

STUDENT VOICE IN SCHOOL REFORM: REFRAMING STUDENT-TEACHER RELATIONSHIPS

DANA L. MITRA *Penn State University*

ABSTRACT. This article examines a student group's two-pronged strategy to build partnerships with teachers at a U.S. high school. Through "teacher-focused" activities, students became aware of teachers' perspectives; "student-focused" activities allowed teachers to learn from students. The article also considers the organizational contexts that enabled this symbiotic strategy to take hold, activities that do not attack classroom practice, buffering group activities from external threats and building bridges with teachers in the school, and supporting the adult advisors who support the group.

LA VOIX DES ÉLÈVES DANS LA RÉFORME SCOLAIRE : RESTRUCTURATION DES RAPPORTS ENTRE ÉLÈVES ET PROFESSEURS

RÉSUMÉ. Cet article analyse la double stratégie utilisée par un groupe d'élèves pour établir des partenariats avec les professeurs dans une école secondaire des États-Unis. Par le biais d'activités « axées sur les professeurs », les élèves prennent conscience des points de vue de ces derniers; les activités « axées sur les élèves » permettent pour leur part aux professeurs de s'instruire sur leurs élèves. L'article envisage également les contextes organisationnels qui permettent à cette stratégie symbiotique de prendre appui. Ces activités ne veulent pas attaquer les pratiques de classe, mais veulent amortir les menaces extérieures au groupe, construire des ponts entre les enseignants de l'école et supporter les conseillers adultes qui interagissent avec le groupe.

INTRODUCTION

How can schools improve student outcomes and improve school climate? Many schools struggle with this question, but few have decided to go straight to the source and ask students. Through increasing "student voice" in schools, students have the potential for contributing their opinions on a variety of levels, including sharing their views on problems and potential solutions in their schools. Such initiatives have served as a catalyst for change in schools, including helping to improve teaching, curriculum, and teacher-student relationships (Soo Hoo, 1993) and leading to changes in student assessment and teacher training (Fielding, 2001). Seeking student views on school problems and possible solutions reminds teachers and

administrators that students possess unique knowledge and perspectives about their schools that adults cannot fully replicate (Kushman, 1997; Levin, 2000; Rudduck, Day, & Wallace, 1997; Thorkildsen, 1994). By not involving students, and particularly those failing subjects or rarely attending school, many researchers have noticed that it is easy for school reformers to shift the blame for failure onto students rather than look at problems with the school's structure and culture (Fine, 1991; Kelley, 1997; Stevenson & Ellsworth, 1993; Wehlage, Rutter, Smith, Lesko, & Fernandez, 1989).

In addition to the potential benefits of student voice efforts for schools, research also documents the potential benefits for the youth involved. Increasing student voice has been found to improve student learning, especially when student voice is linked to changing curriculum and instruction (Oldfather, 1995; Rudduck & Flutter, 2000). Consulting with students on their views of teaching and learning has improved students' understanding of how they learn, helped students to gain a stronger sense of their own abilities, and improved instruction so that teachers do a better job of meeting student needs (Johnson and Nicholls, 1995; Nicholls, 1993).

Increasing student voice in schools also has been shown to help to re-engage alienated students by providing them with a stronger sense of ownership in their schools. Psychological research has demonstrated the connection between autonomy and motivation. If an individual has a sense of control over her environment, she will feel more intrinsically motivated to participate (Johnson, 1991). Recent research has reinforced the importance of teachers developing a learner-centered approach to instruction to increase student motivation. The more teachers become focused on student learning styles and needs in that particular classroom context, the greater the student interest in schoolwork and learning (Daniels et al, 2001; McCombs, 2001). An increase in attachment to school has been seen in programs seeking to build new relationships in Canadian schools. The Manitoba School Improvement Program, for example, (Earl & Lee, 2000, Lee & Zimmerman, 2001) found that students who had been sullen and unreachable became some of the most passionate participants in the school reform process once they became involved. Research conducted with middle-school students in the United States also found that students highly valued having their voices heard and "honored" (Oldfather, 1995).

Despite the increasing amount of research that argues the merits of student voice, most studies do not provide an understanding of the process by which student voice can make schools more democratic places geared to involving youth in decisionmaking. Of the little research that has examined student voice efforts with empirical or theoretical rigor (including Fielding, 2001; Holdsworth, 2000, Lee & Zimmerman, 2001; Rudduck & Flutter, 2000), hardly any has been conducted in the United States. This article offers one of the first scholarly investigations of student voice in the United States.

Since few U.S. schools have emphasized increased levels of student voice and participation as a part of their change work, this research provides a “strategic case” (Merton, 1987) for studying student voice in school reform. Drawing upon over 100 semi-structured interviews and over 100 observations conducted over a two-and-a-half year period, this paper examines the experiences of a U.S. high school to build a framework for understanding student voice. After providing background information on the school and its student voice activities, the article examines strategies used to increase student voice and to influence teacher perspectives on youth. It then considers the organizational supports for student voice that enabled these strategies.

IMPROVING RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN STUDENTS AND TEACHERS AT WHITMAN HIGH SCHOOL

With the school graduating just over half (57%) of the students that start in ninth grade and with one-third of its teachers electing to leave each year, the Whitman High School staff saw the need for change. In 1998, Whitman received a major grant from the Bay Area School Reform Collaborative (BASRC) to launch a three-year reform effort. As a part of deciding where to focus their reform efforts, the school’s reform leadership team made the unusual decision of asking students what needed to be improved.

Located in a bedroom community in northern California, Whitman High School serves a community comprised of first generation immigrants from Latin America and Asia as well as working-class African-American and European-Americans. Half of Whitman High School’s students are English language learners, and half qualify for the free- or reduced-priced lunch program. Fourth-year teacher Amy Jackson convened focus groups of students representing the diverse student body and included in them students representing a broad range of academic achievement and who belonged to a variety of social “cliques.” Amy designed the focus group questions to learn from students what types of supports they needed to enable them to succeed and to uncover what was not working for them in their classes. Rather than simply gathering information from students, Amy also included them in the analysis of the focus group data.

The adults who assisted with the focus groups learned quickly of the importance of having students participate in the analysis of the focus-group data. Adults thought they understood the data, but often they needed clarification from students about what had actually been said in the focus group participants and with translating the responses into “adult-friendly” language. The students and adults worked together to identify 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 infor-

mation 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.

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." Amy worked hard to ensure that the students assumed much of the responsibility for choosing the group's activities. By considering the focus group themes and talking to teachers and students further about what changes were most needed in the school, the students chose to focus the group's efforts on "building communication and partnership between students and teachers."

"REFRAMING" TEACHER-STUDENT RELATIONSHIPS

Student Forum developed two complementary strategies for building communication between students and teachers that can be classified as "teacher-focused" activities and "student-focused" activities. In teacher-focused activities, students joined in the reform work that teachers were conducting, such as participating in staff trainings and research groups on reform. As youth participated in these activities, they gained a greater understanding of the perspectives of teachers and of how the school operates. Other activities developed by Student Forum were student focused, designed to increase teacher awareness of student views and student needs. By developing this two-pronged strategy, both teachers and students taught each other about their perspectives, and both learned to be open to the other's point of view.

Students learned about teacher reform efforts from Amy and from Sean Martin – the school's "reform leader" who had been a guidance counselor in the school for 25 years and assumed responsibility for running the school's reform efforts once the BASRC grant began. Amy and Sean encouraged Student Forum to participate in teacher activities to share their viewpoints and help to influence school policies. The students agreed and chose to invest a great deal of time engaging in teacher-focused activities, including participating in teacher research, assessment development, and textbook adoption.

These interactions provided many opportunities for the students to inject themselves into the reform process and to influence school decisionmaking and teacher perceptions, including activities such as those in which the students: (1) served as experts in a domain of knowledge to which teachers did not have access, (2) gained an understanding of school reform and provide a bridge between teacher and student perspectives, and (3) helped teachers to stay on task during their reform work by reminding them of the

purpose of their efforts and by encouraging a high level of professionalism during their collaborations.

Students serving as classroom experts

Student Forum members served as “experts” of the classroom experience in a variety of activities. They provided teachers feedback on how students might receive new pedagogical strategies and materials through participation in teacher professional development sessions, such as a training on developing standards-based curricular units. Throughout the training sessions, they shared with teachers how they would receive the new lessons being developed and suggested some ideas for how to make the lessons more applicable to students’ needs and interests. In the words of one teacher after a professional development session:

It focused [us] on the reason we’re here. A lot of staff remarked [about] how you get a very insightful perspective with a student at the table. You don’t have to second-guess what they would think. Because so many teachers seem to think . . . they’re the experts on how students would react and what they would think. People find it refreshing. And it’s a little intimidating for some people to have them there, but I’ve heard positive comments.

Student Forum members shared insights on how students learn to read when they joined teacher research groups that focused on learning and experimenting with comprehension strategies. The research groups met during staff collaboration time once a month, and all teachers were required to participate. Working with the school’s reform leader, Sean Martin, Student Forum recruited two students to participate in each group. Felipe, a senior in Student Forum who struggled in school and particularly in his English class, recalled his positive experiences working in the reading research group:

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]. I remember one day the teachers were talking and I was about to say something, but I didn’t know if I should say it or not. And then a teacher saw that I was about to say it. She made everybody stop and said, ‘What were you going to say?’ I said it. I felt good. Somebody was listening, you know?

Students’ participation in the groups, such as Felipe, helped the teachers to learn which reading strategies might appeal to students and why students did not respond to some ineffective teaching methods. These experiences also helped students to develop confidence in their ability to share their experiences and ideas with adults.

Similarly, an art teacher who served as the chair of the Curriculum Council (the school’s decisionmaking body), spoke with warmth about the addition of a student representative of the Council who “provided a lot of very

helpful information and insight to guide the work of the group. And it certainly felt to me as if he were a part of it and that it was not just a gratuitous gesture to have a student present.” The council tended to defer to the student at the meeting during discussions of the success of school policy, such as whether the discipline policy was working.

When working with teachers, Student Forum members also shared personal experiences about situations in which they had significant learning and those in which they did not learn at all. During a professional development training on standards, junior African-American Student Forum member Troy Newman provided feedback to teachers in his group on the type of classrooms and teacher styles that worked best for him. He recalled, “One teacher asked me how I feel about teachers and [which ones] we comfortable with. And I told him that a teacher who is laid back and . . . gives you freedom.”

Students also suggested ways that teaching and curriculum could be changed to improve student learning. For example, a consistent concern of Whitman students was the school’s math curriculum, because the textbooks did not provide them with sufficient examples or explanation. Student Forum critiqued all of the possible new textbooks and identified which books seemed to provide the best explanations and which appeared confusing and unhelpful. They recommended to the math department that they adopt two particular textbooks that they believed would best meet the needs of Whitman students based on criteria such as whether the book had clear and specific explanations to the problems.

Students bridging teacher and student perspectives

Student Forum members served a second role as translators between teacher and student experience. In addition to explaining student responses in the focus groups, Student Forum members also helped teachers to translate their words into language that students would understand. During the staff development sessions, Troy Newman and his fellow students helped to translate curricular standards into terminology that students could grasp. Troy explained that he spent much of his time at the meeting “. . . breaking down vocabulary that some students may not understand. So we were trying to put it [the rubrics and the departmental standards] in a way where all students understand. I guess you could say [I was a] translator.” Similarly, Student Forum developed the questions for the schoolwide writing assessment that all students took twice a year to measure writing competency. The staff found that students did not take the assessment seriously because they did not see its relevance to their lives. Student Forum wrote the prompts so that the topics would be relevant to students and phrased them in language that the students could understand.

To serve as a bridge between teacher and student perceptions, Student Forum members needed to develop a stronger understanding of curriculum, school policy, and teacher perspectives in general. For example, participation in the reading research groups helped students to gain a greater understanding of pedagogy and curriculum. Then they could recognize and understand what the teachers were trying to teach them in their classes. A student participant explained, "One of the things that [teachers in the group learned to use was] reading circles. My teacher used it on us today [in class]. Knowing where it came from, having the background, that was cool knowing what we were going to be doing." The student's participation in the reading research group helped to improve her own learning and to gain a greater understanding of the classroom from a teacher's perspective.

Student Forum members also learned about school policy and how decisions are made. In the textbook adoption process, they learned about the politics of how textbooks are chosen. Although they experienced frustration when they did not have the opportunity to participate as they wished, the students learned the process of textbook adoption and, in the words of one Student Forum member, "We got the jump on it now for next year," when the group planned to work with the science department in their textbook selection process. As the students became more sophisticated in their understanding of the system, they felt more capable of influencing it.

The students developed a deeper understanding of the changes teachers were trying to make, which allowed them to see teachers as both fallible and sincere. It also allowed students to develop positive relations with teachers that did not exist previously. One Student Forum member explained, "When I came the first time, that made me want to come even more because you get to interact with the teachers and see who they really are – not only as they act in the classroom." Through multiple interactions, students and teachers recognized that they had similar reactions to activities. For instance, some students in the reading research group noticed that, for both adults and youth, if the task connected to their experiences, both teachers and students demonstrated a greater interest in participating. Groups that included many English and social studies teachers tend to be more engaged in talking about reading strategies than groups comprised primarily of math or physical education teachers. Similarly, if the students did not have experience in their own classes with the strategies being discussed, they did not tend to find the work as meaningful.

Students keeping teachers focused on their reform work

The third way that students developed new roles in the school is that they served as an accountability mechanism during teacher meetings, and they expressed great pride in this role. Senior Student Forum member Joey

Sampson commented, "When teachers are with each other, they're with their peers. But with students around, their teacher part engages and they want to show that they can be on task." Likewise, teachers noticed the difference when students were present. Staff members noticed the difference in tenor of meetings and felt that resistant teachers were less likely to engage in unprofessional behaviors such as completing crossword puzzles during staff meetings or openly showing hostility to colleagues.

STUDENT-FOCUSED ACTIVITIES

Student Forum also developed "student-focused" activities in which the group helped teachers to gain a better understanding of student perspectives. Unlike the activities in which students changed their own roles and perceptions, during student-focused activities, students asked teachers to expand their current perceptions of their students, the school, and their own practice. Student Forum focused on two such activities: student-led tours of their neighborhood so that teachers could gain an understanding of their lives and forums on the ramifications of being a 'ghetto school.'

In their first attempt at a student-focused activity, pairs of students took teachers on tours of their neighborhood. In the words of one student tour guide, "It was cool. They [teachers] learned where we lived, worked, the different territories, where we stay away from, where people get killed and hurt for being in the wrong areas. I thought it was really successful." Students felt that they truly did come to know their teachers better, and they believed that teachers came to better understand them as well. During a pizza lunch, the tour guides reflected on their experience. One guide remarked, "I was in the car with the principal, and we took him right down the street. We got fifty yards away and he got lost. Now he knows where I live. And I see him down the hall and he says hi to me. He'll go out of his way. I've seen a lot more of the teachers try to make an effort to say 'hi' and include students in their conversations." Another guide commented, "It brought out a better student teacher relationship. A girl was talking about how she walked home at night and how someone took her purse. The teachers were thinking of ways they could help her out. From doing this process, we can better the teacher and student relationship."

Neither the students nor the teachers reported having a negative experience during their debriefing session. In fact, both teachers and students reported that they found the experience valuable, commenting that they developed a better understanding of student experience, and in the words of one teacher, "I think you guys inspire us." Over one-third of Whitman's 90 teachers participated and responded so enthusiastically about their experience that the administration plans on making the tour a regular part of new-teacher orientation each year.

As a second student-focused activity, the group wanted to address the school's reputation – a pressing concern raised during the first days of the focus groups. Student Forum member Joey Sampson explained, "Ghetto is an important topic because we're classified as 'ghetto' – our school is. And the neighborhoods that we come from are. We were like, 'Well, our reputation is that we're perceived as a ghetto school. So it's like where does that come from?' We wanted to deal with that directly."

The group decided to initiate the conversation by hosting a student discussion on the issue, which they called a "Ghetto Forum." The group found that students used the term 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. Others viewed "ghetto" as a state of mind that lowered expectations for themselves and for others. By creating opportunities to openly engage in a discussion of language, Student Forum encouraged their peers to discuss their identities and what sources they draw upon to define that identity. They hoped that by raising consciousness about the different interpretations of individuals and their neighborhoods, they could create a collective sense of the direction in which they wanted the school to move.

Student Forum facilitated a similar conversation with all of Whitman's teachers about what "ghetto" means, how it applies to Whitman, and the consequences for the school. Teachers broke into nine groups, each of which had a student and a staff member as co-facilitators. Student Forum later shared these teachers' perceptions with students who participated in the first Ghetto Forum.

As Student Forum members debriefed about both forums during their next meeting, Terrell, a senior, observed that the teachers seemed to have a different opinion of the concept of "ghetto" than students. The teachers felt that students used the term to excuse themselves from aspiring to higher goals. Terrell reflected, "The teachers use 'ghetto' to lower our expectations. They think we use it as an excuse." Senior Student forum member, Lana, added, "So how do you get them to change their perspective or get students to change their perspectives?" The group planned to continue these dialogues the next school year and to think about how to move beyond the stalemate that existed based on differing perceptions about students and their neighborhood.

Reducing tension between students and teachers

Through both student-focused activities, the tour and the Forums, the students noticed many changes in teacher perspectives. First and foremost, the tour and the Forum helped to reduce tension between teachers and students, to increase informality, and to help teacher and students to iden-

tify one another as individuals rather than as stereotypes. For example, one Student Forum member commented that in her tour group, “Teachers and students learned equally. We got off track talking about our lives in general instead of talking about the neighborhood. I felt like I was driving around with my friends. There was no tension.” Given the history of tension between teachers and students at Whitman, students and teachers alike appeared to value the opportunities to build positive relationships.

An adult reform leader at the school also noted a change in teacher-student communication during the Ghetto Forum activity that occurred later in the same school year. He commented, “It’s fascinating what [students] were saying about how teachers responded to them – a lot less condescension! One young man was saying, ‘I never thought I would agree with that teacher!’ And really feeling much more of an equal basis . . . So we’re going forward with a better relationship between students and staff.”

During their initial dialogues with teachers when they presented their focus group data, students discouragingly observed that a few teachers reacted in an openly defensive and hostile manner to their presentations. Over time, however, Student Forum members observed an increasing willingness to collaborate with students and to engage in dialogues and a deeper growth in teacher understanding and receptiveness. Students did not find a lack of receptivity during the tour or the Ghetto Forum activities. Instead, students emphasized that they came to understand the teachers, and they believed that the teachers came to understand them as well. Joey Sampson, one of the Student Forum members who had been involved in the group since its inception, commented, “For the most part, I see the teachers as more receptive to the students now. . . . They look at students a little bit differently. And I think students look at teachers a little bit differently. That’s our main goal. Teachers need to know that students do have a voice and students need to be listened to.”

Increasing teacher receptivity to student opinions

Joey found that the teachers appeared to value the opinions of students, and when necessary, even agreed to disagree without becoming hostile about their differences. Adults also observed shifts in the attitudes of their colleagues. Sean Martin, a guidance counselor and leader of reform efforts at the school, explained:

We noticed a real difference – and I think some of the students did too . . . [It was] real, real positive having the students there. And [there was] tons of praise for the students who helped facilitate the Ghetto Forum discussions. [Teachers] thought it was really connected to what they wanted to see happen. So I think it was a huge step forward.

Amy's ability to notice differences in her colleagues is particularly significant, since she possessed an understanding of the perspectives of their colleagues and had more opportunities to observe changes in their behavior.

Influencing teachers to involve students in improving classroom practices

In addition to students seeing shifts in teacher perspectives about youth, Student Forum'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. An outside consultant who worked with many teachers at Whitman and other schools on designing curricular units explained:

The teaching assistants [students who get credit for assisting a teacher] ended up doing some more of the reform work are. I mean, I ended up sitting down with Julia and her teaching assistant (TA) and we unpacked her assessment and put a rubric together. The same with Henry and his TA. And also with a couple of science teachers, Margaret and Jessica and their TAs. It was interesting in that it's really clear at Whitman that students support teachers and we all work together.

The consultant observed that Whitman was unique among the schools that she coached. Although they worked on similar reform issues and the consultant encouraged other schools to follow Whitman's example and include students more actively in changing classroom practice, none of the schools chose to do so.

Adults who participated the most in Student Forum efforts seemed to develop a stronger belief in the value of partnering with students. Not surprisingly, the group's advisor, Amy Jackson, experienced the strongest changes in her practice. Through working with Student Forum, she became more aware of the student population, remained inspired to keep working, continued to be impressed by the awareness of the students and gained a greater understanding of the struggles that her students face. Amy found that she began to work with students regularly in her classroom to change her curriculum and to receive feedback on her pedagogical strategies. Amy explained:

I think it makes me a much better teacher. Getting to know kids outside of the classroom is huge and so unique, and . . . most teachers have no avenues for doing that. . . . And seeing how aware and how knowledgeable and how acutely . . . they [students] know what's up. They echo absolutely everything that myself and other colleagues have talked about in terms of dismay at . . . staff and resources. So . . . heightening my awareness and . . . an appreciation of the kids too. . . . The sense of apathy can be overwhelming . . . because of the things these kids are up against in terms of the neighborhood they live in and the

school that they go to. So just seeing their . . . keen awareness, as well as their excitement and willingness and desire to make things better. It's a good shot in the arm.

Amy's opportunities to learn from youth in Student Forum kept her motivated as a teacher and inspired her to continue to improve her practice.

CONTEXTS THAT SUPPORT STUDENT VOICE

Student Forum experiences suggest a promising strategy of balancing student and teacher-focused activities when attempting to increase student voice in reform and decisionmaking. Inevitably, however, school contexts greatly influence the type of influence a group can have (McLaughlin & Talbert, 1993). At Whitman, three organizational contexts especially contributed to school receptivity to Student Forum: (1) activities not striking at the core of teacher practice, (2) buffering Student Forum from external threats and building bridges with teachers in the school; and (3) supporting the adults that supported Student Forum. These emphases resonate with sociological research on organizational theory that examines the survival of organizations within the context of a broader field of influences.

Student Forum targeted activities toward influencing policy and the school's reform process rather than at classroom-focused changes. In other words, Student Forum's approach did not challenge the practice of teachers in a direct manner and might therefore have been perceived as less threatening. Student Forum also did not attempt to influence the school system through the core technologies of the organization; organizations are less resistant to changes affecting processes that are more peripheral to their central work (Hannan & Freeman, 1984; Meyer & Rowan, 1977; Scott, 1998).

Student Forum advisor Amy Jackson also protected Student Forum from the bureaucracy of the school and at the same time connected the groups to opportunities within the school. As a colleague to the teachers in the school, Amy was able to talk about the work of Student Forum during departmental meetings and even informally at places such as the copy machine. Her rapport with fellow teachers encouraged a sense of trust that the program was a valuable resource for the school. She was not perceived as a threat to her colleagues. These efforts align well with research that suggests that organizations use two strategies to manage their task environments: actions that buffer the core focus of an organization and actions that bridge the boundaries between one's organization and partners, competitors and superiors (Scott, 1998).

Another supportive context focuses on the assistance that adults need in order to assist youth in their endeavors. Research has indicated that teachers need to be empowered themselves in order to empower others (Bauch &

Goldring, 1998; Muncey & McQuillan, 1991). Amy's experiences, as much as those of the students, emphasize the need for advice and encouragement. Simply put, the adult advisors themselves needed support too. Amy needed someone to provide to her what she provided to the students—passion, trust, and a belief in their abilities. Sean Martin, the school's "reform leader" provided this support to Amy in many ways.

Sean provided a source of support to Amy by listening to her concerns, serving as a sounding board for ideas, and helping to advise the group when he could. Sean explained, "What I've been trying to do is make sure I'm there every day . . . , trying to be a buffer, but also to try to really help so that she doesn't just get totally frustrated." Sean also provided a source of inspiration and energy for the group. Amy emphasized, "On the day-to-day it will feel like we're crawling, getting nowhere. And he'll come all pumped up and [say], 'I'm just amazed at what we've accomplished this year!'" Sean's praise and broad-based perspective kept Amy and the students motivated to continue engaging in the tough work of change.

Sean's position of authority on reform in the school also provided a source of legitimacy for the group. His clout provided resources – especially in terms of information and funding. Amy explained, "If I had to worry about money . . . and the future of the program, it would fall apart. So having someone who's more systemically astute and/or powerful and/or knowledgeable . . . I think that's crucial [to have] someone to do the politics and someone else in the trenches." Sean's knowledge of the system of the school and the district allowed the group to strategically plan their activities to ensure the best possible reception of their work.

Sean also consistently emphasized the value of student voice to the broader school and to the region. Student Forum member Rosalinda Gutierrez explained, "He gets us places where we need to go and [where] he thinks that we should be. He makes things happen." For example, Sean introduced a Whitman staff training by explaining to the room of 40 teachers and 10 students, "This is a journey that we're on. Having students as partners is a part of our journey. Ten students are here today. Students are our partners. This is not a hierarchical relationship but one of equality." Without the support of someone in an influential position in the school, it is doubtful that these two groups could have developed and continued.

CONCLUSION

Most schools are not structured in ways that encourage student voice; instead they often conflict with adolescent needs (Costello et al., 2000). Structural issues such as large school and class size increase student alienation. Segregation by age and ability prevents students from learning from

more experienced peers. A view of students as “clients” increases the sense of distance between teachers and students. Pressure from districts and states to prove school successes forces a compulsion to sweep controversies under the rug and breeds an unwillingness to tolerate and support the differences of opinion that student voice requires.

The intransigence of high schools and the subsequent epidemic of student alienation might in large part be caused by the lack of opportunities situate students as essential actors in school decisionmaking. Researchers can help schools to begin to construct new student roles by continuing to share the experiences of schools that have begun to incorporate student voice into school reform and classroom practice. The work of Student Forum suggests strategies that can help to create a subtle shift in school culture. By developing activities that were both “teacher-focused” and “student focused,” Student Forum developed a strategy that helped to build trust and understanding rather than to increase divisiveness between teachers and students. To accomplish the smallest of victories required Student Forum to struggle against the inertia of conscious and unconscious beliefs and procedures that tend to suppress the voices of students and their value in contributing to more effective decisionmaking in schools.

The experiences of Student Forum also serve as a reminder that change does not happen in a vacuum. Rather, organizational contexts can enable or hamper change efforts. This article has suggested the types of supports that enabled student voice at Whitman, including finding financial and emotional support both for students and the adult involved, initiating changes in the relationship between students and teachers in less threatening situations first (rather than beginning with classroom teaching), and buffering the group from opposition while building bridges with potential allies in the school. Such strategies might serve to inform the development of future efforts to increase student voice in schools. The supports present at Whitman could also be compared to those in other contexts to gain a greater understanding of the type of environment necessary to foster an increase in student participation and decisionmaking in schools.

As practitioners, researchers and policymakers continue to ask questions about the process and influence of student voice in school reform, knowledge of the implications of student voice will continue to grow. Through further research, it will be possible to deepen theoretical and empirical understandings regarding the possibility of student voice for altering the dynamics of schools and improving teaching and learning.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Bauch, P. A., & Goldring, E. B. (1998). Parent-teacher participation in the context of school governance. *Peabody Journal of Education*, 73(1), 15-35.
- Daniels, D. H. K., Deborah L., & McCombs, B. L. (2001). Young children's perspectives on learning and teacher practices in different classroom contexts: Implications for motivation. *Early Education and Development*, 12(2), 253-73.
- Earl, L., & Lee, L. (1999, April). *Learning, for a change*. Paper presented at the American Educational Research Association, Montreal, QC.
- Fielding, M. (2001). Students as radical agents of change. *Journal of Educational Change*, 2(1).
- Fine, M. (1991). *Framing dropouts: Notes on the politics of an urban high school*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Hannan, M. T., & Freeman, J. (1984, April). Structural inertia and organizational change. *American Sociological Review*, 49, 149-164.
- Holdsworth, R. (2000). Schools that create real roles of value for young people. *Prospects* 115(3) 349-362
- Johnson, J. H. (1991). *Student voice motivating students through empowerment* (ED337875). Eugene, OR: Oregon School Study Council.
- Kelley, R. D. G. (1997). *Yo' mama's disfunkcional! Fighting the culture wars in urban America*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press.
- Kushman, J. W. (Ed.). (1997). *Look who's talking now: Student views of learning in restructuring schools*. (ED028257). Washington, DC: Office of Educational Research and Improvement.
- Lee, L. E. & Zimmerman, M. (2001). *Passion, action, and a new vision for student voice: Learnings from the Manitoba School Improvement Program Inc.* Manitoba School Improvement Program, www.msip.ca.
- Levin, B. (2000). Putting students at the centre in education reform. *Journal of Educational Change*, 1(2), 155-172.
- McCombs, B. L. (2001, April 10-14). *Preparing teachers to meet the needs of diverse learners in urban schools: The learner-centered framework*. Paper presented at the Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association, Seattle, WA.
- McLaughlin, M., W. & Talbert, J. E. (1993). *Contexts that matter for teaching and learning: Strategic opportunities for meeting the nation's education goals*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University, Center for Research on the Context of Secondary School Teaching.
- Merton, R. K. (1987). Three fragments from a sociologist's notebooks: Establishing the phenomenon, specified ignorance, and strategic research materials. *American Review of Sociology*, 18, 1-28.
- Meyer, J. W., & Rowan, B. (1977, September). Institutionalized Organizations: Formal structure as myth and ceremony. *American Journal of Sociology*, 83(2), 340-63.
- Muncey, D., & McQuillan, P. (1991). *Empowering nonentities: Students in educational reform. Working paper #5*. Providence, RI: School Ethnography Project, Coalition of Essential Schools, Brown University.
- Nicholls, J. G. (1993, March 25-28). *What knowledge is of most worth? Student perspectives*. Paper presented at the Paper presented at the Biennial Meeting of the Society for Research in Child Development, New Orleans, LA.
- Oldfather, P. (1995). Songs "come back most to them": Students' experiences as researchers. *Theory Into Practice*, 34(2), 131.
- Rudduck, J., Day, J. & Wallace, G. (1997). Students' perspectives on school improvement. In A. Hargreaves (Ed.), *Rethinking educational change with heart and mind (The 1997 ASCD Year Book)*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

- Rudduck, J., & Flutter, J. (2000). Pupil participation and perspective: 'Carving a new order of experience'. *Cambridge Journal of Education*, 30(1), 75-89.
- Scott, W. R. (1998). *Organizations: Rational, natural, and open systems*. (4th ed.). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- Soo Hoo, S. (1993). Students as partners in research and restructuring schools. *The Educational Forum*, 57(Summer), 386-393.
- Stevenson, R. B., & Ellsworth, J. (1993). Dropouts and the silencing of critical voices. In L. Weis & M. Fine (Eds.), *Beyond silenced voices: Class, race, and gender in United States schools*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Thorkildsen, T. A. (1994). Toward a fair community of scholars: Moral education as the negotiation of classroom practices. *Journal of Moral Education*, 23(4), 371-85.
- Wehlage, G. G., Rutter, R. A., Smith, G. A., Lesko, N., & Fernandez, R. R. (1989). *Reducing the risk: Schools as communities of support*. London, England: Falmer Press.

DANA MITRA is Assistant Professor of Education Policy Studies at Penn State University. Her research interests include educational change, school reform, student voice, and youth development.

DANA MITRA est professeure adjointe d'études politiques en éducation à l'Université d'État de Pennsylvanie. Elle s'intéresse aux changements pédagogiques, à la réforme scolaire, à la voix des élèves et au développement des jeunes.