

LEADERSHIP AND STUDENT VOICE AT ONE HIGH SCHOOL:
AN ACTION RESEARCH STUDY

By

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To the Faculty of Washington State University:

The members of the Committee appointed to examine the dissertation of Tammy L. Campbell find it satisfactory and recommend that it be accepted.

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Abstract

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The purpose of this action research study is to explore how student voice is expressed at one high school with a reputation for promoting meaningful voice and to identify the role the principal plays in promoting a culture of student voice. Questions guiding this study include (a) How does student voice live at the school? (b) What are the beliefs and actions of administrators, specifically the principal, in promoting voice at the school? (c) How can student voice be enhanced at the school, and, by extension, at other district high schools? This action research study relied on qualitative methods including focus group interviews for students and individual interviews and observations of teachers and administrators. Additionally, students participated in this study as co-researchers by collecting interview data from other students at the school. Data were analyzed collaboratively with the school's administrative team, which was comprised of the principal and principal assistant.

The students at the high school described a culture wherein student voice is promoted by staff who (a) signal they are listening to students, (b) know and care about students, (c) act on student insights with real changes in school practices and policy, and (d) ensure those changes

improve the school and student learning. The perceptions of students, teachers, and the administrators paint a picture of a principal who plays a significant role in creating a school culture for voice at the school. Students, teachers, and administrators describe a school culture wherein the principal and the administrative team have a vision for student voice. Acting on this vision, the principal and the administrative team model a “firstness” to students in an informal culture which is absent the typical power dynamics found between adults and students in many schools. The school principal encourages teacher use of student-centered instructional strategies to personalize learning, while decision making is shared between students and teachers in an environment of respect and kindness. School structures that support and enhance voice compliment these practices throughout the school.

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Dedication

This report is dedicated to the resilient and brilliant students who contributed their experiences and thinking during the research. Because of your courage to openly and honestly share your experiences in schools, both positive and negative ones, I can only hope that I got it right. To the teachers who provided a needed layer of detail about the culture of the school, thanks for lending your time. And, finally, to the administrative team at Sampson, especially Fred and Cindy, you taught me a lot about what it means to “serve” our students in the spirit of empowerment; your work and commitment to students is making a difference.

Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

At the 2005 National Governors' Conference, Bill Gates proclaimed, "Our high schools were designed fifty years ago to meet the needs of another age. Until we design them to meet the needs of this century, we will keep limiting—even ruining—the lives of millions of Americans every year" (Murray, 2005, p. 1). While not an education scholar, Gates's comments reflect the concerns of many educators, policymakers, and scholars regarding the effectiveness of high schools in the United States. In fact, the Governors' Conference at which Gates spoke was convened specifically to discuss how to initiate change to improve high schools.

National educational statistics (Ed Trust, 2006) support the argument that high schools are failing students, particularly low-income or minority children. According to data from the Education Trust, the United States currently ranks 16th among 20 developed nations in the percentage of students who complete high school and 14th among the top 20 in college graduation rates, with one out of three high school students dropping out before graduation. Data from the Social Organization of Schools Project at Johns Hopkins University states that in 2001, "there were 1000 high schools across the United States that promoted fewer than 50% of their students to 12th grade on time" (Tirozzi, 2005, p. 8). Just 18 of 100 students entering high school go on to complete their college degree within six years of starting college, and in 2006 the Ed Trust stated that the nation has slipped from first to fifth internationally in the percentage of young people who hold a college degree. The national statistics are even worse

for students of color—nearly half do not graduate from high school on time. Of 100 white kindergartners, 78 will graduate from high school, while only 50 of 100 African American and 30 of 100 Native American students will graduate (Ed Trust, 2006). Further high school data reveals a widening of the achievement gap for students of color and the underrepresentation of these same students in advanced classes, while being overrepresented in special education and school discipline. According to a leading expert on high school reform, Pedro Noguera (2004), many high schools are plagued by violence, poor attendance, low teacher morale and low achievement. Although these problems are not limited to high schools, evidence suggests that they are more common there. Improving the quality of high schools in the United States is critically important, “not only to the futures of the students who attend them, but also for the future prosperity and quality of life of cities and for the nation as a whole” [National Research Council Institute of Medicine, (NRCIM), 2004, p. 3].

How should high schools be reformed? What are the strategies that will improve achievement for all students? What makes a good school? How can students of color be served more successfully in high school? According to Joselowsky (as cited in NRCIM, 2004), if we pose these questions to policymakers, principals, teachers, and students, we are likely to get very different answers. If you were to ask students what makes them want to go to school and learn, Joselowsky asserts you would shift the focus away from the test scores and accountability measures that policymakers and educators advocate for in school reform to the interests of students including issues of social justice, relevant instruction, and belonging. Joselowsky (2007) makes the point that educators “must recognize that improving learning in high school

requires student engagement and voice—both in the learning process and the school reform process” (p. 258).

Past reform efforts have predominately involved school staff, administrators, and teachers in analyzing the issues in high schools and in proposing school improvement efforts. One important voice, that of the student, has been relatively absent from the school improvement process. According to Holcomb (2007), “Students are most intimately involved, aware, affected, and least integrated in the school improvement process” (p. 13). Despite the immediacy of their experience, the thoughts and insights of high school students regarding their experiences and their ideas for school improvement have not been systematically sought (Comfort, Giorgi, & Moody, 1997; Cook-Sather, 2002; Mitra, 2004; Levin, 1994; Rudduck & Flutter, 2000).

Emerging research in the field of high school reform suggests that until schools listen to the voices of their students, educators and policymakers will continue to engage in school improvement efforts with little or no positive results (Cook-Sather, 2002). Schor (as cited in Johnston & Nicholls, 1995) asserts that, “Students will resist any process that disempowers them . . . familiar school routines, teacher talk, passive instruction, and the exclusion of student co-participation in curriculum design and governance” (p. 94). Cushman (2003) challenges us to listen to students because they can serve as informants and “advocates” to educators on what works and what does not work in schools. Levin (1994) tells us that since students are the “producers” of school outcomes, it stands to reason they should be involved at a fundamental level of improvement efforts. While Delpit (1995) asserts listening to students allows them to teach their teachers how to teach them.

What is clear is that the solutions that educators, policymakers, and researchers have generated have not fundamentally reformed high schools so that most, if not all, students

experience success (Noguera, 2004; Holcomb, 2007; Ed Trust, 2006; NRCIM, 2004). Various studies have found that many high schools have yet to engage their students or provide them with the kind of social environment that fosters healthy psychosocial development and is conducive to learning (McNeely et al., 2002; Finn & Rock, 1997; Jessor et al., 1998; National Research Council, as cited in NRCIM 2004). Could it be that the solutions to improving high schools so all students experience success, especially students of poverty, students of color, and other underperforming groups, lie right within the walls of school...in the minds and hearts of the students? What is concerning is that as the number of culturally and linguistically diverse students who struggle in school increases, the discussion on school reform for these students continues to include only the perspectives of predominately white and middle class teachers, school administrators, university researchers, policymakers, and politicians. In his research on African American students' perceptions of effective teaching, Howard (2001) recalled a student who said, "We never get to tell our side of the story" (p. 132). Howard goes on to press educators to acknowledge the shortcomings of misguided interventions and solutions that have resulted from not including these students in the discussion about how to reform schools.

Research, to date, on student voice is limited, yet it is beginning to emerge. The few studies that exist focus on the value and benefit of student voice in terms of empowerment and informing instruction (Mitra, 2004). However, there is little or no research on how school leaders create the conditions for student voice to thrive within school settings. What are the explicit and tacit understandings and actions of school leaders who try to foster meaningful student voice initiatives in their schools? Identifying and naming the actions and beliefs of school administrators who have successfully cultivated student voice would further the efforts of

schools and districts who want to intentionally build student voice structures and practices within schools.

This report details an action research study that examines the role of high school administrators in promoting student voice.

Action Research

With the increased political pressures of education reform, including the need for schools to continually improve through the use of research-based best practices, action research with its goal of “generating local knowledge back into the setting” (Herr & Anderson, 2005, p. xv) is promising to educators.

What is action research? Herr and Anderson (2005) describe it as “inquiry that is done by or with insiders to an organization or community, but never to or on them” (p. 3), while Stringer (2007) states, “Action research is a systematic approach to investigation that enables people to find effective solutions to problems they confront in their everyday lives” (p. 1). Another expert in the field of action research, McKernan (as cited in Herr & Anderson, 2005) defines it as “a form of self-reflective problem solving which enables practitioners to better understand and solve pressing problems in social settings” (p. 4). Mills (as cited in Nolen & Putten, 2007) states, “Action research is any systematic inquiry conducted by teachers, administrators, counselors, or others with a vested interest in the teaching and learning process for the purpose of gathering data about how particular schools operate . . .” (p. 401).

“If you want to truly understand something, then try and change it” is how Kurt Lewin, considered the father of action research frames this form of inquiry (as cited in Neill, 2004, ¶ 2). Lewin believed that knowledge should be created from problem solving in real-life situations.

While Lewin is credited with introducing the action research spiral of fact-finding, planning, taking the first action step, evaluating, amending the plan, and trying another action, revolutionary thinkers like Paulo Freire and W.E. Deming also promoted a cycle of inquiry involving plan-act-observe-reflect (Herr & Anderson, 2005). However, Stephen Corey is credited with first introducing action research as methodology in educational research (Nolen & Putten, 2007). Educators view action research as a bridge between academic research and the day-to-day problems of practice that face students and practitioners.

Action research is grounded in “qualitative research paradigms whose purpose is to gain greater clarity and understanding of a question, problem, or issue” (Stringer, 2007, p. 19). Unlike quantitative approaches focused on *what* things are happening, action research concentrates on *how* things are happening. This understanding of how things are happening is gained through focusing on the lived experiences of the stakeholders, their interpretation of acts and activities, and by incorporating the meaning people make of the events in their lives (Stringer, 2007). Where quantitative research is concerned with generalizability, action research is grounded in the knowledge that “generalized solutions may not fit particular contexts or groups of people” (Stringer, 2007, p. 5).

Action research is undergirded by a certain set of social values that assume a democratic context. According to Stringer (2007), this is especially true of community-based action research which originates with an interest in the problems of a group, a community, or organization. Community-based action research suggests inquiry with the characteristics of being democratic, equitable, liberating, and enhancing (Stringer, 2007).

What is unique about action research is that the locus of control shifts from the researcher to participants and the researcher becomes more facilitative and less directive (Herr & Anderson,

2005; Stringer, 2007). The researcher in action research is constantly mindful of principles that focus on maintaining relationships, using effective communication, enabling full participation of stakeholders, and ensuring inclusion of all relevant members.

Finally, whether ascribing to the cycle of inquiry proposed by Lewin or the cycle of “Look, Think, and Act” proposed by Stringer (2007), action research is a systematic inquiry by stakeholders that is deemed successful only if the proposed solutions solve the proposed problem. Values of equity, democracy, and sustainable relationships are foundational to action research to ensure collaborative exploration that helps practitioners develop more complex understanding of local problems and possible solutions (Stringer, 2007).

Methods in this study were guided by the “Look, Think, and Act” cycle proposed by Stringer. In Stringer’s model, the first phase of the research, entitled “Look” is characterized by working to gather relevant information that builds a picture of how things are happening. The second phase of the research is called “Think” and involves exploring and analyzing the data to better understand how and why things are happening. The final phase of the action research cycle in Stringer’s model is the “Act” phase in which stakeholders move forward with plans to implement actions and recommendations from the “Think” phase. These phases are not linear and, once action has been taken, stakeholders will review, reflect and modify their actions as they continually seek to refine and enhance solutions. Both within and across each phase, collaboration with the stakeholders is essential.

When examining student voice in high schools, the current context in schools is heavily weighted toward privileging the voices of educators and policymakers. If students are to really have their insights and ideas honored as a practice in most schools, it will require new thinking and research in the area of student voice, thereby requiring the use of a methodology that

challenges the status quo. According to Argyris, action research, with its focus on problem-solving, allows the researcher to confront and to help change the routines, skills, norms, and values of an organization (as cited in Herr & Anderson, 2005). Given these considerations, an action research approach was chosen for this study.

The Study

This report details an action research study that explored the phenomenon of student voice in one alternative high school with a reputation for meaningful student voice. The role of school administrators, specifically the principal, in promoting voice was also analyzed. As an action research approach, the study also sought to generate recommendations useful to the district in building administrator capacity in promoting student voice at each high school. In keeping with action research principles involving confidentiality, the school that was the focus of this study will be referred to as Sampson High School (a pseudonym). Research questions guiding the study were: (a) How does student voice live at Sampson High School? (b) What are the beliefs and actions of administrators, specifically the principal, in promoting voice at the school? (c) How can student voice be enhanced at Sampson and, by extension, to other high schools in the district? Based on the findings of the study, conclusions and recommendations were developed based on administrator practices that supported student voice at Sampson. It is hoped these findings will be integrated as strategies into the district strategic plan.

This study took place in a large urban district of 29,000 students in the state of Washington, where I am an Executive Director of Teaching and Learning Services with supervisory responsibility for 11 elementary schools and 2 middle schools. The district is comprised of over 50 schools, including 5 comprehensive high schools with enrollments ranging

from 1600 to 2200 students, 1 alternative high school with an enrollment of 435 students, 6 middle schools, and 34 elementary schools. The district has a highly mobile population with an average of 30-40% mobility and 42% receiving free and reduced priced meals. One in five students in the district is a student of color. White students make up 80% of student enrollment, with the 20% of students of color enrollment comprised of 5.5% multi-racial, 4.4% African American, 2.4% Asian, 3.9% Native American, and 3.8% Hispanic.

District student achievement data for 2007 in Reading reveals that on the Grade 4 Washington Assessment of Student Learning (WASL), the achievement gap is almost non-existent, as the disaggregated scores of African American, Asian, Hispanic, Native American, and white students are all 80% or better. However, high school data are significantly different, with the gap in achievement between students of color and their white and Asian counterparts widening considerably. On the Reading Grade 10 WASL, 80% of white students and 80% of Asian students met standard, compared to 58% for African American, 69% Hispanic, and 59% for Native American students. Overall graduation rates are also indicative of the challenges at the high school in terms of successfully educating all students regardless of race or class. Consider the 2007 data that shows graduation rates at 63% for white high school seniors, 40% for African Americans, and less than 30% for Native American students. The data reveals that high schools have work to do in educating all students, and this is especially true for students of color.

Because of a persistent achievement gap for students of color in the district's high schools, and to a lesser degree for students of poverty of all races, the district has focused in recent years on issues of social justice, cultural competency and personalization. Additionally, in the fall of 2006 and spring of 2007, district and building leaders began listening to high school students

during district-level forums featuring student focus groups. Students participating in these focus groups were selectively recruited to include a racially and culturally diverse group of students from varying economic backgrounds. As a result of these student focus groups, in which students described what worked and what didn't work in their school experience, district administrators began reflecting and posing the question "Why don't we listen to students more often?"

Another result of district leaders listening to student voice was revisions in the strategic plan and a more explicit focus on personalization at the high school. District leaders, informed by Hargreaves' work (2003), defined personalization as "designing every aspect of teaching and learning around the student needs and interest" (§ 6). Reflecting on their experience with student focus groups, district leaders identified student voice as a critical strategy for teachers and administrators to gain access to student needs and interests.

This action research study grew out of, and is a part of, district and building administrators' inquiry into how to foster student voice at both the school and at the district level.

In an earlier study in which I interviewed all high school principals in the district (Campbell, 2007), I explored if, and how, student voice is expressed at the high schools across the district. The findings of this pilot study revealed traditional, formal structures for student participation like Associated Student Body groups, student leadership groups, and individual student leadership opportunities that were focused on social events and which involved a relatively small group of students. However, out of that research, I identified an alternative high school site where there was a concentration of student voice initiatives which could be described as "representativeness" (Mitra, 2004.) Mitra, a prominent researcher in the area of student voice, defines representativeness as multiple examples of meaningful student voice efforts within

a school that improve student learning. Thus, the site chosen for this study is the alternative high school which has a reputation within the district for having an administrative team that promotes student voice throughout the school. Sampson High School, (a pseudonym) has an enrollment of 435 students, many of whom have dropped out of one of the five comprehensive high schools in the district. The student body is the most racially diverse of all the high schools in the district.

This report covers the “Look” and “Think” phases of the action research cycle, with the understanding that the recommendations generated from the research will serve as the basis for the “Act” phase. This action research study relied on qualitative methods including focus groups, individual interviews and observations with students, teachers and administrators. Additionally, students participated in this study as co-researchers, collecting interview data from other students at the school.

Positionality

Assumptions that undergird action research include paying close attention to the positionality of the researcher to fully attend to power dynamics. Herr and Anderson (2005) state that action research is “inquiry that is done by or with insiders to an organization or community, but never to or on them” (p. 3). Stringer (2007) suggests that action research has a “ ‘bottom-up’ orientation that uses stakeholder groups as the primary focus . . . and requires the researcher to use a flat organizational structure that puts decisions in the hands of stakeholders” (p. 25).

Because of my role in the district as an Executive Director of Teaching and Learning, responsible for learning improvement at 11 elementary schools and 2 middle schools, as well as the supervision of principals, my use of action research methods presented issues related to

power dynamics. From the vantage point of the adults in the study, the understanding and acknowledgement of the power dynamics of my position in the organization cannot be overlooked and was an important consideration as I sought to ensure the autonomy of participants. Although I selected a school for the study that is outside of my direct supervision, all the administrators were aware of my role as an Executive Director. As a result, the potential still existed for principals to view my role as a central office administrator in a hierarchal manner and guard what they were willing to say to me, and/or even feel coerced in their participation.

To address these issues, we scheduled several meetings during the study so administrators and other stakeholders could constantly be updated on the study and be provided feedback on how the study was progressing. This allowed stakeholders to revisit and reflect on how they wanted to participate. Also, district meetings on school improvement at the high school level have focused on strategies to incorporate the voices of students as a personalization strategy. Since this issue is relevant and “owned” by high school principals, I felt it was more likely they would be motivated to invest in this research on student voice and not feel coerced to participate.

Maintaining confidentiality in this action research study posed a real dilemma. On the one hand, principals from the study and administrators across the district were aware of the study and made reference to it in meetings because of the potential for new learning in regard to student voice. On the other hand, as a researcher, I did not discuss the details of the study to protect the identity and insights of the participants. In our planning meeting, I asked the administrators how they wanted to handle issues of confidentiality in terms of discussing the study outside of the school. They all expressed a desire to communicate openly with the other high school principals in the district, wanting to indicate that they were involved in action research for the purpose of

enhancing student voice at all high schools, because it is work that has shared meaning and relevance for all administrators.

Another aspect of my positionality in this study is my personal interest as a mother of two African American high school students whom I believe would have benefited from some of the student voice initiatives I have read about. After listening to the voices of my own children, I have felt frustrated and helpless in hearing their stories of poor instruction and the dominance of “whiteness” in both the written and taught curriculum in schools that has no relevance to their lived experiences. Why weren’t their points of view known and integrated into their learning and the learning of the students in their classrooms? Additionally, I was particularly moved in my capacity as a member of the district leadership team that listened to the narratives of a dozen high school students who shared their school experiences, both positive and negative, with many of those experiences being negative ones. As a researcher with limited experience in the use of student voice, I had to constantly check my assumptions and beliefs about the benefits of student voice.

My views as a researcher are shaped by my lived experiences and, as a result, I view the world through both feminist and ethnic interpretive paradigms. According to Denzin and Lincoln (2008), researchers who operate with these orientations believe the “real world makes a material difference in terms of race, class, and gender. In addition, criteria like emotionality, feeling, caring, personal accountability, and dialogue may be applied when making meaning” (p. 33). Denzin and Lincoln suggest that, “any gaze is always filtered through the lens of language, gender, social class, race, and ethnicity” (2008, p. 29). My experience as an African American, growing up in the segregated South, where my voice and the voices of my family and larger community were politically and socially muted, significantly influences my “gaze” as I seek to

hear the voices of the oppressed, invisible, and the marginalized. Growing up in rural Louisiana, I witnessed and lived experiences of oppression, marginalization, bias, and segregation that I never read about, saw on television, or observed in any research journal or empirical study. However, I know my experience was real. As a result, I have a strong desire to listen to students, to learn of the experiences they live in their schools that are not recorded in journals, books, or the literature, but are no less valid or meaningful.

Research Ethics

Designing action research studies raises complex ethical issues that are not present in more traditional research (Stringer, 2007; Nolen & Putten, 2007). Since action research is carried out in real-world circumstances, and involves close and open communication among the people involved, the researchers must pay close attention to ethical considerations in the conduct of their work (Nolen & Putten, 2007). In this particular study, the following aspects of action research are important to consider when designing and engaging in research: (a) informed consent, (b) protecting the confidentiality of participants, and (c) autonomy of participants.

Informed consent is essential to ensuring respect for stakeholders in the planning and execution of action research (Stringer, 2007; Herr & Anderson, 2005; Nolen & Putten, 2007). This means clearly detailing the purpose of the study and the nature of the risk to participants. Stakeholders were collaborators in defining the purpose of this study, and they were continually involved in all phases of the action research cycle. As part of this continual planning, both student and adult participants were reminded that they could participate on any level at which they were comfortable.

Confidentiality in action research is a very tricky proposition when the research is conducted collaboratively by insiders and is not under the sole control of a single researcher. The necessity of dialogue to engage in reflection with participants about the research presents unique challenges in maintaining participant confidentiality. In this particular study, where both the district and other high schools were interested in the findings, the research was done at a high school that is easily identifiable by the demographic data. Stakeholders in the high school made public their participation in the study. However, because at the student level this study relies on the experiences and insights of students, real care was taken to ensure confidentiality of the stories students shared in the focus groups.

From the vantage point of students, the ethical issue of adult-student power dynamics in an interview structure raised concern for autonomy of participants. As a result, in consultation and collaboration with the stakeholders at the school, the strategy of student focus groups was used to provide a safer environment for students to share their thoughts. Steward, Shamdasani and Rook (2007) assert that from an ethical standpoint, focus groups provide specific benefit to youth and student participants in that they foster security in an interview-interviewee situation, without “fear of having to defend your views or feeling like you are alone in your views” (p. 42). Also, students may be more likely to be candid in focus groups because the focus is not on them as individuals, but on the group (Steward et al., 2007). During the actual focus group interviews, I was the only adult present to allow students to speak freely about their experiences with student voice at this school. Students were reminded they could participate at whatever level they were comfortable with, or not at all.

Along with the ethical challenges of action research, come benefits that enhance the ethical standing of a study, since the problem of high school failure is all too common, with few

models of success at either the local or national level. Action research, as a methodology, makes sense from an ethical standpoint for this study because the status quo of listening to educators and policymakers is normed in education. One of the principles of action research is to confront the status quo to facilitate transformative change (Argyris as cited in Herr & Anderson, 2005).

Organization of the Report

Chapter 1 of this report provides background information that contextualizes the study and the accompanying research questions. In Chapter 2, I present a review of the literature in three major areas: (a) student voice, (b) engagement, and (c) the role of the principal in shaping school culture. A detailed report describing the setting and the methods used in this action research study follows in Chapter 3, along with the results of the data analysis. Although this report describes the “Look” and “Think” phases, in Chapter 4 I detail the conclusions of the study with the implications for the school and other high schools in the district. Because this is action research, the focus on “action” is essential, and Chapter 4 includes recommendations in anticipation of the “Act” phase for Sampson High School and high schools across the district.

Chapter 2

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The context for this action research study is represented by three strands of literature related to student engagement, student voice and the role of principals in influencing school culture. Related to these strands of literature, the following topics are explored in this review: (a) the role of student engagement in learning, (b) student voice and its role in promoting student engagement, (c) student voice initiatives, (d) the role of the principal in building a culture for student voice, and (e) research studies on student voice.

Role of Student Engagement in Learning

In the literature, the concept of engagement is inexorably linked to learning. The National Research Council Institute of Medicine (NRCIM) defines student engagement as the motivation to learn. Participation in school activities and the student's identification with school is how Morse, Christenson, and Lehr (2004) define student engagement. Morse et al., 2004 assert that "... increased engagement in learning has consistently been linked to reduced dropout rates and increased levels of school success" (p. 1). According to the NRCIM (2004), learning and succeeding in school requires active engagement, regardless of the student's economic status, race, gender, or language. Beaudoin (2005) maintains that student engagement is the linchpin of great schooling. Engagement is associated with positive academic outcomes, including achievement and persistence in school. Dewey (as cited in NRCIM, 2004) makes the point that students want to live out the belief that learning is a relational event by having genuine, interesting, and collaborative relationships with their peers and teachers. The current thinking in

educational research is that lasting high school reform rests on schools that foster the intrinsic motivation of students to participate in the learning process, whereby students engage in learning “for its own sake, for the enjoyment it provides, the learning it permits, or the feeling of accomplishment it evokes” (Lepper, 1988, p. 21). Finally, Fullan (2007) declares “all successful education ends up engaging the hearts and mind of students” (p. 171).

When considering the failure of high schools to engage more students, researchers point to the fact that when students first enter school, they are highly engaged in their learning, but as they progress through elementary, middle, and high school, this engagement is diminished and, in some cases, destroyed (Bowman, 2007). One of the biggest challenges in high school reform has been the large number of students who teachers and administrators describe as “disengaged.” “While different students begin their disengagement from school for different reasons,” Jansoz (as cited in Belfanz et al., 2006) explains “there are two clear paths that emerge—one rooted primarily in academic struggle and failure, and another grounded more in behavioral responses to the school environment” (p. 7). Although engagement is important for all students and all schools, “the consequences of disengagement vary substantially across economic levels and racial groups” (NRCIM, 2004, p. 1). In fact, the NRCIM maintains that the cost of disengagement for advantaged students is not as devastating as for students in poverty, because advantaged students usually get second chances and eventually graduate, while poor students are less likely to graduate. As a result, poor students who struggle in school have substantially fewer opportunities for success beyond high school.

What strategies are associated with increased engagement? There has been much written on how schools foster and increase student engagement. Sampson and Blumenfield (as cited in the NRCIM, 2004) maintain that important antecedents of engagement are student

participation in school, policies and practices that promote shared decision-making among staff and students on all school related issues, and opportunities for staff and students to be involved in cooperative endeavors. These are critical school-level practices that promote student engagement. Erickson contends that, “effective learning in the classroom depends on the teacher’s ability . . . to maintain the interest that brought students to the course in the first place” (as cited in Davis, 1999, p. 3). To increase student engagement, Davis (1999) asserts that educators must help students feel that they are valued members of a learning community and that they are active participants in learning. In doing so, educators engage students in the core work of teaching and learning, and ask students to describe what makes classrooms more or less motivating (Sass, 1989). Ames and Ames (as cited in Davis, 1999) stress the importance of letting students have voice in choosing what will be studied. According to the NRCIM (2004), increasing engagement is unlikely to be accomplished through simple policy prescriptions such as raising standards, accountability, or increasing school funding, because the fundamental challenge is to create a set of circumstances where schools address student needs for safety, belonging, respect, power, and accomplishment. Schools do this by establishing caring, collaborative relationships between students and adults and by providing students with opportunities to participate and contribute in every aspect of schooling. Zelman, Daniels, and Hyde (1998) state that all the authoritative voices in education are “calling for schools that are student-centered, active, experiential, democratic, and collaborative” (p. viii). By giving students a measure of control over their environment and meaningful choices in the learning process, we increase student engagement and participation in learning (Lepper & Hodell 1989). These efforts can help students achieve a stronger sense of responsibility for their own learning.

One approach in the literature toward enhancing student engagement is to increase opportunities for “student voice” in schools.

Student Voice

What is student voice and what are the benefits of using student voice in contemporary schools? Traditionally, the ideas and insights of children were seen as having less value than those of the adults in the school. Students were at school to be taught by the adults, and all of the exchange of knowledge was one-directional, going from the adult to the student. Views about students and their place in today’s schools have gradually evolved, and according to Manefied et al., (2007) there is an emergence of new thinking that legitimizes and elevates the voices of students.

In the literature, “student voice” is represented by various terms, including youth engagement, youth voice, youth involvement, youth agency, youth participation, and personalization. Fletcher (2003) defines student voice as the “unique perspectives of young people in schools working in partnerships with adults to plan, teach, evaluate, and lead schools” (p. 4). Holdsworth (1996) elaborates that student voice “signals having a legitimate perspective and opinion, being present and taking part, and/or having a role in decisions about and implementation of educational policies and practices” (p. 355). “Voice is ‘not simply’ about the opportunity to communicate ideas and opinions; it is about having the power to influence change” says West (as cited in Manefield et al., 2007) in describing student voice. In all of these definitions what becomes evident is, in this new paradigm of voice, students’ participation is much more than tokenism or superficial involvement; it requires real partnerships between adults and students aimed at improving schools from the students’ perspective.

Student voice is “a liberating force for student engagement,” articulates Beaudoin (2005, p. 1). He further details how student voice provides a means to both actively engage and empower students while accessing student interest and needs in environments that are student-centered and democratic. Student voice initiatives hold promise for students as a means to foster student buy-in, interest, active participation and, by extension, student learning. Motivating and engaging students requires educators to treat students with respect and to take their ideas and interests seriously, while providing them with influence over what they are learning and how they are learning it (Levin, 1994). “Being able to talk about learning and teaching, and being taken seriously, helps students develop a stronger sense of self-worth and connect to the purpose of the school” (Rudduck, 2004, p. 1). Beaudoin (2005) states, “By elevating student voice to its rightful status, we can change the way students view their learning, themselves, and school . . . which can lead to greater achievement” (p. 5). Perhaps Holcomb (2007) puts it best:

There are answers to high school reform and students can help us find them. Students can be visionaries, advocates, and change agents when given the permission, the expectation, and some guidance. It is not so much whether students have the courage to face the challenges as it is whether we have the courage to hear their voices and let their energy pull us to think outside the boxes of our experiences and training. Perhaps we have run out of creativity or hope. Perhaps, instead of feeling that we must instill those characteristics into students, we can draw theirs out and be revitalized in the process.

(p. 8)

Finally, Levin (as cited in Pekrul & Levin, 2007), a leading expert in the area of student voice, makes five arguments for why schools must see student voice as an essential strategy in school reform:

1. Effective implementation of change requires participation by and buy-in from all those involved; students, no less than teachers.
2. Students have unique knowledge and perspectives that can make reform efforts more successful and improve their implementation.
3. Students' views can help mobilize staff and parent opinion in favor of meaningful reform.
4. Constructivist learning, which is increasingly important to high standards, requires a more active student role in schooling.
5. Students are the producers of school outcomes, so their involvement is fundamental to all improvement. (p. 712)

Student Voice Initiatives

At present, student-voice initiatives have not found their way into most schools. Fullan (2007) conveys that “While research in the 1980’s began to look at students as active participants in their own education . . . too little has actually happened to enhance the role of students as members of the schools as an organization” (p. 170). He goes on to say, “little progress has been made . . . in treating students as serious members of the school” (p. 171). Student voice initiatives range from the most basic level to sophisticated approaches, and “At the most basic level, young people share their opinions of problems and potential solutions through student councils or in focus groups . . . at the more sophisticated level, students share their insights by collaborating with adults to actually improve education outcomes” (Mitra as cited in Manefield et al., 2007, p. 5). Too often student participation in schools is at a very superficial level in which a few students are members of the Associated Student Body (ASB), on leadership councils, or on social committees in school. This level of student involvement is seen by some

as “student-voice.” However, there is research in this area that describes both meaningful student voice and those efforts that involve students that are more manipulative.

Numerous initiatives for promoting student voice have been offered and evaluated in the literature. Noted researchers in the field have constructed frameworks for understanding these initiatives and criteria for evaluating them. Fielding (2001), a leading theorist in the area of student voice, insists that if we are to move from “faddism” or manipulative incorporation of student voice structures to a more transformative set of practices, we must evaluate student voice through the filter of three questions: (a) Who gets heard in the school? (b) What are they allowed to speak about? and (c) Who is listening? In thinking about the first question regarding who gets heard in the school, Fielding (2001) makes the case that “all voices of students are not treated the same” (p. 101). For example, in many cases, middle-class girls are more willing to speak than other groups, partly because they feel more at ease with how teachers speak about students. Fielding goes on to say that when schools have multiple venues for all students to have voice throughout a school, not just those who are middle-class and successful, schools are likely to be engaging voice more effectively.

Topics upon which students are allowed to speak are frequently relegated to those that are restricted by the adults in a school, like dances, school trips, or social events. Issues of teaching and learning remain largely forbidden areas of inquiry or dialogue between students and teachers (Fielding, 2001). When teachers and students engage authentically on matters of learning and teaching, student voice can yield powerful gains in school improvement. Related to this question is the idea of what language is encouraged or even allowed for students to have voice. Fielding (2002) and Mitra (2004) maintain that how students speak, the words they use, and what they are allowed to speak about may limit the voices of some students who don’t use the language of the

adults of the school. Students will tire of expressing concerns or not share them at all if they have to speak in a style that is foreign to them on topics that they do not care about. By requiring students to use formal language, schools will limit the expression of voice for many students.

Probably one of the most critical questions that Fielding (2001) poses is: Who is listening? When schools engage student voice, it is vital that students are speaking with those who hold the power to act upon their insights. Timing is also essential, in that students should be engaged so they can participate in the decision and not just represent a superficial step in the process of decisions that have already been made.

Fielding's (2001) questions provide an important filter for school leaders who seek to promote meaningful voice practices in their schools. Because student voice is still relatively non-existent in contemporary schools (Joselowsky, 2007), voice initiatives in many schools merely amplify practices that marginalize some students, while valuing students from middle and upper class families. Fielding presses schools to reflect upon who is listening when students speak. To judge whether student voice initiatives are positioned to foster real change, schools need to ensure that those listening to students are willing and able to act on the insights and ideas of the students.

Another expert in the field, Fletcher (2004), provides a framework for schools to use to evaluate their student voice initiatives. Building on the work of Hart (as cited in Fletcher, 2004), Fletcher presents a "Ladder of Student Involvement in Schools" that is comprised of eight levels of student participation. He asserts that schools can map their student-voice initiatives on the ladder to assess their use of meaningful student-voice initiatives. On the first three "rungs" of the ladder, Fletcher illustrates the superficial expression of student voice by describing degrees of non-participation that include (a) manipulation; (b) decoration; and (c) tokenism. On the

upper rungs of Fletcher's ladder are levels of student participation that can serve as a model for how to enter into the more productive and authentic aspect of student voice. These five rungs are described in terms of "degrees of participation." They detail meaningful student voice initiatives and include (d) informed and assigned action; (e) consulted and informed; (f) adult-initiated, shared decision making; (g) student-initiated and directed; and (h) student-initiated, shared decisions with teachers. Using Fletcher's ladder as a filter, it is helpful to identify examples of student voice initiatives and analyze where they fit on the continuum as either meaningful or superficial illustrations of student participation. On the first few rungs of Fletcher's ladder, the initiatives are characterized as token participation by students in which the students appear to be given voice, but they actually have little or no choice about what and how they participate. Fletcher identifies examples of activities in this category, including membership in leadership classes, the Associated Student Body (ASB), school board, or school social committees. Moving along the continuum to more meaningful student voice efforts are those initiatives on the middle rungs characterized as students informed with shared decision-making. Examples of student voice efforts in this category are full membership on school improvement committees, students teaching while teachers observe, student publications, or students planning the design of a high school. Finally, efforts like student-led action research round out the top rung of the ladder and represent the more transformative student voice practices.

Ultimately, the success of any student voice initiative is measured by its ability to affect positive changes. Fielding and Holdsworth (as cited in Manefield et al., 2007) point to the "importance of linking student voice with action, arguing that authentic voice is not just to provide data for others to make decisions, but should encourage young people's active participation in shared decision making" (p. 3). West (as cited in Manefield et al., 2007)

suggests that “Voice is not simply about the opportunity to communicate ideas and opinions; it is about having the power to influence change” (p. 5).

The literature on student voice reveals multiple benefits for students in terms of empowerment, increased engagement, and the potential to improve teaching and learning. Fullan (2007) recently made a call to educators in which he stated, “Unless they [students] have some meaningful role in the enterprise, most educational change, indeed most education, will fail” (p. 170).

The Role of the Principal in Promoting a Culture for Student Voice

What is culture? How is school culture defined? Alvy and Robbins (1995) describe culture as the “the inner reality that reflects what the school members care about, what they are willing to spend time doing, what they celebrate . . .” (p. 23). Deal and Kent (as cited in Easton, 2008) define it as the “underground flow of feelings and folkways wending its way within schools in the form of vision and values, beliefs and assumptions, rituals and ceremonies, history and stories, and physical symbols” (p. xxxiii). Stating that every school has a culture, Barth (2002) characterizes it as “the way we do things around here” (p. 8). Finally, Schein (2004), a leading expert on culture, describes culture as “a pattern of shared basic assumptions that are learned by a group . . . that has worked well enough to be considered valid and to be taught to new members” (p. 17).

The literature on school culture suggests that leadership matters and, more specifically, that the principal matters in shaping school culture. The most difficult and important job of principals is “changing the prevailing culture of a school . . . more than any other factor, the principal can provide forms of leadership that invite others to join as architects of the new

vision” (Barth as cited in Marriot, 2001, p. 75). Schein maintains that “the only thing of real importance that leaders do is to create and manage culture” (p. 11). Barth (2002) asserts that “a school’s culture has far more influence on life and learning in the schoolhouse than the state department of education, the superintendent, the school board . . .” (p. 7). Deal and Peterson (as cited in Alvy and Robbins, 1995) propose that “the principal shapes a culture through a variety of means . . . by reading the existing culture and then progressively moving to action or behaviors that ‘mold or reinforce desirable core values and norms’” (p. 37). In short, “leaders teach culture” (Schein, as cited in DiPaola & Hoy, 2008, p. 52).

In terms of student voice and the role principals play in creating a culture that supports this voice, research is beginning to emerge. Beaudoin (2005) emphasizes that in fostering a culture of student voice “the leader sets the tone” (p. 22). He goes on to say “Public school leaders can set a tone of openness, caring, empathy and mutual trust by how they behave” (p. 35). Easton (2008) makes the case for how leaders create space where student voice “lives” and states that one of the most important roles leaders play is removing the sense of hierarchy in schools so that teachers are willing to learn from students and become more willing to partner with students. Ultimately, “It is up to the principal to resist pressure from groups and invest in the entire membership, to demonstrate trust in students and teachers that they, together, continuously define the best direction for the school community” (*Education Digest*, 2005, p. 55). In 2005, Smith and Hewitt provided anecdotal stories that described practices that principals engaged in that foster student voice. The authors explain that, initially, students are wary that anything will come from sharing their point of view, so it is important for principals to build trust by dealing with “Level 1” issues (dress codes, dances, or other social issues). Other

important actions of administrators fostering student voice are to be out in the building and talking with students, teaching class periods, eating lunch with students, and being visible in halls. However, the role of the principal is the key variable in the success of any student initiative; without the unequivocal support of the principal, student voice can be a difficult endeavor (Neigel, 2006).

One of the few actual research studies that examine the principal's role in student voice initiatives was conducted by Mitra (2007). Using data gathered from an earlier study at Whitman High school in California, Mitra recoded her data with the new focus of the role of the administrator. She found that administrators can foster student voice within the context of school-wide learning communities by buffering student-voice initiatives from the administrative bureaucracy within the schools and by building bridges for students beyond school to intermediary organizations. A limitation of Mitra's study was the lack of specific detail about what administrators did to foster student voice. However, Mitra's study points to the need for more research in this area to help school and district leaders become aware of specific strategies that foster student voice. Overwhelmingly, most student voice research is focused on the benefits to students and teaching and learning, but there is a growing need to understand how administrators create the conditions for student voice to exist in meaningful ways. As it now stands, with the limited research on student voice, there is even less on how administrators foster it. What is surfacing is the importance of the principal and other school leaders in creating an environment for student voice.

Research Studies on Student Voice

According to Lee and Zimmerman (N.D.), research studies on student voice fall into one of three categories: (a) passive studies in which researchers listen to students as information sources, (b) active studies in which students are participants and collaborate with the researcher, and (c) directive studies in which the student is the designer. In reviewing the few research studies that have been conducted on student voice, most fall into the passive category, with students as information sources to the researcher.

There have been several “passive” studies (Lee & Zimmerman, N.D.) in which the researcher listened to students. For example, in Mitra’s 2004 qualitative study of Whitman High School, which serves families who rarely have had voice in schools in the United States, Mitra explored how student voice activities influence the youth who participate in them. At Whitman, half of the students are English language learners and half qualify for free and reduced priced meals, with only 55% graduating from high school. During the time of the study, two student voice groups existed at the school, Pupil School Collaborative (PSC) and Student Forum. The two groups worked separately, and using qualitative methods, Mitra focused on a between-group comparison. She conducted over 70 interviews with all the students and adults participating in the groups and also with adults and students who did not participate. Mitra found that youth who participated in efforts to increase student voice showed an increase in personal and social assets that are necessary for students to succeed in society (Mitra, 2004).

In another study characterized by passive participation of students, Mitra (2006) listened to students as she researched 13 student-voice initiatives in Northern California to examine the ways students and adults collaborate on issues of equity and social justice. Conducting

interviews of both adults and students, Mitra found that when youth share in leading efforts to address social justice issues, they bring a renewed passion and attention to the process that adults alone can't do.

In another example of a passive study, Shields (1999) listened to students and teachers at a predominantly Navaho high school. The purpose of this study was to examine the challenges facing school communities when many of the attendees are students of color, while white educators rely solely on their own background experiences to understand the identity, representation, and culture of the students they serve. Working in collaboration with the school principal and a teacher, the researcher interviewed 217 out of 232 students. In addition, 17 of the 20 teachers at the school participated in a survey. The findings revealed a real disconnect between teacher perceptions and student experiences, with students describing themselves quite differently from the ways in which teachers described them. Shields asked how teachers can meet the needs of students when they have limited knowledge about these students and are influenced by stereotypes and myths about a particular cultural group. Faced with the voices of these students, teachers had to reflect on their classroom practices and reexamine their explanations as to why students appeared unsuccessful academically.

Hatchman and Rolland, in a 2001 study involving passive participation of students, listened to the voices of those students as they depicted what worked for them on issues related to improving their learning and the implications for school reform. The researchers facilitated 27 individual student interviews and led several focus groups for a total of 68 participants ranging from fourth grade to twelfth grade. Students were enrolled in Hayward Unified School District in Hayward, California. They were from varying academic achievement levels, racial, and

gender groups. The students in the study had a lot to say, but most prominent in their responses was the need to connect with a caring adult, to have personal attention with clear explanations and interesting activities, and to be treated fairly. By listening to students in this study, the researchers surfaced implications for the school, classroom, and instruction.

In 2001, Kaba conducted research that also can be characterized as passive. Researchers listened to Chicago's Local School Council (LSC) comprised of students who shared decision-making responsibilities with adults in their school. The purpose of the study was to explore student perceptions and feelings about their participation in the decision-making body LSC. Both qualitative and quantitative methods were used in this study. The researcher conducted in-depth interviews that ranged from twenty minutes to two hours with 20 LSC student representatives. In addition, a four-page survey was administered to LSC members. Although students at LSC were "participants" in a decision-making body, the findings of the study revealed some expressions from students showing they felt constrained, with little opportunity to affect policy. Students described their ability to "speak well" or "knowing adults on the LSC" as having influence on their ability to be heard. Ultimately, students in the study had difficulty describing concrete examples of influences they had over policy decisions.

Some of the leading research on student voice is occurring in Europe. In England, the East Sussex Project, led by researchers Rudduck, Brown and Hendy (2004), focused on how personalized learning enhances schools. Although this study primarily involved passive participation of students, there was active participation by students who collaborated in analyzing the data from the study. In the summer of 2000, the researchers engaged seven secondary schools by using student commentaries gained through focus groups, learning logs,

surveys, and student-led inquiry groups. Relying on qualitative methods, the researchers conducted interviews and used learning logs with students and teachers. This study found that personalized learning functioned as a powerful orienting principle. It led teachers to review aspects of teaching and learning from the student perspective and to think about how individual students experience the daily routines of school. Researchers in this study found that student voice proved to be invaluable. It fostered a sense of membership and recognition for students while constructing a more authentic agenda for school improvement that was based on student concerns and experiences.

In one of the few active studies on student voice that used students as participants in the role of peer interviewers, Lee (1999) studied what happens when the voices of low-achieving students go largely ignored by educators. He premised that when the voices of students are routinely unsolicited or ignored amid reform planning and implementation, the direction assumed by teachers and administrators can be misguided. In this study, five low-achieving students were trained so they could interview 40 students with grade point averages below 2.0, two or more suspensions, and/or excessive absenteeism. Overwhelmingly, the students interviewed felt that school factors were primary influences on their levels of academic achievement, and they specifically pointed to teacher-centered classrooms, perceived racism and discrimination, low expectations, and lack of teacher-student relationships.

Directive studies on student voice, in which students are directing the research, are rare occurrences in the literature, but the study by Thomson and Gunter (2005) conducted in England provides the best example. Working with a small group of students at Kingwood High School, a comprehensive school of 1200 students, the stated purpose of the researcher was to examine how

the school made meaning and took action. Additionally, the researcher explored the trajectory of school reform and how the school managed the tension between extending choices to students and controlling the school's provisions. The researcher selected a group of eight students, comprised of a boy and a girl from each of grades 7, 8, 9, and 10. During the first phase of the study, researchers interviewed the eight students, asking questions about how things were going at the school. Based on the student responses, the researchers drafted a questionnaire and gathered feedback from the students on how to make improvements. This questionnaire was then administered to all students at the school. Once the data were gathered, the student researchers were the first to look at the data as critical readers and, based on their analyses, issues of (a) bullying, (b) career options after high school, and (c) teaching and learning emerged as the topics most students were concerned about. Additionally, the student researchers proposed surveying the adults to see if their responses would be similar to the student responses. The student researchers then voted on which of the issues the school should tackle first, and, with the endorsement of the head teacher, they moved forward with research of bullying and harassment.

In all of these studies on student voice, whether passive, active, or directive, listening to students was informative and potentially positive for the students themselves in terms of empowerment, belonging, and leadership development. In addition, the data gathered from students offered educators valuable information to inform instructional, institutional, and cultural practices of both the classroom and the school. In light of these findings, schools would also benefit from more research on how to promote an environment where student-voice initiatives can be sustained. Because most of the research on student voice involves teachers and students,

rather than administrators (Cook-Sather, 2007), there is a real need to explore the role of school leaders in fostering voice. Unless more is learned about how leaders create a climate where student voice thrives, schools and districts will continue with the practice of building and rebuilding school systems that are driven by adult voice, with continued results of disengagement and student disconnect.

Definition of Terms in the Study

For the purpose of clarity, it is useful at this point to define several terms that have been and will be used throughout this report. These terms include “student voice,” “meaningful student voice,” and the expression, “how student voice lives” in a school. Although the research on student voice is still emerging, researchers and experts in the field have weighed in on these concepts, and their insights provide a lens through which practitioners and scholars can view this topic coherently.

“Student voice” has shifted in meaning from token participation to true partnerships with educators so that students can influence what happens to them at school (Manefield et al., 2007). Student voice no longer focuses on student rights and empowerment, as was the case in the past, but rather focuses on the idea that “student outcomes will improve and will be more successful if students actively participate in shaping school reform” (Mitra, 2006, p.7). Cook-Sather (2002) suggests that school leaders must “authorize student voice” and confront the power dynamics inside and outside of the classroom and count students among those “who have the knowledge and position to shape what counts as education” (p.3). Fletcher (2004) states that educators should “continually validate” the experiences, perspectives and knowledge of all students through real partnerships in school improvement. In keeping with this shift in how voice is

defined, the term “student voice” in this study will refer to promoting (Mitra, 2004), authorizing (Cook-Sather, 2002) and validating (Fletcher, 2003; Fletcher, 2004) the unique ideas and perspectives of students in order to improve schools and student learning.

In stressing the importance of “meaningful” student involvement, Fletcher (2003& 2004) explains “meaningful student voice” efforts “engage students in every facet of the educational process for the purpose of strengthening their commitment to their education, community and democracy” (p. 5). He proposes that meaningful voice efforts avoid treating students as passive recipients of their learning, but deliberately and actively engage students as stakeholders and partners in teaching, learning and leading processes in a school.

In addition, the phrase “how student voice lives” is meant to describe the degree to which student voice is expressed at the school. An assumption of the study is that student voice exists at all schools. It may be ignored, token, limited, or fully realized in meaningful ways, but as long as there are students in a school, there is voice. As a result, in this study, the phrase “how student voice lives” is intended to describe how the voices of students are expressed within the school.

Chapter 3

REPORT OF THE STUDY

Introduction

This chapter describes more fully the setting for the study, in what manner the “Look” and “Think” phases of the action research cycle were conducted, and the results of data analysis. For the purposes of this study, as discussed in Chapters 1 and 2, the term “student voice” refers to promoting (Mitra, 2004), authorizing (Cook-Sather, 2002) and validating (Fletcher, 2003; Fletcher, 2004) the unique ideas and perspectives of students in order to improve schools and student learning. Meaningful student voice initiatives engage students in every aspect of the educational process, and the phrase, “how student voice lives,” is meant to describe the degree to which student voice is expressed at the school.

Setting for the Study

As described in chapter 1, this action research study took place in a large urban district in Washington State with an enrollment of 29,000 students and over 50 elementary, middle and high schools. The district is known for its quality programs and has been recognized as one of ten high performing districts in the nation. However, student achievement at the six high schools in the district has plateaued, and dropout rates for students of color are disproportionately high. For example, only 5 out of 10 African American students and 3 out of 10 Native American students graduate from the district’s high schools. Beginning in 2000, to address these issues, the district implemented research-based strategies drawn from the literature. These strategies included school-wide use of comprehension strategies, after-school tutoring, and intentional

grouping of struggling students for intervention purposes. In spite of these efforts, achievement data continued to show limited or negligible gains in graduation rates, and district leaders began to seek new solutions for these issues.

One of the new strategies used to explore and examine these issues was student focus groups. In the spring and fall of 2007, several student focus groups were convened at the district office at the request of the Associate Superintendent of Teaching and Learning. The student focus groups were formed for the purpose of understanding student perspectives on the disproportionately high dropout rates, the discipline trends for students of color, and the achievement gap that was evident in district achievement data. At the time, it was determined that the target group of students for the focus groups would be students who had experienced academic or behavioral setbacks in one of the high schools, but still managed to stay in school. Over a period of several months, the district convened multiple focus groups of students from several high schools across the district. What emerged from these focus groups was a compelling student narrative that portrayed the district's large comprehensive high schools as places where students were lost and invisible. Some students described not having an adult advocate who could help or intervene on their behalf as they encountered academic or behavioral struggles.

As a result of these focus groups, district leaders began to ask how to intentionally engage the voices of students at the building and district level to better understand how to improve student learning in the district's high schools. This concern was the catalyst for this action research project.

The first phase of this study was a pilot study designed to gain a sense of how and if student voice is expressed at the high schools across the district (Campbell, 2007). I interviewed

six high school principals, using a semi-structured interview guide. The interviews were tape recorded and lasted from 45 to 90 minutes. The findings of this pilot study revealed traditional, formal structures for student participation like Associated Student Body (ASB) groups, student leadership groups, and individual student leadership opportunities that were focused on social events and involved a relatively small group of students. Reflecting on the definition of student voice for this study in which schools are involved in promoting (Mitra, 2004), authorizing (Cook-Sather, 2002) and validating (Fletcher, 2003; Fletcher, 2004) the unique ideas and perspectives of students in order to improve schools and student learning, there was little evidence of widespread student voice initiatives within the district's high schools.

However, as a result of the work of the principal, one alternative high school, Sampson High, was identified as having a strong culture of student voice. Data from the pilot study indicated that student participation at Sampson included students taking part in professional development with teachers and the use of student focus groups to inform school practice. In addition, data from the district-initiated focus groups of high school students across all high schools included compelling testimonials from several students describing their success at Sampson. Additionally, Sampson had a strong reputation throughout the district for listening to students.

What was compelling in the data was the fact that Sampson has an enrollment of 435 students, many of whom had dropped out of one of the five comprehensive high schools. With an overall graduation rate of 11%, a dramatically lower percentage than the district average, and an annual dropout rate of 38%, Sampson High School has come to be known as “the last chance” for many struggling high school students. The student body is comprised of 47% students of color. Of the students of color, two-thirds are Native American. The school has a free or

reduced lunch rate of 70%. Of the 400 plus students at the school, 60 % are female and 40% are male. The administrative team at Sampson High School is composed of the principal, the assistant principal, and the principal assistant.

Across the district, leaders were wondering, how was it that a school with students who had been faced with so much adversity and struggle was building a reputation for listening to students?

It was clear that, under the leadership of the school principal, the Sampson administrative team and staff were already engaged in promoting student voice at Sampson, and they were eager to participate in this action research study to enhance student voice initiatives throughout the school. At the time this study was launched in the fall of 2007, the principal and the administrative team had been engaged in trainings on student voice, reading books on voice, and bringing in national consultants who supported the use of student voice for school improvement. So when approached about being active participants in an action research study, the administrative team of the principal, the assistant principal, and the principal assistant were all extremely interested. They viewed the study as a means of improving their ability to enhance student voice at Sampson. As a result, this made action research a natural fit as it “is inquiry that is done by or with insiders to an organization . . . to solve local problems” (Herr & Anderson, 2005, p. 3).

The Study

In our initial planning meeting in the fall of 2007, we defined the research team at Sampson as the principal, the assistant principal, the principal assistant, and me. The principal of Sampson is a white male who is in his fourth year as the principal at that school. Two other

members complete the administrative team, an assistant principal who is a white male and has been at the school for three years, and a principal assistant, a white female who has also been at the school for three years. Both the assistant principal and the principal assistant handled student discipline, evaluated teachers, and collaborated with the principal in leading instructionally. This collaborative group would be responsible for meeting with me at each phase of the action research cycle to plan, generate ideas, and discuss the progress of the study. It should be noted that, during the initial months of the study, the assistant principal was promoted to another assignment within the district and was not interviewed for this study.

The research partnership between the administrative team and me meant we would schedule planning meetings at each phase of Stringer's (2007) action research cycle (Look, Think, and Act) to collaborate on how to proceed. This report covers the "Look" and "Think" phases of the study, with the understanding that the research team would look to the findings and recommendations of these phases to plan further initiatives and actions to enhance student voice at Sampson as they engaged in the "Act" phase of action research at the school.

Phase I of the Study — "Look"

Planning

To launch the "Look" phase of the action research study, we had several planning meetings at Sampson in the fall of 2007 and the winter of 2008. We used these meetings to generate research questions that the study would seek to answer. These questions included (a) How does student voice live at Sampson High School? (b) What are the beliefs and actions of administrators, specifically the principal, in promoting voice at the school? and (c) How can student voice be enhanced at Sampson and by extension to other high schools in the district?

Additionally, we began to brainstorm methods for collecting data from administrators, students and teachers. We also agreed upon times for me to observe school meetings and events in which student voice would be evident. The school had an established practice of listening to students in focus groups, so we decided to use student focus groups as the primary means of collecting data from the students. This decision is supported by Denzin and Lincoln (2008), who state that focus groups “can facilitate the democratization of the research process and it functions to decenter the role of the researcher” (p. 396).

As reviewed in Chapter 2, studies on student voice fall into one of three categories: (a) passive studies in which researchers listen to students as information sources, (b) active studies in which students are participants and collaborate with the researcher, and (c) directive studies in which the student is the designer (Lee & Zimmerman, N.D.). Because Sampson High School sought to engage students in meaningful ways, the principal and his administrative team thought this research study should engage student participants in a manner consistent with “active” participation. In active research studies on student voice, students are collaborators in the research. This meant that students would join in as researchers and conduct some of the student interviews. In addition to the student focus groups, student-to-student interviews would be conducted by student researchers.

The administrative team shared information about a pre-existing student leadership group at the school which was comprised of 25 student representatives from each of the school’s 25 advisory groups. This group, called Peer-to-Peer, served as advisors to the school administration. It was thought that this group might be a good place from which to recruit student volunteers for the focus groups for this study. We also agreed that it was important to include students outside the Peer-to-Peer structure to ensure that students not involved in this

structure had voice in the study. As a result, we recruited students from the Peer-to-Peer group to join in as researchers and to identify two students of their choosing to interview using the same questions they responded to during the focus groups. In addition, we decided that interviews would be conducted with individual administrators and selected teachers to explore fully the school culture and its interaction with student voice at Sampson.

Data Collection

In February of 2008, I met with 25 students from the Peer-to-Peer student advisory group to describe the study, explain the consent forms, and emphasize the importance of getting the consent forms signed by their parents if they were under the age of 18. During this meeting, I spent considerable time intentionally detailing the benefits of participating in the study, explaining possible risks involved in participating in the study, informing students that confidentiality would be maintained, and responding to student questions about various aspects of the research. Because of the traditionally strong family-school partnership at Sampson, the principal assistant called the parents of those participants who were under the age of 18 to explain the study and to answer questions. Of the 25 students who attended the informational meeting, 14 students volunteered to participate in the focus groups; thirteen of these students returned their consent forms and agreed to participate.

Considering the number of participants, we decided to have focus groups of only three students to ensure that all voices were heard. Based on their experience with previous focus groups, the administrative team expressed concern that in larger focus groups some students would dominate the conversation, and all voices would not be heard. Four taped focus group interviews were planned for which I would be present at the school and spend 45 minutes asking questions using a semi-structured interview protocol (see Appendix A). Due to student absence

and scheduling changes, two of these focus groups had only two student participants, one had three student participants, and one had four participants. I interviewed the remaining two students individually, using the same interview protocol from the focus groups.

All the students who participated in the focus groups were asked if they would be interested in participating as student researchers to interview two more students for the study. Of the 13 students who participated in the focus groups, 3 volunteered to be student researchers. I met with those students in March of 2008 to train them on the technique of interviewing, to discuss the content of the consent forms, to get feedback on how to make the language in the interview protocol more student friendly, to explain how to use the digital tape recorder, and to establish a date for the student-to-student interviews. These student researchers then met with the students they wanted to interview to explain the study, the consent forms and to answer student questions. The student researchers recruited seven additional students who were willing to be individually interviewed, using a protocol that both the students and I revised to be more student-friendly (see Appendix B).

Because of the importance of maintaining the confidentiality of the study participants, demographic data provided in this report is intentionally “sketchy.” Sampson is a small school, and extra care is being taken to protect the identities of students who participated in the study. In all, 20 students participated in the study, including both focus groups and the student-to-student interviews. The participants ranged in grades from 9 through 12 and included 14 females and 5 males. This gender ratio reflects the overall population of Sampson High School where two-thirds of the students are female. With 47% of the student body being students of color, Sampson High School is one of the most culturally diverse high schools in the district. Participants in this study included 9 students of color and 11 white students. Because many of

the students of color identified as bi-racial Native American or bi-racial African American, the term students of color is used to describe these students. Although district free and reduced lunch rates at high school are very unreliable indicators of socio-economic status because students and families underreport, based on the narratives of the students interviewed, many of them lived in poverty. In terms of academic profiles, all of the students interviewed described having academic difficulty at either a high school or a middle school prior to attending Sampson. For many students, Sampson High School was the first school beyond elementary where they experienced success in school.

In addition to the student interviews, I interviewed administrators and teachers using a semi-structured interview protocol (see Appendix C). I interviewed the principal four times during the 2007-2008 school year. The interviews, which took place in his office, ranged from 30 to 60 minutes. The principal assistant and four classroom teachers were interviewed individually for 30 to 60 minutes at a place of their choosing in the spring and summer of 2008. Due to scheduling conflicts and his promotion to a new position during the course of the study, I did not interview the assistant principal. Four teachers were interviewed for this study, two white males, one African American female, and one Native American female, all who have been at Sampson High School between one and six years. Teachers for the study were identified based on a snowball technique (Creswell, 1998), with their names being generated by the students during the focus groups, as teachers who promoted student voice in their classrooms. Finally, I conducted site visits at Sampson High School throughout the 2007-2008 school year to observe the principal, staff, and students.

Although this is an action research study, it is essential to maintain some level of confidentiality. As the researcher, I collaborated with the stakeholders on how to best handle

this. The students wanted to create their own pseudonyms for the study. Each student wrote his or her pseudonym on a piece of paper, and I was the only person who had access to these names. The administrators and teachers wanted to use their real first names, while the school name, Sampson High School, is a pseudonym.

Phase II of the Study — “Think”

The second phase of the action research cycle, “Think,” involved the administrative team and me working with and analyzing the data collected in the “Look” phase. After listening to the tape-recorded interviews, I transcribed them and, whenever possible, provided transcriptions to administrators, teachers and students for member checking (Creswell, 1994) to enhance the accuracy and credibility of the data. In preparation for the group analysis of the data, I removed any identifiers in the data that would undermine confidentiality for the student participants as the administrators and I looked at the data together. In the summer of 2008, school administrators and I met to analyze the data and generate themes from the student data. Because of the limited time available to administrators and the time intensive nature of analysis and coding, we agreed that I would conduct a more detailed and formal analysis to be informed by our more informal discussions of the data. The administrative team requested that, after I had formally analyzed the data, I meet with them to present the findings of the study to staff so the school could begin the “Act” phase of the action research cycle, with the goal of continuing to enhance student voice at Sampson.

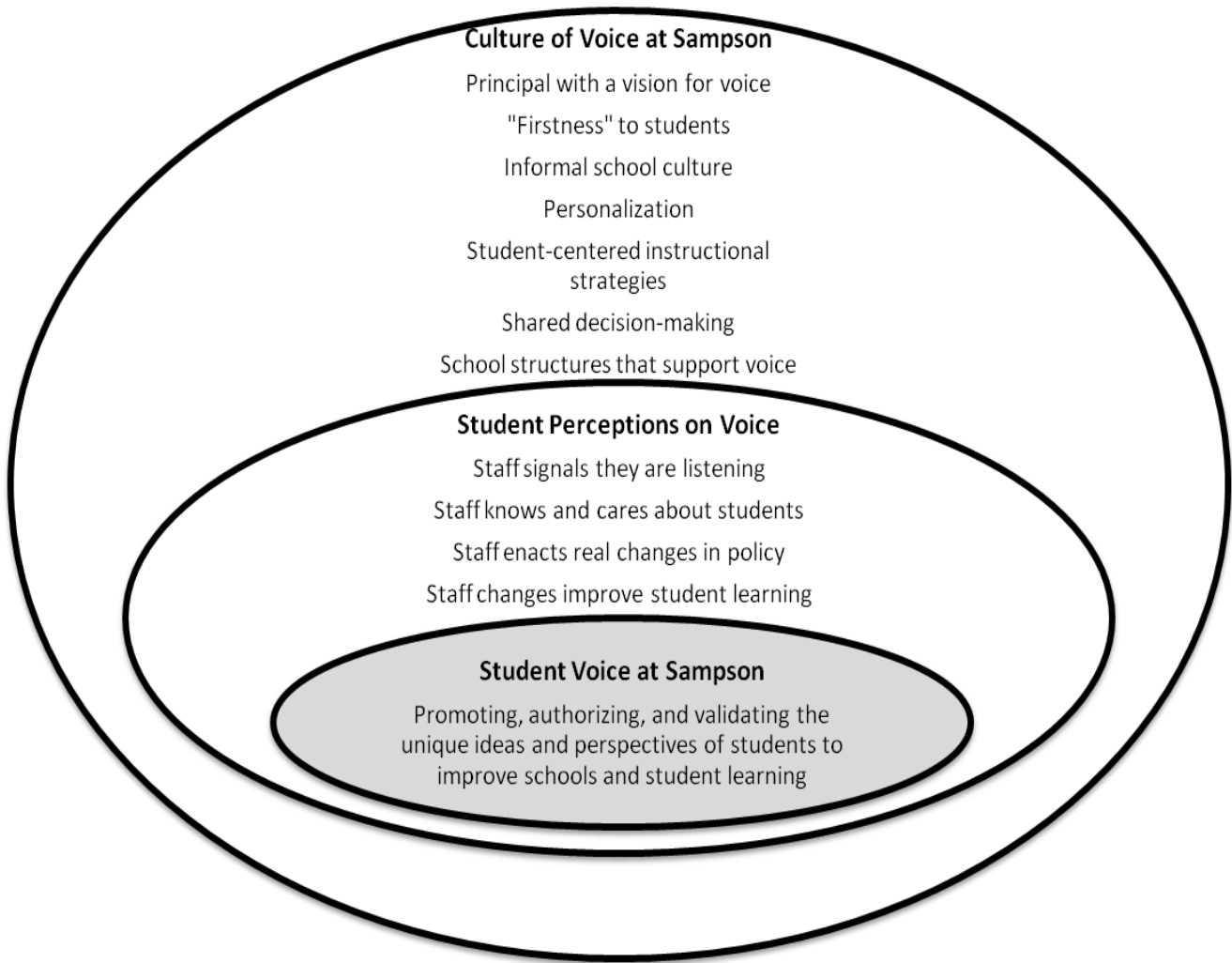
After the initial analysis with the stakeholders, I reread all transcripts, wrote notes in the margins of the transcripts, and began open coding and listing my initial codes. I then made an analysis table in which I listed the initial codes and read the data once more to refine and revise

my codes. Once I identified codes, I sorted the data into categories and began axial coding, seeking connections between categories (Creswell, 1998). I continued to review and analyze the data, noting the frequency of certain codes as clearer themes and patterns emerged. Out of the detailed data analysis, a picture of a school with “meaningful” voice (Fletcher, 2004) began to emerge.

The qualitative data from the interviews of over 20 students, 2 administrators (the principal and principal assistant) and 4 classroom teachers reveal that student voice at Sampson High School lives on multiple fronts and in “meaningful” ways (Fletcher, 2004). Students in the study overwhelmingly describe a culture that nurtures student voice, wherein their opinions and insights are promoted, authorized and validated in order to improve the school and enhance their learning. Thus, it appears that student voice at the school is nested in a larger school culture that continually promotes and cultivates the insights and opinions of students. The findings are presented in two main sections: (a) Student perceptions about voice at Sampson High School; and (b) an analysis of the school culture at Sampson High School that promotes voice. The school culture section includes the role of the principal’s leadership in promoting student voice.

Figure 1 illustrates the conceptual framework that represents the findings of the study. The center circle in the figure depicts the overall findings of the study in regard to how student voice “lives” at Sampson. The Sampson culture promotes, authorizes and validates student voice in the service of school improvement. The next larger circle in the figure illustrates how students at Sampson perceive their voice is heard. Finally, the outer circle represents a larger culture of student voice at the school in which the collective experiences of students are influenced by school structures and the practices of school administrators and teachers, in particular the school principal.

Figure 1. Conceptual Framework of Student Voice at Sampson



Student Perceptions about Voice at Sampson High School

Of the 20 students interviewed, all but one expressed a strong sense of having their voices heard at Sampson High School. The interview data from both the student researchers and the

focus groups yielded similar themes. The students at Sampson High School describe a culture where student voice is promoted, authorized and validated by staff who (a) signal they are listening to students, (b) know and care about students, (c) act on student insights with real changes in school practices and policy, and (d) ensure those changes improve the school and improve student learning.

Staff signal they are listening to students.

Overwhelmingly, students in the study spoke about actions that adults take when signaling they are listening to student insights. According to students at Sampson High School, these “signals” were subtle and, for most of the participants, they could readily and easily describe instances in which they felt listened to; for these students, behaviors that communicated listening were giving eye contact and following up on student concerns.

For students, receiving eye contact determined whether or not they perceived teachers and adults to be receptive to hearing their ideas and opinions. These signals by adults encouraged and promoted a culture of voice. All but 2 of the 20 students interviewed mentioned eye contact from an adult as a measure of whether or not they were being heard. Annie, a junior at Sampson High School, said

They pay attention to you when they are talking to you. They look at you in the eye.

They listen, and they aren't talking, and they sit right next to you and look you in the eye and try to help you as much as they can.

Megan, a sophomore, animatedly stated, “If I've got to yell more than three times, then they are not listening . . . when they are looking STRAIGHT at me.” Another student, Lugi, a sophomore, explains teachers signal they are listening when “they are looking at you,” he continues by stating “Sometimes a teacher will be sitting there and they won't be listening to

you. They will be off into their own world. If they are looking at you, you know that you are being heard.” Finally, Amanda, a senior, states that when adults are listening, “They give you eye contact. They are engaged in what you have to say . . . instead of maybe looking away and not focusing.” Almost all of the students described eye contact as a critical indicator that adults were listening to them and a pivotal non-verbal signal that the “door was open” for their voice. For many of these students, their earlier experiences in large, comprehensive high schools rendered them “invisible,” and this sense of invisibility was apparent in a lack of eye contact from the teachers and administrators.

In light of what students said about how adults signal they are listening to them, teachers interviewed for this study were asked to detail how they signal to students that they are listening. This was of particular interest to me to see if there was alignment between student and teacher perceptions. Three of the four teachers described giving students eye contact as one of the primary ways in which they signal they are listening.

In addition to eye contact, students in the study conveyed the importance of adults demonstrating they are listening to them by (a) asking clarifying questions, (b) answering their questions, and (c) providing feedback. Many of the students in the study had prior experiences in other schools of not being heard, and many had identified subtle actions that indicate when adults are listening to students, and when they are not. For these students, genuine listening and seeking understanding meant that their teachers would be providing feedback, asking clarifying questions, and answering their questions. “When teachers answer my questions and don’t put me off, and when they put part of what I asked in their answer, they are listening” is how a senior named Jericho describes knowing teachers are listening. Similarly, Amanda explains “When a teacher gives you feedback, or they are taking notes and they are not saying ‘hmm, that’s right,’

looking away, and focusing on something else instead of focusing on me.” “I know they are listening if they know what you are saying and they come up with suggestions,” similarly, Janet, a senior, recalls that “when teachers are not listening, they don’t have suggestions.”

When teachers were asked for examples of how they indicate to students they are listening, they mentioned strategies that complimented the perspectives of the students. These strategies included (a) stopping conversations and asking that other students listen to students as they are speaking; (b) creating student-centered lessons wherein the voices of students are heard through discussions, group share-outs, group anchor charts, and recording their thinking on charts; (c) asking follow-up questions at a later time; and (d) being available to help at lunch time, during class, and before and after school. Based on this data, there seemed to be a match between the needs of students in feeling heard and how teachers view their role in signaling to students they are being heard.

Staff knows and cares about students.

According to students who participated in the study, having caring relationships with adults at Sampson created an environment in which they were more willing to express their ideas. These students described being willing to work harder and to do whatever their teachers asked, because they knew the adults at Sampson knew them and cared about them. Kat describes it this way:

I could go to most of the teachers here, and they know me by name, even teachers I have never had. The teachers are really friendly, they don’t know you, but they know your name and we talk, even though we have never had classes with them. I know a lot of teachers. It is like you don’t know them, but you know they want to help you. That is

why they are here at Sampson; they want a sense of community. They want to feel that sense of family.

For Sampson students and teachers, real relationships were the conduit for voice to thrive. The relationships were the basis for students trying harder and trusting their teachers. In listening to teachers at Sampson, they too describe the importance of caring relationships with students in regard to eliciting voice. One teacher concluded,

Students here are more willing to speak out, maybe not on the first day, because the relationships have to be built over time . . . but because relationships are being built by so many adults with so many students in this school, the students see it. They see we care about them and want to hear what they have to say.

Finally, another teacher declares, “Truly caring is the ‘seed’ for student voice to start and continue to grow . . . students won’t waste their voice if they know somebody doesn’t really care.”

Staff enacts real changes in policy.

Once school staff demonstrates they are listening to students, the ultimate measure of whether or not they were being heard, from the point-of-view of the students, was if their insights and opinions were acted upon so that things changed. Students viewed these changes as proof that the staff took their voices seriously. While students talked about adult behaviors that indicate listening, ultimately, the final test was whether actions resulted from their input to teachers and administrators. Consider Janet, a senior, who contends, “They say they are listening, but if you don’t see action, you know you are not heard.” Daniel, a sophomore, explains, “Even subtle changes would be a reminder that my voice is heard,” while Kat, a senior, states, “If my voice is heard, I should see some changes around the stuff I am talking about.”

Students at Sampson High School expressed a faith that if they made suggestions, asked questions, and voiced concerns, most adults, and particularly school administration, would make an effort to respond. These students described incidents in which they voiced an issue or concern and school administration listened and made changes. Students perceived administration as actively responding to their voice in both the classroom and in school policy. One student described an incident in which she and a group of students were sitting outside the school with the principal assistant, Cindy. They were looking down the alley, and the students expressed concern about all the trash in the alley and how someone needed to clean it up. According to the student, “We told Fred, and he asked if advisory class would go out and pick up trash; the following week it was done. If we say something, they try their best to do something about it.” Another student mentioned the upcoming placement of a new reader board for the school and said, “We know we will have a say in where the reader board will be placed.” Thus, a majority of the students, when asked how they knew administration supported student voice, were collectively saying, “When we ask, speak or provide input, they (Fred, Jay and Cindy) listen and they try to do something.”

Staff enacts changes that improve student learning.

Once changes were enacted by staff, based on student input, students expressed a strong desire to see these changes result in improvements in their learning. One of the most compelling narratives of the students in this study was the sense of hope and optimism they expressed about their new-found academic success. When students were asked what was the most important aspect of the school they wanted to have a say about, over half stated, “my learning.” These students had strong feelings about being able to have a say in how the school could help them be more successful academically. For many of these students, prior to coming to Sampson, failure

and academic struggle had been the norm at other schools. According to the self-reporting of students, most of them portray complete academic turnarounds at Sampson High School. “Right now I have a ‘B’ average” a senior named Shelby proclaimed, “and when I was at another high school, I had an ‘F’ average.” Annie, a junior, said, “At the high school I attended prior to Sampson, I had a 2.1 G.P.A and now at Sampson, I have a 3.8 G.P.A.” And another student, Samantha, a junior, joyfully stated, “I am actually getting ‘Bs’ and at my other school, I was getting ‘Ds’ and ‘Fs.’” Of the 20 students interviewed, 18 reported having improved academic achievement in terms of grades and overall self-confidence.

Culture of Student Voice at Sampson.

Students at Sampson describe a school culture that fosters student voice where their insights, ideas, and perspectives were promoted, authorized, and validated in order to improve the school and student learning. As a result, it appears that student voice at Sampson emerges and is cultivated in the larger school culture. This is evidenced by student narratives that describe specific conditions at Sampson that allowed student voice to flourish in a way it didn’t at other schools.

What is contributing to the culture of voice at Sampson High School? When listening to students, teachers, and the administrators themselves, their perceptions paint a picture of a principal who plays a significant role in shaping the school culture for voice at Sampson. Students, teachers, and administrators describe a school culture where the principal and the administrative team have a vision for student voice. Acting on this vision, the principal and his team are continually modeling a “firstness” to students in an informal culture that is based on personalization. The Sampson principal and his administrative team encourage teacher use of

student-centered instructional strategies, shared decision-making, and a climate of respect and kindness. Complimenting these practices are school structures that promote voice.

Principal with a vision for student voice.

The principal of Sampson High School is known throughout the district as a transformational figure who reshaped the culture at the school so that it became known as a place of promise for struggling students. Based on interview data and observation, Fred's vision and beliefs about student voice significantly shape the overall culture of voice at Sampson. Fred has been principal of Sampson High School for the last four years. Prior to coming to Sampson, he was a district leader in the areas of mediation, counseling and social work. Fred, as he is called by students, staff, and community, has an unassuming physical presence that in itself provides some insights into why students are at ease with him. Foregoing the usual business suit, dress slacks, dress shirt and tie of the typical high school principal, Fred is often attired in jeans and a t-shirt. It is as if, that by his very appearance, he is communicating to the students at Sampson High school, "I am one of you." His face seems weary from the absorption of the social, economic, and academic struggles of the students in the school, but let a student walk in and begin a conversation and his eyes and entire face light up.

When asked to define student voice, Fred states, "The word empowerment comes to mind . . . it also means that students should have some say about the system that they are part of, which is high school, and a way to contribute back to the community that is meant to serve them." He goes on to say that voice means, "Listening to students, it means I care, the school cares, and we believe what they say." Also, Fred defines student voice in terms of how it impacts decision-making at the school-wide level in terms of school improvement plans and school policy and at

the classroom level where instructional decisions are made. This definition of voice strongly aligns with Fletcher's (2003 & 2004) conception of "meaningful" voice efforts.

Fred's vision about student voice is shared by the administrative team. When asked how she defines student voice, the principal assistant, Cindy, provides a compelling expansion of the definition of the term:

Voice to me is a very powerful word. Our voices come from somewhere. To me it is even deeper than just what do you think about this issue; it is about who I am at the core. It is an identity issue. So when somebody shares who they are . . . through their voice, whether it be written, oral or their artwork, even their clothes—it is like it is their identity.

Teachers participating in the study had similar views about voice, with one teacher stating, "Student voice to me is wanting students to know that who they are, what they know and have to say is important to me, and not only to me, but to the world." In reflecting on the administrator and teacher perceptions about student voice, one gains a sense of their beliefs and possible actions in supporting a school-wide vision for voice that goes beyond the superficial involvement of students to more meaningful engagement of students.

Sampson teachers depict a school where the principal and his administration have a real vision for student voice. When looking at the school improvement plan, a focus is seen on students and strategies that support student voice. Also, in talking with school administrators, they viewed the school improvement plan as an important tool to lay out the long-range plan to build the capacity of teachers to promote student-centered classrooms where the needs of students are being met so they can achieve academically. Listen to this teacher:

I think administration has a big picture view, a vision that is very clear about what our students can do, and they show us data so we can see the school's growth over time. . . .

When they bring in new ideas, they all support our belief in our students, so the professional development supports us listening to our students in our teaching, in advisory and in every way. They don't overly rely on one presenter; they bring several presenters who help us see the whole child academically and social-emotionally. It would be easy for Fred to get caught up into the latest thing, but he stays focused on where we are going . . . that takes vision for him to do that.

So what does it look like when a school leader acts on his belief that student voice thrives when decision making is flattened, when the insights of students may be believed, and when you are putting students first? What are the specific structures that exist at Sampson that support these beliefs? What are the specific practices that shape the culture of voice at Sampson? How do these structures and practices interact to create a culture of student voice?

Climate of "firstness" to students.

Listening to Fred, you quickly gain a sense of his belief in the role of school administrators in promoting a climate of voice by continually modeling it. For Fred, this means the school must be a student-centered environment where all decisions are based on what is best for "our" students. In talking with the principal and his administrative team, you get a sense of the intentionality in creating an environment that is focused on the needs of students. Fred describes the importance of the principal in modeling this by simply stating over and over to staff that students come first. He moved his office from behind the office managers to the front hallway, directly in the path of the students as they enter the school. This new location increased his contact with students and signaled to students that he had an open-door policy. He describes doing his e-mails at the end of the day and rarely sitting at his desk, because he is talking with students throughout the day. During my observations of the school and my interviews with Fred,

students walked in and out of his office continually. As students came into his office, absent was the hesitation you might see from students when an adult is in the room; these students walked in with a confidence that they would be heard. No matter what was happening at the time, Fred always interrupted what he was doing and deferred to the student. This also proved to be true when I met with his principal assistant, Cindy; she would immediately shift her attention from me or other adults and focus on the student. As an observer, it is noticeable that the students at Sampson are used to being heard, listened to, and acknowledged. There is an ease and a confidence that students have when mingling with adults that suggest they know they matter. In listening to teachers, they, too, bring to the surface that administrators have a strong commitment to listening to students. One teacher described it this way:

Here the administrators are extremely receptive to voice and the students know that. It is one thing for somebody to say I want to hear your voice and somebody listens or doesn't listen or pretends to listen and it goes no further. Kids are very bright and pick up on that; here they know that it goes somewhere. Their voice does matter. Words are one thing, but action is another. Here they can see on a daily basis, action, where it is actually taking place. Which moves me to another area; we have an administrative team that is extremely open to student voice and even wants more student voice. They [Fred, Cindy and Jay] practice an open-door policy. You can't fake it . . . you can't say we want to hear your voice and not really listen. So here, it is said and the students see it in all kinds of subtle, if not overt ways. They see it happening. They can go in and talk to Fred or Cindy. Fred and Cindy know every student's name.

While teachers mentioned how receptive administration was to student voice, they also described the difficulty, in the beginning, as Fred shifted the school culture to include more

voice. Some teachers did not necessarily agree with this practice. They felt undermined if they made a decision in class that a student didn't agree with, and the student would just get up and say, "I am going to see Fred." In talking with Fred about this, he was aware of this dilemma and in his words, "I have heard teachers say these kids are like Fred's favorites, and he is not going to do anything to them." He goes on to say that "for some teachers, it is difficult to see how I can support a kid and then support them, and then set clear expectations for what needs to happen . . . this is our work and it is not going to happen overnight."

Students also described a sense of student focus from administration and how they are able to go and talk to Fred, Cindy and Jay anytime, and how all three administrators were always in the halls at school, greeting and talking with students. According to one student, "They [Fred, Cindy and Jay] say, 'hi' to me every day." Another mentioned that Fred "comes and joins in with our drumming group." Finally, another student states:

Fred, Cindy and Jay, they all know us, so when we are walking down the hall and they will call us in the office and say, "What is going on?" . . . There have been a couple of times where I have run away from home and they are right there when I walk through the door and they say "How is it going?" They have known us long enough that they know our expressions, how we do certain things.

Most students described all three administrators as wanting to listen to students without judgment.

Informal school culture.

One of the first things noticeable when visiting Sampson is the informal culture of the school. In this informal culture, there is a "narrowing of space" between the adults and the students—a space in which voice and student insights become amplified and authorized. Also, in

this informal environment, there is a noticeable shift away from the typical power dynamics that are present in many schools, wherein adults are the holders of power. At Sampson, there is a focus on shifting that dynamic to one of equals where the adult-student relationships are based on kindness and respect.

Students in the study spoke about how this informality allows them to form relationships with teachers and administration so they can say what they are really thinking. During my site visits, I was struck by the language students were using with administration; it was the language they would use with their peers. On one occasion, a student was in the office discussing his struggle to stay clean and not use drugs, while using language that was sprinkled with profanity and slang; this didn't seem disrespectful, but revealed a young person comfortable in his relationship with the principal, who, in turn, was providing information on resources to support this student's sobriety.

Another aspect of the informal culture at Sampson is that staff and students operate on a first-name basis. Students perceived being on a first-name basis as a sign that teachers and staff respected them and, according to one student, "Here at Sampson it is at family level, first-name basis . . . they [administrators and teachers] let you use their first names because they want you to feel comfortable, no barriers, no walls." One student, Daniel, a sophomore, spoke about the impact of this informality on student voice:

At my other school, administration was on the top, then next were the teachers and then the students. Here at Sampson, there is no power struggle, no hierarchy; the teachers and administration respect us and they can learn from us. There is no trying to control the students. You know . . . it is first-name basis here. So you get more voice because the students feel respected and they know something will be done.

Another student, Alex, a senior, described earlier experiences at another high school where she was lost and repeatedly failed academically. According to Alex, “Here at Sampson, the teachers are more like friends than teachers; they can relate to you, they share stories that happen at home . . . they don’t just treat you like you are a regular student at a regular high school.” When I asked Alex what she meant by this, she said,

Well at a regular high school, you come in and you do your work and you leave...here the teachers start with how was your day, they ask you about what is going on at home, and relating to you as a person first, so you are more willing to work hard here.

When talking with students, several of them described relationships with adults in which they felt respected and that their voice was heard; one student described it this way: “There is no power struggle here at Sampson, there is no superiority over the students.” According to Fred, leaders must attend to “the power differential that can exist in institutions when adults and students interact.” “That power differential must be minimized to really hear student voice” Fred emphasizes. At Sampson, this means that relationships between students and teachers are seen as between equals and, as a result, student voice is promoted and authorized in this informal environment.

Personalization.

In listening to the students, you hear about how many of them were “lost” or “invisible” at other high schools. Students describe larger, comprehensive high schools where they were not known and how at Sampson, with its smaller size and focus on students, they feel known. Nicole, a senior, explains that when she was at a big school, “There are bigger crowds of people . . . you had to set up a day to see the principal or counselor; here, the principal or the counselor is always available.”

Sampson students describe a unique relationship with the administration led by Fred, the principal, a relationship that many of them coming from other high schools had not had with previous principals. Students described not knowing the principal or other administrators at high schools they had attended prior to coming to Sampson. “You don’t see a lot of the higher ranking administrators in a larger school because they are always too busy but, at Sampson, they are always out in the halls, talking to kids” one student remarked. “I can always go and talk to Fred and Cindy,” another student reported; “When I was at my other school, the only administrator I knew was the counselor. I didn’t know who the principal was . . . here I know Fred, Cindy and Jay.” Probably the most compelling description of the principal’s willingness to listen to student voice came from a student who could barely contain himself in describing Fred:

I know that Fred really, really, really is good! He hears students. He really pays attention to kids. I know how to communicate with him and he knows how to communicate with the students a lot. He knows if a student is pissed off about something, if they are angry. Fred just seems to really, really listen to what is up. He enjoys talking with me; every time I go into his office, he always allows me to come in, even if he is in a meeting . . . even if other adults are there, he will allow me to come even for a few minutes. He likes the culture and he really likes black people, the Indians, he is diverse with the cultures, and I am deaf; he is good with deaf students, blind students. I think he wants to learn how people feel, their ways and stuff.

Student-centered instructional strategies.

It is well known in the district that many students at Sampson are there because they have not been successful at other high schools. So when students in the study described how many of them, for the first time, were experiencing academic success, they attributed this success to the

instructional strategies practiced by their teachers. Students listed relevance in their learning and persistent support by staff as instructional strategies that increased their academic success. A few students suggested that having even more input in curricular decisions would enhance their learning even more.

Relevance in their learning. What was striking was the number of students at Sampson who described how positive their academic experiences were at the school, many of whom had struggled academically at other high schools. Students in the study spoke often about how their learning felt connected to their lives. Listen to Jericho:

A lot of what I am learning is high-student-interest and it relates to me and shows me how it is going to relate to my life with history, science and math and how it is going to affect the career I want. I understand why I am being taught that. That used to be my excuse, “How is that going to relate to me? I’m not going to use that stuff.”

Another student, Crow, a senior commented,

Like teachers at other schools, they teach you something, but they don’t tell you why they are teaching it and how you are going to use it . . . here, the teachers start with why we are going to learn it and how we are going to use it.

Kit describes it this way:

In English, my teacher always has us write about something that is important to us. And every time we write about something that means something to us, she has us share. As a student, your voice is being heard through your peers, through teachers, through everyone who wants to listen. Like my poetry, my poetry is very important to me . . . it is our voice, our opinions, it is what matters to us.

When talking with teachers at Sampson, they attributed their attention to relevance to focused professional development aimed at teaching teachers how to elicit student voice to build relevance and meaning in what students are learning. All of the teachers interviewed listed several national presenters who had come to the school and trained staff, but the common theme among all presenters was knowing and listening to “our students.” One teacher quoted a presenter who stated, “Students just want to know they are being held in another’s heart and mind.” Another teacher and the administrative team mentioned a prominent literacy presenter who has worked with Sampson staff on using student voice to enhance expectations and academic achievement in instruction. In short, the training that Sampson staff received supported the school vision of listening to and promoting student voice to improve learning.

Persistent support. For some Sampson students, at-risk behaviors like drug use and crime are a part of their daily lives. Coupled with prior academic struggles, many of these students require additional support and intervention. In talking with students, you hear about experiences in other schools where teachers and staff either gave up on helping them or provided little support. These students described how at other schools they didn’t fit the profile of students whom the teacher would help. Shelby, a sophomore, described her experience at a previous high school:

I noticed the kids that the teacher cared about. I remember this kid, not his name, but he had red hair and he had all passing grades. I remember he had a “D” in one of his classes and the teacher immediately helped him because he was gone for awhile. He was always talking about college. And I knew I was never going to college. When I went to my counselor, she was like, “Oh . . . like come back and talk to me in two months.” She was,

like, “I am pretty much scheduled up for the next two months.” I was like, that is not going to help me and I knew that I was probably going to be gone by then.

Students stated that providing persistent support when students express a need, and even when they didn’t, is a real strength of the Sampson staff. An example of this persistent support is when teachers and other adults continually check in with individual students during a lesson. Shelby describes her classroom experience at Sampson this way: “The teachers want to help us . . . they come to us and help us with our work.” Another student, Louis, describes a particular teacher this way: “She is the enforcer. She stands right there with you. She watches. She stands with the students. When I try to do nothing, she refuses to allow me to do nothing.” In the words of Annie, “Here the teachers come to you. They check on you with what you are asking. Like do you need help with this? This is really cool, ‘cause there are kids who don’t like raising their hands . . . and I am one of those kids.” For these students, support wasn’t defined by the obligatory passing by and checking in once, or lecturing from the front of the room and hoping students were gaining understanding. These students measured support in terms of teachers coming to individual students and checking in with them by asking questions, answering questions, providing feedback and providing encouragement.

Shared decision-making.

Students and teachers at Sampson described a school environment at Sampson in which they all have a say in school practice and policy which translates to being authorized to have a say in the school. There was a sense from both teachers and students that they felt empowered in having their voices heard in school decision-making. The two most common areas mentioned by students and teachers as evidence of this shared decision-making were curriculum and student-led events.

Student and teacher choice and voice in curricular decisions. Some of the students interviewed expressed how having choice in what they were learning helped them to be more successful. However, this particular topic was one area in which students wanted even more voice. Students shared ways in which choice and teacher flexibility enhanced their education. One student described how her teacher at the beginning of the year lays out the standards and says, “Here is what you have to learn; how do you want to go about learning it?” But many of the students, when asked what the one thing is they wanted to have more voice about, responded by saying, “their learning.” Kat describes it this way:

It goes back to how we relate to it and that’s the basis of learning. At the bottom of it is, like how can we relate? How does it affect us? When does it affect us? Is it going to affect us? If you look at our textbooks, anything . . . it is from a white viewpoint. It is not from other viewpoints. Take Christopher Columbus, the natives welcomed him with open arms . . . you don’t see the other side of it. Like with the blacks, yeah, we learn about the slave trade, but what they don’t tell you is what you want to know.

Another student, Rochelle, states,

We should have an opinion on what we do. Like certain ways that we do things . . . or certain techniques they use. Instead of just having the teacher just having only their opinion about what they are teaching, they should ask us our opinion, like, okay, we are going to learn this today; what do you think about it? Just kinda let us be with the learning agenda, too, and not just having the teachers do it and us kinda having to struggle and say, “What is she talking about?” or that is too easy.

So while students expressed a strong sense of having student voice, when asked what topic they wanted to have more voice about at Sampson, it was their learning. Students viewed that having voice in this area of their education would increase student interest and motivation. Based on the responses from students in the study, the school could work to improve student input and student participation in the area of curriculum and instruction.

In talking with teachers, all of them said, “Administration not only listens to students, they listen to teachers too.” So not only does Fred see that “decision-making at Sampson must include student voice,” he goes on to say, “I have always believed in shared decision-making and everybody, students and teachers, having input into the decisions that are made at a school.” Teachers internalized this shared decision-making in terms of the curricular decisions they were entrusted to make in their classrooms. According to one teacher,

In a typical high school, if the principal walks in and sees me just having a face-to-face conversation with a student, she would question me by saying “Where is the learning? Where is the content? Why is there no learning happening right now?” Well, because of our shared view that we have to build relationships with students, Fred understands this and he allows it, he trusts us. He treats us like professionals. He knows we have the best interest of the student in mind. He also knows that on test scores, all of my kids have passed the WASL. I think the most important thing in our success with our kids is that Fred trusts us.

Promoting student-led events. From the perspective of the students, the administration’s practice of promoting student-led events was seen as proof that their voices were heard. Students saw the school administration’s trust in letting them have considerable say in school events as

proof that they were respected and trusted as full members of the school community. The account of a senior named Annie clearly illustrates this point:

It is important because you spend four years in a high school, and if you don't have some kind of say in how you live in those four years and how you learn in those four years then you are not going to like it. Teachers say these are the four most important years of our lives and that we are going to cherish them forever. So you want to make that a fun experience, you want to get students involved . . . it is important for students to be active or they won't remember it for the rest of their lives.

Other students described with incredible pride the fact that they were given full range in planning and putting on school-wide events like Hope Fair, Peace Day, and Earth Day. During a recent site visit, I observed an all-school assembly for Peace Day. Students were the primary planners and speakers for the event, in which several students rapped about their lives and about peace. Native students performed a tribal song, students drummed and sang inspirational songs about peace. During the Peace Day assembly, the governor sent a proclamation to be read by her assistant. But instead of having the governor's assistant read the message, Fred and Cindy had a Sampson student read the proclamation. The language used at this assembly during the student raps and other student performances was clearly that of the students; it was not filtered by the adults at the school. As I looked out at the audience throughout the performance, I noticed high levels of engagement from the students in the audience; you could see they had a high interest and buy-in on what was being shared during the assembly.

Climate of respect and kindness.

Fred has asked his staff to always interact with students and with each other with kindness and respect. According to Fred, he and the administrative team emphasize to staff, "It is always

more important to be kind than right with kids.” He views that kindness as an investment that every adult at Sampson has to make in his or her relationship with students. According to Fred, the notion of respect means that the adults at Sampson need to believe what students are saying and only when this condition exists will students say what they are really thinking to staff. Fred goes on to say that, absent real kindness and respectful interactions between students, student voice is silenced or significantly muted. Listen to this incident involving discipline that Fred described:

Once we were at the community college, and an adult went into a game room where two kids were playing pool. He said to the kids, “It is time to leave.” He was right, but he wasn’t kind, they were in the middle of a pool game. The kids came back and told me that the teacher disrespected them by abruptly putting all the balls back in the middle of the game. I said, “Do you understand why he did that?” So I explained to them they had a point, and I acknowledged they felt disappointed. I told them I would talk to the teacher, because I don’t think the teacher meant for you to feel disrespected. So I talked to the teacher and asked, “If Jay and I were playing pool, how would you handle that?” I said, “Would you have grabbed the balls and put them back in the middle of the game?” I said, “I want you to treat these young men just like you would treat me and Jay if we were playing pool . . . that is the level of respect we have to have for our kids.”

Fred goes on to say, “When I notice teachers are not being kind and trying to be right, that is when we intervene.” In talking with Sampson teachers and students, several of them described how Fred and his administrative team interact with staff and students with respect. Several of them said, “Fred not only listens to students, he listens to teachers, and he treats us as professionals.”

“I tend to believe what students tell me.” This statement was a recurring phrase in my conversations with Fred. He goes on to suggest that once adults and students are interacting with respect and kindness, students must know that we “believe what they are telling us.” According to Fred, “The decision to act and respond to student voice is linked to our fundamental belief that what they are telling us is true even when they [the students] are disagreeing with us.” Fred also states that, “Kids tell us stuff for a reason,” and we should always ask, “Why would this student tell me what she did?” Because many of the students at Sampson have struggled academically, Fred describes how students will come to him and say, “School sucks, I hate this class,” or “I don’t want to do this.” At many schools, the adults would ignore these comments or dismiss them. Fred states it is important to believe students when they make comments and he makes a point of saying to students, “Tell me more about that,” or “I want to hear more about that.”

According to Fred, it is important for him, as the principal, to anticipate that:

Conflict is a part of everyday life and when a kid comes in with conflict, whether it is with a teacher, textbook, or another student, then I, as principal, have to break it into smaller parts and really figure out what is the source of the concern.

He goes on to say that only then can he respond effectively to student voice.

School structures that support voice.

In talking with the administrative team and the teachers, it became clear that certain structures at Sampson were sustaining, promoting, and, in some cases, enhancing student voice at the school. These structures were the result of Fred’s vision of empowering student voice and student participation in decisions at the school. Two of the structures at Sampson that complimented and elevated voice at the school were student advisories and a leadership group called “Peer-to-Peer.”

Student advisories. At Sampson High School, the principal and his administration described the importance of advisories in allowing time for staff to build relationships with students and as a permanent structure where student voice is continually promoted. The principal had worked with staff in implementing advisories where 10 to 14 students met daily for half an hour with one teacher. At Sampson, there were 25 advisory groups in all. According to Fred, these “advisory groups are the students’ home base; this is their family.” During advisory, students have time to discuss how things are going in their lives, discuss school-related issues, and generate ideas for student-led school events like Hope Fair or Peace Day. During focus group interviews, when asked where their voices were heard the most, many students said “advisory.” These students also described how teachers advocated for them with other teachers because of the conversations that occurred during advisories. Listen to this student:

I think in advisory we are heard a lot. We can go to the advisory teacher and just say what is happening during the day and they will go and talk to teachers about your concern when they have teacher meetings. At the beginning of the year, I was having problems with my math teacher, and I talked with my advisory teacher, and she talked with my math teacher. Since my advisory teacher talked with my math teacher, I have had better experiences with the teacher.

Students also spoke about how advisory was a place for them to have voice and input into school events. According to one student,

We talk a lot in advisory . . . it is where we decide the kind of activities we want to do like Hope Fair, Peace Day, and Earth Day. . . . We told our teachers in advisory we wanted to do this to support our community, and we did it. We put it on without the teachers; we did it all.

Not only did students see the importance of advisories in fostering and promoting student voice, but so did the teachers who were interviewed. These teachers viewed the advisories as a crucial time to build relationships with their students and get to know them without the pressure of having to teach content. One teacher illustrates this point by saying:

I would be remiss when thinking about student voice at Sampson if I didn't mention advisories. All students have an opportunity to be with an adult they connect with.

Through that advisory, I don't have the pressure of having to further content. It is directed toward relationship building, getting to know my students, and student voice. It is a wonderful time to practice democracy . . . we ask the kids, "Do you want to celebrate Peace Day? How do you want to celebrate it?" . . . this time really could be called "student-voice advisory."

Teachers also described this as a time "where teachers hear what students are saying and take it to administration."

Peer-to-Peer. Out of each of the 25 advisories, one student representative is selected on a voluntary basis for a student leadership group called "Peer-to-Peer." This leadership group meets with the assistant principal, Cindy, once a month to surface issues that arise during advisory and to take information back to the advisory from administration. Administration viewed this structure as an important vehicle for them to hear from students and to formally link students into staff development efforts. So when administration wanted to implement a program that would be used during advisories to promote resiliency in students, they turned to the students in "Peer-to-Peer" to attend the all-day training with teachers. These students would then go back and help teachers launch this program with the students in advisory. During the focus groups, students who described student input in the placement of the new reader board or the

trash removal from the alley behind the school both mentioned “Peer-to-Peer” as the place where student insights would be heard to impact these decisions. The “Peer-to-Peer” structure provided students who were in the group, as well as those outside of the group, a degree of validation that changes would occur when they shared their insights and ideas.

Summary

In summary, the students at Sampson describe a school culture wherein their voices are heard. After attending schools where they felt invisible, with little input in the teaching and learning aspects of school, students portray Sampson as a school where staff are (a) signaling they are listening to students, (b) knowing and caring about students, (c) enacting real changes in policy and (d) ensuring those changes improve student learning.

Combining the insights of students, teachers, and administrators, a picture of a larger school culture emerges: a culture shaped by a school principal who promotes and cultivates student voice. The experiences of the students at Sampson are situated in this culture wherein the principal’s vision for voice is continually informed by student insights and ideas. The adults and students at Sampson interact without the usual power dynamics, as the goal is to always interact with respect and kindness. Student learning is enhanced in classrooms that use student-centered instructional strategies, and student self-reporting of improved achievement is evidence of this. One of the most compelling aspects of the culture at Sampson was the sense of “firstness” to students in every corner of the school, from the office personnel to the principal. As the building leader, the principal set the tone by modeling that students come first. He did this by positioning his office so it is in the heart of student traffic, answering e-mails at the end of the day, meeting with students all throughout the day, and filtering all decisions through the lens

of “what is best for kids.” Additionally, this “firstness” to students is supported and complimented by several structures at the school, two of which are the advisories and “Peer-to-Peer.” Both of these structures directly foster and amplify the voices of students at Sampson.

Chapter 4

CONCLUSIONS, RECOMMENDATIONS AND REFLECTIONS

The purpose of this action research study was to explore how student voice is expressed at one alternative high school with a reputation for promoting meaningful voice and to identify the role the principal plays in promoting a culture of student voice. Questions guiding this study included: (a) How does student voice live at Sampson High School? (b) What are the beliefs and actions of administrators, specifically the principal, in promoting voice at the school? and (c) How can student voice be enhanced at Sampson?

In presenting the conclusions of the study in this chapter, I used the research questions as a filter for synthesizing the findings. Beginning with how student voice lives at Sampson, the narratives of the students in the study are used to provide a depiction of voice at Sampson. Additionally, I refer back to the definition of student voice for the study and use it as a lens to examine the expression of voice at the school. I also refer back to the work of Fielding (2001) and Fletcher (2004) to assess whether student voice is expressed at the school in meaningful ways. Data from the interviews with students, teachers and administrators provide evidence of administrative beliefs and actions. Lastly, I present recommendations for the school that provide a framework for the “Act” phase of the action research cycle in which Sampson teachers and administrators will work to enhance voice at the school. These recommendations also provide information for other high schools in the district, and the district as a whole, in their efforts to enhance student voice.

How Does Student Voice Live at Sampson?

How does student voice live at Sampson? Students in the study provided compelling evidence of the power and persistence of voice at the school. Their narratives paint a picture of a school where adults communicate they are listening through non-verbal actions like eye contact and through overt actions like providing feedback, giving suggestions, and answering the students' questions. Students describe a school where the staff is intentional in building relationships with students and demonstrating that they know and care about individual students. Not only were the voices of the students listened to, but students gave examples of how their insights resulted in real change in school practices and policy, changes that most students viewed as improving their learning.

One filter through which to examine how student voice lives at Sampson is the definition of student voice that guided the study and that emphasizes the importance of staff promoting (Mitra, 2004), authorizing (Cook-Sather, 2002), and validating (Fletcher, 2003; Fletcher, 2004) the unique ideas and perspectives of students in order to improve schools and student learning. Did the teachers and administrators at Sampson, promote, authorize and validate the unique ideas of students in order to improve the school and student learning? In terms of promoting voice, several examples in the findings verify that the school engages in promoting student voice. They include (a) staff signaling they are listening, (b) staff knowing and caring about students, and (c) staff building a climate of respect and kindness. All of these strategies cultivate strong relationships between adults and students that allow students to feel safe and open to sharing their voice at the school. For many of the students, the strong relationships they had with the school staff made them more likely to share their thinking and insights at school.

Is Sampson a place where student voices are “authorized”? According to Cook-Sather (2002) schools are “authorizing” voice when school leaders confront the power dynamics in a school that may assume knowledge and position reside with the adults. The data from students at Sampson, as well as the administrative team and teachers, suggest that the school has an informal climate in which adults and students interact on a first-name basis as equals. Several students made the case that, unlike other schools they attended, at Sampson “there is no power-struggle here . . . it is first-name basis and we make decisions about our school.” Students described feeling respected by the adults in the school. Easton (2008) suggests that, “If there is any sense of hierarchy, the student’s trust, progress and willingness to listen is not based on genuine respect but on the duties of fulfilling [what] a high power demands” (p. 22). If schools want to engage and motivate students they [adults] will have to treat students with respect and take their ideas and treat them seriously (Levin, 1994). The principal and the administrative team’s practice of modeling that it is more important to be “kind than right” cultivated an environment in which adults and students, even when faced with discipline and conflict, would interact with respect and dialogue and not default to traditional power dynamics to solve problems. The practice of promoting student-led events was viewed positively by students, and they felt if they shared concerns and ideas, their thoughts were heard and changes were made. Examples of this were the numerous student-led events at the school, including Hope Fair, school assemblies, and operational decisions like the placement of the school reader board. In promoting student-led events, Beaudoin (2005) asserts that students are given an investment and ownership in their school.

Lastly, are student insights and ideas “validated” at Sampson through real partnerships with the adults at the school (Fletcher, 2004)? In other words, did the insights of students result

in real changes in the school that improved learning? What students expressed the most pride about was the dramatic improvement in their learning, as measured by their description of high interest topics in various classes and by improvement in their overall grades. All but one of the students in the study self-reported significant improvement in their grades. These students attributed this to the staff usage of instructional approaches that stressed relevance in the learning, persistent support by teachers, and student voice and choice in curricular decisions. All of these strategies rely heavily on teachers knowing the needs of their students and acquiring this knowledge through student voice. In the area of validating student voice, students in the study expressed a need to have even more voice in their learning, particularly in terms of what is taught, when it is taught, and how it is taught. The desire of Sampson students to be even more involved in their learning is also supported in the literature. Fletcher (as cited in Manefield et al., 2007) challenges educators to “provide opportunities for students to become active participants in their education, including making decisions about what and how they learn, and how their learning is assessed” (p. 5).

The frameworks of experts in the field serve as another filter to evaluate how student voice lives at the school and whether it is expressed in meaningful ways. Thus, it proves useful to refer back to the literature and the works of Fielding (2002) and Fletcher (2004).

Building on the work of Roger Hart (as cited in Fletcher, 2004), Fletcher presents a “Ladder of Student Involvement in Schools” that is comprised of eight levels of student participation. Fletcher asserts that schools can map their student-voice initiatives on the ladder to assess their use of meaningful student voice initiatives. On the first three “rungs” of the ladder, Fletcher illustrates the more token and superficial student voice efforts, which he describes as degrees of non-participation. They include (a) manipulation, (b) decoration, and (c)

tokenism. The upper rungs of the ladder are the more productive and authentic aspects of student voice that Fletcher (2004) refers to in his continuum. These five rungs are described in terms of “degrees of participation.” They detail meaningful student voice initiatives including (d) informed and assigned action; (e) consulted and informed; (f) adult-initiated, shared decision-making; (g) student-initiated and directed; and (h) student-initiated shared decisions with teachers.

Sampson High School structures like “Peer-to-Peer” and student advisories are situated on the higher rungs of Fletcher’s ladder between those that are adult-initiated and those that are student-initiated. Both structures promote the sharing of student opinions and insights with teachers and administration that result in teacher-to-teacher advocacy for individual students, professional development partnerships between students and teachers, and shared decision-making. Beaudoin (2005) makes the case that advisories play an important role in elevating student voice by “bringing students together with adults who know them as individuals” (p. 24). Both students and staff depicted a school culture in which students were listened to and their insights affected positive changes at the school. This provides evidence that student voice initiatives at Sampson High School reside on the upper rungs of Fletcher’s continuum between adult-initiated, shared decision-making and student-initiated and directed decision-making. Finally, the student descriptions of the many student-led events they initiated and implemented is further evidence that the student voice initiatives at Sampson represent the upper rungs of Fletcher’s ladder of student participation.

Fielding (2001) also provides insights into how to assess a school’s ability to engage all voices in the school. He poses the questions, (a) Who is allowed to speak? (b) What are they allowed to speak about? (c) Who is listening? and (d) Is it just the student with a middle-class

background who uses the language of the establishment? Fielding (2001) presses by stating “To judge the potential of student voice for change, [schools] need to pay attention to who is talking and who is listening” (p. 101). In other words, is it just those students who are successful, who come from well-resourced families and who are compliant with the adults in the school and use more acceptable vocabulary? Although I did not count or quantify in a systematic way the words that students used in assemblies, interviews, and countless observations, I noticed that students spoke freely to administrators and teachers, using the language of their cultural backgrounds. From the student who rapped at Peace Day, to the student who used profanity-laced conversation with Fred to express his frustration with his math class, or the many students from broken families living in extreme poverty, all were allowed the space for their voice. During one of the focus group interviews, one student said, “Here at Sampson, they don’t judge you about what you do, or where you are from.” She goes on to explain, “If you get in trouble, they don’t hold it against you for the whole entire year, they still believe in you and you still feel like you have a place at this school.”

What are the Beliefs and Actions of Administrators, Specifically the Principal, in Promoting Voice at Sampson High School?

The literature on voice clearly identifies the principal as a critical factor in promoting student voice. Beaudoin (2005) writes in regard to student voice, “public school leaders can set a tone of openness, caring, empathy, or mutual trust through the way they behave . . . open doors, vulnerability, shared hardships” (p. 25). Neigel (2006) states, “The role of the principal is a key variable in the success of any student initiative. Without the unequivocal support of the principal, student voice is a difficult endeavor” (p. 4). This study examined the beliefs and

perceptions of the principal about voice and the specific actions of the school principal in promoting a culture where students were heard. Reflecting on the insights of students, teachers and the administrators in this study, perceptions and actions of the building principal can be linked to a strong presence of voice in the school.

Both the principal and his administrative team held beliefs about voice that aligned with the definition of voice outlined in the study. The principal described voice in the following terms:

The word empowerment comes to mind . . . it also means that students should have a say about the system that they are part of, which is high school, and a way to contribute back to the community that is meant so serve them.

While the principal assistant defined student voice by saying:

Voice to me is a very powerful word. Our voices come from somewhere . . . it is about who I am at the core. When students share their voice, whether it is written, oral or their artwork, even their clothes—it is their identity.

Coupled with a belief about voice that fits with “meaningful voice,” as defined by Fletcher, (2003 & 2004), the principal held the view that students were to be “believed.” He stated, “I tend to believe what students tell me.” This orientation resulted in the administration and the school staff acting on the voices of the students at Sampson.

What were the actions of the principal and his team in establishing a culture of strong voice for students? Looking back at the many actions of the principal and his team in creating a culture of meaningful voice at Sampson, the most pivotal action that the principal took was modeling and repeatedly advocating for a “firstness” to students. Moving his office to the hub of student activity, answering e-mails and doing paperwork at the end of the day so he could meet

with students, and making it clear that all decisions had to be made with the best interests of students in mind all created trust and credibility from both the students and staff. In talking with the principal of Sampson it became evident that he had a clear vision of the importance of having student voice in every aspect of schooling. Acting on this vision, the principal and his team promoted a personalized environment, an informal culture, professional development that supported teacher use of student-centered instructional strategies, shared decision-making, a climate of respect and kindness, and school structures that fostered and amplified student voice throughout the school.

How Can Student Voice Be Enhanced at Sampson?

Recommendations

The “Act” phase of action research will continue, based in part on the recommendations from the “Look” and “Think” phases. The overall recommendations of this study are for Sampson staff to (a) continue the practices at the school that are fostering voice and to formally integrate information from the study into the school improvement plan; (b) enhance student voice and decision-making in teaching and learning, particularly on what is taught, how it is taught and when it is taught; and (c) consider either the “Peer-to-Peer” group or another student group to be resident researchers, at the school to engaging in research on how to enhance voice on issues of teaching and learning.

At the district level, there is much work to do to promote and support student voice initiatives throughout the district. This study revealed the critical role the building principal plays in fostering a culture where student voice is promoted. Based on the findings of the pilot study discussed in Chapter 3, there was little evidence of widespread student voice initiatives

within the district's high schools. The schools relied on more traditional initiatives in which student participation was limited to a few students, and discussions were adult directed with little input from the students. As a result, it is recommended that the district (a) continue to use student focus groups as a strategy to assess the presence of more meaningful voice initiatives across all high schools; (b) provide professional development for building administrators that fosters increased capacity and skill in promoting meaningful voice initiatives in their schools; (c) celebrate and reward schools that show evidence of having meaningful student voice initiatives; and (d) require that schools use both qualitative and quantitative data that is representative of the perceptions, insights and ideas of students to measure the effectiveness of a school.

Anticipating the "Act" Phase

This report focused on the "Look," and "Think" phases of the action research cycle. The final phase of the action research cycle is the "Act" phase. The Sampson administrative team will look to the recommendations from this action research study for guidance as to how to continue to promote meaningful voice and incorporate relevant actions into the school improvement plan. I will be sharing the recommendations with the entire Sampson staff in the spring of 2009, as they are revising and updating the school improvement plan. Also, the recommendations from this study will be shared at the district level in March of 2009 with the Strategic Leadership Group, a committee consisting of the district administrators and teachers from all levels, representatives from the teachers' union, the superintendent and members of the school board. In addition to the recommendations, a framework for promoting student voice will be shared with all administrators in the district to provide information on aspects of school culture that elevate student voice (see Appendix D) at Sampson.

It is also apparent that the “Act” phase has already begun at both the school level and the district level. At the school level, in the final meeting with the collaborative research team at Sampson, in which we determined the timeline for sharing the findings with the staff, I asked how the study had impacted the principal’s thinking and practice. “I am even more intentional about voice than ever before” Fred shared and “Whenever we are making decisions about anything, I think, where is the student voice in this?” Both Cindy, the principal assistant, and Fred described a new strategy they were already using to increase student voice where they have had students analyzing student achievement data at the school to collaborate on how to improve learning.

Not only is the success of student voice dependent on the principal at the building level, it is equally as important at the district level that the superintendent has a vision and commitment to student voice. The superintendent is actively promoting the use of student voice throughout the district both with the school board and with building principals. As a result, in meetings at the district level, I am beginning to hear leaders referring to “student voice” when generating school improvement strategies; this signals an increased awareness of the importance of student voice in school improvement. At the beginning of the 2008-2009 school year, for the all-administrator training, the superintendent and the associate superintendent used video clips of a high school student and an elementary student describing the kind of teacher that has helped them be successful. With the support of the superintendent, and because of the district’s interest in voice, Fred, several building principals, and I facilitated a workshop on how to use student voice for student learning at one of the state school board association meetings. Probably one of the most compelling examples of the district’s shift to incorporating student voice as a practice at our schools is the work being done centrally by high school principals at every school in

designing and implementing the practice of end-of-course surveys to be completed by students. Students are being asked, at the conclusion of every course, to provide feedback to their teachers about the effectiveness of the instruction. Although this practice is common at universities and colleges, this represents a significant shift in practice for K-12 education.

Conclusions

Student voice “lives” at Sampson in meaningful ways and the most compelling evidence of this was in the narratives of the students who described new found academic success. Both the administrative team and the teachers in this study support the students’ depiction of the school culture at Sampson where the principal, Fred, plays an essential role in establishing a vision for voice. The principal then acts on that vision through overt actions of modeling, shared decision-making, implementing student voice structures, and promoting classroom and school practices that foster voice.

The findings of this study reveal compelling ideas about voice and schooling. In listening to the students at Sampson, their teachers and administrators, the following conclusions can be made:

1. Students have a strong need and a desire to have voice in their schooling.
2. Students look for cues from teachers and administrators to gauge if they are being heard and they look for changes that result from their insights to ultimately measure if their voices are taken seriously.
3. When given voice, students are more engaged in their learning and in school.

4. Educators can create a school culture that promotes and amplifies student voice by mitigating power dynamics, building trusting relationships with students, and seeking out the insights and opinions of students and then acting on them.
5. Leadership matters!--especially the building principal in setting the tone for voice by holding a vision for student voice, modeling a “firstness” to students, designing school structures that promote voice, and integrating student voice strategies in all aspects of school improvement planning.
6. Some of the most difficult questions about what needs to be improved in schools and how to improve them can ONLY be answered by students. For it is students who are ultimately responsible for their performance in schools, and they are intimately aware of what is working and what is not.
7. Student voice is as important, if not more so, than any other reform strategy. When given voice, students are empowered, motivated and engaged in their schooling. Without being empowered to participate in every aspect of their education, students will resist efforts by adults to coerce and convince them to learn.

Further Implications

What is most urgent at both the district and school level is that high schools are still reporting high dropout rates and disproportionate discipline and special education referrals for students of color. Administrators and teacher leaders are actively engaged in trying out strategies to remedy this challenge with limited, if not negligible results. The approaches by both administrators and teachers in the past have not included the insights of students. What is most troubling is that those students who struggle academically or social-emotionally all too

often are students of color, second language learners or students in poverty; the voices of these students and their communities are often muted or even silenced in many schools. Many prominent scholars attribute the absence of the voices of these students in matters of their schooling, particularly teaching and learning, as one of the primary contributors to the achievement gap (Noguera, 2004; Shields, 1999; Delpit, 1995). This current state of our schools and particularly high schools is illustrated in the thinking of Freire (1993) who said, “Schools suffer from narration sickness, where teachers are the talking subjects and students are the listening objects, educators need to speak by listening” (p. 71).

If the district and schools within them are to truly reform, then the 2006 recommendations of Neigel are compelling. He maintains,

The message is clear, giving students voice in determining the quality in their education is central to school reform . . . this means that districts and schools need to engage in the creation of student leadership forums and student-initiated seminars on topics directly related to school improvement (p. 1).

Howard (2001) challenges educators to see the parallel between education and the medical field in which physicians elicit the voices of their patients by asking basic, yet vital questions like “What is the ailment?” or “What do you think caused your sickness?” He goes on to say that without this information from the patient, the physician simply cannot make a successful plan for intervention. In education, it is becoming increasingly clear that many students are academically “ill,” yet educators continue to prescribe failed strategies and initiatives without ever consulting the patient, in this instance, the student.

When looking at the larger education community beyond our district, it means that schools across the state and across the nation are going to have to reframe how they think about school

improvement. With national educational statistics (Ed Trust, 2006) depicting a picture of high schools as places that are failing students, particularly low-income or minority children, and with the United States currently ranking 16th among 20 developed nations in the percentage of students who complete high school and 14th among the top 20 in college graduation rates, the urgency to think about reform in new ways is evident. Past reform efforts have relied on the minds of educators, researchers and policy makers. So far the results of the collective thinking of these groups are that one out of three high school students drop out before graduation while just 18 of 100 students entering high school go on to complete their college degree within six years of starting college. The United States has slipped from first to fifth internationally in the percentage of young people who hold a college degree. The questions that arise from these results are: (a) Who has the knowledge to know how to reform schools? (b) Is it the just educators or a combination of adult and student insights?

With the latest research on constructivism and the need for the learner to be actively engaged in creating meaning about their learning, it stands to reason that students need to be actively engaged in efforts to reform their schools. “Increasing student voice in schools also has been shown to help reengage alienated students by providing them with a stronger sense of ownership in their schools” (Mitra, 2003, p. 289).

The findings of this study suggest that a significant component of reform, as it relates to student voice, relies on the leadership of the building principal and teacher leaders. This means that national principal organizations and principal leadership programs will have to redefine the characteristics of an effective principal in terms of how well they engage and promote student voice in schools. If we listen to the calls of Cook-Sather (2002) and “stop building and rebuilding entire school systems without considering the insights of the people the schools were

designed to serve, the student” (p. 3), then the work of school leaders and, specifically principals, is to further school culture where student insights drive improvement efforts. Teacher preparation programs should also build teacher capacity for fostering and promoting student voice in the classrooms, because according to Cook-Sather (2007), “Fostering student engagement and voice within and through teacher education is a rare phenomenon” (p. 345).

Members of the education community will have to grapple with a critical question: Do we believe students have something to say that is essential to our understanding about how to teach them? If the answer is “yes,” then it implies that any strategy or practice of school reform devised and implemented without the insight and involvement of students is likely to fail. This question also presents endless possibilities for the future in that what many in the education community have seen as an “impossible task,” teaching and reaching ALL students, may just appear unreachable because we have not engaged the right people in the endeavor, the students. Who would know better how to understand and tackle this challenge than the students themselves? Mitra says it best when she asks, “What might happen if we viewed youth as part of the solution of the problem?” (as cited in Manefield et al., 2007, p. 14).

At the larger state and national level, policy makers and other stakeholders will have to find ways to bring students to the conversation about school reform. In many ways, schools are reacting to policy and legislation at the state and national level that have unintended consequences and tend to obscure student voice. With students as active participants in the dialogue, their unique ideas and perspectives can illuminate those policies that promote student learning by getting at the “root” causes of current challenges like high dropout rates, the achievement gap, and poor student engagement.

Creating a culture for meaningful student voice is not easy. It requires adults to challenge longstanding notions of hierarchy with adults at the top and students at the bottom. Additionally, with the fast pace of schools and the numerous initiatives that are placed at the school house door that are either driven by district, state or national policy, taking the time to explore and develop effective student voice strategies will require persistent and committed school leaders. As a result, more research on student voice is needed to explore the practices and structures of schools with meaningful voice. This study focused on the role of the principal, yet are there schools with a strong presence of student voice in which other factors are furthering student voice? Most of the studies on student voice describe the benefits of student voice, while a small number detail how school leaders cultivate voice. If student voice is to become more established in schools, more research will be needed to provide guidance to school leaders on the specific factors that are essential in furthering meaningful student voice. Future studies that build on this study and the research of others are needed to continue to detail and clearly depict powerful exemplars of schools with meaningful voice, so that more evidence is provided to practitioners in the field on the “how to” of student voice.

Positionality and Personal Reflections

Because this is an action research study, I had to fully attend to power dynamics by paying close attention to my positionality. This is especially important as the study was “inquiry that is done with insiders . . .” of the school, “but never to or on them” (Herr & Anderson, 2005, p. 3). Because of my role in the district as an Executive Director of Teaching and Learning, responsible for supervising elementary schools, I worked to minimize the power dynamic that might surface in schools I directly supervise by researching a high school. Looking back on my research, the intentionality in engaging with the Sampson administrative team collaboratively at each phase of the action research cycle also ensured the study was conducted with the team as partners.

Because the culture of Sampson was a place where the power dynamics between students and adults were moderated, I found that students spoke freely to me because they were accustomed to sharing their insights and ideas with adults all the time. To be frank, I had to reframe my thinking as many students spoke about drugs, sex, and other contemporary dilemmas they faced with an ease that I had not been accustomed to hearing. There were instances where I had to look to the Sampson administrators as they modeled facial expressions and tone of voice that rarely waivered as they interacted with students in these settings. For the students, it meant they were not being judged and, as a result, it increased their trust to say whatever they were thinking.

Probably the most significant dimension of my positionality that I had to be aware of was my experience as a mother of two children who have attended high schools in the district, and whose experiences were similar to many students who had little opportunity to engage in meaningful voice. I constantly reminded myself of this lens as I engaged in my research at

Sampson. As I listened to the narratives of the students at Sampson, I could not ignore the similarity of their points of view to those of my own children. I have come to think that because of the experiences of my children as students of color in the same district, I had the benefit of wearing a set of “lenses” that allowed me to hear the stories and see the images of the Sampson students with a certain clarity and familiarity. These “lenses” allowed me to care enough to get their stories right and report the findings with a certain truth and transparency befitting these incredible young people.

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APPENDIX A

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL FOR STUDENT FOCUS GROUPS

1. How are things going here in terms of your learning?
2. Do you feel you are heard by adults?
3. Who is allowed to speak here? To whom do you speak? What do you speak about? How often?
4. Who listens to you?
5. How does student voice support your learning?
6. How do you know?
 - Give specific examples
7. How could the school do a better job of listening to students?

APPENDIX B

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL FOR STUDENT-TO-STUDENT INTERVIEWS

1. How are things going here in terms of your learning?
2. Do you feel you are heard by adults here at Sampson? (Can you provide examples?)
3. Are you heard in your classes? (How do you know?)
4. How do teachers signal to you that you are being heard?
5. How do Fred, Cindy, and Jay signal to you that you are being heard?
6. What is the most important topic you want to be heard about here at school?
7. Who listens to you? When do you feel listened to the most?
8. How does student voice support your learning?
9. How do you know? Give specific examples.
10. Have you been in other schools where you were heard? If yes, could you provide examples? If no, how were the other schools different?
11. How could the school do a better job of listening to students?
12. Is there anything else you want to add about student voice?

APPENDIX C

TEACHER/PRINCIPAL INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

1. When you hear student voice, what comes to mind?
2. How do you view the role of student voice in school improvement efforts?
3. Describe your experience with student voice at high school.
 - What is the role of the principal as it relates to student voice?
 - What is happening here with the use of student voice?
 - What is the impact for students whose voices are heard?
 - What is happening at other high schools in the area of student voice?
 - What is the role of the principal in influencing student voice?
4. Are there structures that exist in the school to foster the use of student voice?
 - What are barriers to student voice?
 - School/community?
5. How could the experiences of students inform the professional development plan of the school? Structures?
6. How could the experiences of students inform your teachers/school leaders about student learning in classrooms?
7. Can you provide a specific example of a decision you made that was influenced by student voice?
8. If you have regular forums where students could provide feedback on school improvements, what would you ask them?
9. What do you think students would say?
10. Anything else you want to add on student voice?

Appendix D

A Framework for School Leaders Seeking to Promote, Authorize and Validate Student Voice	
How do students perceive adults are listening?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Eye contact • Asking clarifying questions • Answering their questions • Following up on student concerns • Providing feedback • When changes are made as result of student insights
How do students know they are being heard?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Real changes occur as a result of their insights • Changes improve the school and student learning • Authentic collaboration with staff on issues of teaching and learning
Components of a school culture that promotes student voice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Informal school culture absent of power dynamics and minimal hierarchy between staff and students • Personalized environment where student feel known and cared about • Trusting and respectful relationships between students and staff • Shared vision of the importance and power of student voice with all staff • Responsive instructional approaches
Leaders beliefs, values and vision about student voice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hold a vision and definition of student voice that involves students as authentic partners in all aspects of the school • Believe students and trust that their insights are real and should be authorized • Belief in a “first-ness” to students • Model shared decision-making • Promote flattened structure---attend to power dynamics between adults and students
Leader Actions	<p><i>Lead in the implementation of structures that promote student voice</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Advisories • Peer-to-Peer (student leadership and administration partnership) <p><i>Lead by</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Having student-centered orientation • Promoting student-led events • Modeling a vision for student voice that is reflected in school improvement plan and staff development • Facilitating shared decision-making