

Increasing Student Voice and Moving Toward Youth Leadership

By Dana Mitra, Ph.D.



The term “student voice” describes the many ways in which youth might have the opportunity to participate in school decisions that will shape their lives and the lives of their peers (Fielding, 2001; Goodwillie, 1993; Levin, 2000). Through student voice opportunities, students can work with teachers and administrators to co-create the path of reform. This process will enable youth to meet their own developmental needs and will strengthen student ownership of the change process. All types of student voice, from limited input to substantial leadership, are considerably different from the types of roles that students typically perform in U.S. schools (such as planning school dances and holding pep rallies). When placed into practice, student voice can range from the most basic level of youth sharing their opinions of problems and potential solutions, to allowing young people to collaborate with adults to address the problems in their schools, to youth taking the lead on seeking change.

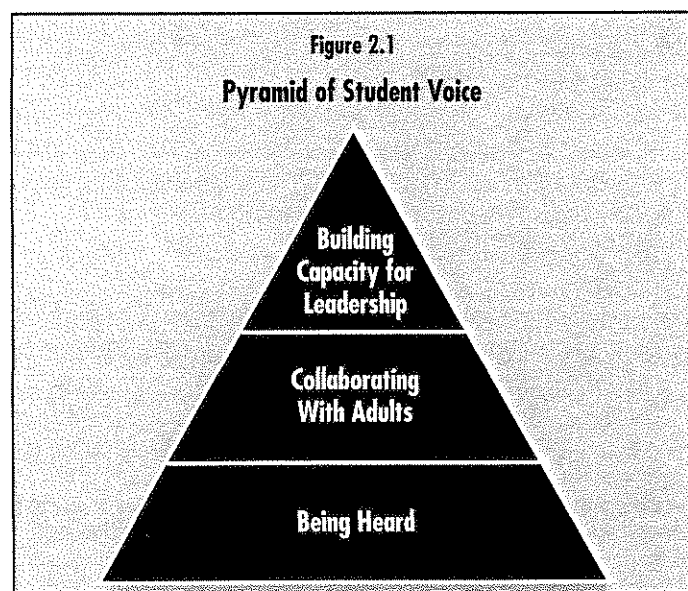
This article describes a progression of student voice activities, using the case of Whitman High School¹ as an example. It describes the importance youth placed in “being heard” (Mitra, 2003; Oldfather, 1995) during the initial focus groups conducted at the school. Following these focus groups, the school then shifted from solely listening to students to collaborating with them (Mitra, forthcoming) to solve the problems that had been identified. Students then exerted a leadership role in these student voice activities when they were given the institutional space and guidance to think strategically about school change. After the creation of student leader positions, the group developed many successful student-focused and teacher-focused initiatives aimed at improving relationships between students and teachers at the school.

Typologies of Student Voice

Various typologies have been developed to describe student voice activities in schools. The Manitoba School Improvement Program (Lee & Zimmerman, 1999) describes its work on student voice along a three-point continuum from passive (information source) to active (participant) to directive (designer). Michael Fielding’s (2001) spectrum of student involvement in school-based research follows a similar trajectory, from least to greatest: student as data source, student as active respondent, student as co-researcher, and student as researcher. Additionally, in the community development literature, Roger Hart’s (1992) “ladder of young people’s participation” offers a typology of youth participation that ranges from tokenism and manipulation, or “non-participation,” to projects that are “young person-initiated” but still require shared decision-making

with adults. Missing from these typologies is an interpretation of the extent to which these types of student participation tend to occur. Also missing is an explicit discussion of the relationship between these opportunities and the youth development opportunities available for youth.

The pyramid of student voice (Figure 2.1) illustrates youth development opportunities possible as student voice is increased in a school. It begins at the bottom with the most common and most basic form of student voice—“being heard.” At this level, school personnel listen to students to learn about their experiences in school. “Collaborating with adults” is the next level. It describes instances in which students work with adults to make changes in the school, including collecting data on school problems and implementing solutions. The final (and smallest) level at the top



¹All names used within this article have been changed to protect the confidentiality of the school and students involved.

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of the pyramid, "Building capacity for leadership," includes an explicit focus on enabling youth to share in the leadership of the student voice initiative. This final level is the least common form of student voice.

Being Heard

Listening to students is the most common form of student voice reported in the literature (Mitra, forthcoming). When gathering student information, adults seek student perspectives and then interpret the meaning of the data (Costello, Toles, Spielberger, & Wynn, 2000). The importance of learning from student voices stems from the belief that students themselves are often neglected sources of useful information. Listening to students reminds teachers and administrators that students possess unique knowledge and perspectives about their schools that adults cannot fully replicate (Kushman, 1997; Levin, 2000; Mitra, 2001, 2004). Most often researchers and practitioners have sought student perspectives on learning, pedagogy, and curriculum (Daniels, Deborah, & McCombs, 2001; Pope, 2001).

Through focus groups, surveys, interviews, and shadowing youth, school personnel can learn about student experiences and discover ways to improve schools. When Whitman High School began an inquiry-based process of collecting data to determine the focus of the school's change effort, the school's reform leadership team made the unusual decision of asking students what they felt needed to be improved. A fourth-year English teacher partnered with the school's reform coordinator to develop a process for students from all academic levels, races, and social cliques to share their views. Students participated in focus groups to answer the questions: What contexts help students to have a successful freshman year at Whitman? What issues contribute to student failure?

When participating in student voice activities, students often speak with great appreciation that their voices are finally being "heard" (Mitra, 2003) and "honored" (Oldfather, 1995). Whitman students also expressed gratitude for having the opportunity to share their opinions with adults in their school. Commenting on his participation in the Whitman focus groups, junior Sala Jones reflected, "Me being a student, I can really do something. I'm just not an ordinary guy. I have a voice ... My opinion counts and people need to really respect my opinion, to value it." Students expressed a growing sense of self-worth because they felt that people were listening to their perspectives (Mitra, 2003).

Collaborating With Adults

To satisfy the many goals of positive youth development, youth need to participate more deeply than simply "being heard." They need opportunities to influence issues that matter to them (Costello et al., 2000; Pittman, Irby, & Ferber, 2000) and to engage in actively solving problems (Fielding, 2001; Goodwillie, 1993). They also need to develop closer and more intimate connections with adults and with peers (McLaughlin, 1999; Pittman & Wright, 1991). Whitman students had such opportunities when school staff decided to involve the students in the process of analyzing the focus group data.

The students and staff at Whitman divided the focus group data and worked in small groups in subsequent meetings to identify repeating themes. Adults offered assistance to each group by asking probing questions and providing informal assistance with research methods. The adults also taught the students "education lingo," such as the concept of standards-based reform, to help them to identify themes in the data. The students did their share of teaching as well, including

translating student explanations into language adults would understand. For example, in one focus group transcript the adults interpreted a student's comments as meaning that she did not see the value of coming to school. A student who was a part of the team analyzing the transcript explained to the adults in his group that this interpretation was incorrect. The student was missing school due to family problems. Yet when she came back to school, her teacher seemed very angry with her for missing so much class. Ashamed of the possibility of letting down her teacher and also mentally tired from the problems at home, this student did not want to engage in a confrontational situation with the teacher, so she stopped coming to class entirely. Through the process of reviewing the transcripts, youth and adults worked together to develop a common language and a set of skills that created a shared knowledge base from which the group could communicate and proceed with their activities.

Over the course of three months, the students and adults identified four main themes in the transcripts as the most pressing areas for reform at Whitman: (1) improving the school's reputation, (2) increasing counseling and information resources for incoming ninth graders, (3) improving communication between students and teachers, and (4) raising the quality of teaching. The students then presented these findings to the school faculty.

Through partnering with adults, youth noticed a growing mutual understanding between teachers and students. Whitman sophomore Joey Sampson explained, "I think the teachers look at us differently

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now. Like, I kind of, like, get a little bit more respect, or I know a lot more of them now that I'm involved with this stuff ... Because you're not just another punk kid anymore. You're actually trying to do something."

The enthusiasm generated from the focus group experience caused the students to want to continue to work on some of the problems that they had identified, so they organized a group called "Student Forum." Student Forum chose to focus its efforts on building stronger relationships between students and teachers to help to counteract the isolation and lack of respect and appreciation that students reported they often feel.

Building Capacity for Youth Leadership

Youth at Whitman wanted to inject student voice into school decision making and to seek ways to make the school a better place for all students, yet they struggled with how to turn their vision of student-teacher collaboration into an action plan. They found themselves inhibited by a meeting structure that only allowed them to come together once a month during the school day. Since nearly all of the youth in this working-class community held jobs after school, meeting after school was not an option either. The group finally started to achieve some of its goals when six students, called Organizers, began to meet every day as a class to plan Student Forum activities. Through the establishment of a consistent space and time for work on student voice activities, these six youth assumed leadership roles for the group.

The creation of student leadership positions was important since youth need opportunities to practice and to assume leadership roles in preparation for future adult responsibilities (Connell, Gambone, &

Smith, 1998). The Organizers assumed responsibility for developing activities that would build a stronger partnership and improve communication between students and teachers. The Organizers developed two complementary strategies for building communication between students and teachers. These strategies were classified as “teacher-focused” activities and “student-focused” activities.

In teacher-focused activities, students joined in the school’s reform work, including participating in staff trainings on inquiry-based research and research groups on reading strategies. During these activities, students served as experts of their classroom experience by providing teachers with feedback on how students might receive new pedagogical strategies. The students also shared their own experiences, including both positive and negative experiences in Whitman classrooms. In addition to teachers benefiting from student input, the youth gained a greater understanding of teacher perspectives and school policies.

The group also developed “student-focused” activities that helped teachers gain a better understanding of student perspectives. Pairs of students took teachers on tours of their neighborhood and showed them where they lived, worked, and socialized with friends. The student tour guides pointed out the gang territories and safe zones where they could find support from community agencies and friends.

One of Whitman High School’s greatest troubles was its reputation as a “ghetto school.” Considered the worst school in the district, Whitman graduated just over half (57%) of the students that start in ninth grade and one-third of its teachers elected to leave each year. Since the first focus group, students and teachers listed the school’s reputation as one of their greatest concerns about the school. To address the school’s reputation, Student Forum hosted student and teacher discussions on the issue, which they called “Ghetto Forums.” The group found that students used the term “ghetto” as a source of identification and pride amongst their peers, but viewed it as a derogatory term when used by people who did

not live in their neighborhood. Other students and teachers viewed the term as a state of mind that lowered expectations for themselves and for others.

As a result of the student-focused and teacher-focused activities, group members noticed many changes in teacher perspectives. The student-led tour and the Ghetto Forums helped to reduce tension between teachers and students, to increase informality, and to help teachers and students identify one another as individuals rather than as stereotypes. In addition to students seeing shifts in teacher perspectives about youth, the group’s work inspired some teachers to partner with students to make changes in classroom pedagogy. Working with Student Forum members during professional development sessions and reading research groups encouraged teachers to continue to involve students as they returned to their classrooms to implement what they had learned. Adults who participated the most in student voice efforts seemed to develop a stronger belief in the value of partnering with students.

The Trade-Offs of Student Voice Strategies

Given the difficulties of enabling youth leadership, the experiences of Whitman High School and other student voice examples (Fielding, 2001; Oldfather, 1995; Mitra, 2003, 2005) suggest that gathering data from students is decidedly simpler than determining how to embolden youth to assume the leadership of an initiative that seeks to change a school. And perhaps for schools just beginning to explore ways to increase student voice, listening to students is a natural first step. It is the least threatening form of student voice and it still offers great rewards in terms of encouraging school personnel to challenge their assumptions about the problems and solutions available to them. Nevertheless, solely listening to students does not present youth with opportunities to collaborate with adults or to develop leadership skills. The greater the involvement of youth in student voice initiatives and the more that young people have the opportunity to assume leadership roles in these activities,

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the greater the rewards in terms of youth development and overall growth (deCharms, 1976; Lee & Zimmerman, 1999; Mitra, 2004).

Yet cultivating youth leadership within the institutional constructs of a school is a challenge. Students face definite limits in terms of the amount of power and authority that they can assume. To achieve youth leadership within a school, adults switch roles to become supporters and educators (Kirshner, O'Donoghue, & McLaughlin, 2003) in the interaction and work to build a tone of trust among adults and students (Cervone, 2002). Scholars have examined how adults go about empowering youth and emphasize that true engagement requires a "rupture of the ordinary" (Fielding, 2004; Kirshner & O'Donoghue, 2001; Mitra, 2005). Adults need to work in partnership with youth conscientiously and continuously to develop patterns of interaction that aligned with the values of equitable relations.

When adults do not intentionally keep a focus on group process, the youth and adults often fall back into traditional teacher-student roles (Mitra, 2005). The payoff of such challenging work, however, can be a marked increase in opportunities for young people to learn and to grow. The experience of junior Donald Goodwin exemplifies the important opportunities that became available to him through participation in student voice activities at Whitman. Donald was an articulate, passionate student who did not have many opportunities

in his life to have his self-worth reinforced. His mother was a drug addict and many of his relatives were in jail. When reflecting on his experience in Student Forum, he commented:

"When I was talking to those teachers, you could just see those eyes of people who just wanted to know what we were thinking. That just felt so powerful..." He wanted adults to "know that students at this young age have an opinion. We know what we want and can see the different things that are happening. [We can push for change in our school] in a respectful manner without raising our voice, getting upset, and other ways that people have tried to do in the past, which have gone nowhere..."



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