what type of statement would be made that morning. Following the Parkland shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Florida, there had been much discussion surrounding student led gun violence protests.

Like many students around the nation, The Activist had been deeply affected by the most recent school massacre and had become determined to make a meaningful statement. She went to work organizing the protest in the days after the Parkland shooting, making signs and procuring a megaphone. At noon on that dreary Wednesday, exactly one week after the Parkland shootings, over three hundred students quietly got up from their desks and began filtering into the hallways. Slowly, a steady stream of students flowed out from the main entrance of the high school, lining the sidewalk and visitor parking lot. The Activist, leading several other female students, stood up on the large built-in concrete planters that adorned the front entryway, gaining a better vantage

point to lead the protest. She had prepared statistics documenting the rise of gun violence on school campuses across the country since Columbine and many of the posters reflected this research. Other posters were created with chantable sayings in mind, like “When will enough be enough” and “Less fear, more kindness.” Two local television news stations were parked across the street from the visitor lot, filming the protest. Yet despite the media attention and significant student turnout, The Activist and her leadership group maintained a calm command over the proceedings.

When The Activist spoke about the peaceful protest, she connected these two seemingly very different things, the work of The Student Voice Team and her being the chief organizer of the walkout. She explained:

As for the student walkout, my freshman self would not have done that. She would not have been out there. She would have been so worried about the whole situation. But having gone through this student voice experience project made me so much more comfortable in doing so. It openly gave me a microphone to my own voice and talking about what we felt was important
(exit interview with The Activist).

The walkout became a major talking point on campus for several weeks with The Activists’ democratic organizing skills were on full display. The Outsider also recognized the connection between The Student Voice Team’s work and the walkout. Speaking bluntly about school, he said:

We’re trained almost to go to school, you sit down, you listen and you learn, you execute what you learned and then you finish. The majority of the time we’re not taught you come to school and you can voice your opinion if something needs to

be changed. Like with the whole walkout. That was cool—just being able to act like an adults! (journal entry by The Outsider).

While many participated, The Activists' leadership from the pre-planning stages to the actual chants and speeches once students arrived outside contributed something so democratic at its core that it might serve as the ultimate measure of The Student Voice Team and their role in standing courageously for democratic practices. When more people are included and more voices are truly heard, then individual topics like curriculum rapidly manifest into other topics, sometimes related and sometimes not. Whether it be the content in an English class or the safety of young people across all schools, when students are empowered to actively lead, they are very likely to become agents of positive change.

While this chapter is about the evolution of young people as leaders, it documents how that exactly took place within the boundaries of high school. The chapter begins by describing how The Student Voice Team invested in the process of building working relationships with the teachers and then parlayed that progress into helping peers and future generations of students. The chapter then pivots to the work students accomplished while inquiring about and revising the curriculum in English and math courses. Ultimately the chapter concludes with the lasting legacy of The Student Voice Team, which combines their curriculum work with the emergence of a new leadership mold that could redefine the term *student leader*. However, before celebrating their legacy, the chapter begins by describing the importance of students feeling a sense of ownership in the school improvement process. After all, without ownership, curriculum changes and reimagining of student leadership could not occur.

Ownership

Nearly every member of The Student Voice Team mentioned the word ownership or community in their exit interview. This was not prompted by a specific question referring to ownership or community, but rather by their own emotions as they reflected back on the process and the legacy of their work. They were so invested in the process of school improvement that their ownership became part of the fabric that defined them as individuals, a team, and most importantly for this chapter, representatives of their peers and future students. As Kemmis and McTaggart (2000) explained, the concept of ownership is so intertwined with participatory action research because:

Participatory action research is a process ... where people, individually and collectively, try to understand how they are formed and re-formed as individuals and in relation to one another in a variety of settings—for example, when teachers work ... with students to improve processes of teaching and learning (Kemmis & McTaggart, p. 597).

This idea of improving teaching and learning is what first enticed students about The Student Voice Team work. But it was the notion of benefiting others that proved even more motivational. Feeling a sense of ownership from the beginning and through the entire study process, the team was able to look outside of themselves as they grappled approached each issue.

This ability to form and re-form echoes Fielding's (2012) thoughts about students and teachers re-seeing one another in different roles. And just as these traditional roles shift and then become something new and better, ownership builds. Students began to envision a new identity, not simply as student, but something far greater. An agent of

change who could influence learning for far more people than just themselves. The second part of this shift within the participatory action research journey is thus a “Process in which each individual in a group tries to get a handle on the ways his or her knowledge shapes his or her sense of identity and agency and reflects critically on how that present knowledge frames and constrains his or her actions” (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2000, p. 597). Identity and agency clearly coalesce in The Student Voice Team’s exit interviews, videos, and journal entries to create a powerful sense of ownership as they reflected back on the entire study.

The student who maybe characterized this combination of identity, agency, and ownership the most was The Artist. She freely admitted that she lacked confidence through much of high school, constantly questioning her place in school, her intelligence, and her talent. Despite her academic accomplishments, she never saw herself as an elite student. In her final interview she said, “Doing the student voice project gave me perspective. You’re representing other kids. It helped me because I realized you can’t think of yourself as stupid because what happens to everyone who has worse grades than you? Are they stupid? No. So, it boosted my confidence and it also helped me view people in a better light and treat them with more respect.” Watching her work through this answer, it was evident that she was visibly still trying to figure out where she belonged, but the team had helped her to grow so much. And the reflective and dialogical process had provided tremendous empathy—a deeper kind that might not have existed in her before.

The Contrarian bridged the gap between personal identity and community as he reflected on his personal growth. He stated the team “Helped confidence and that sense

of importance. Because without that, you're developing that on your own. Adding programs like this definitely helps students' confidence levels. But it's more their confidence as a person, as being part of something larger than them." Being part of something larger was never anything that we openly discussed in our meetings, the focus there was always on the work at hand. Yet, as they looked back, it was clearly on their minds. The Contrarian even spoke about his own family for the first time, stating, "But with other students who were not in the meeting who were affected with it later, we changed a lot of English classes. That won't have any effect on me because those are all classes that we previously took, but I have three siblings coming up to the high school. They are all going to see the changes that we made." The pride in his voice was deep and sincere.

Another somewhat hidden achievement of The Student Team was how often they talked with their peers about their work collaborating with teachers. It was not mentioned often, even though many students knew about the existence of the team. However, in the following quotes, it is evident that there was frequent dialogue about the work they were doing with teachers and how they could represent other students through that work. The Educator said, "I think the [professional development/curriculum planning days] are the easiest way to get every student involved because you're not just a student anymore. You're a learner, and a listener to your peers, and to your teacher, and to your classmates." She was listening in her classes all through high school, noticing how other students learned. What interested them, what bored them. Taking measure of their attitude toward the class and the teacher. It is easy to forget how much the average

student has observed about learning and the perception their peers have about school.

The Educator later added:

Students who aren't learning, who don't feel like they have a sense of ownership in the school feel out of place. I think by helping with curriculum options and influences, you suddenly give them a place in the school, and you make them feel that someone cares what they have to say. You listen to them and all of a sudden they feel that sense of ownership. They feel like they belong to the school because they helped impact the school, and they're going to help impact the future of the school (exit interview with The Educator).

Her wise conclusions about other types of learners added further support to the claim that “Students can learn from articulating their prior learning experiences and knowledge and the questions they consider relevant. And they learn from other students’ input and the discussion that can follow” (Bron, Bovill, van Vliet, & Veugelers, 2016, p. 51). An empathy that might have been clearly evident before developed and took hold of each student in an almost emotional way.

This was again expressed by The Critic, who explained, “We tried to, from the very beginning, to just think about how we could reach each student, and how we could help teachers reach each student, so that everyone felt included.” The team was always looking out for so much more than just their personal school experience. The sense of community and shared ownership helped to create a powerful altruism. The Educator was able to circle back and connect the curriculum focus with a broader, more human sensibility, stating that “Not even what happens in your curriculum, but what happens in the next people’s curriculum. What happens in the year after you. There has been an

amazing, at least from what I've noticed on this team, change in perspective. It changes from just a student sitting in class to how can I help those after me. Completely unselfishly. You get that complete different change in mindset from outside yourself. That gives, again, a sense of responsibility, a sense of ownership.” The changes created from the teacher meetings extended far beyond those specific classes and conversations. They spread to many areas of the campus, and were a part of conversations that were inclusive to all types of students.

Curriculum Negotiation

Despite the opportunity for students and teachers to work as partners in curriculum, there was never a guarantee that students would successfully alter any part of these teachers' curriculum. And that was the scariest part of this entire endeavor. It is a testament to each person on The Student Voice Team that they established such a strong rapport with the teachers through the real progress they made in the areas of dialogue and equality that making revisions to the curriculum was even an option. Without those two pieces, there would be no legitimate discussion about curriculum. The Student Voice Team's curriculum dialogue with teachers closely resembled these five principles of curriculum negotiation (Bron, Bovill, van Vliet, & Veugelers, 2016, p. 42):

- I. We have a responsibility to ensure that education leads to further democratic qualities (as part of the aims for citizenship education).
- II. Democratic qualities are developed by interpersonal practices such as discussion, cooperation and decision making (educational benefit).
- III. All students are entitled to practise their democratic rights and have a voice in their education (the universal right to participate).

IV. Students can offer unique perspectives and within a class these perspectives can be diverse (student voice).

V. Learning is a social process involving peers and adults (social learning).

Students actively demonstrating democratic practices factors heavily into each of the principles, and this emphasis on students leading a more democratic approach to their education was at the heart of this study from the beginning. This section illustrates how The Student Voice Team's journey largely reflected these principles. In addition, it details their progress in working with teachers and the future reverberations these meetings eventually had on the entire campus.

Both The Activist and her partner in the English curriculum meetings, The Throwback, were seniors at the time they met with the English department faculty to discuss the junior curriculum. This provided them with a different perspective because they were able to reflect on that past year in relation to their current year of English. The department chair met with them ahead of the meeting to tell them she was cutting *Animal Farm* from the sophomore reading list and keeping *Merchant of Venice* as the Shakespeare play. It should be noted that students have bemoaned the fact that every sophomore at the high school must read *Merchant of Venice* and had done so for decades. It is easily the least liked Shakespeare play taught at the high school level, but a curriculum choice that had stood the test of time.

Their curriculum meeting thus began with the department chair asking them if she had made the right choice. It presented a defining moment for The Student Voice Team right away. How honest could they be and how would their honesty be received? They both said, "No." The Activist then added:

Animal Farm taught us so much more . . . it was our first look at satire and allegory. A political satire, especially, because we have to keep looking at those later on in school, and it just gave us a lot of context and history. So, a lot of us, the next year, when we took United States history, and we were talking about that whole timeframe, a lot of us were able to relate back to Animal Farm, besides just being an amazing book, it gave us so much more and benefited us in the long-term. Animal Farm was just way more beneficial, and so we got to talk about that in the curriculum meetings. We got to talk about content. And we also got to talk about what point in the year would be best to learn different content

(exit interview with The Activist).

The Activist and The Throwback were ultimately successful in winning over the department chair. She eliminated *Merchant of Venice* from the curriculum and kept *Animal Farm*. Fielding and Moss (2010) labeled this type of student role as, *students as knowledge creators* because “Partnership and dialogue remain the dominant ways of working, but here it is the voice of the student that comes to the fore in a leadership or initiating, not just a responsive, role (p. 77). And while the adjustments made by The Activist and The Throwback might seem minor, an element of the English curriculum that had remained a fixture for a generation had finally been changed.

Despite changing only one book on the reading list that day, their partnership and united voice accomplished something that had never been done at the school. In the process, they also shifted the idea of what was possible for other students. After all, they were working with the most respected and feared department on campus. One that other veteran teachers were even afraid to challenge. This was a perfect example of how

“Inviting students to participate in curriculum design changes power relations, providing opportunities for voices that are often marginalized to speak and those who customarily hold positions of power to listen and hear” (Bron & Veugelers, 2014, p. 135). The Activist and Throwback also wisely navigated what could have been a really contentious meeting. It should be noted that they never disparaged *Merchant of Venice*, even though they despised reading it. Rather, they tied *Animal Farm* to other important learning, genuinely praising the books strengths. The act of “Negotiating means giving and taking which is based upon a capacity and disposition to compromise” (Bron, et al., 2016, p. 53). In addition to exhibiting the maturity to compromise, the students also demonstrated democratic practice. They were judicious in their comments while not backing down as they stood up for their beliefs.

If there was one single item The Student Voice Team discussed more frequently than any other, it was their disdain for final exams. In particular, it was the high school’s traditional view of what a final exam should look like. Much like *Merchant of Venice*, the final exams had not changed in recent memory. The exams consisted of hundreds of multiple-choice questions covering every bit of material the teacher taught over the course of the entire year. The Adult articulated this frustration:

I shared how I personally preferred a project over having a traditional paper final. I felt like it gave them another option instead of just a traditional standardized type test and gave teachers a different insight into our experiences.

That was the best way I was able to contribute (exit interview with The Adult).

Her comments reflected Bron and Veugelers’ (2014) statement that “Involving students in curriculum design improves the relevance of curricula” (p. 136). In this case, it is

important to distinguish that curriculum includes major tests, like final exams, just as much as the books a student reads or does not read. For The Student Voice Team, the final exams had become almost this kind of tyrannical tool used to measure knowledge. They had come to represent an antiquated and controlling system of education that was more punitive than anything else.

The Outsider, in his exit interview, talked about the change that had occurred since The Student Voice Team first prioritized these concerns, “The English department has started doing more projects for their final exams and I think it’s a great way of doing finals. It’s a lot less stress because you have more time than taking a bunch of tests in a couple days.” In fact, not one teacher in the English department administered a traditional, multiple-choice final exam. They are all now either project based or class presentations in which the students work in small teams and present to their classmates on the day of the test. The teachers essentially began to follow The Adults advice when she stated:

How you learn is not set in stone! Creating freedom within the curriculum is really beneficial to the class because you can work with a group or you can work by yourself, whatever fits best for you and teachers can decide how they want to do that (exit interview with The Adult).

However, the English department was not the only team to change their ways because of the curriculum day meetings. The Governor reported other major changes:

After those curriculum meetings, I can definitely tell, especially this year, the way that teachers are kind of forming curriculum and how they present the information to the students . . . there are teachers that are more flexible, they’re

willing to talk to you more. For example, the chemistry department has completely changed from how they were doing it. And they have those relationships with students and they have that trust in their students of they are going to learn this because of how they've grown with them throughout this process [curriculum meetings]" (exit interview with The Governor).

Bovill and Bulley's (2011) ladder of student participation in curriculum design (see Appendix H) helped to describe the level where The Student Voice Team was working with the teachers. They consistently operated in the highest levels of the ladder, where students control decision-making and have substantial influence. Each of the student pairs collaborated from within the "students control decision-making and have substantial influence" bracket. And while the students were not in complete control, they did form a strong partnership with the teachers in an effort to negotiate. For the purposes of this study, the partnership category is more fitting because it demanded that the two sides practice democratic leadership.

Legacy

Near the end of The Student Voice Team's senior year, after all departments had wrapped up their curriculum planning day meetings, a new and defining moment occurred. The Educator, through her passion for teaching and desire to pursue a special education degree in college, partnered with her senior English teacher to create a series of education courses at the high school. These courses would serve as a pathway toward a career in education and would eventually allow for students to take four years of education classes in high school. Fielding (2011) referred to this highly evolved form of curriculum creation as, "students as joint authors" (p. 78). The following pages detail

The Educator's journey, from how this curriculum opportunity came about to the final product (see Figure 12) that was made available to future students before her graduation from high school. The education training and career cluster course progression was co-authored by The Educator and defined each course in the newly created education academy for high school students planning to pursue a career in teaching. The course track she devised planned to begin with a principles in education course, followed by human growth and development. Students who remained in the academy throughout high school would have the opportunity to work in an instructional setting at one of the district's elementary or middle schools to gain teaching experience alongside a professional. Essentially, these practicum courses would strongly resemble a teacher college teacher preparation program.

The Education and Training Career Cluster focuses on planning, managing, and providing education and training services and related learning support services.

1. Principles of Education and Training (Fall Semester) is designed to introduce learners to the various careers available within the education and training career cluster. Students use self-knowledge and educational and career information to analyze various careers within the education and training career cluster. Students will also gain an understanding of the basic knowledge and skills essential to careers within the education and training career cluster. Students will develop a graduation plan that leads to a specific career choice in the student's interest area.

Human Growth and Development (Spring Semester) is an examination of human development across the lifespan with emphasis on research, theoretical perspectives, and common physical, cognitive, emotional, and social developmental milestones. The course covers material that is generally taught in a postsecondary, one-semester introductory course in developmental psychology or human development.

2. Instructional Practices is a field-based (practicum) internship that provides students with background knowledge of child and adolescent development as well as principles of effective teaching and training practices. Students work under the joint direction and supervision of both a teacher with knowledge of early childhood, middle childhood, and adolescence education and exemplary educators or trainers in direct instructional roles with elementary-, middle school-, and high school-aged students. Students learn to plan and direct individualized instruction and group activities, prepare instructional materials, develop materials for educational environments, assist with record keeping, and complete other responsibilities of teachers, trainers, paraprofessionals, or other educational personnel.

3. Practicum in Education and Training is a field-based internship that provides students background knowledge of child and adolescent development principles as well as principles of effective teaching and training practices. Students in the course work under the joint direction and supervision of both a teacher with knowledge of early childhood, middle childhood, and adolescence education and exemplary educators in direct instructional roles with elementary-, middle school-, and high school-aged students. Students learn to plan and direct individualized instruction and group activities, prepare instructional materials, assist with record keeping, make physical arrangements, and complete other responsibilities of classroom teachers, trainers, paraprofessionals, or other educational personnel.

Figure 12. The Education and Training Career Cluster.

Their work together, as teacher and student, came to epitomize the joint author model that Fielding described as including, “Leadership, planning and conduct of research and the subsequent commitment to responsive action are embraced as both mutual responsibility and energising adventure” (p. 77). Most of this section allows for The Educator’s reflections on this experience to do the talking. Rather than undercut her narrative with further research, it seemed more natural and appropriate for her to tell the story, mostly uninterrupted:

I had a unique position, because I was able to help create a curriculum. I was able to help pick out learning materials, and pick out projects, and even movies that you learn from because there are great educational movies out there. I was able to work one-on-one with a teacher, planning this whole new curriculum. We discussed all the different ways of learning and instructing students. It doesn't just have to be just a lecture style anymore. It doesn't have to be the kind of situation where a teacher passes out a worksheet and students fill in some blanks. There are so many different options!

I was able to help directly with instruction materials and instruction types. I selected textbooks, keeping my eye open for what kind of things each textbook taught, and the benefit of each for the learner. Some had online resources that interacted with the textbook. There are so many different options for instructional materials. Being able to be part of The Student Voice Team, helping plan curriculum, really gave me that direct correlation to see how to help everyone. Everyone doesn't read the textbook all the time, so there are times when a video would be better. Or, if you have an online textbook, often people

use it more. There are so many different ways of teaching and instructing, and I think the best is to do a combination of all because no student learns the same.

We created two core classes in this new program of study: Principles of Education and Instructional Practices and Methods. One is more of an introductory course and the other one is more advanced. We're structuring it that way for a reason. They overlap on purpose for the student's benefit. Students will have the beginning class and the intermediate class at the same time. This way, the classes can be offered during multiple class periods, allowing for the program to fit into more students' schedules. Students can take one and then take the other one. They are two separate classes, but in the same classroom at the same time. For right now, we're structuring it so the Instructional Practices class will do more lesson planning and by the end of the year they should be able to make their own lesson plans and teach the other class about that material. And with the Principles class, students have two days per week where they go to the elementary school. The Principles class, the more introductory class, will travel to the elementary school to observe classrooms. A different classroom every week. The more advanced class will have one specific classroom where they are the student teacher.

I have an extreme passion for teaching! I kind of assumed that not all of these students know that they want to teach for sure. So, some of the required documents in the class would be like a contract or a list of expectations, explaining how you're expected to dress and behave. There are a bunch of

different expectations that you need as a teacher. Things that, not to toot my own horn, but things that I have already established for myself. I want to set a good example, and I don't want to be that slacker high school kid that never shows up, or shows up ten minutes late. So, I already set those standards for myself. I used my two years of experience to push everything that I learned. This is something that you don't always see from a teacher's perspective. For me, not wearing way too short Nike shorts is something I just don't do. They're really short shorts! But, other girls do. That is not always a common sense thing for teenagers. When you go hang out with little kids it's not appropriate to dress like that! They really look up to you, so if you show up ten minutes late, then they're going to think less of you and you're going to lose that respect. So, the document of expectations got as detailed as the shorts you wear or don't wear. We also designed five different education shirts that students have to wear. It's kind of your nametag to get in and out of the building, so that the teachers and everybody know all of the students in the program.

Students need to understand that they can't just be a high school student anymore. They must behave like a student teacher. A lot of the kids and the teachers expect you to be as mature as college students if not more, because there is no room for error with kindergarten kids. You mess up, and they're going to repeat that. They're going to repeat whatever you say, whatever you do. They're going to validate whatever they do, so you better check yourself. And so by putting on that shirt and walking in the school, you have to command respect! It's about developing a certain mentality.

Students in this program will learn how hard it is to ask context questions that kindergartners can understand. Even a simple question like asking about the plot of the story. Those kindergartners would have no idea what that meant. Or you ask too basic questions. The question has to be semi-entertaining too. Or some kind of use to them, or else they'll just check out and zone out or whatever. So I think keeping kids' attention, too—that's crucial. There's just so much. But the students will eventually learn that. That is why they are in the program. They will also learn through the observation as well, especially the different knacks that teachers have. Keeping the kids engaged. That's why observations are so crucial. Oh, my gosh, I've learned so much through observation, and through teaching. It's crazy!

After the initial meetings where The Educator and teacher brainstormed various ideas and structures for each of the classes, the next phase began. The Educator described how these next more formal meetings came about:

Then a couple months went by because it's a long process to get an academy set up. Eventually she came back to me and said, 'Hey, would you be interested in having a curriculum planning day with me?' I was like, 'Oh, yeah! Please!' She then told me that I would have to get out of school one day. I was so excited! This is an experience you don't usually get. You never hear about students helping create curriculum. You don't hear about that. I was like, 'Please let me help. This is something that I'm really interested in.'

The Educator and her teacher both took an entire day off together after drafting an outline of how the different classes would roll out to students. During their curriculum planning day, they created the education and training career cluster document (see Figure 12) and finalized a list of instructional materials to be ordered over the summer. Then they went to work on the issue of how to get these students into various classrooms across the school district, from elementary to high school, depending on the student's future teaching interest. While the campus had academies for subjects like engineering and health science, there was nothing offered to students before this partnership that allowed for students to gain knowledge and experience in the education field. This "genuinely shared, fully collaborative partnership" (Fielding, 2011, p. 77) provided current and future students a whole array of classes to choose from that did not previously exist. The establishment of the education academy also symbolically announced to all students and staff that becoming a teacher is something that the school supported, that it was a career just like engineering and health science. It was now just as worthy as those others.

While The Educator's accomplishment as a joint-author for an entire new program of study should certainly help to shape lives and careers over time, The Student Voice Team's infectious energy and positive collaborations with teachers allowed for another legacy. Every department on campus, from English and science to Spanish and business are now partnering with students during the curriculum planning days to improve teaching and learning in their particular classrooms. Because each department offers dozens of different courses and they all have the freedom to schedule the curriculum planning days, hundreds of students have now participated in these potentially

transformative meetings, with the number expanding by the week. And as the numbers grow, the inclusion of the less traditional student participants also increases. Teachers have taken to heart the goal of affording every type of student the opportunity to engage in a valuable dialogue in an effort to improve school for everyone.

The following chapter highlights how the study participants transcended traditional school hierarchies. The ripples of change generated by The Student Voice Team impacted teachers, campus administrators, and all the way up to the superintendent. Recommendations and implications are also offered in an attempt to guide future researchers and students.

V. REALIZING A HOPEFUL FUTURE

The main goal of this participatory action research study was to reimagine and document ways in which students must be included as equal partners in school improvement efforts. Their voices and expertise in all school-going issues provided an invaluable wealth of knowledge and context. While this began as a study devoted to bringing students and staff together, working collaboratively in ways that had not been seen before, it ultimately evolved into something that tapped into numerous aspects of what democracy in schools might look like when students are empowered to take on a leadership role. The study listed four research questions at the outset, with each question anchored in a different democratic pillar. The questions covered a range of topics because the study was ambitious from the start. Working with these students ultimately proved that when engaging with students in these democratic practices, other barriers come tumbling down in the process. Outlined below are answers to those four original research questions.

1. How can students exercise democratic practice and student agency within the boundaries of their school?
2. In what ways can including student voice change curriculum choices and instructional methods?
3. What are the possibilities when students feel like true equals on their campus?
4. When acting as agents of change, how can students influence the school improvement process?

The Student Voice Team exercised democratic practice and student agency by working as partners alongside teachers in order to change curriculum, influence teaching

methodologies, and access parts of the education process that were closed to them before. Having professional dialogues with teachers opens so many doors. Those moments establish relationships and connections that ripple throughout all aspects of what school is like for other students as well. It is like that imaginary line that The Educator mentioned in her exit interview. When that line is crossed and then ceases to exist, there is no limit to the other spaces and decisions that students can influence.

When students have the opportunity to change curriculum choices and instructional methods teachers gain access to information that they never would have otherwise. Oftentimes teachers truly think they know how students feel about their classes, but quite often they do not ever hear the unfiltered truth. They might hear some truth, but even then it is a watered down version. Being in the same professional space with teachers, like a conference room, allows for this truth to emerge. Take even a veteran teacher who has been teaching the same way for decades, using the same content, the same assignment and projects, and even the same notes. When a group of students are sitting in front of that teacher and are politely, yet clearly telling that person what does not work and why, then even that type of teacher is confronted with a reality that must be addressed. That teacher then goes home and replays those comments over and over. Students having voice demands change. Like with the novels in the English classes The Student Voice Team changed. That stuff had not changed forever. And now it is different. And as they continue to meet year after year, more will change. Once the process for change has been established, there is no going back.

The Student Voice Team provided the most powerful and unexpected answer to the question of what happens when students feel like true equals on their campus:

There becomes a new-shared empathy between students and teachers. This, of course, is in addition to students relating more strongly to school instead of regarding it as some thing that is being done to them. But the empathy piece is so important because without that, classrooms might still maintain an air of friction, even with students having a more significant voice. However, with both voice and empathy, school is transformed into a place that *feels* different. In the curriculum meetings, the students glimpsed all that goes on behind the scenes with teachers. They witnessed the planning, the challenges, and the compromises that are often made because of the many constraints that the job presents. So, why hide that side of teachers like some secret place that nobody can ever see? Educators know how important it is for students to know the why behind everything. Working alongside the teachers provides the ultimate why, and in doing so brings both sides together. An often antagonistic relationship is then replaced with one rooted in equality and empathy.

Acting as change agents, The Student Voice Team changed the perception of what students are capable of accomplishing. Most teachers and administrators simply do not think of consulting with students before making major campus policy decisions. However, when students have a seat at the table for all discussions surrounding school improvement efforts, their presence transcends the typical conversation. Their voices add dimension, weight, and expertise. Throughout this study, time and again, teachers and other administrators approached me with the same general comment: I cannot believe how articulate and insightful those students were on all of the different issues. The adults in schools often forget how much students think about school and how often they reflect about how it could be different. And

that is not only true for high performing students. These students, all of them, attend school for thirteen years. They are full of school improvement ideas. The Student Voice Team not only had a say in curriculum changes, but their work opened the eyes of their teachers in ways that had teachers wanting to collaborate with them on future projects. For example, the education pathway that The Educator developed with her English teacher. At the end of the school year, an additional assistant principal was being hired for the following school year. This time, there was not just a teacher committee that interviewed the candidates, there was also a student committee that conducted their own, separate interview. This had never occurred before The Student Voice Team. Students now had a say in the hiring process. The student committee and teacher committee met together to compare notes on each of the candidates and engage in a dialogue addressing each of the candidates' strengths and their concerns. Like the curriculum meetings, it was a collaborative process predicated on democratic practice and student agency.

Study Highlights

The following section highlights the pedagogical evolution and future plans for students, teachers, and administrators throughout the school district. In order to better organize these highlights, they have been separated into categories for dialogue, equality, leadership, and curriculum negotiation to specifically illustrate how each group benefited and in what ways.

Dialogue

The Student Voice Team opened up a two-way line of communication with teachers and administrators that leveraged their ability take action beyond the

traditional student role. From the teacher perspective, these honest conversations with students demanded a reexamination of their own pedagogical methods and curriculum that were sacred to teachers, but not students. This ultimately allowed for teachers to gain a more accurate gauge of their professional success and effectiveness. On the campus and district administrator side, this study embodied the mission and vision of a personalized learning model for every student. Witnessing the high school's success in this endeavor, district administration became bullish on the idea of combining student voice and professional development at the lower grades levels.

Equality

Meeting with teachers during the professional development sessions empowered students to talk differently with teachers even when outside of those spaces. They grew comfortable initiating conversations about real school improvement issues. For the teachers, the new balance of power removed the fear and sensitivity they often anticipated when working with students in a critical capacity. Once their guard was down, the teachers then recognized that students are vital components to the school improvement process. Administrators even created student interview panels for the hiring process for potential new teachers and administrators. Previously, only teachers, parents, and board members served on hiring committees, but this shift in power saw students represented in equal numbers. Both the assistant superintendent and superintendent also began questioning how every school in the district could better foster student voice in everyday classroom practices.

Leadership

The Student Voice Team consistently referenced the altruistic nature of their work as one of the most meaningful elements of the project, specifically their direct role in impacting the learning experience for future students at the high school. Also, after the TASA conference they began to realize just how ambitious the work they started could become in the future. The notion of spreading their experiences and incorporating the processes they helped to develop across the educational landscape, not just in their own school district, but also on campuses across Texas, was something they eventually considered a reality. The teachers also learned of the pivotal role they could play in redefining which students are selected to serve as leaders and then developing those nontraditional individuals into leaders in their classroom and in school improvement initiatives on a broader scale. They witnessed the transformative experience of what is possible when a student who might not seem like a likely candidate for a project of this nature is permitted the autonomy and confidence to step boldly into such a role. The high school and district administrative teams connected The Student Voice Team's work with the reach it could have with the entire community. Developing student leaders would, in their view, create ambassadors to serve as positive advocates for the school district's mission and vision, while enriching the community by producing stronger citizens.

Curriculum Negotiation

Empowering students to collaborate with teachers to modernize pedagogical techniques and content choices while shedding antiquated curriculum ultimately cleared the path for student generated courses that did not previously exist.

Throughout this process of reshaping teaching and learning, teachers realized that in the future, more careful planning was essential because students noticed every curriculum choice and rightly question the *why* behind each of those choices. However, this did not necessarily mean an increased workload because as they learned, when students assist in all aspects of curriculum development and lesson planning, teachers are freed of the intensive planning hours they once faced all alone. Just as importantly, district administration quickly grasped the potential students possessed as curriculum experts. District leaders began implementing The Student Voice Team template to help guide vertical alignment conversations from campus to campus. It also meant that rather than unnecessarily hiring additional curriculum and instruction staff, each campus could lean on students to provide data and leadership for curriculum changes and development.

Study Contributions

The study contributed both to the literature on school improvement and participatory action research literature. The Student Voice Team determined the study goals and led the project from beginning to end, thus contributing to both the school improvement and PAR categories in new and progressive ways.

Contributions to School Improvement

There are numerous studies about school improvement from the teacher and administrator perspective, but there are very few participatory action research studies where the focus is all on the students. And those that do exist lean heavily toward students acting as change agents from mostly outside the system, not working alongside teachers, or as students voicing their concerns over issues related to basic student rights.

This study positioned students squarely inside the system, as insiders working as equal collaborators alongside teachers on curriculum, pedagogy, and the way learning should look and feel. Students were working inside those conference room spaces with teachers, actually doing professional development together. That is a whole new way of seeing students and their role at school. The study has also changed the way every teacher on campus now approaches the curriculum planning days. Each team on campus, whether that be algebra, biology, or history now invites teams of students to think, discuss, and plan curriculum with them. It has become an integral and pervasive component of the school improvement effort.

The study provided the opportunity for students to present at the Texas Association for School Administrators. Attending a major conference and fielding questions from other administrators from across the state as their own superintendent and assistant superintendent looked on from the audience elevated this study beyond the campus and district level. The study not only traveled to others throughout the state of Texas, but it also traversed across every hierarchy of authority. Students, teachers, the assistant principal and principal, as well as both the assistant superintendent and superintendent were players in this participatory action research study.

Contributions to PAR

In many ways, this study represented the ultimate combination of PAR and student agency because it transcended each of the major school district hierarchies (see Figure 13).



Figure 13. Transcending School Hierarchies.

The ripples surrounding each of the stones in the transcending school hierarchies visual serve as metaphors for multiple meanings. Each ripple is seen as emanating in a way that creates overlap, blurring traditionally defined roles and suggesting how when one group acts, in this case, students acting as agents of change, every other group is impacted. The ripples also represent change and how that change can extend out beyond just the group that initiates that change. The Student Voice Team's efforts in this PAR study created a ripple effect from each group because their original aim, to meet with teachers in a professional space, affected and ultimately changed each group in some deeper way. All

teachers across campus now meet with students where before that had never occurred.

The school's assistant principal acted as the lead researcher in the study, with the strong backing of the principal. At the district office level, both the assistant superintendent and superintendent empowered The Student Voice Team to serve as the district's sole representatives at the TASA conference, thus making a bold statement to every campus in the district that this type of innovative and collaborative work between students and teachers was part of their leadership vision.

Future Research

This study presented the opportunity to fill a gap in the student voice literature, and while it accomplished that mission, there remains much potential for further research. Four additional studies are worthy of the next phase of work which The Student Voice Team began: continuing to follow the college experiences of these ten students, implementing this model with elementary and middle schools campuses, examining the teacher perspective of working collaboratively with students, and incorporating the study on a more diverse campus with possibly more challenging circumstances.

Conducting a longitudinal study with these same ten students through college and even into their jobs after college would present the ultimate long-term future study. Tracking their progress in higher education and interviewing them about college teaching and learning, as compared to their high school experiences would present an interesting and substantial study into just how impactful this PAR study was in their lives and if it had any residual staying power in college. Having a dialogue surrounding college versus high school curriculum and student-teacher relationships at the different institutions as a point of comparison might enlighten everyone on future PAR possibilities. Also,

bringing these same ten students back to help conduct a similar study at the middle and elementary grades with them serving as advocates for student-teacher partnerships while being able to speak from a position of experience and expertise would also serve as an interesting continuation of the study. Especially having them return to the same district where they graduated. Their influence could easily outmatch that of any teacher or administrator in that role and would allow the study to truly come full circle.

Chartering this same study at both the middle and elementary school levels seems the most logical next step and the one most deserving of a future study. Just as many people do not think that high schools students are capable of such challenging collaborative work, many more contend that this type of study would be beyond the grasp of middle and elementary students. And just as with the high school students, that would underestimating their knowledge and skills. One of the most consistent comments from the high school students in their responses to the question of what should come next was not a change in how this study was carried out for them or their peers, but rather that this exact same study should take place at all grade levels. The Educator, quite possibly a future elementary special education teacher, thought student-teacher partnerships like this could start as early as first grade.

Researching the teacher side of this study would make for a fascinating shift in point of view and one that could definitely shed an insightful light on how to possibly improve the student-teacher curriculum planning day template. Teachers could also serve as experts for how to integrate the study on other campuses while providing knowledge on how to reassure other teachers who might experience reluctance or even a fear of collaborating with students so closely.

Finally, taking this model to a more diverse campus would also serve as a challenging next step in the research. Students in those settings are rarely afforded such an opportunity and when they are, the issues raised often relate to school safety and other more survivalist type needs, not issues like curriculum and pedagogy. Those struggling campuses are just as deserving as any and could possibly show evidence of even more significant shifts in teaching and learning than a more stable campus.

Recommendations

Any mention of possible recommendations should begin with the process of recruiting key participants early on in the process. And it certainly helps to include district supervisors. Educational leaders, regardless of their status, take it as a compliment when they are invited and involved. So, while it might seem like the superintendent would be way too consumed with other issues to invest in a PAR student voice study, that could not have been further from the truth. Making it all about the students also greatly aided this study. When people are able to see students taking on leadership roles, it is very difficult for them not to get behind their efforts. There were times in this study when it was tempting to give equal weight to the teacher perspective, and while that would have proven a worthy study, that would not have prompted the same excitement and pride from district leadership. That is not to say they were not proud that teachers were active participants, but there is something about seeing students take on this kind of work that is uplifting and makes everyone associated with it feel better about the work they do.

Then there are the political implications of who is invited, who is not, and when. With the English department, it was a calculated risk that their competitive nature to be

first on this journey would trump any hesitations they might have had about allowing students inside the sacred realm of their professional development time. However, having the principal and superintendent wholeheartedly backing the study provided the necessary leverage to hurdle any barriers had there been some early resistance. Schools are political in nature, and that should always remain at the forefront for anybody embarking on a PAR study set within a school.

Implications

The Student Voice Team carried the workload throughout this study, both creatively and organizationally. However, the study's overall success would not have been possible without the school district's progressive philosophy, the high school's student-centered campus culture, and the autonomy provided by both the school district and campus to allow for a reimagining of what is possible from an administrator-student relationship. Each of those three implications must be either in place or supported from the highest levels of leadership for a study like this to flourish.

District Philosophy

The school district's fundamental belief that each student's education should consider and reflect who she or he is as a person and learner gave license for The Student Voice Team to operate freely, without the outside constraints from the top that typically interfere with such work. The superintendent faithfully believed that students and teachers must be encouraged to take risks for authentic learning to take place. This progressive brand of personal learning was so detailed that each student even had their own personalized learning plan, a collaborative working document with input from the student, parent, and school counselor. Having the superintendent take a personal interest

in The Student Voice Team instilled confidence in each team member because they knew their work was supported from the very top. His unconditional support also infused the project with additional credibility among the staff and campus leadership. Without these conditions in place, many educators might consider the gamble of such work too precarious and not even worth the struggle.

Campus Culture

The high school's campus could best be described as both student and teacher centered. For example, all staffing decisions are based solely around which courses students want to take, yet the staff has considerable autonomy within their classrooms in terms of teaching methods and curriculum choices. This autonomy extends to state testing as well. Conversations surrounding the state assessment are kept to a minimum because that type of student measurement simply does not hold much value within the larger district philosophy such forth by the superintendent. Thus, both students and teachers are granted more time and freedom during the course of the school year for actual learning opportunities.

Reimagining Student-Administrator Relationships

In order to pull off this study, the most important single relationship, that between the administrator serving as the PAR lead researcher and the students, had to start from a place of trust. In many schools, the assistant principal acts as a punitive hammer, enforcing rules without ever engaging with students as people. In this study, the administrator served as an advocate for The Student Voice Team, and especially their rights as learners. It is often easy for the administrator to side with the adults on campus, but listening to the student perspective is the first step in achieving a lasting relationship.

Then there must be an open and authentic dialogue in which both sides feel safe in expressing those things that are most important in their school lives. There must also exist an initiative on the administrator's part to invest in a project that is probably not at all expected of them. Doing the difficult daily administrator work can often prove challenging enough, which makes the support of district and campus leadership even more comforting.

Student Ambassadors

Near the end of their senior year, in the spring of 2018, the assistant superintendent invited The Student Voice Team to a district wide showcase at one of the elementary schools where they would present their work to the school board members. The event was conceived of as a chance to impress the board with work that was reflective of the district's mission and vision. After the TASA conference, this was also another opportunity to spread the study's accomplishments to an entirely new group of influential stakeholders. Rarely do all board members assemble outside the confines of an actual board meeting. Filling out the audience that morning was PTA parents, other administrators, and elementary teachers. Driving over to the elementary school and entering the library with the team, there was a bittersweet quality to the proceedings. It would be the last time they would present their work together. Each of them would be off to college in just a few months, leaving their legacy in the hands of younger students.

As they all lined up, flanking the presentation screen, they settled into an impressive synchronized rhythm, playing off one another flawlessly as they explained the project and all they achieved in collaborating with the high school staff. Their presentation style now resembled that of a highly skilled, yet improvisational jazz band—

confident and complimentary. They unselfishly took turns speaking and then fielded many questions from the school board, who looked on with near dismay as they detailed the curriculum changes and the teachers' willingness to compromise and change. As they patiently answered each question, they once again emphasized the need for this type of project at the lower grade levels. Standing in an elementary school, they used the setting to make their point. The Critic said, "This could be happening here and at the middle schools right now." They would all be packing up and moving by the end of that summer, but they had great conviction that the work they started should continue and grow in scope.

Thinking about the ways this project might resonate with them after they have gone gives hope to an educational system where positivity is not easy to come by. All ten members of The Student Voice Team were accepted into four-year universities. Four will remain in Texas for college, with six heading off to all different states. Their majors of study run the gamut, from science and technology to education and the visual arts. The high school experience they pack with them to college will likely look much different than that of the other freshman. Sitting in lecture halls, they might think back to The Student Voice Team's many deep dialogues on effective teaching and learning. In college, through parenthood, and as active community leaders, their journey as student voice pioneers and change agents seems likely to linger in their future.

At graduation, students wear different colored chords that they have earned through major accomplishments. Some are academic, others related to community service. The Student Voice Team collectively asked if they could have a distinctly colored chord to represent the changes they initiated on campus. Purple, a royal color,

was selected and when they were passed out at the final team meeting, it might have been the happiest they had been all year. The chord was wrapped with layers of meaning and memories. As they proudly walked the stage at graduation, the purple that adorned their gown distinguished them. They were now ambassadors for a new progressive model of learning, walking boldly into a society that needs them to speak their truth.

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APPENDIX A

DISTRICT MISSION AND VISION

The following sections outline the educational philosophy for the Central Texas ISD where this dissertation study took place. In addition to the mission and vision statements, both the core beliefs and core commitments provide a deeper context for understanding the district's leadership and learning philosophies.

Vision

We inspire and equip students to be life-long learners and positive contributors to the world.

Mission

We partner with students, parents and the community to provide a personalized and exceptional education for every student.

Core Beliefs

- Each child has unique worth and potential.
- Our schools and our staff have the power to positively change each child's life.
- It is the responsibility of the school district, the student, the family and the community together to identify, nurture and develop each child's individual talent and passion.

Core Commitments

- We are committed to developing leaders, one child at a time.

- We are committed to empowering our teachers, staff, and administrators to foster the skills of critical thinking, communication, collaboration, and creativity.
- We are committed to identifying, nurturing, and developing each individual's talent and passion.

Having served on the district leadership team as the superintendent began the work of putting pen to paper so everyone would be clear on the educational philosophy, I was fortunate to co-author part of the district strategic plan. The goal was for every campus leader to have a say what education should look like in this particular Central Texas school district. The following is a sample of the final strategic plan:

Every position in Central Texas ISD will be filled with someone who makes a difference in the lives of children. Employees will take risks and be allowed to explore passions and talents. Because of the equity of life changers in every classroom, parents will feel confident about the placement of their children with any teacher. Parents will have an assurance that children are cared for and well educated. Teachers and district staff will advocate for every student. The most important part of this plan is the people. Without a life-changer in every position in the district, we will not achieve everything in this plan. Our job is to hire the right people, put them in the right places, and build their capacity to do the right work.

APPENDIX B

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

This study is about democracy, school culture, curriculum design, and dialogical principles. But most importantly, this study is about students. It's about them playing a significant role in their own education. It is about them using their knowledge, thoughtfulness, and passion to act from a position of power in determining what school looks and feels like for them. Most importantly, it is about students leveraging democratic practice and student agency within the boundaries of their school. In providing a narrative account of how this looks in practice, it is necessary to first examine the past in order to have a realistic understanding of what is possible in the present and future.

The review of the literature takes the United States public education system to task, but only does so to fully explore how changing a bureaucracy so engrained in our economy, politics, and culture might become a reality. The review is organized historically, beginning first with the recent past before circling back to the capitalistic nature of education in the United States in an attempt to explain why students have such little sway in their own education. Freire stated, "by criticizing traditional schools, what we have to criticize is the capitalist system that shaped these schools" (Freire & Shor, 1987, p. 35). This historical journey ultimately pivots back to the current stalemate pitting student voice against a barrage of both government and school-induced threats not just in the United States, but also with a global perspective from education researchers grappling with similar challenges in their own countries.

Democracy and Student Voice

Investigating student influence in the areas of teaching and learning in the United States is a curious study into the country's past, its current politics, and most importantly, how we as a nation treat young people. While this review will take time to explain the various obstacles and detours that have largely prevented students from having an authentic say in what public education looks like in the United States, much of this review will focus on student-centered initiatives that began gathering steam in the early 1990's in what Cook-Sather (2006) described as "a way of thinking . . . that strives to reposition school students in educational research and reform" (p. 360). This progressive model of listening to and collaborating with students has most commonly been defined as "student voice." And although there are subcategories within this term that better explain the work being done in the student voice field, an accurate definition of the philosophy underlining this work can be described as, "young people have unique perspectives on learning, teaching, and schooling; that their insights warrant not only the attention but also the responses of adults; and they should be afforded opportunities to actively shape their education" (Cook-Sather, p. 360). Put in slightly different terms by Fielding (2004b), "Student voice forces us to confront the present realities and future aspirations of those for whom the system of formal schooling exists" (p. 206).

Fielding's multi-faceted contribution to voice research presents an opportunity to introduce the major role that democratic processes play in student voice. Just over a decade after Fielding referenced these present realities and future aspirations, he revisited these same themes, but through the lens of an increasingly endangered democracy when he stated, "The nature, quality and legitimacy of the outcomes we seek within our education system must be linked demonstrably and insistently to democracy as the

manner, means and humanly fulfilling aspiration of our way of life” (p. 29). Biesta (2013), also urged educators to weight the present and future:

if we continue to think of the relationship between education and democracy in terms of preparation, so that once the preparation has finished democracy can begin, we also take away the opportunities for learning from political existence in the “adult” world (p. 118).

The notion that school simply exists to prepare students for some unknown future career has become common, empty sermon for most students. Cook-Sather (2006) argued that “A democracy should be premised on change, not just reproduction, but there is more and more that is interfering with that commitment within school frames” (p. 381). Fielding (2015) also expressed great concern for what he deemed, “matters of principle that reflect an emerging crisis of democracy. Confidence in its established machinery and the integrity of those tasked with its daily work is less secure than it has been for some time” (pp. 26-27).

There is a sense of impending doom from this literature if schools don’t take swift measures to protect what many currently perceive as an endangered system. Biesta (2013) starkly pointed to both the educational and political responsibility that rests on educator’s shoulders “because what is at stake is the very possibility of our human existence in a common world” (p. 118). Fielding continued in this same vein with equally strong language:

The actuality and future development of education in and for democracy depend on our willingness to not only name democracy as the touchstone of our

endeavour but to weave its threads into the fabric of our daily work. It cannot be an occasional or exclusive task (p. 32).

Fielding (2004a) continued examining the complexities of voice and how it is intertwined with democracy. He deduced that “We can only hesitantly speak on behalf of others significantly unlike ourselves because we lack, not only understanding, but the means to understand those whose interests and causes we would represent” (pp. 299-300).

In 1989, the United Nations ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child. “The United States is the single remaining United Nations (UN) member state that has not ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), the most important international human rights treaty governing children’s rights” (Lee, 2017, p. 687). Critics of the United States’ unwillingness to make this a unanimous member agreement point to two specific articles. Critics of the CRC claim that these articles infringe upon the rights of both individual states and parental rights.

Article 12: 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 (UN, 2017).

Article 13: The child shall have the right to freedom of expression; this right shall include freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds, regardless of frontiers, either orally, in writing or in print, in the form of art, or through any other media of the child's choice (UN, 2017).

These articles, both symbolically and substantially, have segregated the United States from the rest of the world. It also brings into sharp light the differences between what is

happening with student voice and youth empowerment in the United States when compared to many Europe.

Unlike many European countries, the United States has not mandated any official national policy empowering student expression related to education. While the United States has been aggressive in its efforts to federally mandate many school improvement and accountability policies, most notably the legislation in 2001 of No Child Left Behind, the results of these reforms have worked to remove students from the school improvement discussion, thus silencing the most critical members of the process. This confounding reform approach was acutely summarized by Cook-Sather:

The disconnect . . . between the espoused goal of supporting student learning and the reality of ignoring students, points to a profoundly disabling and potentially very dangerous discrepancy between the claims behind federal legislation and the policies and practices that result from it (2006, pp. 372-373).

For students to feel truly invested and valued in school, there must be an effort to establish the means through which they can express their opinion regarding what and how they learn. This can only occur through authentic collaboration and by providing students a seat at the table with the professionals they work alongside each day at school. “Unlike the United Kingdom and other nations that have developed formal systems to encourage youth participation in decision-making, United States policies tend to inhibit child participation” (Mitra, Serriere, & Kirshner, 2014, p. 292). This inhibiting of voice seemingly betrays the nation’s democratic ideals and pride in a system that promises a free public education for every child, yet there are several factors embedded in the country’s past that are actively muting student voice.

The Past Isn't Dead. It Isn't Even Past.

When Dewey began writing about what constituted a progressive education in the early part of the twentieth century, he questioned not just issues of curriculum and instruction, but more bluntly, the role of student voice within school structures. In a statement that still resonates today because of its prophetic nature and unfulfilled promise, Dewey declared:

There is, I think, no point in the philosophy of progressive education which is sounder than its emphasis upon the importance of the participation of the learner in the formation of the purposes which direct his activities in the learning process (1938, p. 67).

Dewey's brand of pragmatism is still widely read and taught, so why has his model of progressive education, rooted in student voice, proven such an uphill battle? The answer partially lies in the United States' economic structure and the psychological detachment stemming from an overwhelmingly corporate model that Marx decried on the heels of the industrial revolution.

In fact, the industrial factory model is still on display in most schools and it dictates what school *feels* like for students, but it also helps to perpetuate those less than healthy capitalistic underpinnings. The concept of changing classes when the bell sounds, moving from room to room with little time outdoors and enduring what essentially boils down to an eight hour workday are daily frameworks that lead to student alienation. Marx (1988) defined alienation in the industrial age as creating a situation

where “labor becomes an object, an external existence . . . it means that the life which he has conferred on the object confronts him as something hostile and alien” (p. 72). In this definition it becomes easy to see how the student has the same expectations as the nineteenth century worker because the act of school has become the object or work. Marx continued this psychological examination, stating, “The worker therefore only feels himself outside his work, and in his work feels outside himself” (p. 74.) This is the antithesis of what Dewey would call for nearly a hundred years later, yet it gets to the heart of what happens when compliance becomes synonymous with productivity. Marx concluded, “his labor is therefore not voluntary, but coerced; it is *forced* labor” (p. 74).

Mitra (2003) recognized this same dynamic playing out in modern high schools when she wrote, “alienation might in large part be caused by the lack of opportunities that situate students as essential actors in school decisionmaking” (p. 302). Using this same Marxist language, Freire (1998) wrote about “that invisible power of alienating domestication, which attains a degree of extraordinary efficiency in what I have been calling the bureaucratizing of the mind” (p. 111). These terms: coerced, bureaucratizing, and most importantly, alienation, all coalesce to form a sort of dreadful film over the school-going experience. In each of these examples, the student, or worker, has been stripped of the ability to shape or even express thoughts about their current existence and experiences. Dewey’s awareness of the involvement of the student is ultimately the answer to Marx’s question, “How would the worker come to face the product of his activity as a stranger. Were it not that in the very act of production he was estranging himself from himself?” (p. 72-3).

Emancipation and Equality

To understand the value of student voice implicitly points to a deep understanding of student-teacher equality. Rancière (1991) wrote about equality, using the problematic dichotomy of emancipation as his entry point. He defined emancipation as “the consciousness of that equality, of that reciprocity” and later focused his argument on the notion of intelligence being something that creates equality (p. 39). Rancière, adept at viewing life through the student’s reality, challenged the system, “We must therefore reverse the critics’ questions. How, they ask, is a thing like the equality of intelligence thinkable? . . . We must ask the opposite question: how is intelligence possible without equality?” (p. 72). Biesta explained the issue with this relationship, “emancipation . . . actually installs dependency at the very heart of the “act” of emancipation” (p. 82). Placing this more squarely within the current confines of the teacher-student relationship he explained, “Modern emancipation is not only based on dependency—it is also based on a fundamental *inequality* between the emancipator and the one to be emancipated” (p. 83).

The question then becomes, how is true equality of intelligence achieved? Rancière continued coming back to the student-teacher relationship and the necessity for the teacher to maintain not just an open mind, but also to reach a type of intuitive relationship where there were no limits to the amount of intellectual growth that both the student and teacher could achieve together. Rancière’s conclusion on the matter read, “And only an equal understands an equal. Equality and intelligence are synonymous terms . . . The equality of intelligence is the common bond of humankind, the necessary and sufficient condition for a society of men to exist” (p. 72-73). Thus, it is incumbent

on the teacher to begin from a position of equality with each student and the student to demand this type of relationship and respect. Anything less than this collaborative, robust attack on inequality might just result in a simplified version of emancipation, the type Biesta (2013) defined as, “to relinquish one’s authority over someone” (p. 79). However, according to Freire, this might not be possible because the dependency that Biesta referenced is a very real thing, and one with a strong foothold throughout public schools in the United States.

Freire (1987) somewhat deviated from Biesta and Rancière in his deeply held view that for equality to emerge, students might need more of an assist from teachers because of this long history and culture of dependency, stating, “I must recognize that students cannot understand their own rights because they are so ideologized into rejecting their own freedom, their own critical development, thanks to the traditional curriculum” (p. 107). This understanding that Freire accurately reveals is also deeply embedded in the absence of dialogue from many classrooms in the United States.

Dialogical Education

In order to arrive at a place where students have achieved legitimate equality, in the true sense that Rancière, Biesta, and Freire all advocated, complex and weighty dialogue must play an instrumental part in that seismic shift. Only by committing to an authentic dialogical education model can schools avoid the type of pedagogy that continues to plague the United States, one that Biesta (2013) explained as “Where it is the task of the teacher to explain the world to the students and where it is the task of the students to ultimately become as knowledgeable as the teacher” (p. 82). This abundance of *explaining* makes Freire’s (1987) emphasis on dialogue, and equally importantly,

listening, an integral part of student voice. Freire captured the almost metaphysical power of dialogue as, “a moment where humans meet to reflect on their reality as they make and remake it . . . we become more able to transform our reality, we are able *to know that we know*, which is something *more* than just knowing” (Shor & Freire, 1987, p. 98).

This concept of “remaking reality” is echoed in Cook-Sather’s (2006) observation that student voice brings an “insistence on altering the dominant power imbalances between adults and young people” (p. 366). However, as Biesta and Rancière warned, adults must come to the table with an equality mindset before productive dialogue can occur. An oft overlooked, but necessary place for this entire process to begin is with listening. Freire (1998) remarked that, “It is in listening to the student that I learn to speak with him or her” (p. 106). With so much of the social media obsessed culture in the United States now predicated on having not just strong, but verbose and widely known opinions, elevating the skill of listening is a daunting challenge. This is especially true when considering Freire’s (1998) sentiment that “to listen . . . is a permanent attitude on the part of the subject who is listening, of being open to the word of the other, to the gesture of the other, to the differences of the other” (p. 107).

Rorty (2009) used a sort of reinvention of the term edification to get at what Freire seemed to ultimately want from this “remaking” concept of dialogue. Rorty explained, “The attempt to edify (ourselves or others) may consist in the hermeneutic activity of making connections between our own culture and some exotic culture or historical period” (p. 360). After all, listening and the productivity that accompanies authentic dialogue wasn’t always this trying. Rorty added, “For edifying discourse is

supposed to be abnormal, to take us out of our old selves by the power of strangeness, to aid us in becoming new beings” (p. 360). His conceit of discourse containing the transformative power to, in essence, create new beings rings true with what Freire (2013) called conscientizacao or consciousness-raising. This term is a crucial element in arriving at Rancière’s equality of intelligence end goal. Through the process of conscientizacao, Freire introduced a critical level of dialogical education most crucial for students and teachers, one that works through the other, inferior types of consciousness. He described the necessity for people to move beyond magical consciousness, which “apprehends facts and attributes them to a superior power by which it is controlled and to which it must submit” and naïve consciousness which “sees causality as a static, established fact, and thus is deceived in its perception” (Freire, 2013, p. 41).

Freire sought a critical consciousness because it “is integrated with reality” and “leads to critical action” (p. 42). In his effort to diagram this method, he created two matrices, one representing dialogue and one anti-dialogue. The dialogue matrix included the following adjectives: “loving, humble, hopeful, trusting, critical” whereas the anti-dialogue matrix identified: “loveless, arrogant, hopeless, mistrustful, acritical” (pp. 42-43). This inclusion of the “critical” and “acritical” is a significant development in the type of dialogical education being discussed here.

It is imperative for students and teachers to look beyond the sort of Pollyanna discourse that often exists between these two groups. This “critical” element is indispensable in attaining student-teacher equality. Freire (1998) reminded educators of this again when he wrote, “true listening does not diminish in me the exercise of my right to disagree, to oppose, to take a position” (p. 107). Shor (1987) talked about his first-

hand experiences in witnessing the opposite of this critical honesty in his passage on the *culture of silence* in many mainstream American classrooms where “students simply withdraw into a speechless cocoon in class” (pp. 122-123). In his observations, students had never been exposed to a dialogical classroom model. Shor (1987) also recognized that “Others simply swallow what the official curriculum offers, without enthusiasm” (p. 123). This idea of an oppressive curriculum that suffocates student voice and healthy dialogue is another major obstacle in authentic student voice becoming a reality.

Student Voice Types

Although a relatively modern term, student voice has come to mean many different things, depending on the age of the students, the country of the school, the political landscape of that country, and the ultimate desired outcome and change initiative driving the process. One way to categorize student voice is by discussing it as a bottom-up approach. “Three types of bottom-up participatory activities that occur in the United States [are] youth activism, youth leadership, and carpettime democracy” (Mitra, Serriere, & Kirshner, 2014, 294). Age and the purpose of the change initiative are largely at play in these three broad terms. Because the focus of this review is on secondary school students, carpettime democracy will not be included in the discussion, based on its history of existing only in elementary school classrooms (p. 294). In the youth activism model, “young people take collective action to challenge injustices that they experience in their schools or neighbourhoods” (p. 294). The connotation being, some social wrong must exist in a very real way for this type of activism to become necessary.

Youth leadership allows for students to “have the agency to participate in discussions on the core operations of schools, including teaching, learning, and class or

school-wide decision-making practices” (p. 294). While this is certainly plausible at the elementary level, it does not seem to currently exist at the younger grade levels in the United States. And while, youth leadership does occur on middle school and high school campuses, “Few such activities are youth-led or youth-initiated” (p. 297). Fielding (2004b) framed the student voice categorization differently. He chose to examine what he called the “person-based approach to student-voice” (p. 208). Fielding developed this person-centered approach in order to avoid what he essentially saw as an abuse of students relating to their connection to school improvement.

He began his argument with “the personal is used for the sake of the functional: students are included or excluded, valued or not, primarily on the basis of whether they contribute to organisational performance of the school” (p. 210). Fielding implemented these terms, ‘personal’ and ‘functional’ as a method to detail how schools truly view students within their philosophical structures. However, before he arrived at his classification system, he added about students, “Student complaints that schools do not care about them as persons, but only about them as bearers of results and measureable outcomes are now ubiquitous” (p. 210). Thus, Fielding crafted what he termed his fourfold typology (see Table 6):

In schools as ‘impersonal’ organisations the functional marginalises the personal. In the ‘affective’ orientation this relation is reversed with the personal marginalising the functional. In the ‘high performance’ learning organisation the personal is used for the sake of the functional, whilst in the ‘person-centred’ learning community the functional is used for the sake of the personal (p. 210).

As the scale climbs toward the person-centered approach, the terms grow more favorable, because at this level the school is not obsessed with simple academic growth and statistical improvement, but more with something that sounds similar to a whole child approach. Fielding (2004b) revealed, “Student voice operating within the ‘high performance’ mode is largely an instrumental undertaking orientated towards increased measurable organisational performance. In its most extreme form it is about the use of student voice for particular kinds of adult purposes” (p. 211).

In the United States this would most closely resemble those schools that attain consistently impressive test scores on Advanced Placement and state testing measures to prop up their local and national reputation, but never really make an effort to serve students beyond those very public measurable.

Table 6

The Communal/Instrumental Orientation of Organisations

Schools as <i>impersonal</i> organisations	Schools as <i>affective</i> communities	Schools as <i>high performance</i> learning organisations	Schools as <i>person-centered</i> learning communities
The functional marginalises the personal	The personal marginalizes the functional	The personal is expressive of/used for the sake of the functional	The functional is expressive of/used for the sake of the functional
<i>Organisational type:</i> mechanistic organisation	<i>Organisational type:</i> affective community	<i>Organisational type:</i> learning organisation	<i>Organisational type:</i> learning community
<i>Characteristic mode:</i> efficient	<i>Characteristic mode:</i> restorative	<i>Characteristic mode:</i> effective	<i>Characteristic mode:</i> morally and instrumentally successful

The ‘person-centered’ mode schools most clearly separate from the high performance mode schools by not allowing measurable outcomes to “constrain” their philosophy (Fielding, 2004b, p. 211). Students and teachers work collaboratively “rather than one party using the other for often covert ends. Its processes and procedures are emergent, rather than fixed, and shaped by the dialogic values that underpin its aspirations and dispositions” (p. 211). The dialogic and emergent philosophy of this approach also strongly resembles Freire’s methodology, allowing students and schools to experience genuine growth and not the kind limited to quantitative data points tied to state sponsored testing.

Holdsworth (2000) arrived at a similar place with Fielding, believing that “A simple focus on 'being heard' can merely serve to make it appear that young people are active participants; this may, in reality, act as a 'safety valve' to ease pressures for real changes in decision-making or simply be a way of letting decision makers feel as if they are 'doing the right thing'” (p. 358). He delineated this hierarchal approach with the creation of a participation ladder (see Table 7), which outlined his emphasis on authentic, rather than artificial forms of voice.

Table 7

Student Participation Ladder

youth/student voice: 'speaking out'
being heard
being listened to
being listened to seriously and with respect (including a willingness to argue with students with logic and evidence)
incorporating youth/student views into action taken by others
sharing decision-making, implementation of action and reflection on the action with young people

In both the Fielding and Holdsworth models there is a clear priority in the notion of a shared experience, with both students and adults benefiting. There is also explicit mention in both of an amiable relationship between the two groups, rooted in a genuine interest and care for the work being done together.

Participation vs. Consultation

Rudduck and McIntyre (2007) were the first researchers to denote a distinct difference between student participation and student consultation. They qualified student participation as more of a token form of voice, calling it not enough because “Participation may or may not involve pupil commentary” (p. 6). They sought a teacher-student relationship rooted in consultation, but that proved difficult too due to time constraints on the teacher and the management component of meeting with students

regularly (p. 13). This truer form of voice was only sporadically offered. Without a guiding philosophy from school and state leaders, the management of such a system proved overwhelming for teachers to lead on their own. They captured the reality of this situation in numerous secondary schools throughout the United Kingdom:

The greater control pupils have over the terms in on which they are consulted, the greater the opportunities there are likely to be useful for teacher learning, but also the more demanding the tasks for teachers, both at the level of effective practical arrangements and at the more fundamental level of being constructively responsive to what pupils have to say (p. 32).

As is the case in the United States, the type of consultation that rises to the level of actually making an impact wasn't part of the educational culture because it wasn't viewed as a priority. The question then becomes, how can student voice be brought to life in a way that changes what it looks and feels like to experience school in a classroom?

Student Voice as School Improvement

When viewed through the school improvement lens as an equally shared collaborative endeavor between student and teacher, we can begin to see the potential for change in the United States. However, to get to the real change that needs to occur, to have the hard conversations about whether students are engaged in what and how they're learning and their role in that change process, there must be an acknowledgment that what has constituted student voice in the past is simply a charade. Fielding (2004a) wrote about calling things for what they are and fooling ourselves into believing that traditional forms of voice are doing the real work of school improvement:

Students have student councils and other arrangements within which they pursue their joint interests. Teachers have team meetings, faculty meetings and so on.

Occasionally, students are allowed to present issues in faculty meetings and staff attend student council meetings (p. 309).

He gets at something that the educational system seems fearful to talk about: Students and teachers must work together in a democratic setting in order to achieve substantial change. By defining this work as collaborative and participatory with action as the ultimate desired result, educators then have a vision for the work that must be done and how it can be achieved. The challenge then becomes whether teachers and school and district administrative leaders have the capacity to enter into this type of work with students. If so, Fielding (2004a) got to the heart of how this could become the transformative school improvement project of our time:

If we see and relate to each other within the context of a reciprocal responsibility we will indeed transform what it is to be a teacher, what it is to be a student, and the spectre of schools as nineteenth-century institutions will begin to fade (p. 308).

The optimal place for this reciprocal responsibility to begin is with students and teachers meeting in the same location, outside of class, to engage in an ongoing dialogue about how best to update this antiquated nineteenth-century model.

Gap in the Literature

While there is a steady flow of academic work concerning student voice from around the world, the topic is absent in major education policy discussions in the United States, both at the state and federal levels. And while Norwegian and South American

countries, along with parts of Australia and Canada have clearly separated from the United States in their general attitude toward students and their rights as students, there is a void in the area of students and teachers working as equal collaborators in curriculum and instruction. In fact, Fielding (2004a), one of the foremost authorities and advocates for student voice, acknowledged that “so far as I’m aware, there are no spaces, physical or metaphorical, where staff and students meet one another as equals, as genuine partners in the shared undertaking of making meaning of their work together” (p. 309). This study’s goal is to change that reality. And doing so in the United States and on top of that in the conservative educational landscape of Texas, would fill an enormous gap in the current literature and in our country’s well-deserved maligned reputation as a nation that simply does not value the dignity and potential agency of our young people.

APPENDIX C

DEFINITION OF TERMS

Democratic Practice – “Should be premised on change, not just reproduction, but there is more and more that is interfering with that commitment within school frames. Because schools are set up on premises of prediction, control, and management, anything that challenges those premises is hard to accomplish within formal educational contexts. Until teachers, administrators, policymakers, and the wider public see that there is value in this particular kind of change prompted by attending to, responding to, and following the lead of students, and indeed embracing the threat these actions carry, efforts that aggregate under the term ‘student voice’ will not get very far” (Cook-Sather, 2006, p. 381).

Dialogical Education – “Where humans meet to reflect on their reality as they make and remake it” (Shor & Freire, 1987, p. 98).

Equality – “Such relationships enable us to ‘re-see’ each other as persons rather than as role occupants, and in doing so nurture not only a new understanding, sense of possibility and felt respect between adults and young people, but also a joy in each other’s being and a greater sense of shared delight and responsibility” (Fielding, 2011, p. 79).

Ownership – “Students who aren’t learning, who don’t feel like they have a sense of ownership in the school feel out of place. I think by helping with curriculum options and influences, you suddenly give them a place in the school, and you make them feel that someone cares what they have to say. You listen to them and all of a sudden they feel that sense of ownership. They feel like they belong to the school because they helped

impact the school, and they're going to help impact the future of the school (exit interview with The Educator).

Personalized Learning – “Tailors the instruction, content, pace, and testing to the individual student’s strengths and interests, using technology, data, and continuous feedback to make that customization possible” (Newcomb, 2017, para. 2).

Progressive Education – “There is ... no point in the philosophy of progressive education which is sounder than its emphasis upon the importance of the participation of the learner in the formation of the purposes which direct his activities in the learning process” (Dewey, 1938, p. 67).

School Improvement – “Going beyond the narrow confines of the performance agenda to include pupils’ progress as learners, their sense of self as learners (including their confidence, competence and commitment to learning) and the conditions of learning at classroom and school level” (Rudduck & McIntyre, 2007, pp. 204-205).

Student Agency – “The capacity and willingness of young people to act upon issues that affect them” (Fielding, 2000, p. 358). Often used interchangeably in the literature with student voice.

Student Leader – The Student Voice Team invested in the process of building working relationships with the teachers and then parlayed that progress into helping peers and future generations of students.

Student Voice – “Calls for a cultural shift that opens up spaces and minds not only to the sound but also to the presence and power of students” (Cook-Sather, 2006, p. 363).

APPENDIX D
MEETING AGENDA

Student Voice Team Meeting

A G E N D A

March 2017

1:00

**Counseling
Conference
Center**

*** Conversation explaining previous themes on whiteboard and next steps in the process.**

▣ Classroom Environment

-
-

▣ Learning Styles

-
-

▣ Projects and Collaborative Work

-
-

▣ Time and Pacing

-
-

▣ Instructional Strategies

-
-

APPENDIX E

CONVERSATIONAL EXIT INTERVIEW

1. How can students exercise democratic practice and student agency within the boundaries of their school?
2. In what ways does having voice change curriculum choices and instructional methods?
3. What happens when students feel like true equals on their campus?
4. When acting as agents of change, how can students influence the school improvement process?
5. In what ways were you able to contribute to the topic of the different ways students learn in class?
6. In what ways were you able to contribute to the discussion concerning the different types of instructional or learning materials used in class?
7. When discussing course planning and items like the curriculum calendar and pacing, how were you able to add to that conversation?
8. Were there any changes or potential revisions made to the course related to teaching, learning, and curriculum based on your conversations with the teachers?
If so, what were these specific changes or possible revisions?
9. In what ways do you feel this process did help or could help both students and teachers throughout the school?

APPENDIX F

INDIVIDUAL INFORMED CONSENT

Co-Investigator/Faculty Advisor: Clarena Larrotta

Email: cl24@txstate.edu Phone: 512-245-6288

Sponsor: N/A

This consent form will give you the information you will need to understand why this research study is being done and why you are being invited to participate. It will also describe what you will need to do to participate as well as any known risks, inconveniences or discomforts that you may have while participating. We encourage you to ask questions at any time. If you decide to participate, you will be asked to sign this form and it will be a record of your agreement to participate. You will be given a copy of this form to keep.

PURPOSE AND BACKGROUND

The purpose of this qualitative research study is to document the experiences of young adults (ages 17-18) as they collaborate in a professional development setting in order to incorporate student perspective into curriculum development, instructional delivery, and learning styles. Additionally, the study aims to document how this level of student consultation and collaboration impact the perception of their value as a person with voice on campus. Finally, the study intends to significantly add to the literature on student voice by directly connecting student presence and consultation in professional development meetings to teaching and learning and to the notion of schools becoming a truer democracy.

PROCEDURES

1. If you agree to be in this study, you will participate in the following: Once a month (60 minute) student voice forum meeting in a professional conference room on the high school campus with the assistant principal and principal researcher for the study facilitating the forum conversation.
2. If you agree to be in the study, you will be asked to participate in three brief interviews to be given during the 2017-18 school year on the high school campus. Each interview will last approximately 30 minutes. During the interviews, you will be asked how you feel about participating in this democratic process as well as your opinion on implementing curriculum and instructional changes at the high school. The interview will be audio-recorded by the assistant principal and principal researcher at the high school. The assistant principal and principal researcher may take notes as well.

RISKS/DISCOMFORTS

There is very little risk in participating in this study. During your participation in this project, you might become frustrated at times if their recommendations or suggestions are

not fully embraced by the school. If you become uncomfortable at any point in the study, you will not be required to continue. Participation is voluntary and you can stop at any time. In the event that some of the survey or interview questions make you uncomfortable or upset, you are always free to decline to answer or to stop your participation at any time.

BENEFITS/ALTERNATIVES

You will be empowered to share your learning experiences and collaborate to improve curriculum and instruction. Study findings will contribute to the field of student voice and also strengthen student voice at the high school. You will have the opportunity to become familiar with democratic practices such as providing opinions, voting on curriculum related issues, and representing your peers.

EXTENT OF CONFIDENTIALITY

Reasonable efforts will be made to keep the personal information in your research record private and confidential. Any identifiable information obtained in connection with this study will remain confidential and will be disclosed only with your permission or as required by law. The members of the research team and the Texas State University Office of Research Compliance (ORC) may access the data. The ORC monitors research studies to protect the rights and welfare of research participants. Your name will not be used in any written reports or publications which result from this research.

PAYMENT/COMPENSATION

You will not be paid for your participation in this study. Your school grades will also in no way be affected by your participation.

PARTICIPATION IS VOLUNTARY

You do not have to be in this study if you do not want to. You may also refuse to answer any questions you do not want to answer. If you volunteer to be in this study, you may withdraw from it at any time without consequences of any kind or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

QUESTIONS

If you have any questions or concerns about your participation in this study, you may contact the Principal Investigator. This project was approved by the Texas State IRB on February 5, 2018. Pertinent questions or concerns about the research, research participants' rights, and/or research-related injuries to participants should be directed to the IRB Chair, Dr. Denise Gobert 512-245-8351 – (dgobert@txstate.edu) or to Monica Gonzales, IRB Regulatory Manager 512-245-2334 - (meg201@txstate.edu).

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DOCUMENTATION OF CONSENT

I have read this form and decided that I will participate in the project described above. Its general purposes, the particulars of involvement and possible risks have been explained to my satisfaction. I understand I can withdraw at any time.

Printed Name of Study Participant _____

Signature of Person Obtaining Consent _____

Signature of Study Participant Date _____

Date

APPENDIX G

PARENT/GUARDIAN INFORMED CONSENT

Study Title: Beyond Student Voice
Co-Investigator/Faculty Advisor: Clarena Larrotta
Email: cl24@txstate.edu Phone: 512-245-6288
Sponsor: N/A

Dear Parent/Guardian:

I am a doctoral student in the School Improvement PhD program at Texas State University and assistant principal at your student's high school. I am asking for your permission to include your child in my research. This consent form will give you the information you will need to understand why this study is being done and why your child is being invited to participate. It will also describe what your child will need to do to participate as well as any known risks, inconveniences or discomforts that your child may have while participating. I encourage you to ask questions at any time. If you decide to allow your child to participate, you will be asked to sign this form and it will be a record of your agreement to participate. You will be given a copy of this form to keep.

PURPOSE AND BACKGROUND

The purpose of this research study is to document the experiences of young adult students (ages 17-18) as they collaborate in a professional development setting in order to incorporate student perspective into curriculum development, instructional delivery, and learning styles. Additionally, the study aims to document how this level of student consultation and collaboration impacts the perception of their value as a person with voice on campus. Finally, the study intends to significantly add to the literature on student voice by directly connecting student presence and consultation in professional development meetings to teaching and learning and to the notion of schools becoming a truer democracy.

PROCEDURES

This study will include: Once a month (60 minute) student voice forum meeting in a professional conference room on the high school campus during your child's lunch time with the assistant principal at the high school and principal researcher for the study facilitating the forum conversation.

Three brief interviews to be given during the 2017-18 school year on the high school campus. Each interview will last approximately 30 minutes. During the interviews, your child will be asked how they feel about participating in this democratic process as well as their opinion on implementing curriculum and

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instructional changes at the high school. The interview will be audio-recorded by the assistant principal and principal researcher at the high school. The assistant principal and principal researcher may take notes as well.

RISKS/DISCOMFORTS

There is very little risk in participating in this study. During participation in this project, your child might become frustrated at times if their recommendations or suggestions are not fully embraced by the school. If they become uncomfortable at any point in the study, they will not be required to continue. Participation is voluntary and they can stop at any time.

EXTENT OF CONFIDENTIALITY

Reasonable efforts will be made to keep the personal information in your research record private and confidential. Any identifiable information obtained in connection with this study will remain confidential and will be disclosed only with your permission or as required by law. The members of the research team and Texas State University Office of Research and Integrity (ORC) may access the data. The ORC monitors research studies to protect the rights and welfare of research participants. Your child's name will not be used in any written reports or publications which result from this research.

BENEFITS

Your child will be empowered to share their learning experiences and collaborate to improve curriculum and instruction. Study findings will contribute to the field of student voice and also strengthen student voice at the high school. Your child will have the opportunity to become familiar with democratic practices such as providing opinions, voting on curriculum related issues, and representing their peers.

PAYMENT/COMPENSATION

Your child will not be paid for their participation in this study. Your child's school grades will also in no way be affected by your participation.

QUESTIONS

If you have any questions or concerns about your participation in this study, you may contact the Principal Investigator. This project 2018219 was approved by the Texas State IRB on February 5, 2018. Pertinent questions or concerns about the research, research participants' rights, and/or research-related injuries to participants should be directed to the IRB Chair, Dr. Denise Gobert 512-245-8351 – (dgobert@txstate.edu) or to Monica Gonzales, IRB Regulatory Manager 512-245-2314 - (meg201@txstate.edu). IRB approved application # 2018219 Page 2 of 3 Version # 1

DOCUMENTATION OF CONSENT

I have read this form and decided that my child will participate in the project described above. Its general purposes, the particulars of involvement and possible risks have been explained to my satisfaction. I will discuss this research study with my child and explain the procedures that will take place. I understand I can withdraw my child at any time.

Printed Name of Child _____

Printed Name of Parent/Guardian _____

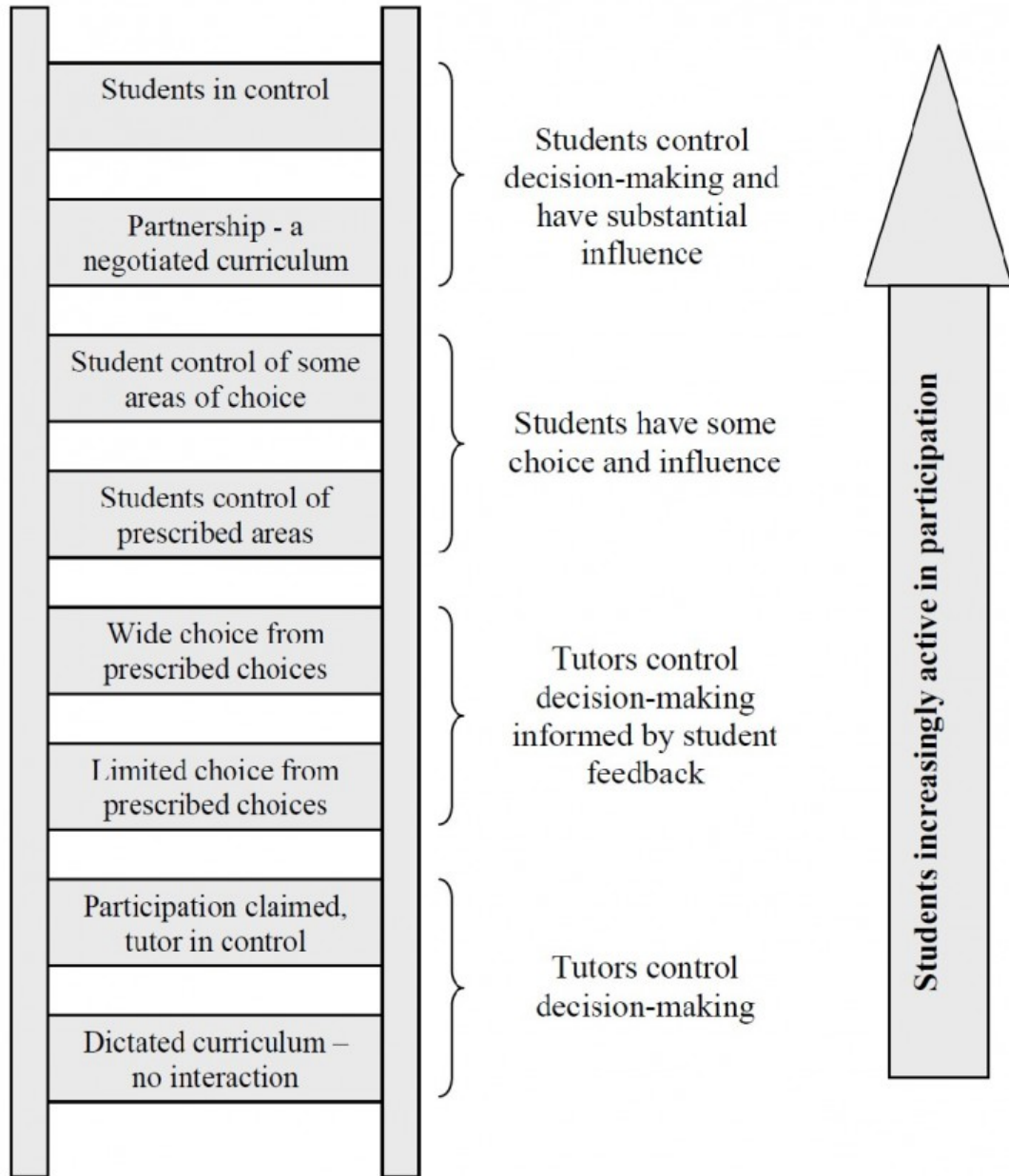
Signature of Person Obtaining Consent _____

Signature of Parent/Guardian _____

Date

APPENDIX H

LADDER OF STUDENT PARTICIPATION IN CURRICULUM DESIGN



(Bovill & Bulley, 2011)

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