

Student Voice Or Empowerment? Examining The Role Of School-Based Youth-Adult Partnerships As An Avenue Toward Focusing On Social

Leadership for Learning in the Context of Social Justice: An American Perspective

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Student Voice Or Empowerment? Examining The Role Of School-Based Youth-Adult Partnerships As An Avenue Toward Focusing On Social Justice

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ABSTRACT: Drawing on the parallel literature on increasing student voice in the field of education and on building youth-adult partnerships in the youth development field, this article examines the place of young people in efforts to increase social justice in school settings. Through an examination of thirteen youth-adult partnership initiatives, it considers the ways in which students and adults can collaborate to examine issues of equity and injustice that they experience in their lives, in their schools, in their communities, and in broader society. The findings identify that the groups' intended goals focused on addressing issues of equity and social justice on three levels—the system level by focusing on issues of intolerance and injustice, the organizational level by advocating for school change, and the individual level by fostering youth leadership and peer helping.

Introduction

When considering the place of social justice in educational leadership, one must examine the concept as both a goal and a process. That is, one must think not only about whether schools can be engaged in discussions and activities on questions of equity and social change. One must also examine whose voices are included in such conversations. Having students participate in activities aimed at addressing inequities and intolerance in schools relates both to the process and product questions related to a focus on social justice.

Review of Literature

A growing body of literature emphasizes the value of extending the notion of distributed leadership (Elmore, 2000; Lashway, 2003) to include students in the process. Such research has demonstrated that youth-adult partnerships can create a synergy that transcends what youth or adults alone can do, including sparking great strides in clarifying an organization's vision and accomplishments (Kirshner, O'Donoghue, & McLaughlin, 2003; Mitra, 2001; National Research Council, 2002; Zeldin, 2004; Zeldin, Camino, & Mook, 2005). Increasing student voice in schools can also encourage schools to more closely align their mission, goals, and activities with a social justice focus. Research indicates that young people tend to broach subjects that adults are reluctant to discuss, such as equity issues that tend to get swept under the rug by administrators and other adults in the school who would rather avoid controversy (Fine, 1991; Wehlage, Rutter, Smith, Lesko, & Fernandez, 1989). For example, by involving students in school-wide discussions about academic achievement—and particularly students failing subjects or rarely attending school—school personnel cannot easily shift the blame of failure onto the students (Mitra, 2003). Instead they must assess the problems within the school's structure and culture. Giving students a voice in such reform conversations reminds teachers and administrators that students possess unique knowledge and perspectives about their schools that adults cannot fully replicate without this partnership (Kushman, 1997; Levin, 2000; Mitra, 2001; Rudduck, Day, & Wallace, 1997; Thorkildsen, 1994).

In addition to a focus on social justice of outcomes, the process of including young people at the table also has been

shown to lead to great benefits for youth. These gains include an increase in agency, confidence, attachment to social institutions, and to foster a range of competencies (Kirshner, O'Donoghue, & McLaughlin, 2003; Mitra, 2004). Increasing student voice can lead to an increase in youth empowerment (Larson, Walker, & Pearce, 2005), which can provide sources of social capital for youth that can yield opportunities for further education, employment and other enrichment opportunities (O'Connor & Camino, 2005). In addition to the professional growth that these partnerships can facilitate, youth-adult partnerships also benefit the adults involved by fulfilling a fundamental psychosocial need of adult development by fostering intergenerational relationships that include sharing knowledge and experiences with youth (Ginwright, 2005).

The Evolution of Student Voice in Schools

The current origins of student voice initiatives in school stem from the student empowerment efforts of the sixties and early seventies that demanded increased civil and individual rights (Johnson, 1991). During this era, students focused more directly on social justice issues, such as youth having a right to contribute to decisions about their schools and their academic preparation. In the modern context, the term "student voice" offers a less threatening notion of youth engagement than "student empowerment." The politics of the time often require a justification of student voice as a way to increase student outcomes, and particularly test scores. Legitimacy of student voice is thus gained by developing the argument that it can be an avenue toward improving student outcomes.

The recent increase in attention to student voice initiatives dovetails with a growing field of research on the importance of "youth-adult partnerships" in the youth development field (Camino, 2000; Zeldin, 2004). The literature is so similar in its findings and approach that this article will use the concepts of "student voice initiative" and "school-based youth-adult partnership" interchangeably to draw attention to impressive and growing research in both fields. Both of these fields describe youth-adult partnerships as spaces in which adults and young people have the potential to contribute to decision making processes, to learn from one another, and to promote change (Jones & Perkins, 2004). A focus on mutual teaching and learning develops in youth-adult partnerships as all parties involved assume a leadership role in some aspects of their shared effort (Camino, 2000). This emphasis may include youth sharing in the responsibility for the vision of the group, the activities planned, and the group process that facilitates the enactment of these activities (Jones, 2004). In school contexts, the concept of student voice has gained increasing credence as a construct that describes the many ways in which youth might have the opportunity to actively participate in school decisions that will shape their lives, the lives of their families, and the lives of their peers (Fielding, 2001; Goodwillie, 1993; Levin, 2000).

Given the history of student empowerment and the current political contexts deemphasizing individual rights and prioritizing test scores, this article takes a closer look at the ways in which school-based youth-adult partnerships can still raise issues of social justice. The article suggests that a socially just school not only trains students in a narrow academic sense but it also prepares young people to lead democratic and morally just lives. This article therefore examines how young people can be a voice for change in their schools and what such efforts look like.

Methods

Sample

This article draws from a larger study designed to examine the process and outcomes of 13 student-voice initiatives in Northern California. The research sample was designed to identify sites that most actively demonstrated commitment to fostering youth-adult partnerships rather than to find schools with a range of student involvement in reform efforts. The sample therefore is based on representation of strong student voice initiatives rather than representation of school sites (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

The 13 groups for this study were chosen because they all received grant funding from a local foundation in the San Francisco Bay Area to work on building a student voice initiative in their school. Schools had to apply for the funds, and seed grants of \$5,000 were awarded to schools demonstrating involvement in the proposed plan and sufficient capacity to complete their proposed projects. The groups were chosen because they were identified as the strongest applicants in the pool (and indeed some were recruited because of their reputation for working on student voice

issues). The staff of the foundation worked closely with potential applicants to learn more about both the goals and process of the groups. This interaction before the funding decision helped to inform the selection committee of the extent to which young people were actively involved in the grant writing process, since preference was given to applicants that actually had youth write the grant request themselves. Additionally, it is worth noting that all of the schools in the sample were situated within an urban environment—either within an inner city or a bedroom community in the Bay Area that possessed urban characteristics of the region, including a diverse population, a public school system that lacked sufficient funding, and high concentrations of poverty. The groups ranged in size from only 3 youth to over 50, with each group supervised by one or two adult advisors. Table 1 provides a summary of the types of activities conducted by the 13 groups in the study.

Table 1. Description of the youth-adult partnerships in the sample

School/group	Examples of specific projects
College Center: Unity Council	Creation of a unity council that would include representation from all ethnic groups on campus
Great Valley: End the Stereotypes	Creation of a peace park honoring students who serve as peacemakers
High Hills: Polynesian Club	Creation of a large mural reflecting Polynesian history and their roles in that community
Highland: Business Enterprise	Program offering school lunches made by local restaurants; participation in international business competitions; Income tax assistance for elderly; Student-designed business cards
Hillside: Unity of Youth	Development of a center providing social services and tutoring assistance; campaigns seeking an end to school exit exams and improving bathroom conditions

Data Collection

Data collection consisted of two semi-structured telephone interviews conducted with a minimum of two and a maximum of five individuals participating in each of the 13 groups. The interviews were conducted once within the first few months of receiving their grant funding and again a few months after the grant funding ended. Reliability of the data was increased for all of the interviews by always acquiring the perspective of both youth and adults in each group. The interviews lasted between thirty to sixty minutes. All interviews were recorded on audiocassette and the tapes were transcribed to preserve the words of the interviewees.

When conducting semi-structured interviews, the intent was not to follow strictly a pre-determined protocol, but instead to allow the interviewees to tell their story in manner that could best describe their group experiences. The protocol (see Appendix) ensured that all the questions were discussed by the end of the interview, if not in the same order. The questions on the protocol consisted of the following: (a) Tell me about how things are going this year with your program and what has changed from last year. (b) What kind of skills and support to youth and adults each need to do this work? (c) What do teachers and students in the school think about your group? Who are the group's biggest allies (principals, teachers, outside nonprofit, and others) (d) Who makes decisions in your group? Who are the leaders? (e) Have you seen any changes in the school as a result of your work yet? Have you seen any changes in yourself? (f) What are your plans for continuing your work after the grant ends?

In addition to interviews, data collection also included gathering group documents of media coverage, internal

publications, and pages from group and school websites. Observations were also conducted of mandatory meetings that brought potential grant recipients together to learn about the grant process and of subsequent meetings after the funding was awarded that encouraged the schools to share their successes and struggles with each other in order to foster collaborative communication among the grantees. These meetings included small group discussions and collective brain storming on how to improve the work of all of the groups. Data collection at such events consisted of transcribing on a laptop computer the conversations of the attendees and recording all flip chart and other visual forms of communication as well. These opportunities allowed for a comparison of the plans and interaction styles of the 13 groups.

Data Analysis

The coding structure that guided the data analysis was developed using a grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1990), which is a qualitative methodology that is useful for the purpose of developing theory that is derived from systematically gathered and analyzed data. Although the design of qualitative research is necessarily emergent (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), the grounded theory method provides a process for synthesizing data and creating a set of criteria against which to evaluate results. Moving from raw data to conclusions involved a process of “data reduction” that involved breaking data down, conceptualizing it, and putting it back together in thematic categories that best fit the text (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The data reduction process has three steps: open coding, axial coding, and selective coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). The analysis process for this article began with *open coding* by examining the ways in which participants articulated the vision and activities of their groups. Based on themes emerging from the data and from the author’s previous research on student voice, the main coding bins examined for this study consisted of examining interviewee’s conceptions of their work (of student voice overall and their specific project) and the components of their change strategy (vision, actions taken, and partnerships formed).

Next, a process of *axial coding* was used to define the relational nature of these categories by identifying their properties and dimensions (Becker, 1998). Each school naturally faced unique institutional and community contexts. Nevertheless, through examining the activities and visions of the 13 groups, common patterns were identified among the groups which resulted in defining three levels at which student voice initiatives worked— at the system level looking at broader questions of justice and intolerance, at the organizational level looking at school change, and at the individual level focusing on youth development.

Selective coding involved identifying the central theme around which the hypotheses fit. The three categories were descriptive in nature, but further examination was necessary to examine their relationship to each other. An examination was conducted of whether these three goals were distinct and equal entities or if they were hierarchical or otherwise built upon one another. Moving back and forth between the data from this study and the literature on student voice initiatives and the broader youth-adult partnership literature led to the creation of an explanatory *framework*, which illuminated the relationship between the three categories (Miles & Huberman, 1994, Strauss & Corbin, 1990). All three of the emphases for these schools shared a common thread—that of a social justice focus. The following results summarize the findings of this analysis process. While the grounded theory approach seeks to reduce data into concepts, the quotations provided in the findings offer narratives which allow readers to join in the process of viewing the data in its original, albeit selective, form to share in the interpretive process (Stake, 1995).

Findings

Through an examination of the reasons that individuals participated in these groups, the collective vision of what they wanted to accomplish and the actual activities that the groups pursued, a common theme of social justice emerged across the experiences of these cases. Some of the groups spoke consciously of the intention to address issues of intolerance and equity. For others, this mission was more subtle and instead became clear through follow-up questions in interviews about why they wanted to engage in the activities that they choose. Through these clarifying questions, the values shared by the groups were found to be markedly similar, with common themes of attention to issues of access, voice, equity, and intolerance. Table 2 provides an overview of these group goals. It also groups the focus of these groups into three levels—the systemic level focuses on issues of intolerance and injustice, the organizational level focuses on advocating for specific school changes, and the individual level focuses on fostering

youth leadership and peer helping. Initiatives are listed in more than one category if their activities were intended to serve more than one purpose. For example, College Center's unity council initiative worked both to relieve administrative problems at the organizational level of the school, and it also was intended to serve as a forum for discussing the systemic racial tensions that were an ongoing source of struggle at the school. At Highland High School, the initiatives sought to develop new skills in individual young people through the creation of new school-wide (organizational) initiatives. The remainder of this section details the vision of change at these three levels and how groups enacted this vision through activities focused on social justice principles.

The visions of other groups fit more solidly into one category, such as McGuire's individual focus of providing peer-to-peer mediation. While this type of program could have some organizational vision as well of how to improve school climate or reduce behavior problems, these possible benefits were not discussed in the interviews and therefore the initiative was classified as having primarily an individual focus.

Table 2. Social justice goals of the youth-adult partnerships

Social justice focus	Groups	Goals
Systemic	College Center	Fostering dialogue across racial groups
	Hillside	Tempering racial tensions
	Hoover	Educating about gay rights and tolerance
	Latin	Educating peers on racism and student rights
	Midland	Strengthening youth voice in decision making bodies
	Morgan	Raising awareness of inequities in society through peer education
	Sierra	Examining the structural inequities of their community
Organizational	College Center	Developing a unity council to facilitate within school communication across student groups and with the administration
	Great Valley	Improving school climate through the reduction of bullying
	Hillside	Improving school building conditions
	Highland	Creating a new school lunch program and a school business card program
	King	Creating formal structures for the input of student voice into the school decision making process
	Whitman	Improve school climate through increasing communication between teachers and students

Change at the Systemic Level

Seven of the groups focused their work on addressing systemic issues of discrimination and inequities, including targeting racism, homophobia, and economic disparities. Midland's Campaigns for Justice and Hillside's Unity of Youth approached their focus on social injustice through a traditional form of organizing, sharing information and, at times, protest. A student leader at Unity of Youth explained, "We've joined the campaign to help stop the high school exit exam. We're [also] trying to help some teachers who are getting transferred out of [our school]. And we are trying

to get them [the district and state] to stop the budget cuts.” Such initiatives were usually coordinated with youth-adult partnerships in other schools. Community-based organizations often took the lead in facilitating communication and planning for such events. Campaigns for Justice also took the importance of student voice and empowerment literally through creating a series of campaigns aimed at education youth about their rights as citizens, lobbying for a student position on the district’s school board, and fighting a community effort to impose a daytime curfew on youth between the times of 8:30 a.m. and 1:30 p.m.

Three of the groups working at the systems level (Hoover’s Gay-Straight Alliance, Latin’s Peer Support, and College Center’s Unity Council) focused their attention on raising awareness of issues of tolerance and discrimination in their own schools. At Latin, the Peer Assistance group spent a semester researching questions of racism, classism and what they called “nativism” (discrimination against immigrants) and “adulthoodism” (discrimination against youth). The adult advisor explained that they looked at how these issues “connect in our school community and into systems of power.” The following semester, these youth would present workshops on these topics to their peers. The shape of the workshop would be the decision of the youth. The advisor explains, “Because it’s up to them what direction they’ll go from here...We’re looking at doing a school-wide change project based on making presentations and getting a core group of youth talking about racism and classism at school.”

College Center focused its efforts on creating a Student Unity Council, which, according to its student leader, would be a “committee of all the clubs” in the school. The youth leader explained that the school has had a “huge problem for the last 30-plus years of African Americans and Latinos getting two or more F’s. Last year, two-thirds of the freshman class got two or more F’s, meaning they really wouldn’t go on to being juniors, or sophomores.” The purpose of the council would bring together two undergraduate representatives from each of the clubs in the school—many of which are ethnic clubs representing the incredible diversity in the school. In the words of the student leader of the project, “It’s basically started an ‘all-student union’ on campus—a place to not only unify students, but to protect their rights; and a place where they could come in if they need help of any sort.” Through dialogue and a common meeting place, the intention was to increase the voice of students to try to help to address the achievement gap problem in the school, to reduce racial tensions through a source of dialogue, and to provide a focus point for community celebrations.

Hoover High School, along with Morgan and Sierra High Schools created videos and written materials to articulate youth experiences. These personal stories highlighted the injustices experienced by these young people in their schools and their communities, including racism and intolerance. For example, Hoover High School’s Gay-Straight Alliance worked on a video to share with their school and other schools. According to a student leader in the group the video is “about stereotypes and what it’s like to be gay in high school.” Sierra High School instead developed a video about the economic, racial, and social injustices of their neighborhood, specifically focusing on the prevalence of drug and alcohol abuse and domestic violence in their community. The adult advisor explained that the youth also “want to highlight the lack of grocery stores in [their neighborhood] when there’s all kinds of liquor stores. But you walk over the hill to [an affluent neighborhood], they have bakeries and coffee shops and...just the disparity. They ask the question, ‘How does a child feel when they grow up here as compared to over there?’” A youth member of the group added that the video sought not only to raise awareness of these disparities but also to talk about positive ways to address these inequities head on. The youth commented that they wanted the video “to let everybody know that there’s other ways to deal with situations than with violence. Speech is powerful too...and trying to find out a lot of positive things that teens are doing out there.”

Change at the Organizational Level

Four groups (College Center, King, Whitman, and Hillside) focused their energies on school reform. For these groups, the unit of change was the organization itself, advocating for improvements in school structures, policies and culture. For example, Hillside’s Unity of Youth tackled the problem of inadequate bathroom facilities at their school. A youth leader in the group explained, “First we did a survey on what was wrong here on campus so out [it came three top themes]—security, too many substitutes, and clean bathrooms.” The group chose to focus on bathrooms because, according to the student leader, “The bathrooms here at school weren’t clean and they were never open.... So we asked students what was it that they needed and what they wanted the principal and staff to do about it.” The group felt that the lack of adequate facilities was inappropriate and unfair to young people.

Highland's Free Enterprise group put their socially responsible business skills to work by creating many programs for their school and community including a program that brought local restaurants into the school to offer hot meals at lunch time. A student leader of the group explained, "It's a completely student run business. Our mission is to provide food alternatives to on-campus meals while supporting local businesses. Because in the school year 2000-2001, we had a 72 percent truancy rate. We have an open campus during lunch but two years ago people weren't coming back." The program not only increased student attendance, but it also helped to strengthen local businesses by increasing lunchtime sales and it also offered healthier and broader lunch options for the students at the school. Other programs run by the group included income tax assistance for elderly residents in the community and a student-designed business card initiative.

Student Forum at Whitman High School focused its efforts at the organizational level by seeking student participation school reform and to institute new programs and policies. The group eventually narrowed its focus to one school-wide issue—building communication and partnership school-wide between students and teachers. Students joined in the school's reform work, including participating in staff trainings on inquiry-based research and research groups on reading strategies. One student participant explained, "I'm in the 'English as a Second Language group' [where they focus on] trying to help students break into the reading habit. We shared different ways of teaching. I'm willing to give feedback on how this [strategy] doesn't work [and others do]." During these activities, Student Forum members served as experts on their classroom experience by providing teachers with feedback on how students might receive new pedagogical strategies. The students also shared their own experiences, both positive and negative, in Whitman classrooms.

King High School focused specifically on increasing student voice in the problem solving focus of the school by hosting a series of dialogues throughout the school year in which students shared their problems and concerns about the school. A youth leader of the effort explained, "In our school it gives the students a chance to speak their mind without limitations, without holding their breath." As a result of these discussions, the school increased the number of electives offered at the school. Morgan similarly focused on student voice but did so through the creation of a textbook that would reflect the lives and experiences of youth in their school. A youth on the project explained, "We're trying to get everybody's story—like an experience that you had in your life. Something happened to you or you went through something." The advisor explained that this book was needed because "a lot of the things that they read in school don't relate to them... They wanted a way for youth to understand themselves, to understand each other, that they all come from different paths of life and different circumstances. And for teachers to understand youth." Thus, the sharing of youth experiences could help to both emphasize the value of the youth themselves and to educate their peers and teachers about both the diversity and commonality of the school.

Change at the Individual Level

Seven of the thirteen groups emphasized change at the individual student level through such initiatives as peer counseling, conflict resolution, anti-bullying, and tutoring. Morgan and Latin High Schools worked on peer helping and mediation activities. A youth member of Peer Support at Latin High School explained, "I'm involved in this program called Peer Theater. Every semester we learn a new topic that has to do with social issues that high schoolers go through, like drugs, peers, identity...crises, and body image. Then we try to reach out to teach to other people in our school....We have an assembly day when we perform [skits] throughout that day." Another youth project leader of the same group described a second program at Latin called Peer Advocates, which pairs up a young person with a student who needs support. She explained that the youth "meet once a week. They can talk about anything they want and the peer advocate offers support and different choices that they could decide on. They don't necessarily give them advice but listen... and list options...It's like a one-on-one kind of help stuff for that person." Thus, this group worked on both peer education and peer mentoring as ways to help young people work through challenging issues.

McGuire High School's project instead focused on peer mediation and conflict resolution. A youth in the project explained the need for the project by explaining that McGuire "is actually a continuation school, and some of the kids here have a lot of problems... with their friends and with their family outside of school [because of] drugs, fighting, and stuff like that." Student volunteers for the program received 16 hours of training from an outside organization to serve as mediators. An adult advisor of the group explained the delicate nature of preparing youth for conflict resolution. She explained:

It's one thing to teach them how to do it. But a lot of it is doing it and making the mistakes. So we do a lot of mock situations and they've been able to see [what] could happen. It's been an excellent opportunity to address issues that already affect them personally and then also to train them how to deal with those things both as a peer but also as a member of a family or [as a] student.

Through direct experience, students both faced their own problems and learned how to help others.

Another group focused on reducing stereotyping and bullying behavior through an intervention approach. Working with a non-profit organization, the group offered intense all day workshops for 100 or so students with the purpose of breaking down stereotypes and showing the commonalities among youth from different cliques and backgrounds. An adult coordinator of the program explained that the day has a three-step philosophy of "inclusion, influence and affection. You include them by doing an icebreaker that [connects] everybody; you teach them whatever the lesson is; and then you send them off with affection and love them up." Activities throughout the training include, according to the adult advisor, "breaking down those walls and stereotypes of what people think about." The training included opportunities for youth to apologize to others in the school and to acknowledge that they have been hurt by stereotyping themselves. The coordinator explained, "A lot of times kids get up and apologize to teachers, to friends, to kids they've teased. They make amends, and they say what they never want to see in their school again. It's a really, really powerful day."

Almost all of the groups in this study also discussed the need to strengthen the skills of young people in student voice initiatives so that they could work together to make a difference in their own lives and their communities. In this sample, youth in seven of the groups (more than half of all of the cases) received training from external organizations on issues such as leadership, youth rights, parliamentary procedure, conducting research, interacting with adults in power, goal setting, facilitation, and developing a work plan. According to the adult director of Highland's Business Enterprise, the young people learned "socially-responsible business and entrepreneurial skills" from a non-profit organization whose mission was to foster entrepreneurship and to encourage the development of socially just businesses by training inner-city youth. Unity of Youth students instead received more general training on "how to be more organized and how to organize ourselves ...like, 'You're talking to the media. How are you going to speak to them?'" according to a youth member. Five of the seven groups set aside time for internal trainings as well, including hosting all day retreats and weekend meetings at which a longer time could be devoted to building both general community and specific skills.

Discussion

The findings in this article describe how school-based youth-adult partnerships worked on social justice issues on three levels—the systemic level by raising concerns about equity and discrimination, the organizational level, by making changes in schools and communities, and the individual level by fostering youth skills. While these three levels were separated in this article to articulate the types of goals of youth-adult partnerships, these goals were greatly interrelated for the groups in this study. The levels also appear to have a degree of directionality. While some schools began with an explicit focus on systemic social justice issues, groups focusing on youth leadership or school reform tended to move toward a focus on broader issues of equity and justice. By engaging in collective activities, their understanding of issues became more sophisticated, and their conversations became more honest.

Connection between Individual and Systemic Issues

The groups in this study suggest that the stronger the focus on fostering youth leadership, the more the work of the group moves toward social justice questions. A great overlap existed in the individual and systemic categories in this study, with four groups fitting in both categories. Indeed, an important lesson from this study is the importance of the social organizing phrase, "the personal is political."

An adult advisor of Morgan High School explained the connection between individual and systemic concerns by stating, "This is a class where youth take over... They lead. They decide what projects they want to do and what

things they want to change. They want to be change makers. The job of the class is then how to enable these youth to feel that they can change their school and community.” Teaching youth the skills to problem solve and ask questions while bolstering their sense of agency and confidence to ask tough questions inevitably led groups to discussions about injustices and inequities in their community and around the world. According to Morgan’s adult advisor, this process is one of enabling youth to find these skills within themselves. She explains, “From the start they understand they don’t have ownership. Because we don’t teach students to think for themselves or take, take the lead. So you need to...facilitate for that to happen. You don’t teach them; you don’t make them. They make themselves.”

One step in this enabling process was helping youth make connections between their own personal experiences and issues of race, class, and gender. An adult advisor of Unity of Youth explained her interpretation of how identity formation inherently is related to broader understandings of social structures and inequities. She discussed the importance of helping youth to understand their identity by:

having them learn to be empowered by their race and their class and not having to be ashamed of the fact that they’re working class kids. [It’s about] being clear about understanding what it is to be a girl in this society, being a young boy having a single mom most of your life. How do all those things affect how you feel power? We work off of community building principles of empowering young people...to put out the kind of vision of the world that they want to live in. And to live in it.

The adult advisor of the Youth Taking Charge project at Sierra High School also noticed a strong change in the students in the group as they became more aware of the equity questions that arose through the creation of their video project. Sierra is an alternative high school that was in most cases a last chance school for students who were unable to succeed in traditional schools because of discipline problems and other academic concerns. The advisor commented, “The kids involved in it are changing [from] delinquent into activists. [They can see] how they got sucked into being delinquent and the criminal justice system through their upbringing—not just their family, but the community and the policies.” The process of open discussion and the encouraging of youth to ask questions that lead to even deeper questions about inequities lends itself naturally to a social justice focus. It also helped young people to understand the connections between their problems and those of others in their community and around the world.

Connection between Organizational and Systemic Issues

For many of the groups in this study, the process of working on school change issues raises awareness of how disparities within a school are inevitably related to injustices in the broader community and in society at large. The principal at King High School noticed, for example, how student dialogues throughout the school year began to broaden from problems with bathrooms to larger inequities that were “political in nature—the distribution of books in the city; [and] why do schools in the hills get better books and better equipment?” Many other school-based projects observed a similar extension from school-focused issues to broader systemic problems. Unity of Youth’s bathroom campaign focused on improving the conditions of bathrooms at their school, but it also served as an exclamation point for drawing attention to the marked lack of adequate school facilities in poor communities. Similarly, as a result of Business Enterprise’s school lunch program at Highland High School in which they invited local restaurants to sell meals at lunch time, the group extended its focus from school-based concerns to thinking more deeply about the root causes of economic conditions in their neighborhood and the consequences of poor nutrition among their peers. At Latin High school, the Peer Support group’s discussion of concerns in the school also extended to a broader examination of youth rights. The group’s advisor explained,

One of the things that [youth] were really frustrated about was [that] when class starts, some teachers would lock their doors. In the process of finding out about student rights we learned that they aren’t allowed, because it denies your right to a free

public education. They can lock their doors but if you knock they have to let you in, because they can't deny you the ability to be educated.

By looking at specific issues that concerned students in the school, this examination of student rights extended to an investigation of the broader penal code and the types of rights that youth have in society.

Conclusion

The thirteen youth-adult partnerships in this study demonstrated the potential ways in which students collaborate with adults to examine issues of equity and injustice that they experience in their lives, in their schools, in their communities, and in broader society. The data from this study suggest that social justice conversations tend to begin at either the organizational level or individual level as a stepping stone toward broader discussions at the systemic level. Student voice initiatives therefore could serve an important role in facilitating this progression of thinking about social justice issues in school settings.

The cases further indicate that when youth share in leading efforts to discuss and address social justice issues, they can bring a renewed passion and attention to the process that adults alone rarely do. Youth also bring attention to the need for working on specific projects to address these problems, such as intolerance, bullying, and the inclusion of voices in decision making. While administrators and teachers undoubtedly share in these concerns, the pressing focus on student outcomes, accountability and other important school tasks can tend to relegate such discussions of social justice to the back burner in many schools. This study therefore has important implications for research on distributed leadership (Elmore, 2000; Lashway, 2003) since it points to the specific value of students' contributions to a focus on these matters. Through future connections between educational leadership and student voice/youth-adult partnership research, scholars can strengthen our understanding of the potential for addressing social justice issues by broadening of distributed educational leadership to include youth at the table.

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Appendix: Interview Protocol for Youth and Adults

Tell me about how things are going this year with your program.

-what has changed from last year?

What is the purpose of your organization? (Making change? Youth development? Youth assistance? Something else?)

What kind of support do adults need to do this work?

What kind of supports do youth need to do this work?

What do teachers and students in the school think about your group? How do they perceive your work?

Who are the group's biggest allies (principals, teachers, outside nonprofit, other)

Who makes decisions in your group? Who is a leader?

What types of skills do young people need to engage in the work that you do?

What type of skills do adults need?

Have you seen any changes in the school as a result of their work yet?

Have you seen any changes in the youth involved?

What are your plans for continuing your work after the grant ends?

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