

Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

Many youth in today's high schools share the desperation of Rosalinda Gutierrez, a tenth grade student at Whitman High School, who exclaimed, "They don't even see how students feel at this school. We're really dying inside." In fact, students report that adults rarely listen to their views, and they rarely involve students in important decisions. Large numbers of high school students describe their school experiences in terms of anonymity and powerlessness (Noddings, 1992; Poplin & Weeres, 1992; Heath & McLaughlin, 1993; Nightingale & Wolverton, 1993). Large school size, the segregation by age and ability, and a view of students as "clients" further increase the sense of distance between teachers and students. To make matters worse, these experiences of alienation often result in disengagement between students and their schools. In fact, disengagement is a key reason for students dropping out of school, according to a 2006 survey (Bridgeland, Dilulio, & Morison, 2006). Disengaged students tend to come to school less, have lower self-concepts, and achieve less academically and are more likely to drop out of school (Fullan, 2001; Rudduck & Wallace, 1997).

Ironically, youth themselves tend to be viewed as the source of the problem. Teenagers are portrayed by the media, politicians, and even researchers as uniformly resistant, rebellious, and determined to isolate themselves from society (Males, 1996; Takanishi, 1993). The consequence of this perception is that it limits the expectations not only of adults but also of adolescents.

What might happen if we viewed youth as part of the solution, rather than as part of the problem? This book examines the emergence of "student voice" as an avenue for fostering both youth development and broader conceptions of school leadership aimed at achieving meaningful school change. More than a token

gesture of a student sitting in on a meeting, student voice activities are school-based youth-adult partnerships (Camino, 2000; Jones & Perkins, 2004). When placed into practice, student voice can describe instances in which young people collaborate with adults to address the problems in their schools and to improve teaching and learning in their classrooms.

Previous research has identified important benefits of student voice initiatives for schools, youth, and adults. Such efforts can serve as a catalyst for change in schools, including helping to improve teaching, curriculum, and teacher-student relationships and leading to changes in student assessment and teacher training (Fielding, 2001; Rudduck & Flutter, 2000). Student voice initiatives also have been shown to increase youth agency, to create greater attachment to schools, and to build a range of skills and competencies, including learning to get along with others, planning complex projects, and public speaking (Kirshner, O'Donoghue, & McLaughlin, 2003; Mitra, 2004). In addition to the professional growth that these partnerships can facilitate, these student voice initiatives 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).

Much of the previous research on topics related to student voice has looked at classroom-level student voice initiatives, including the importance of joint student-teacher responsibility for creating the learning environment (McLaughlin, Talbert, Kahne, & Powell, 1990; Meyer, 1999) and the examination of the power relationship between students and teachers (Blase, 1991; Cusick, 1973; Muncey & McQuillan, 1991; Powell, Farrar, & Cohen, 1985). In contrast, few examples exist of student voice as a new conception of school leadership and an avenue toward influencing schoolwide change.

With little research available on the resurgence of student voice efforts occurring for the first time since the early seventies, the intent in this study was to find a "best case" scenario of student voice efforts. This research provided an in-depth explanation of a school that did contain strong student voice efforts. While many high schools have struggled with how to improve student outcomes, Whitman decided to go straight to the source and ask the students. The students accepted the task with gusto and sought, in

their terms, to make the partnership “real”—meaning that students wanted their school to hear their voices. They wanted to engage in meaningful discussions about why so many students at Whitman failed their classes and dropped out of school. They wanted to partner with their teachers and principals to improve learning for themselves and their peers.

The research sample for this book is based on representativeness of the concept of ‘student voice’ (Strauss & Corbin, 1990), rather than representativeness of school sites. The goal was to maximize the opportunities to observe student involvement by choosing the sites that most actively demonstrated commitment to working with students on their reform work rather than to find schools with a range of student involvement in reform efforts. This book therefore tells the story of “Whitman High School” (all names have been changed in this book), a school serving families who rarely have a voice in schools in the United States. 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 Americans and European Americans. Half of Whitman High School’s students are English-language learners, and half qualify for the free or reduced-price lunch program.

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, Whitman High School staff felt compelled to make changes. In 1998, Whitman received a major grant to launch a three-year reform effort from the Bay Area School Reform Collaborative (BASRC), a \$112 million education initiative in the San Francisco Bay area that was supported by the Annenberg Challenge and the Hewlett Foundation. 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 they felt needed to be improved.

During the time that this research was conducted, Whitman could easily be considered the trailblazer on student involvement in the San Francisco Bay Area. Many other high schools in the area were talking about wanting to involve students in their reform work, particularly through interviewing focus groups of students. After conducting a small sample of interviews and observations with other schools and after talking with school reform consultants

in the area, it was clear, however, that although these other schools indicated an interest in increasing student voice, it was not occurring at these schools at the time. The student voice effort happening at Whitman was unusual and deserved to be the sole focus of this study.

This book focuses on the work of Whitman's student voice initiative, Student Forum. The group began when a fourth-year English teacher selected a cross-section of students to participate in focus groups on how improve the academic success of ninth graders. This group of 30 students continued to work together after the focus groups to target its efforts at increasing student participation in efforts to reform the school and to institute new school programs and policies. Student Forum sought to inject student voice into school decision making and to seek ways to make the school a better place for all students. The group eventually narrowed its focus to one schoolwide issue—building communication and partnership between students and teachers.

This book describes the evolution of student voice at Whitman High School. Specifically, the book examines two questions: What does student voice look like in practice? and What difference does it make? The first half of the book focuses on the nitty gritty of how student voice evolved at Whitman High School. It contributes needed research on what student voice initiatives look like in practice, including supports that enable them and detractors that constrain them. Chapter 2 provides a background on previous student voice research. Chapter 3 describes Whitman students and the school's reform history that culminated in the initial step of fostering student voice at Whitman—adults listening to students through interviews and surveys. Chapter 4 examines the process by which Student Forum members wanted to make a difference in their school and tried to figure out how to do so. The youth translated their vision of student voice into a structure and a plan that would allow them to foster a youth-adult partnership at the school. Chapter 5 lays out how hard work of creating Student Forum finally led to action as the group implemented many activities intended to increase communication and build partnership between students and teachers. The chapter describes the leadership assumed by Whitman youth as they sought to make changes in their schools and communities. Their actions demonstrated a

rare occasion in which young people assumed much of the responsibility for making changes happen.

The second half of the book considers the difference that student voice made at Whitman and the connections between this research and educational leadership, professional learning communities, and positive youth development. Chapter 6 examines how student voice initiatives can expand notions of distributed leadership, professional learning communities, and collaboration to include young people in conversations and efforts to achieve educational change. Student Forum demonstrates the potential for strengthening school improvement by broadening a school's learning community to include students in the reform process.

Chapter 7 defines the fundamental ways in which student voice initiatives can lead to important gains in positive youth development outcomes for youth. In a time in which students feel increasingly isolated and disengaged from school, the chapter provides powerful evidence of ways in which young people can increase their sense of agency, a range of skills necessary for leading successful lives, and the growth of relationships that increase their attachment. Chapter 8 concludes the book by reiterating the important lessons that Whitman offers scholars, policy makers, and practitioners.