

Student Voice in School Reform: Youth-Adult Partnerships in the land of Edutopia

Dana L. Mitra, Ph.D.
Education Theory and Policy Program
Penn State University
dana@psu.edu

Paradox

Edutopia

An ideal educational landscape, where students are motivated to learn and teachers are energized by the excitement of teaching. In these schools, parents and other professionals from the community—architects, artists, physicians, and writers, among others—contribute their expertise and resources.” George Lucas Foundation

Tinkering Towards Utopia

Classic text by Larry Cuban and David Tyack that says we're never going to get to Edutopia.

Alternative title:

**Lost in translation:
Navigating the silos of
educational policy and
human development**

Educational reform and policy

- ▶ Loosely coupled/egg crate nature of schooling in the United States
- ▶ Micro-level policy and reform experiences
 - Bottom-up change
 - Milbrey McLaughlin
- ▶ Organic, emergent change processes
 - how changes develop
 - Focus on conceptualization, implementation, sustainability and scale
- ▶ Case study and ethnographic approaches
 - Developing--asking What and How
 - Surveys usually as a secondary, contextual source
- ▶ What would the “intervention” be and in what context?

Micro contexts of youth in schools



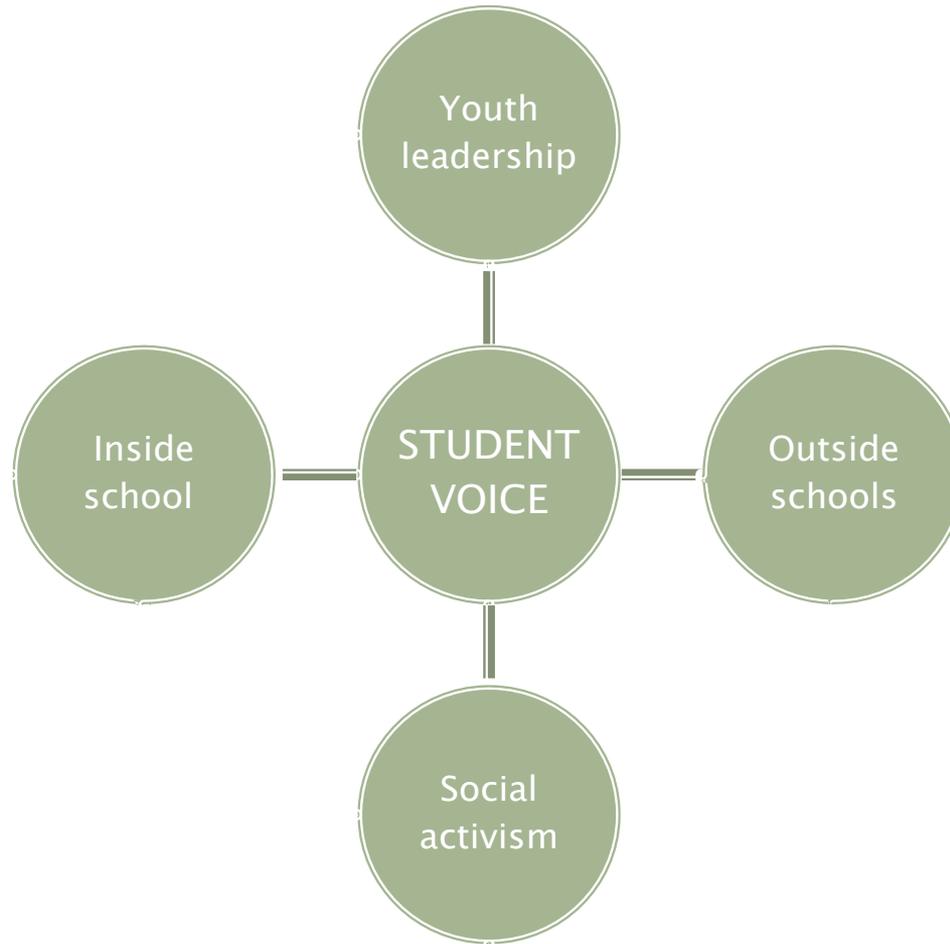
What's in a name?

Student voice vs. Youth-adult partnership

- ▶ Form of youth–adult partnership (not a term used in educational world)
- ▶ Opportunities for youth to share in the school decisions that will shape their lives and the lives of their peers
- ▶ Youth and adults collaboration together
 - Mutual teaching and learning
- ▶ A.k.a.: pupil participation, active citizenship, youth leadership, and youth empowerment.

Insider/outsider approaches

Mitra, D.L. & Kirshner, B. (Forthcoming). Insiders versus outsiders—Examining variability in student voice initiatives and their consequences for school change. . In B. McMahaon & J. Portelli (Ed.), *Student engagement in urban schools: Beyond neoliberal discourses*. Charlotte, NC: Information Age Publishing.



Types of voice

	Youth leadership focus	Social activism focus
Inside schools	Student Councils, student projects focused on changing things within a school	Students working on systemic efforts to reform their school, often in partnership with teacher and administrators
		<i>Example of blending: When activists get a seat at the table</i>
Outside schools	Community-based organizations such as 4-H, Boys and Girls Clubs	Social change/social protest focus, driven by youth and community organizing

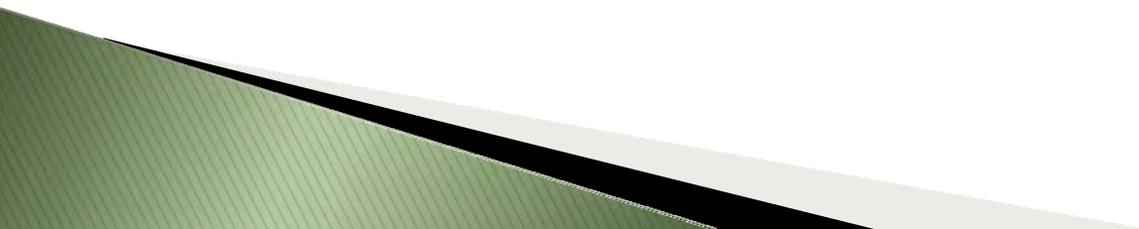
Finding student voice

- ▶ Pockets in the United States
- ▶ Often attached to school reform networks / movements
 - Coalition of Essential Schools
 - League of Democratic Schools
 - Montessori Schools
- ▶ My research: Bay Area School Reform Collaborative
 - Schools focused on inquiry-based reform
 - Two year ethnographic study
 - Follow up seed money to 12 schools in region by the Walter S. Johnson foundation

Student voice outcomes

For school reform

1) Strategic planning and improving depth of implementation

- ▶ Identify problems with school structure and culture—especially for failing students
 - ▶ Bridge families and schools
 - ▶ Improve pre-service teacher training
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Student participation in professional development at Whitman High School

- ▶ Translating reform into student friendly language:
- ▶ *My job at the training sessions was "...breaking down vocabulary. Some students may not understand [this reform effort]. 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] a translator..."*

Troy Newman, 11th grader

2) Improve school culture

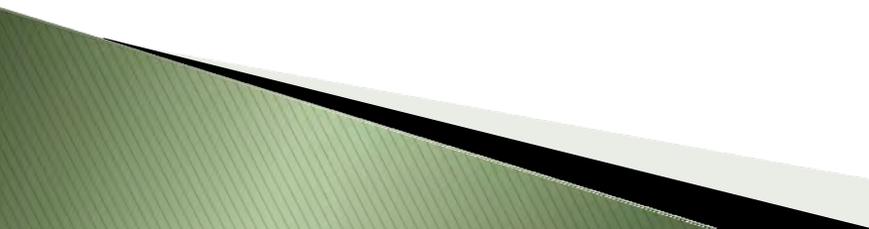
- ▶ Strong desire for positive, caring relationships with adults and peers

Example: Whitman neighborhood tours

“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.” Marcus, 11th grader

“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. 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.” Joey, 11th grader

3) Improve classroom practice

- ▶ Student improvement in academic outcomes, interest in learning, meta-cognitive understanding
 - ▶ Increases teacher confidence and improved relevance of the curriculum
 - ▶ Students want: autonomy; relevant pedagogy; respect and collaboration; greater responsibility in school decisions
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4) Positive youth development

Mitra, D. L. (2004). The significance of students: Can increasing “student voice” in schools lead to gains in youth development. *Teachers College Record*, 106(4), 651–688.

- ▶ Agency
- ▶ Belonging
- ▶ Competence

- ▶ Very similar to the 5/6 Cs of Positive Youth Development
 - caring, connection, character, confidence, competence , (and contribution)

Agency

- ▶ Self-confidence, self-worth, and the belief that one can exert influence and power in a given situation

“Now I'm very confident in myself. I know that I can make changes. Sometimes I used to think that our lives were kind of pointless. And now, it's like, you can make real changes. Now it's the school, and maybe in my career and my adult life I could actually do something, with a lot of determination and a lot of will.” Rosalinda, 12th grader

I “think a lot of students don't even know that when they first come in [to high school] that they can ...actually make changes. And since they don't know that and something goes bad and they just say, ‘I'm just going to drop out of school because I don't like it.’ We need to let them know that they can make changes if they put their minds to it.” Donald, 12th grader

Belonging

- ▶ Increase in attachment and positive relationships to peers, teachers, school, and broader community

“I think that relationships between teacher and student throughout their high-school career are the most important thing. . . . Once you have that relationship, you can go to that teacher and you can say, ‘That’s my friend.’ And they will listen to your problems...and give you feedback. And they’ll be there for you. Just to have people there for you to support you, you will be successful in anything you do.” Sala, 12th grader

Competencies

- ▶ Problem solving and facilitation
 - *“I learned how to bite my tongue, I learned how to hear out people a little bit more. I learned how to facilitate.”* Sala, 12th grader
- ▶ Public speaking
 - *“I learned to speak with no fear. I used to be shy.”* Mary, 12th grader
- ▶ Working with people different than themselves
 - *“I used to misjudge people ... Once you meet the person, it’s totally different...I think that made me think about that everybody should be treated equal.”* Jaycee, 12th grader

THE “HOW”: Enabling and sustain student voice initiatives

Pushing against the institutionalized
roles of teachers and students

1) Signs that this is not “business as usual.”

- ▶ The intentional creation of new roles for youth and adults other than “teacher” and “student.”
 - Adults as coaches, friends, counselors
 - Youth as leaders, teachers
- ▶ Beginning with creation of a safe space and open lines of communication
- ▶ Rearranged physical space to establish a different and more equitable form of interaction

Mitra, D. L. (2009). Collaborating with students: Building youth-adult partnerships in schools. *American Journal of Education*, 15 (3), 407-436.

2) Creating meaningful, but not equal roles

- ▶ Foster equal responsibility and respect through mutual understanding
- ▶ Creating a space in which all group members—youth and adults—could develop a common vision and share responsibility for decisions
- ▶ Power is not a zero sum game
- ▶ Encourage group members to experiment with a variety of roles, including being a critical thinker, a teacher, a learner, a peacemaker, a supporter, a facilitator, and a documenter

3) Creating “visible victories”

(McLaughlin, 1993)

- ▶ Legitimacy and credibility of student voice effort needs to be shored up
- ▶ Small enough to happen quickly
- ▶ Large enough to be meaningful to youth and sufficiently impressive to adults
- ▶ Timeline especially important due to school calendar

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4) Ongoing professional development

- ▶ Adults must learn how to enable leadership in youth
 - Understanding of youth developmental needs and cultural contexts
- ▶ Youth must learn how to assume leadership positions
 - “Adult speak”
 - Time management
 - Strategic planning
 - Conflict resolution

Sustainability



Sustainability of group and group positioning

School and group name	Sustainability	Positioning
Morgan: Peer Resources	Yes	*Outside affiliation to citywide organization
Latin: Peer Resources	Yes	*Outside affiliation to citywide organization
Hillside: Unity of Youth	Yes	*Outside affiliation as a branch of a local youth organization
Hoover: Gay-Straight Alliance	Yes	*Outside affiliation with a nationwide social movement
Sierra: Youth Taking Charge	Yes	*Outside affiliation with a non-profit
Highland: Business Enterprise	Yes	*Outside affiliation with a non-profit
Midland: Campaigns for Justice	No	*Outside affiliation with a weak organization that closed down
Great Valley: End the Stereotypes	No	*Outside affiliation with an organization that shifted to another focus
King: Youth Voice Initiative	No	*Outside affiliation with a weak national organization that closed down
Whitman: Student Forum	No	Internally developed
McGuire: Peer Mentoring	No	Internally developed
College Center: Unity Council	No	Internally developed
High Hills: Pacific Club	No	Very loose ties with an outside affiliation

Mitra, D. L. (2009). The role of intermediary organizations in sustaining student voice initiatives. *Teachers College Record* (111), 7, 1834-1868.

5) Partnering with an intermediary organization

- ▶ Other terms include: coaches, non-system actors, support providers
- ▶ Sustainability of student voice initiatives often is tied to intermediate organizations (IOs) for
 - Vision
 - Funding
 - Networking
 - Training

Current projects

- ▶ Student voice, service learning and democratic practice in the elementary grades
 - Park Forest Elementary
 - Small school groups, all school groups, and service learning
 - Survey measures of civic engagement and student voice for Grades 2–5
- ▶ Supporting the adult ally
 - Little training and support for adults
 - Developing training for adults involved in Second Mile Leadership Institute
- ▶ Student voice in high stakes testing contexts
 - Authentic assessment in times of a narrowed curriculum and silenced voices

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