

**Where are the Students in Student Voice?  
Challenging Dominant Epistemologies in Student Voice Discourses**

A THESIS  
SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF THE  
UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA  
BY

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IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF  
MASTER OF ARTS

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December 2020



## **Acknowledgements**

I want to acknowledge my Mom and Gram for instilling the value of education and supporting my pursuits to engage in student voice. These two women inspired me to study education and truly see the transformative value education can have. I am forever grateful for the value of education being instilled into me.

I want to acknowledge and express gratitude to Donna Taylor and Michael Seymour, who both provided me with the technical tools to be an agent of change within education. Additionally I want to thank my undergraduate professor and advisor, Dr. Mary-Beth Doyle from Saint Michael's College for encouraging me to contribute to the field of student voice research. I also want to thank Professor James Nagle for inspiring me to pursue graduate school and to raise the bar for myself as a researcher. Thank you to Annie Jenkin, who has acted as a wonderful colleague, friend, and mentor for providing thoughtful feedback on my thesis.

I also want to express my sincere gratitude for my Advisor, Dr. Nicola Alexander who has guided me and has helped me focus my research and to be more concise and articulate in my academic writing. I also want to thank my Thesis Panel. I acknowledge that the timing of reviewing a thesis during a global pandemic has to be particularly taxing, and I appreciate the diligence from Dr. Demarath, Dr. Mitchell, and Dr. Alexander.

## **Abstract**

The following master's thesis explores how adult researchers and practitioners' defining, framing, and implementation of student voice may have contributed to the positioning of secondary school students in education policy and leadership. Key research questions addressed whether or not there is a disconnect in how researchers, practitioners, and students define student voice, as well as considering if the term, "student voice," positions the role of students in educational decision making. The key themes that emerged from the content analysis include: Disconnect between student and adult stakeholders; aspirations of students within student voice; and students as spectacles. Findings suggest that the majority of student voice research literature frames student voice as a process that only occurs in a class and school setting. Student discourses, in contrast, understand student voice as a democratic process occurring in the state and federal policymaking arena, and view themselves as key decision makers.

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## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION

#### **Motivation of Study and Researcher Positionality**

Student voice has had an incredibly transformative impact on my life. Engaging in student voice is largely the reason as a first generation student that I was even interested in pursuing a college degree. Though I had participated in middle and high school student councils, I never really considered this an empowering or transformative extracurricular, as the programming for these organizations largely consisted of fundraisers to finance school dances we would plan, and create talent shows. Even before I was familiar with student voice, I found these student-facilitated events to be largely superficial. During my tenure as a high school student, there were two seminal moments that cultivated my immense passion for student voice and how I would consider what the role of students are in education.

The first event was my first year in high school, I was a timid student that generally did well academically. The local school principal invited me to his office to offer a position in the Southeast Regional Student Advisory Council, which is a student-led organization that has high school students from the southeastern region of Massachusetts meet and discuss common issues that we witnessed in our schools. The purpose of this organization was to find these commonalities and bring back solutions to our local schools that were developed in these meetings. Additionally, these commonalities would be brought up to the State Student Advisory Council (SSAC), which consists of five total regions in Massachusetts who report directly to the Department of Elementary & Secondary Education. SSAC created policy

recommendations based on the problems that students and adult advisors identified. This offer from my principal has significantly shaped the course of my life, as I otherwise would not have known about this organization, or even the concept of student voice. In retrospect, I realized that my principal determined which students could be represented as only two students per high school were allowed to be voting members. Considering my school had nearly 1,000 students, I felt like I had won the lottery, but I now realize that my high school principal screened students they thought would be suitable based on their academic standing, as opposed to allowing constituents to choose their own representative. I am reminded of the fact that my entry into student voice and having more agency in education was due to an adult deeming that I was somehow more deserving than other students to be granted more agency. This moment acted as a catalyst to my progression into experiencing and learning more about student voice. It would not be hyperbolic for me to say that I genuinely do not know where I would be, or *who* I would be without this seemingly arbitrary decision by my principal. I cannot deny that I have benefited immensely from an adult selecting me to serve as a representative for a student voice organization, whereas I likely would not have been elected by peers. However, I would argue that if students are stakeholders in education, they should have the freedom to elect who will represent the diverse concerns of the student population. I am ardent in my belief that students should get to select who best represents their values and concerns, because they may be incongruent with whom an administrator selects.

The second event was during my junior year of high school, where I was the high school student liaison for the school committee, and each committee member was afforded the opportunity to speak about the impact of the superintendent, with the

exception of myself. I was skipped over, and when every member finished, I interjected to provide the student perspective based on recent student town halls I hosted. As I was discussing potential room for growth to improve school culture and inclusion, the chair of the school committee exclaimed, “Dan, you do realize that you are actually not a part of this, right?” This was an incredibly important moment in my life, because it made me question, ‘what exactly is the role of the largest stakeholder in education?’ How should students be involved in the process of educational policy making and leadership? I struggled to reconcile my role on the school committee, because I was being tokenized, and I was being silenced. This also made me realize in hindsight that there is a significant disparity in what student voice means to practitioners.

I have made it my life’s mission to expand access and equity for student voice opportunities. This direct involvement in student voice has framed the way I understand what student voice means, and what it should *actually* mean. My own sensemaking and worldview have directly influenced the way I look at student voice, and has also narrowed the way I may explore the literature of student voice (Evans, 2007).

### **Background and Context**

Student voice is an emerging field in education which considers the role of students within the context of educational change. Researchers in student voice have expressed that there is a lack of consensus as to what exactly student voice means (Conner, 2016; Cook-Sather, 2006). Generally speaking, a contemporary definition of student voice is: “The process of how we [those that are not students] facilitate, listen to, act on and influence policy and practices in classrooms and schools through the experiences, views and accounts of young people” (Bourke & Loveridge, 2018 p. 2). It is

worth mentioning that the definition provided by Bourke & Loveridge has been used in globally distributed journals that has shaped the understanding of what student voice means for practitioners and stakeholders internationally (Bourke & Loveridge, 2018; Cook-Sather, 2019; Gonzalez & Hernández-Saca, 2017). This definition of student voice is an example of a concept known as *school-level positioning*, which involves the enabling or constraining of what it means to be a student (York & Kirshner, 2015). In their definition, Bourke & Loveridge position students to be dependent on adult stakeholders in order to have their perspective heard. This relegates students having to channel their perspectives to another stakeholder and have their voice vicariously represented without having a proverbial seat at the table. This popular definition limits the agency and capacity that students can have in settings of educational change.

Since the inception of student voice, there has been the concern of students being tokenized or their diverse perspectives being reduced to nothing more than an erroneous homogenetic entity, in which there is a universal perspective that students share (Fielding, 2007; Holquist, 2019). This concern is augmented by the legacy of hegemonic voices of adult practitioners and researchers who have promulgated the concerns of students without student consultation (Bourke, 2016; Charteris & Smardon, 2018; O’Neil, 2018; Woods, 1980). This lack of student inclusion in the research of student voice is concerning, considering the policy and cultural implications that result in the stereotyping and effective silencing of the student.

Why is it that the largest stakeholders in education, the students, are continuously either limited or not invited to participate in educational change? Researchers in the field of student voice have posited that the limited role of students in educational change stems

from: Adultism; threat of tokenization; rhetoric; unsafe space for students to speak; misconception of the term student voice; youth incapability; immaturity; vague understandings of student voice; seeing students as irrational agens; and mistrust (Conner, 2016; Cook-Sather, 2006; Holquist, 2009; Mitra, 2008; & York, Kirshner, 2015). Though these explanations are legitimate barriers towards increasing the role of students as educational stakeholders, these are symptoms of a potentially more universal factor inhibiting the capacity of student participation in educational leadership and policy making. The term, student voice, may unintentionally be limiting the involvement students have in education policy and leadership.

This study explores how the student voice label stymies the ability of students to be recognized and valued as legitimate educational decisionmakers. The positioning of the term, “student voice,” inhibits the relationship students may have with other stakeholders, which may lead to the tokenization, homogenization, and/or removal of students' diverse perspectives.

There has been recent discussion pertaining to the issue of the terminology used in the student voice movement by scholars. Student voice researchers have recently pointed out that operating as if there is a monolithic student voice can diminish or eliminate the perspectives of marginalized communities within the student population, as well as reinforce privileged perspectives (Charteris & Smardon, 2019; Fielding, 2007, as cited in Bourke & Loveridge, 2018; Cook-Sather, 2007, as cited in Bourke & Loveridge, 2018; Groundwater-Smith, 2015, as cited in Bourke, 2018). If these tokenizing practices within student voice are the product of the ascribed terminology, then the consequences

of continuing to use the term, “student voice” are even more damaging to the most marginalized communities.

The literature within student voice insufficiently addresses how the terminology utilized by researchers may paradoxically and adversely impact those the researchers are trying to emancipate, the students. Recent literature emphasizes that there should be close critiques of voice within education in order to disrupt hegemonic practices (Charteris & Smardon, 2019). Ironically, Charteris and Smardon’s study reinforces the hegemonic discursive practices by only interviewing school administrators in regards to the “complex and contested” construct of student voice (2019).

The gap in the literature of not incorporating students’ perspectives within student voice is vast and problematic. If the student voice movement is to burgeon into a widely accepted policy, it has to reconcile that the definitions and rules around that movement were often framed by the adults without student consultation. As of this study, there is no student voice research that directly addresses how students feel about the definitions and terms that were imposed on them. There is a dangerous assumption that the rules are built to the benefit of all students. This is not to say that scholars in this field are operating out of malice. To the contrary, most of these researchers view this field as a work of inclusivity and radical collegiality. This very well could be the case if students were directly involved as equitable stakeholders defining the terms and boundaries of their own involvement. The current literature does not suggest this to be the case.

## **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study is to explore how adult researchers and practitioners' defining, framing, and implementation of student voice policies may have contributed to the positioning of secondary school students in education policy and leadership. The purpose also considers how the discourses distributed by adult voices may be inconsistent and create potentially adverse relationships between students and other stakeholders in educational decisionmaking.

## **Key Research Questions**

The following key research questions are rooted in the systematic examination of predominant student voice articles. In addition, the following questions assisted in guiding the choice in research methods that were employed for this study:

1. How, if at all, does the term, "student voice," position the role students have as education stakeholders?
2. How, if at all, do adult researchers, adult practitioners and student voice organizations have a similar understanding of what, "student voice," means?
3. How does the discourse amongst key stakeholders speak to the role of students in student voice?

## **Significance of the Study**

If the term, "student voice," unintentionally hinders the capacity of secondary school students to contribute to education policy and leadership in the United States, there may be significant ramifications to those who are receiving an education. Students and student organizations are seldom represented at the state level, but when these students and student organizations are participating, they have made meaningful contributions that have benefited all stakeholders. These contributions are in spite of the

terminology, “student voice,” as there is incredibly limited research considering how students are stakeholders in state and national policy arenas. For instance, the Connecticut State Student Advisory Council addressed the Connecticut Board of Education to ensure that there was information on sexual harassment within student handbooks in the state, which had not been previously considered (Musante, 1999). This was an issue that was not on the legislative agenda of the Connecticut Board of Education, and without having students at the table, this may have been an issue where students and schools would not have had the proper resources to address complaints of sexual harassment.

Additionally, the Illinois State Student Advisory Council presented to the Illinois Board of Education to address the abstinence-only curriculum for secondary students. The presentation from the high school students covered statistics on HIV and the increase in teen pregnancies in Illinois; this presentation, along with a call to have comprehensive sex-education in Illinois from the students resulted in a successful board adoption of a curriculum that required comprehensive sex-ed to be taught in schools (Illinois State Board of Education, 2014; Illinois Student Advisory Council, 2009). When students are seen as legitimate stakeholders, there is an opportunity for more diverse, comprehensive policy creation, implementation, and analysis.

It should be noted that these examples are the exception, and not the expectation of how states and schools value students as decision makers. In fact, in 14 states it is illegal for students to serve on local school boards, even as non-voting liaisons (Fletcher & King, 2014). It is also worth considering that according to the 2019 *Quality Counts* report card that the bottom five states (Mississippi, Louisiana, Oklahoma, Nevada, and

New Mexico), are all states that have outlawed student participation on local and state boards of education, whereas the top five performing states (New Jersey, Massachusetts, Connecticut, Maryland, and New Hampshire) all have a combination of local and state student board presence, as well as having legislative youth advisory councils (Lloyd & Harwin, 2019; Fletcher & King, 2014; New Hampshire General Assembly, 2010).

Though correlation does not equate to causation, there is research that concludes diversity improves organizational performance (Wardell, 2018). Additionally, representative bureaucracy is a widely accepted concept in which a government organization is better suited to serve its constituents when the organization is composed of a representative constituent population (Grisson, Kern & Rodriguez, 2015). Internationally, when schools and education systems inculcate the value of having legitimate student stakeholders, there are positive outcomes that improve the relationships among teachers, administrators, and students, as well as improve overall school climate (Mitra, 2008; Rudduck & McIntyre, 2007). This evidence suggests that when students participate in educational change, there are positive outcomes. If there is empirical research that highlights the merits of representative bureaucracy as well as racial, gender, and ethnic diversity leading to improved organizational outcomes, it is reasonable to suggest that involving the participation of students can cause improved outcomes for local and state level educational outcomes. If there was substantial evidence to suggest that the term, “student voice,” limits the participation of students in educational change, it could significantly change stakeholder interactions and roles. All stakeholders could benefit from students being decision makers in education.

## **Limitations of the Study**

There are limitations as to what can be addressed within this study. Students' discourse will be comparatively analyzed with adult researchers and practitioners' discourse to explore what student voice means to various stakeholders. Additionally, not all literature pertaining to student voice will be analyzed. This presents threats to generalizability. Additionally there is the threat of selection bias with the student voice literature, student voice practitioners, and student voice organizations. The threat of selection bias would be akin to the threat of convenience sampling, as well as not getting comprehensive perspectives from the discourses from the relevant texts being analyzed. These limitations are addressed further under the delimitations section.

## **Delimitation**

In order to narrow the scope of this study, a sample of the works from student voice researchers, practitioners, and student organizations were systematically analyzed in order to explore the meanings of the term, "student voice." Specifically, utilizing content analysis and critical discourse analysis will be the primary methods employed in order to systemically explore the texts of students and non-students. In order concretely to define how these texts are chosen, the most cited student voice literature and seminal works from practitioners and student organizations will be selected.

Further discussion of the inclusion and exclusion criteria will be presented in the methodology chapter. Additionally, empirical research methods being employed to explore how adult researchers and practitioners' define student voice will be discussed later. There will also be an exploration of how adults' framing, and implementation of student voice policies may have contributed to the positioning of secondary school

students in education policy and leadership, methodological questions will be addressed further in Chapter Three.

### **Organization of the Study**

The remainder of this study comprises four chapters. Chapter Two provides a review of the literature that underlies this study and the gaps that emerge from the literature. Chapter Three describes in details the methods used to collect and analyze the data on which this study is based. Chapter Four presents the findings of the analysis. Chapter Five concludes with a discussion of the findings with implications for theory and practice, as well as future recommendations.

## CHAPTER TWO

### LITERATURE REVIEW

#### **Introduction**

Student voice research and literature is a relatively new field of study in which there exists no comprehensive historical account of the development of student voice, though leading researchers in the field identify the origins of student voice research can be traced back to the 1990s and early 2000s (Cook-Sather, 2018; Fielding, 2001; Mitra, 2008). The purpose of this literature review is threefold: To describe the development and eventual divergence of the student voice movement in the United States versus global development; to explore student voice case law in the United States and; to provide taxonomies developed by adult researchers. These sections build a rationale for the research questions to consider how discourses from students and non-students are disconnected. Throughout this literature review, there is latent content that shows the absence of student perspectives that inform the literature on student voice.

The first section of this literature review describes how student voice grew globally, and how the United States began to have its own distinct student voice movement. As will be discussed in greater detail, the United States has focused on looking at student voice through a lens of measuring educational outcomes, as opposed to democratic participation and inclusion as experienced in other countries. This focus on outcomes and program evaluation has led adult researchers and practitioners in the U.S. to research students predominately within the realm of classrooms and schools. The consequence of this focus has resulted in a burgeoning disconnect between discourses from students versus adult voices within the student voice movement.

The second section of this literature review builds a historical account of the student voice organizations and movement led by students throughout the United States. This subsection addresses a significant gap in the current student voice literature, as most of the student voice literature is oriented around theories and pedagogical approaches created by adults. This student-centered section aims not only to showcase how students have developed within the field of student voice, but to also highlight to broader audiences the accomplishments students have historically made.

The third section of this literature review discusses the global taxonomies of student voice created by adult researchers. These taxonomies show that most adult scholars outside of the United States have developed taxonomies centered around students as decisionmakers. This is in contrast to how U.S. scholars have examined student voice through a process of school quality review. The difference in theoretical approaches to student voice has led to discourses from students becoming incongruent to non-student scholars and practitioners in the United States.

The fourth section regards the current stigmatization of students within the United States. Non-student researchers and practitioners discuss ways to reduce stigmatization and tokenization of students. This section includes a critique of the absence of student perspectives, which is in itself, tokenizing since students were not consulted in drawing these conclusions.

### **Student Voice Scholarly Literature**

Student voice, though a fairly new field of study, can primarily be broken down into a first wave and second wave. The first wave of student voice can be understood as a period between the 1970s through early 1990s. The Vietnam War protests acted as a

catalyst to expand the rights of elementary and secondary students as seen in the *Tinker v. Des Moines* court case as well as the 26th Amendment in 1971. Additionally, the Civil Rights movement in the U.S. during the 1960s was a pivotal impetus for the student voice movement. Student voice during the first wave was largely a philosophical discussion of what the role of students could and should be.

Many researchers generally pinpoint the beginning of the second wave, or “new wave” during the 1990s-early 2000s (Fielding, 2004). The second wave built upon the philosophical conversations questioning if there should be student voice, to studying how student voice is effective in the classroom and local setting. Roger Hart’s *Ladder of Participation* was one of the first publications to actually conceptualize and scaffold differing levels of student voice and participation within education (1992). Hart’s contribution has been one of the most widely cited and influential pieces regarding student voice, thus, it would be reasonable to consider the 2nd wave of student voice to begin with his 1992 book.

In the context of U.S. student voice research, the choice for the United States not to ratify the 1989 United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) led to a noticeable divergence in the study of student voice. Student voice research in the United States has focused on how student voice can be utilized for school improvement outcomes (Conner, 2016; Mitra, 2006; Mitra, 2018). This is in contrast to how other non-U.S. Western developed nations have studied student voice through a lens of civic participation or redefining what it means to be a student (Fielding, 2004). The second wave of student voice research in the U.S. can be best understood through the decision not to guarantee the rights of youth.

### ***First Wave Student Voice: Pedagogical Assertions & Calls for Reform***

It should be noted that Constructivists like John Dewey, and Jean Piaget emphasized the value of student-centered approaches to learning. In particular, Piaget stressed that the purpose of education is for students to be creators and non-conformists (Bringuier, 1980). John Dewey also expressed that students should be able to make their own contributions to a collective interest (1916). Though these pedagogists influenced student voice literature, their contributions were limited strictly to a classroom setting, and not necessarily connected to how students can make contributions that transcend the classroom.

In addition to the radical state student advisory council and student advisory committee laws proposed by Massachusetts state representative Alan D. Sisitsky and signed by Governor Sargent, there were many federal reforms driving the student voice conversation. During the 1970s the National Education Association promulgated that official student voice in schools is only possible if students have basic rights such as freedom of speech (Mitra, 2008). The early 1970s started off with much fervor pertaining to student voice, but as the decade progressed, efforts in expanding student voice largely became stagnant. This may be due to a public perception that the civil rights protests of the 1960s and the 26th amendment of the 1970s solved the issue of student voice, thus making the issue itself quiescent (Edelman, 1960). This phenomenon of stagnation in student voice may also be understood through the concept of political utilities. Specifically, student voice can be understood as a response to the need to redistribute authority (Weiler, 1990). According to Hans Weiler, redistributive policies are intentionally superficially implemented, in order to perpetuate social control of oppressed

groups and maintain the status quo (1990). An example of this would be a redistributive policy being implemented inconsistently. This may explain why student voice in the United States looks widely different depending on which state, or even school district, in which one resides. Paulo Freire makes a similar point about the tokenization and objectification of students, or any marginalized group being represented inauthentically (1970). Most school committees and boards of education, when they even decide to have students present, have either a single token student, or students without voting rights (Fletcher & King, 2014).

The beginning of the 1980s was largely inactive in regards to student voice literature with one exception. Knefelkamp's 1981 article on student voice contended that students must be trusted if student voice is going to be successful (1981). Kenefelkamp's argument specifically pertained to college students, and not necessarily elementary or secondary students. Major educational agendas and reforms following the 1970s largely ignored student voice, in particular, *A Nation at Risk* omitted any discussion or urgency to expand student voice (1983). This is particularly surprising when only a decade ago, the quickest amendment ever ratified in U.S. history directly pertained to the expansion of student and youth rights (U.S. Const. amend. XXVI, 1971). Later in the decade, Giroux highlighted that there is paradoxically bipartisan ambivalence to expand student voice in U.S. secondary education: "...Both radical and conservative ideologies generally fail to engage the politics of voice and representation--the forms of narrative and dialogue---around which students make sense of their lives and schools" (1986). As previously mentioned, the 1989 United Nations Charter on the Rights of the Child was, and still is, a landmark publication indicating that youth deserve fundamental rights such

as having agency. Even though this is the most widely ratified charter in U.N. history, the U.S. has not officially acknowledged that youth have fundamental rights such as having a right to express their views and to influence decisionmaking that other countries possess.

The latter half of the 1980s was arguably a regressive period for student rights and the student voice movement in the United States. Two Supreme Court Cases: *Bethel v. Fraser*; and *Hazelwood v. Kuhlmeier*. In 1986, the *Bethel v. Fraser* case involved the suspension of Matthew Fraser for his speech in favor of class president candidate, Jeff Kuhlman, which included such sexual innuendo as, "I know a man who is firm--he is firm in his pants" (Fraser, 1983). The decision from the Supreme Court ruled in favor of Bethel school district 7-2. The majority opinion attempted to distinguish between political and lewd speech. Specifically, Chief Justice Burger concluded that the First Amendment did not prohibit schools from prohibiting vulgar and lewd speech since such discourse was inconsistent with the "fundamental values of public school education" (*Bethel v. Fraser*, 1986). Even though the premise of this case may seem crass, the implication of the distinction the Supreme court made between *Tinker* and *Fraser* has had adverse impacts on student rights and student voice. In 1992, the *Broussard v. School Board of Norfolk* ruled in favor of the decision to suspend a student who wore a shirt that said, "drugs suck" (1992). Lower courts have continued to interpret *Bethel v. Fraser* broadly, in which verdicts are not based on the original intended restrictions on school-sponsored student speech, but instead any form of lewd student expression (Hudson, 2002). This distinction is crucial, because labelling lewd speech is largely subjective and contextual, and students could be silenced by a heckler's veto, which at worst, could further marginalize concerns and perspectives from students. In their analysis of the

historically broad interpretation of *Bethel v. Fraser*, Hudson and Ferguson contend that, “the Fraser standard should be limited to school-sponsored student speech, and that all other student expression should be governed by the Tinker standard” (Hudson & Ferguson, 2002). This broad interpretation of *Bethel v. Fraser* has resulted in limiting how students can participate civically. A recent example involved two students attending the Stonington Connecticut High School. One student was suspended back in 2016 for wearing a “Black Lives Matter,” T-shirt, while another student was allowed to wear a Confederate flag T-shirt (Wojtas, 2020). This example showcases how hegemonic white school districts can disproportionately enact punitive measures upon students supporting civil rights causes, while iconography supporting white supremacy is tolerated. This broad interpretation of the *Bethel v. Fraser* standard allows for adults to stymie the ability for students to engage civically.

In conjunction with *Bethel v. Fraser*, the 1988 Hazelwood School District v. Kuhlmeier Supreme Court case started with the student newspaper, *Spectrum*, at Hazelwood East High School in Missouri. The East Hazelwood Principal objected and ultimately removed two articles from publication: The first article pertaining to the experience of three pregnant high school students attending East Hazelwood; and the second article discussed the impact of divorce on students (Reimer, 1998). The Supreme Court decided in favor of the principal, stating that schools have the right to limit the publications of students, due to schools not being considered public forum. Instead, schools are considered places of learning, and the Supreme Court ruled that, "school officials were entitled to regulate the contents of *Spectrum* in any reasonable manner" (Hachiya, Shoop, & Dunklee, 2014; Reimer, 1988). The Court also decreed that students

may also not be capable of processing sensitive material: “readers or listeners are not exposed to material that may be inappropriate for their level of maturity, and that the views of the individual speaker are not erroneously attributed to the school” (Reimer, 1988). This is problematic as particular declaration directly reinforces an adultist culture, thus diminishing how students are able to communicate issues that are relevant to them. The term *adultism*, can be defined as the, “behaviors and attitudes based on the assumption that adults are better than young people, and entitled to act upon young people without their [young people] permission” (NCCJ, 2020). Additionally, the Supreme Court ruling determining that students are not mature enough to discuss certain issues is incongruent with the entire basis of *Tinker v. Des Moines* (1969) in which students were protesting over the Vietnam War. If the Supreme Court determined that students were able to non-disruptively express their views over war, a topic that is certainly mature, these particular students should have been permitted to discuss topics like teen pregnancy and divorce. The *Hazelwood v. Kuhlmeier* (1988) Court arguably permits school officials to implement heckler’s veto, without student consent or consultation.

The first wave of student voice was largely driven by social movements without the actual partnership or involvement of students. There is a glaring lack of students' perspective in the early student voice literature, in which scholars, practitioners, and governments did not work with youth in the United States or globally to define student voice. Additionally, education scholars were noticeably absent from analyzing advancements in students' rights during the Civil Rights era. To this day, there is a gap in the student voice literature discussing how the 26th Amendment and Supreme Court

cases like Tinker v. Des Moines (1969), Bethel v. Fraser (1986), and Hazelwood v. Kuhlmeier (1988) influenced how students can be stewards of their own education and communities. The Supreme Court Rulings and the United States choosing not to ratify the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child is where a notable shift in student voice emerged between the U.S. and the rest of the world. The mid to late 1980's is where the U.S. saw particular losses in the expansion of students' rights to influence decisionmaking through student voice.

***Second Wave Student Voice in the U.S.: Divergence from Democracy & Focus on School Improvement***

The 1989 United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) expanded the rights that youth have globally. In particular, Articles 12 and 13 emphasize that youth should be able to form and express their own views, represent themselves in judicial and administrative proceedings, as well as utilize media to communicate their diverse perspectives (1989). In fact, the United States is the only United Nations recognized country in the world not to have ratified UNCRC (Rothschild, 2017). This divergence from other nations may explain why other countries have more institutionalized forms of student voice than the United States. For example: Denmark requires secondary students to be represented on all school boards; there must be equal representation of students and educators when discussing matters of teaching and curriculum changes; Nigeria has student representation on School-based Management Committees (SBMCs); Azerbaijan has the Azerbaijan Student Youth Organizations' Union (ASYOU) in which 101 public and private high schools are connected with the government and higher education institutions; the New Zealand Ministry of Education

has provided federal funding to research and promote student voices; while the U.K. ministry of education has incorporated pupil consultation into the federal curriculum (Azerbaijan Student Youth Organizations' Union, 2009; Bako, Krauss, Samah, & Hamid, 2017; Kidman, 2018; Rudduck & McIntyre, 2007). The decision for the United States not to ratify the UNCRC has impacted the way stakeholders in the U.S. frame their understanding of the role of students in education, as well as civic society. In Dr. Mitra's 2018 text, she distinguishes the difference between student voice in Europe and the United States:

In marked contrast to European nations, the USA lacks any formal policy to spur youth participation. While the democratic foundation of the USA rests on the idea that participation is the fundamental right of citizenship (Ochoa-Becker et al., 2001), many US policies inhibit the voices of young people. (Mitra, 2018, p. 475)

Dr. Mitra contrasts how the European model of student voice is focused around the idea of decisionmaking, whereas the United States tends to focus on classroom and school improvement (Mitra, 2018). Dr. Conner also states how the U.S. not ratifying UNCRC has had ramifications on the student voice movement:

The rarity of student voice initiatives in American schools and school systems stems from a few related factors. First, the USA is one of only two nations not to have ratified the 1989 United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (2016, p. 406).

Adult student voice researchers from Australian and New Zealand also signify how student voice in their regional context is rooted in UNCRC and youth participation in

democracy (Charteris & Smardon, 2019; Bourke & Loveridge, 2018). Non-student scholars and practitioners have focused student voice literature on local school improvement and classroom management (Conner, Ebby-Rosin, & Brown, 2015; Mitra, 2008; Mitra, 2018; Mockler, & Groundwater-Smith, 2015; Yonezawa, & Jones, 2009). Non-profit student organizations are also examined within U.S. student voice research. Despite there being more of a focus on civic participation, most non-profit case studies written by non-student researchers and practitioners limit the examination of student decisionmakers to the local and school arenas (Conner, 2016; Mitra, 2006; Sussman, 2015). It hasn't been until very recently that publications have had any in-depth analysis of student voice at the state arena. An exception to this rarity would be Dr. Holquist's dissertation which includes an examination of Oregon Student Voice, which is a secondary school student organization that works to be agents of change at the state level (2019). There is an insufficient examination of student voice in the state and federal arenas, and this can be attributed to both a gap in highlighting state and federal student initiatives, as well as focusing case studies at the class and school arenas.

In an attempt to model what future student voice literature reviews should encompass, the following section highlights student voice organizations and their contributions to policy change at the state and federal levels. These instances provide an overview of how individual students and student organizations acted as decision makers through policy initiatives, or through Supreme Court Cases to expand the role of students rights.

## **History of Student Voice Movements in the United States**

The history of what could be understood as student voice in the United States arguably began with the New Jersey Association of Student Councils (NJASC), which was formed in 1927 (NJASC, 2020). The purpose of the NJASC was that it “...works with both student leaders and student council advisors to encourage participation in student government and provide a forum for students to network and share ideas for successful projects and events” (2020). It remains unclear if this was a movement created by students, or if faculty at the school suggested having a student council.

The first prominent student rights movement in the United States began with the Supreme Court Case of *West Virginia Board of Education v. Barnette* in 1943. The case involved Jehovah’s Witnesses being expelled from public schools due to refusing to salute the flag during the pledge of allegiance. The Supreme Court ruled in favor of students who were not saying the pledge of allegiance, whose recital was made compulsory by the West Virginia Board of Education. The Court ruled that when students are being forced to say the pledge of allegiance, it is in violation of the free speech clause in the first amendment. This violation encroached on the due process and equal protection clauses of the fourteenth amendment. This rendered the conscription of students to state something they don’t believe in unconstitutional (Justice Jackson, 1943). This is the first known case that affirmed that youth have a right to exercise their voice within public schools, which is one component of student voice.

### ***Student Voice: Little Rock Nine & Vietnam***

Nine African-American high school students fought to uphold the contemporary verdict of *Brown v. Board* which resulted in the desegregation of schools. The Little

Rock Nine protested the noncompliance of the *Brown v. Board* ruling and fought for their right to have equal education. These students fought for their rights, and the rights of other students of color by attending Little Rock Central School, an all-white high school:

On Sept. 23, the nine students entered Little Rock Central High School for the first time, ignoring verbal abuse and threats from the crowd outside. When the mob realized the students had successfully entered the school, violence erupted, and seven journalists were attacked — including two reporting for Life [magazine]. As the situation deteriorated, school officials, fearing for the students' safety, dismissed the Little Rock Nine at lunchtime. (Cosgrove, 2012)

Despite being threatened with violence and discrimination, nine courageous students knew that their protests were driving the possibility of desegregation, as adult educational leaders in Arkansas weren't complying with the law. By the end of 1957, the Little Rock Nine were able to continue studying, and three of the nine graduated from Central High, though Governor Faubus closed all Little Rock public schools in 1958 (Journal of Blacks in Higher Education, 2007). Though the Little Rock Nine movement is typically seen as a major landmark for civil rights in America in the 20th century, it should also be viewed as a milestone for students who demand to be heard. It should also be recognized that a majority of students during this time did not want desegregation, though students who fought for the compliance of desegregation rightfully saw this as a pervasive issue of equity, social justice, and quality of education. This further highlights that students' perspectives shouldn't be treated as a monolithic entity, as majority movements like the Massive Resistance or the Southern Manifesto were reactions to nullify *Brown v. Board* in the South (Recchiuti, 2016).

The Vietnam War was highly influential in the expansion of student rights and student voice in the United States. One of the first instances of students challenging their constitutional rights in American schools started with John Tinker, Christopher Eckhardt, and Mary Beth Tinker. The aforementioned students attended secondary schools in Iowa, where they wanted to peacefully demonstrate their abhorrence of the Vietnam War by wearing black armbands within the school. The Des Moines school district stated that these students were not permitted to wear these armbands, and they were suspended for insubordination. What ensued was the Supreme Court case, *Tinker v. Des Moines Independent Community School District*, which invariably acted as the impetus for expanding student voice and promulgating students' rights throughout the United States. *Tinker v. Des Moines* has been ubiquitous in its influence of determining what students are allowed to say within American schools and how administrators respond to student protests. To this day, *Tinker v. Des Moines* is germane in regards to how schools create a learning environment that respects dissent. The case is still debated in recent protest efforts such as Black Lives Matter, and students as digital citizens utilizing social media.

*Tinker v. Des Moines* was a 7-2 decision by the Supreme Court ruling that students were allowed to protest peacefully and speak freely, as long as students are not disrupting the educational experience of others within the school. The most prolific quote to derive from the Supreme Court's decision is that, "it can hardly be argued that either students or teachers shed their constitutional rights to freedom of speech or expression at the schoolhouse gate" (Justice Fortas, 1969). Students have the constitutional right to speak freely, express themselves, and protest within school, which are paramount tenets of a free and democratic society. The concept of having citizenship being taught in school

derives from the father of American public education, Horace Mann. He famously stated: "Without undervaluing any other human agency, it may be safely affirmed that the Common School...may become the most effective and benignant of all forces of civilization" (Messerli, 1972). It is evident that the values of a democratic republic and public education in the United States certainly is designed to protect all citizens, including students attending public schools.

### ***The Ratification of the 26th Amendment & Impact on Student Voice in the 1970s***

The 26th Amendment was a major cornerstone in expanding student rights as well as validating the political rights of youth in the United States. Influenced by the recent passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965, the practice of conscription for 18 year olds in the Vietnam War was a key factor in garnering support for lowering the voting age from 21 to 18. Vietnam War activists in the U.S. put pressure on congress to lower the voting age to 18 with the, "old enough to fight, old enough to vote," campaign, which was inspired by a WWII slogan (Williams, 2016). In response to an outpour of protests demanding that the voting age be lowered, Democratic West Virginia Senator Randolph Jennings introduced a law to lower the federal voting age from 21 to 18 in 1970, which passed overwhelmingly in 1971 (Weil, 1998). It is worth mentioning that this was the quickest an amendment had been passed in U.S. history (Weil, 1998; Williams, 2016). In a 1970 Senate Subcommittee on Constitutional Amendments, Senator Ted Kennedy (D-MA) testified that the 26th amendment will, "encourage political activity not only in the 18 to 21 year-old age group, but also in the pre-18 year-old group... We [the U.S. government] will give our youth a new arena for their idealism, activism, and energy"

(Kennedy, 1970). The 26th amendment invariably impacted how states viewed high school students.

In 1971, Governor Francis Sargent successfully recommended that Massachusetts establish a State Student Advisory Council (SSAC), in which high school students from across the Commonwealth would advise the Board of Elementary & Secondary Education (Sargent, 1971). Additionally, this SSAC would have regional councils as well as have a student-democratically elected chairperson who would be a full voting member on the state board of education (Sargent, 1971). Governor Sargent recommended passing H.R. 5806, because this bill would allow for deeper and more authentic student involvement:

This bill does more than place a student representative on the Board of Education, however. It establishes a rational mechanism for choosing that student representative, and it creates a channel of communication between that student representative and every high school student in the Commonwealth. (Sargent, 1971)

Governor Sargent understood that students are the largest stakeholders in education. More importantly, Governor Sargent did not see the youth as the leaders of tomorrow, instead, he saw them as the leaders of *today*: “If we are to replace confrontation with deliberation and shouting with dialogue, youth must be invited in, not shut out. The generation gap is not unbreachable, if both sides will only listen” (Sargent, 1971).

According to a 2018 report from the National Association of State Boards of Education, there are 22 states that have at least one student on their state board of education (NASBE, 2018). However, only 5 of those states have a voting student representative:

California; Maryland; Massachusetts; Tennessee; and Vermont (though Maryland's student representative cannot vote on any decision pertaining to budgetary issues) (Bauer-Wolf, 2016; NASBE, 2018). Additionally, Massachusetts is the only state to have the voting member not only elected by their student peers, but also the only state in which a student representative represents a student voice organization (NASBE, 2018).

Also in 1971, Massachusetts signed into law a resolution that required local school committees to establish student advisory committees (SAC), in which the SAC elects a student representative to serve on local school committees (Massachusetts General Assembly, 1971). Despite these progressive student voice reforms from nearly 50 years ago, there are many vacancies on local school boards in Massachusetts, even though having student vacancies is illegal. States such as Tennessee routinely have their state student position vacant. Additionally, 14 states still outlaw any student representation on local and state boards of education (Fletcher & King, 2014; Tennessee Board of Education, 2020).

### ***Critical Lens on Student Vacancies: Students as Spectacles***

These vacancies on local and state school boards tend to reflect cases of political spectacle, in which student member quiescence and lack of participation may derive from the construction of symbolic policies (Edelman, 1960). This concept, symbolic policy, is also reflected in the idea of democratic participation as illusions, in which civic participation is nothing more than a formality and stakeholders, in this case students, aren't actually being valued in the process of educational change (Miller-Kahn & Smith, 2001). Education theorist Paulo Freire also conceptualized a similar idea of superficial participation in his book, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Freire posited that leaders would

exercise “libertarian propaganda,” where dominant groups bestowed the gift of inviting the dominated to the table, thus objectifying and trivializing the participation of the oppressed class. Without students having *conscientizando*, or a sense of raised self-awareness and purpose in these adult dominated spaces, students can end up as spectacles of the education process, as opposed to being legitimate stakeholders (Conner, 2016; Freire & Ramos, 1970; Hart, 1992).

### ***Student Voice in the U.S. Today: Non-Profits; Legislative Youth Advisory Councils; & Youth-Adult Partnerships***

A recent movement in the United States student voice movement has been the rise of both youth legislative advisory councils (LYACs) and non-profit student voice organizations. In 1995, the non-profit community organization, Philadelphia Student Union, was founded in which its mission is to, “build the power of young people to demand a high quality education in the Philadelphia public school system (PSU, 1995). In 2001, the PSU successfully mobilized a student protest, where students linked arms around the Philadelphia school district headquarters to prevent the for-profit education management company Edison Learning from taking over multiple schools in the city (Conner & Rosen, 2013; PSU, 2001). This led the Philadelphia school district to abandon its potential partnership with the for-profit education management organization (Conner & Rosen, 2013; PSU, 2001).

In 2002, the first LYAC in the United States was formed in Maine, in which high school students from the state would present policy recommendations to the state legislature, as well as advocate for legislation that would promote the wellbeing of youth (Maine State Legislature, 2006). In 2006, students in Maine were concerned about

families that have either been separated or children that have been taken by the state from their parents due to the concern of the safety of the children. Until recently, it was not permitted that separated siblings had custody rights to see each other if they were placed with different homes. The Maine Legislative Youth Advisory Council (MLYAC) recommended that the state legislature pass a law granting visitation rights between siblings (Maine Legislative Youth Advisory Council, 2006). Within the same year, the Maine Legislature passed the resolution allowing visitation rights to siblings under the condition that it served the best interest of the siblings' safety (Maine State Legislature, 2006).

In 2013, the Minnesota Youth Council (MYC) became the first and only student organization in which a state legislature promulgated the MYC to be the official voice for the youth of the state (Youth Voice Law, 2013). Other states have laws that require student advisory councils (MLYAC, 2002; NHLYAC, 2010; SSAC, 1971), but they are not seen as the official voice of the students. This matters because this is the first state to demand that students are part of the state policymaking process. On February 7th, 2019, the Minnesota Youth Council (MYC) introduced a seminal piece of legislation entitled: "An Act Relating to Education Finance; Making Grants to the Minnesota Youth Council" (MN State Legislature, 2019). This act, otherwise known as H.F. 683 is the first known legislation submitted by a student governing body seeking compensation for their contributions as researchers and analysts.

It is worth mentioning that a newly emerging subset of the student voice movement in the United States is the concept of *Youth-Adult Partnerships (YA Partnerships)*. YA partnerships gained momentum with being seen as a viable path to

integrate student and adult stakeholders in educational change (Camino, 2000). This integration has led to adults and youth working on committees and serving together in organizations. Youth-Adult Partnerships can be defined as:

Youth-adult partnership is the practice of: (a) multiple youth and multiple adults deliberating and acting together, (b) in a collective [democratic] fashion (c) over a sustained period of time, (d) through shared work, (e) intended to promote social justice, strengthen an organization and/or affirmatively address a community issue. (Zeldin, Christens, & Powers, 2013, p. 4)

Youth-Adult Partnerships can focus around restorative justice practices, youth-centered governance, and community building (Alderman, et al., 2019). Researchers like Dana Mitra have referred to youth-adult partnerships (YA partnerships) as a, “stronger” form of student voice (Mitra, 2008). YA partnerships are often considered a subset of student voice (Mitra, 2008). By categorizing YA partnerships, which have been designed to have youth as decision makers, as an extension or accessory to student voice has limited the understanding of what student voice can be in the U.S. context. This subsetting of YA partnerships may unintentionally de-emphasize the value of students as decision makers. In other words, student voice is currently the umbrella term, despite having a more narrow definition of how students and youth are decision makers and within society. YA Partnerships are seen as a sub category of student voice, when it would be more beneficial to conceptualize YA partnerships as the umbrella term. YA partnerships encompass communities beyond the school, whereas student voice in the U.S. context has largely been written through a school lens (Alderman et al., 2019). Student voice scholars have lamented on the terminology of student voice and believe

there are unintentional consequences that hinder the ability for students to be seen as legitimate drivers of educational change (Cook-Sather, 2006; Holquist, 2019; Robsinon & Taylor, 2007).

Though there are certainly more cases of student voice in the United States today than in the past, most of the researched examples are often only analyzed and explored at the local level. The existing student voice literature often analyzes and explains student voice in the context of schools or school districts (Cook-Sather, 2006). The focus of student voice literature being confined to a class and school level will be discussed further in the findings and discussion sections. There is a gap in the literature regarding state and national student-centered governance. It is important as a student-centered field of study, that student organizations be distinguished in the literature from an adult-centered analysis of how students are involved in educational change. The students are largely absent from student voice literature, which means that student voice research is presented through adult lenses.

### ***Student Voice Taxonomies***

In order to better conceptualize student voice research, it is beneficial to highlight some of the most salient taxonomies that have contributed to how practitioners, and students understand the role of students in education. Most of these taxonomies derive from global perspective on student voice and are not necessarily contextualized for the United States. However, these taxonomies have undeniably influenced, to some degree, how stakeholders in the U.S. conceptualize students.

Roger Hart's 1992 Ladder of Participation can be understood as a response to the 1989 UNCRC declaration. Hart created a scaffolded approach to youth participation, as

many governments and organizations were struggling to incorporate youth participation in policy efforts in a meaningful way. Hart's Ladder has eight stages: (1) manipulation; (2) decoration; (3) tokenism; (4) assigned and informed; (5) consulted and informed; (6) adult-initiated, shared decisions with youth; (7) youth-initiated and directed; and (8) youth and adults share decision-making (Hart, 1992). The first three rungs can be understood as either nonparticipation or adultist practices (Hart, 1992; Fletcher, 2008). Hart's contribution was the first substantial effort to provide a conceptual framework for how youth can participate in decision-making.

Shier's 2001 Levels of Participation alters Hart's conceptual framework to only include ways in which youth are involved in decision making. Shier's five levels are: (1) Children are listened to; (2) children are supported in expressing their views; (3) children's views are taken into account; (4) children are involved in decision-making processes; and (5) children share power and responsibility for decision-making (p. 111). Shier's model considers three stages of commitment at each level including *openings*, *opportunities* and *obligations*. An opening can be understood as an individual's intent to contribute, an opportunity is when the needs of the individual are met in order to participate at a certain level, while an obligation occurs when an organization has required a certain level of commitment from youth (p. 110). Shier's model also provided practical questions for organizations to consider as they try to incorporate youth voices. The purpose of Shier's model was to equip organizations with a more comprehensively sustainable and meaningful capacity to involve youth.

In Fielding's 2001 groundbreaking article on radical collegiality, Fielding established factors for evaluating student voice: *Speaking; listening; skills; attitudes and*

*dispositions; systems; organizational culture; spaces; action; and the future* (pp. 134-135). Each condition provided a series of questions to evaluate how adult stakeholders are regarding students as decision makers. Some of the questions considered if adults are listening actively, who decides the answers to the questions being raised, how stakeholders view each other, and where meetings are taking place. This taxonomy differs from the aforementioned models created by Hart and Shier, as Fielding considers how culture, language, and the environment impacts how students can contribute to the process of educational change.

Lundy (2007) introduced a four-point model to better connect Article 12 of the UNCRC. This model is composed of: *Space; voice; audience; and influence* (p. 933). Lundy highlighted that youth must be given the opportunity to express their views, that their views are expressed, heard, and acted upon. This is an important distinction from the other models for two reasons: The first reason is that Lundy creates a model explicitly based around the rights youth have through nations that have ratified UNCRC; this model reinforces that youth have these inalienable rights. Secondly, the concept of influence establishes the right that students can and should have power in the decision-making process.

Education anthropologist Mica Pollock offers a helpful conceptual framework known as the *Foundational Image*, which highlights how many stakeholders and partners interact with students on a daily basis. These stakeholders include: *Paraprofessional; teacher; specialist; best buddy; peer; counselor; career mentor; afterschool provider; tutor; coach; community program staff; other family; parent/guardian; parent liaison; administrator; and nurse* (Pollock, 2017). There are individuals who work with students

and the way in which they talk about students can either adversely or positively impact the experience of students (Pollock, 2017). This is a helpful conceptual framework as this model is less focused on the process of student voice, and instead is focused on the relationship students have with other education stakeholders. This framework expands upon the traditional people students are interacting with, as well as highlighting that students aren't in separate silos from these other stakeholders.

Holquist's (2019) model for Student Participation in Statewide Student Efforts includes four key components: *Power shifts*; *shared practices*; *adult supports*; and *student relationships* (p. 60). The concept of power shifts pertains to students holding either equal or inflated power as adults, and that there is equity for all students to participate. Shared practices are germane to the rules and norms that guide participation. Adult support considers the importance of having salient allies as well as having a dedicated advisor. Lastly, student relationships highlights how social emotional learning contributes and organizational culture impact the efforts of students (Holquist, 2019). This model is important as it is the first model to consider state-level partnerships with students, as opposed to the more historic class and school-based conceptual frameworks.

The chronology of these conceptual frameworks demonstrates that the idea of student voice, and what it means to be a student in the context of educational change is rapidly evolving. Student voice is a field that is still in its nascent stages, and it is worth acknowledging that student voice researchers address in their own conceptual frameworks, that the understanding of student voice is incomplete. In a recent framework, the researchers intentionally left the apex of their model as, "undiscovered territory of student voice possibilities," due to acknowledging that future work will better

contribute to the understanding of how students can be involved in educational change (Cummings Mansfield, Welton, & Halx, 2012). These frameworks point to the possibility of what the role of students should be, but the reality is that stakeholders and institutions in the U.S. are still recalcitrant to share with and entrust power to the largest stakeholders in education -- students.

### ***Stigmatization of Students in the 21st Century***

Researchers have argued that one of the most pervasive issues as to why adults have such a negative view on youth is due to how mass media reproduces negative and stereotypical concepts of what it means to be a youth in the United States (Gilliam & Bale, 2001). This negative mindset is also substantiated through the segregation of youth and adults in civic arenas (Camino, 2000). Students are seen as incapable, or seen as pawns (Conner, 2016). As of writing this study, mass media continues to portray student leaders such as David Hogg, Emma Gonázles, and Greta Thurnberg to be nothing more than pawns and propaganda tools (Chavez, 2018; Lowry, 2019). Students having to combat negative perceptions ascribed by adults can be difficult to mitigate and reframe (Camino, 2000; Gilliam & Bale, 2001). However, one of the most effective ways of de-positioning negative perceptions is to engage in youth-adult partnerships (Biddle, 2017; Camino, 2000; Gilliam & Bale, 2001; Jones & Perkins, 2016).

It can be daunting to expand student voice when there is a considerable stigma held by the most salient decision makers. Many adult decision makers view students as children, which is rooted in a historical false dichotomy of adults versus children. It was not until the 20th century that the concept of adolescents and teenagers emerged when psychologist G. Stanley Hall created a framework for adolescence (Cravens, 2006). In

2000, the concept of emerging adulthood was presented to discuss how 18 to 25 year olds have distinct developments and identities that are separate from adolescence and adulthood (Arnett, 2000). The reason as to why this is relevant is twofold: The concept of a student has been rooted in being a child, which historically children have been seen as immature, or not fully developed, thus diminishing the ability for youth to be taken seriously in discourses of educational change. Additionally, the concept of life stages has largely been dichotomous, when in reality, life stages are more incremental and better resemble a continuum (Arnett, 2000). Students have not been seen as emerging adults, or adolescents, which are considered more capable of decision making than children. It was not until fairly recently that researchers began broadening the concept of student voice outside of the tertiary and secondary levels of education to scaffold student voice in an elementary context (Mitra & Serriere, 2012). The historical legacy of a dichotomous understanding of human development may have contributed to how stakeholders negatively view students in the role of education. This dichotomy is reinforced by a focus of U.S. student voice literature focusing on school improvement and classroom management, which confines the role students can have within decision making beyond school settings. The concept of youth being stigmatized will be explored further in the discourses of students and non-students within Chapter Four. These discourses will be critically analyzed for language that infantilizes youth in order to substantiate whether or not students are positioned within student voice.

### ***Adultsim***

An integral component to student voice literature in the United States is the concept of *adultism*. Adultism can be defined as:

...All attitudes and actions that flow from the idea that adults are superior to young people and have the right to control and punish them at will. These attitudes are embedded in institutions, customs, child rearing practices, and relationships between young people and adults (Bell, 2018, para. 1).

These attitudes and actions are reinforced by institutions and can be internalized by both youth and adults (Adams, M., Bell, L. A., & Griffin, P. 2007; Bell, 2018; Bettencourt, 2020; Conner, Ober, & Brown, 2016). Adultism is centered around an understanding rooted in accepted inequitable power dynamics. In particular, “adultism dictates that only adults are viewed as credible authorities and able to act, while youth serve as recipients of knowledge and action” (Bettencourt, 2020, p. 154). Adultism creates an environment in which students are not necessarily seen as credible, which can lead to diminishing, or outright excluding students from participating in any kind of decision making.

It should also be noted that adultism impacts interactions between students of different ages. This internalizing of adultism can manifest in different ways. Both youth and adults can experience internalized adultism. In one particular study, youth internalized adultism in four ways: Feeling successful about their contributions to policy that framed youth with deficit-based language; self-dismissals/self-defeat; dependency on adults; and replicating patterns of power and privilege (Conner, et al., 2016). Adults also internalize adultism and may not fully understand the implications of their actions or recognize their implicit biases. Adultism can also present itself through discourse such as

curriculum design (Adams, et al., 2007). The extent to which adultist discourses can impact student voice is not well known nor has it been exhaustively researched. However, certain practices have been recommended to combat these biases in society: “Creating more equitable schools requires that youth, specifically those who are most impacted by injustice, participate in school and district-level educational decision-making” (Bertrand et al., 2020, p. 21). This idea of combating inequity is interlinked with the notion of decision-making capacity for students in education and communities beyond school.

### ***Summation of literature***

The literature has presented that there is a gap in understanding as to how students conceptualize student voice. Historically speaking, adult student voice researchers and practitioners in the United States have focused on how students can act as informants to improve classroom and school outcomes. This focus in research and practice has shaped the way in which student voice is defined. These definitions typically limit student voice exclusively to a classroom and school setting. Definitions and taxonomies of student voice are the manifestations of adult observations and understandings. The literature does not explicitly discuss how students define student voice. The lack of research pertaining to students’ discourse in student voice has created a gap in understanding of how those involved in student voice conceptualize the field.

Students, throughout history, have mostly been seen as nothing more than “objects of reform” (Levin, 2000), as a bank in which teachers deposit knowledge (Freire & Ramos, 1970), and “passive receptacles” (Clinchy, 1995). This can be a challenging cycle of oppression to break, and this paper argues that part of this oppression stems from

how the literature has written about the concept of student voice, without students being a part of defining a movement and field that has been created for them. Additionally, adultism, when recognized, is understood to be pervasive in institutions throughout society, especially in education. Adultism has an impact on how youth and adults behave, interact, and write. Discourses can impact the role of students as demonstrated in Supreme Court cases, as well as legislation. This evidence of discourse changing the role of students can be either positive or negative. The way in which discourses are framed can lead to equitable relationships, or perpetuating inequities in society. Within the literature review, an ecology of sorts has emerged in which definitions and texts pertaining to student voice may have an impact on the perception and role of students within student voice. In order to determine how students, practitioners, and researchers understand what student voice means, it is crucial to explore variations in the perspectives in how student voice is understood, primarily between how non-students and students conceptualize student voice within the United States.

As noted prior, the gap in literature provides an insufficient understanding of how different discourses from stakeholders conceptualize the role of students within student voice. This gap is augmented by an unclear understanding of what student voice is. The unclear definition manifests in the disconnect between the actions of student voice movements in the United States, and the scholarly topics adults explore within student voice research. In order to address these gaps and questions, this study explores the following questions:

1. How, if at all, does the term, “student voice,” position the role students have as education stakeholders?

2. How, if at all, do adult researchers, adult practitioners and student voice organizations have a similar understanding of what, “student voice,” means?
3. How does the discourse amongst key stakeholders speak to the role of students in student voice?

The answer to the first question will be determined by exploring how adult discourses frame students within the context of the student voice movement. This exploration will be compared with the discourses of students within student voice to additionally determine how key stakeholders understand student voice within their respective discourses. Lastly, the discourses of students and non-students will be explored in order to better understand how key stakeholders envision the role of students within student voice. In order to answer these questions in a systematic and replicable way, Chapter Three provides details regarding the methodology of this study.

## CHAPTER THREE

### METHODOLOGY

#### **Introduction**

It is important to choose a methodological approach that can contribute value to the student voice movement in an authentic and replicable manner. As presented in the literature review, discourses within the student voice movement highlight a hegemony of understanding derived from non-student voices. In an attempt to curtail and challenge dominant epistemologies from non-student discourses, it is meaningful to consider the texts and media students have created. Additionally, comparing and contrasting these texts between non-student and student perspectives will create a better sense of understanding as to how student voice is conceptualized in the U.S. framework. This chapter will provide methodological details in order to build trustworthiness and credibility. The methods chosen were intentional in order to authentically and meaningfully create a systematic understanding of how discourses in student voice shape the role of students within student voice. The methods were also selected in order to have replicable results.

A constructivist research paradigm is ideal for exploring how discourses shape the understanding of disciplines like student voice. Constructivism relies on exploring phenomena (Mertens, 2014). Documents created by students and non-students are deliberate forms of communication to convey how multiple stakeholders understand student voice. Being able to analyze publications, websites, and videos created by multiple stakeholders creates a more holistic picture of how stakeholders conceptualize student voice. This is in contrast to previous research regarding student voice, in which student and adult stakeholders' discourses are not comparatively analyzed. Exploring the

intentional documents crafted by students will lend greater insight into how students and student organizations see themselves.

Within this paradigm, a constructivist approach calls for an approach utilizing purposive sampling (Mertens, 2014). Purposive sampling is defined as, "...the deliberate choice of a participant due to the qualities the participant possesses (Etikan, 2016). In this study, rather than rely on individuals as the data source, this research relies on documents. This is an appropriate way to address the research questions because texts and media are able to reflect on how students are conceptualized within student voice (Gilliam & Bale, 2001). A large gap in the U.S. student voice literature pertains to the absence of student discourses. By collecting and analyzing student discourses, in addition to non-student discourses, a deeper understanding of how multiple stakeholders perceive student voice can emerge. Currently, student discourses have not been comparatively analyzed with non-student discourse.

## **Data Sources**

### **Inclusion Criteria**

It is vital to determine what is being included for purposive sampling of relevant texts. In this particular study, seminal works pertaining to student voice are being considered. To be clear, the samples are the documents, texts, and media created by non-student researchers, practitioners, and students, not the people themselves.

Since there is no existing journal database that is inclusive of all student voice literature, a combination of *ERIC*, *Ebscohost*, *Social Citation Index*, and *ProQuest* *Sociological Abstracts* were used in order to determine the most cited student voice works in order to have the results be more replicable. Even with these databases, crucial

student voice literature was missing, including Roger Hart's 1992 book, *Children's Participation: The Theory And Practice Of Involving Young Citizens In Community Development And Environmental Care* (Hart, 1992). Some of the literature doesn't exactly refer to the term, "student voice," yet the literature has directly impacted the framing of the student voice movement. In instances where works such as Hart's was not visible in database searches, the author referred to widely cited student voice authors who consistently referred to influential works within student voice. Widely cited authors were determined through exploring publication volumes that were student voice themed, as well as using the aforementioned journal databases to select student voice research that had been cited at least 50 times. Student voice research is a nascent field and at the time of writing this thesis, no U.S. student voice publication had been cited more than 500 times. Additionally, student voice researchers at the 2019 *International Conference on Student Voice* shared what they identified as seminal works within the field. The author was present in this conference session.

Samples of text from students and non-student practitioners were also chosen through purposive sampling. The samples were generally conducted through the discovery of student organizations that were the first of their kind. An example would be how the 2013 establishment of the Minnesota Youth Council was the first legislatively mandated youth council in the United States (Minnesota Youth Council, 2013). Similarly with foundational student voice literature, the term, "student voice," doesn't always appear. Student organizations are often referred to as either youth councils, student advisory councils, or student unions. This study focuses on texts that emerges from student voice in grades 8-12. This means that any elementary, middle, or tertiary student

organizations will not be considered for the purpose of this study. To clarify, there are middle schools that have grades 6-8, any student organization that originates from a middle school is not being considered for the purpose of this study.

*Research articles.* Discourses from researchers will be considered the texts that have influenced the student voice movement. This may include scholastic articles about pupil voice, youth-adult partnerships, and youth participatory action research as they are generally considered forms of student voice (Bourke & Loveridge, 2018; Cook-Sather, 2019; Fielding, 2001; Mitra, 2008). In particular for researchers, the most widely cited articles will be considered for sampling. Between exploring the most widely cited articles, expert sampling has been employed in order to both understand how researchers understand student voice, as well as developing a greater breadth of perspectives on how student voice is defined and discussed (Etikan, 2016).

*Practitioner reports.* Documents from practitioners will be defined as the texts from public, private, and/or non-profit organizations whose primary purpose is to influence student voice. This will also include Youth-Adult Partnerships. Documents from practitioners and students have been sampled in a similar manner, in which the most reputable, and important organizations/movements have been identified by influence. To clarify, these are documents and media created by the most influential organizations and movements within student voice. In this case, documents from non-profit, for-profit, and governmental practitioners have been identified through internet searches, as well as researchers who have cited these contributions. Terms such as: Student voice; student voice organizations; student voice non-profits; youth-adult partnerships; and student

voice in the U.S. were some of the common search terms used to explore student voice discourses.

*Student contributions.* Lastly, student contributions were sampled through prominent organizations. The prominence of these organizations were determined by a combination of being the first-of-a kind organization, the level of impact the organization has had, and the sustainability of the organization. Impact was determined by change these student organizations were able to catalyze and contribute within local, state, national, and international settings. This change can be understood as legislative change, and grass roots change.

### **Exclusion Criteria**

Since the focus of this study is to explore student voice among secondary school students in the United States, it is important to attempt to highlight content from the U.S. Documents produced by organizations focused on elementary student or tertiary student voice will not be included in the sample of documents informing the study.

Documents from practitioners will be defined as the texts from public, private, and/or non-profit organizations and will not include the texts of student access organizations and student leadership organizations such as *College Possible* and *Girl Scouts of America*. Both organizations may have varying levels of work with student voice, but their primary purpose is not directly connected with student voice. Educational psychological articles, and pedagogical approaches like inquiry-based learning, or democratic classrooms will not be considered

In total, 50 materials have been chosen, including a combination of: Research articles; practitioner guides; student organization by-laws; social mediaposts from student

voice groups; policy recommendations from student organizations; and minutes/videos from the 2019 International Conference on Student Voice.

Table 1

*Inclusion Criteria*

| Decision Making Group                 | Number of Documents | Rationale for Inclusion   | Document Examples   |
|---------------------------------------|---------------------|---|---|
| <b>Non-Student, Academic Research</b> | 25                  | Non-student research drives the theoretical understanding of student voice in the U.S.  | Peer-reviewed articles, conference presentations  |
| <b>Practitioner Guides</b>            | 10                  | These practitioner guides are informed by non-student research and impact climates where student voice can transpire.   | Policy reports, blogs, news articles, conference presentations, peer-reviewed articles in which practitioners are the sole authors                                  |
| <b>Student Media</b>                  | 15                  | Student discourses have largely been absent from how student voice as a field is developed. Students are researchers, leaders, practitioners, and innovators. | Peer-reviewed articles in which students are the sole authors, by-laws, mission/vision statements, policy reports, policy recommendations, conference presentations |

### **Analytical Methods**

#### **Content Analysis**

The discourse from students, student voice researchers, and student voice practitioners will be explored to better understand how stakeholders understand student voice. This understanding will be explored utilizing content analysis. Content analysis is defined as, “a research technique for making replicable and valid inferences from texts

(or other meaningful matter) to the contexts of their use” (Krippendorff, 2013). In order to conduct meaningful content analysis, it is important to employ multiple research techniques for making credible and valid inferences from texts (Drisko & Maschi, 2015). In regards to content, there are multiple approaches to interpreting content. One such approach is considering *latent content*. Drisko and Maschi define latent content as, “meaning that is not overtly evident in a communication. Latent content is implicit or implied by a communication, often across several sentences or paragraphs” (2015). In the context of this study, being able to explore and interpret the meanings and language of authors will be vital to building a better understanding of student voice. In order to better interpret latent content, it will be beneficial to explore the discourse of multiple stakeholders through a critical lens. The content that is explored through student voice research highlights that there is an asymmetrical power relationship between students and non-students. This identification of asymmetrical power is a crucial reason for selecting critical discourse analysis as a subcomponent of content analysis in order to explore the power relationships within the discourses.

*Critical Discourse Analysis.* One method that will be helpful in conducting content analysis is utilizing critical discourse analysis. Critical discourse analysis inherently takes a sociopolitical stance, in which language, text, and discourse are systematically analyzed in order to make change through critical understandings of dominant epistemologies (van Dijk, 1993).

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is an appropriate method for exploring the role that language plays in the de-powering of students because of its focus on power dynamics: “Power is a central concept in critical discourse studies. It tends to be defined

in terms of negative uses of power, articulated through and within discourses and resulting in domination and oppression” (Rogers, 2011, p. 3). A prominent example of CDA being employed in educational research would be Paulo Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970). Freire examines the language that is used by dominant groups to oppress marginalized communities. For the purpose of this study, CDA is being utilized because the student voice movement is understood as an emancipatory pedagogical movement. However, it is problematic that the definitions, terms, and rules for the movement are often created by the adults without direct student involvement. This may have the unintended consequences of oppressing students and limiting their roles to perpetuate inequitable power dynamics in education.

*Buried Proposition Understanding & Example with Student Voice.* In order to code the text, there will be a particular focus to the concept of buried propositions. The concept of a buried proposition can be understood through feminist scholar Julia Penelope’s (1990) definition and explanation:

When a passive participle is used prenominally, it states a hidden claim, a buried proposition, that the speaker/writer is making about the noun that the participle precedes. These participles look like adjectives, they seem to be attributes inherent in the character of the noun, and they constitute hidden, and therefore unsupported claims. (p. 170)

The rationale for utilizing buried propositions allows for researchers not only to read what has been written, but analyze how it was said and the context of what is being said. Noun phrases can also be treated as attributes, due to their position (Penelope, 1990). Penelope contextualizes noun phrases that have agentless attributes to demonstrate the

removal of responsibility from the agent (i.e. *Willimae was robbed* versus *Mark robbed Willimae*). In contrast, the noun phrase, “student voice,” or, “student government,” positions the student prenominally, thus acting as an adjective to the terms, “voice,” and, “government,” respectively. Both nouns in the noun phrase are problematic as the prenominal, “student,” differentiates the level of involvement students can have in the practice of vocalizing their diverse concerns, or the way in which they participate. It is unlikely for one to ever hear other stakeholders expressing their concerns being described as “adult voice.” Additionally, the term student also may act in a way to homogenize or white wash diverse perspectives from an incredibly large population (Fielding, 2007; Holquist, 2019). The term, “voice,” also elicits the notion that students can only vocalize their concerns, and not be active agents of change. This can influence the way other stakeholders understand the capacity of students (Holquist, 2019). More broadly speaking, this study utilized buried propositions in order to understand how students are being described in relation to student voice. The emphasis on context and how things are being communicated is also closely related with the social actors approach.

*Van Leeuwen’s Social Actors Approach.* The social actors approach (SAA) is a critical discourse methodology that analyzes how people are categorized and if people are deliberately included or omitted from discourses (2008). In particular within the SAA, Van Leeuwen highlights some key concepts that he labels: Excluding; backgrounding; generic; and specific representation (2008). Excluding can be understood as completely omitting actors all together within discourse, whereas backgrounding may elude to actors, but not explicitly mentioning actors (Leeuwen, 2008). Generic representation can be understood as referring to a group as a group (like saying students, instead of mentioning

specific students). This is in contrast to specific representation, which can be used to either privilege or single out individuals (Leeuwen, 2008).

For the purpose of this study, SAA was utilized in order to analyze when students were mentioned, and where they were omitted. A common example of backgrounding would be adult researchers and practitioners defining student voice without the consultation of students. This makes the reader either have to infer if students were a part of the definition creation, or that students were left out of the process. Examples of exclusion within this study would be analyzing how definitions of student voice confine students to be informants, or limit their ability to participate to the school arena. Students have been excluded from being considered decision makers either all together, or students are excluded in the definitions of being decision makers outside of school. This exclusion of students being defined as decision makers shapes how stakeholders choose to interact with students. If the definition of student voice omits decision making capabilities, then students may be barred from engaging in educational change as decision makers. Generic representation manifests in this study through students being lumped into one grouping, or making students singular. This looks like having a student representative, or the study body. This creates a false homogenized group of many students who in reality have contrasting and diverse perspectives. This false homogeneity also undermines the importance of representative democracy within the U.S.. Having students portrayed as one entity can further marginalize vulnerable communities that aren't being accurately represented within the diverse group of high school students in the United States.

## Coding

Conceptual coding will be applied with an abductive approach (a combination of inductive and deductive approaches) in order to develop concepts and theories that emerge from the student voice discourses. NVivo was utilized in order to categorize, analyze, and interpret the concepts that emerged from literature and discourse. The texts have been broken into three groups: Students/student organizations; researchers; and practitioners.

These nodes are exploratory concepts that have emerged from common themes and patterns within the varying discourses from multiple stakeholders. Table 2 provides nodes created by the author to name common patterns and phenomena that emerged from the literature. Table 2 provides the name of the node, a definition of the node, the number of texts in which the node was found, the total amount of references, and the rationale for the inclusion of the node.

Table 2

*Nodes for Student Voice Discourse*

| Node                     | Definition  | Texts | References | Node Rationale  |
|--------------------------|---|-------|------------|---|
| Discourse Stratification | The process in which the role of students as decision makers is diminished and positioned. This includes defining student voice to only occur in classroom and school settings, as well as task relegation of students in comparison to other stakeholders.<br><br>***NOTE*** Discourse Stratification does not need to occur intentionally, this | 42    | 152        | Discourse stratification derived from language in the literature regarding inequitable relationships as well as Max Weber's Social Stratification Theory. |

|                       |  |    |    |  |
|-----------------------|--|----|----|--|
|                       | process can occur in a more passive, seemingly innocuous manner.   |    |    |  |
| De-Honorifics         | Students being assigned demeaning/derogatory titles reduce their legitimacy as stakeholders and as agents.   | 9  | 28 | De-Honorifics is grounded in the discourses of non-students ascribing titles that demean or infantilize students. This is the inverse of honorifics. |
| Constituencies        | A collective and systemic partnership of populations to which representatives are beholden.  | 14 | 37 | Student discourses expressed the value of having constituencies to avoid tokenistic practices of non-student decision makers.                        |
| Institutional Vetting | A process where those from a dominant group screens who they conceptualize as a “good fit.” An adult’s decision of what defines a good fit for a marginalized organization can be infiltrating and incongruent with what students would conceptualize as a good fit. The dominant class does not permit the open choice and advertisement of students that could be part of the process. | 9  | 16 | Student and non-student discourses expressed that adults in power can create qualifications to select students.                                      |

|                                       |   |    |  |    |   |
|---------------------------------------|---|----|--|----|---|
| Student Sequestration                 | When students are absent from decisions and dialog that impact students. A common example would be students being removed from defining and conceptualization of “student voice.”   | 10 |  | 27 | Student sequestration is a specific type of Leeuwen’s backgrounding and excluding practices in critical discourse analysis.   |
| Molding                               | The process in which students remove or soften their identity as a student in order to resemble an adult. This is a process of needing to be legitimized, while simultaneously removing their identity to be taken seriously. | 3  |  | 5  | Molding derived from student discourses as well as Judith Butler’s Gender Performance Theory and Erving Goffman’s Performance Theory.   |
| Re-Position                           | The redefining and expansion of the role of students within education.  | 31 |  | 97 | Re-positioning was found in student discourses, where students expressed wanting more shared power in their education and communities. This concept is the inverse of York and Kirshner’s positioning theory. |
| Social-Spatial Control (Hannah, 1993) | In order to regulate social control, there is observation, judgement, and enforcement, which  | 10 |  | 17 | Expressed in discourses, where students have been   |

|  |   |  |  |                              |
|--|---|--|--|------------------------------|
|  | are forms of power from an oppressing force that aims to control a marginalized population. |  |  | excluded from participating. |
|--|---|--|--|------------------------------|

*Note.* Some of the nodes created by the author were also used to develop the Ecology of Student Voice conceptual map.

A total of 50 documents were included ranging from research articles, text on student organization sites, mission statements, and conference materials from the students, adult researchers, and adult practitioners.

Chapter Four explores the discourses of students, adult researchers, and practitioners. The findings will highlight the how discourse amongst key stakeholders speak to the role of students in student voice.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### FINDINGS

The findings of exploring the preeminent student voice discourses from researchers, practitioners, and students suggest that there is a considerable disconnect between how students and researchers conceptualize the term, “student voice.” This chapter will be composed of two sections: The first section will discuss a conceptual map that emerged from the findings of this study as well as the literature review. This conceptual map is called, *The Ecology of Student Voice*. This ecology provides an exploration as to how discourses from adult practitioners and researchers can impact how adults can either develop equitable or inequitable relationships with students. Following the full description of the Ecology of Student Voice, key quotes and texts from students and non-students will be discussed utilizing this framework. This conceptual map will aid in exploring how the discourses from students and non-students influence student voice movements within the United States. Secondly, the key themes and nodes will be used as a way to map relevant findings from the discourses of students and non-students. The key themes are: Disconnect between students and adults; aspirations for students within student voice; and students as spectacles. These key themes are substantiated with nodes, in which thematic patterns emerged within the discourses. The Nodes are: Discourse stratification; de-honorifics; constituencies; institutional vetting, student sequestration; molding; re-positioning; and Matthew Hannah’s 1993 theory of social-spatial control. Examples from students, adult researchers, and adult practitioners will be provided in order to build insight as to whether or not the term, “student voice,” positions the role of students, if there is a similar understanding of what student voice is between key

stakeholders, and how discourse amongst key stakeholders speak to the role of students in student voice,

### **The Ecology of Student Voice**

The Ecology of Student Voice (see figure 1) is a way to conceptualize how dominant epistemologies and discourses from adult researchers and practitioners can have an impact on how students are viewed in the context of educational change. This ecological framework emerged from this study, as well as the literature review, the separate texts, policies, by-laws, conferences, and media created by students, adult researchers, and adult practitioners.

As discussed from the previous sections, student voice research is largely influenced by adult researchers and practitioners. The literature presented a different picture of student voice in contrast to how student organizations perceive how they have mobilized in the United States. Student voice literature in the U.S. has typically focused on school improvement, while student organizations have focused on decision making in local, state, and federal arenas. This disconnect is illustrated in the Ecology of Student Voice. Adults are driving the discourses on student voice, and these discourses have impacts on inputs, climate, students, outcomes, and outputs that will be explained in greater detail. The culmination of these factors contribute to creating an ecosystem that can promote or hinder student voice in any setting. The reason as to why this map is framed through adult discourses specifically, is due to the pervasive nature of adultism within the United States. This theoretical map is not intended to be definitive, but instead is an interpretation and exploration of how the discourses of student voice can impact outcomes and outputs for student voice in various ways.

### ***Inputs***

These discourses influence two different types of inputs: Students as spectacles; and students as decision makers. Students as spectacles may exist due to discourses from researchers and practitioners stratifying the roles of students, versus non-students (Cook-Sather, 2006). They position, or limit, the capacity in which students are conceptualized as stakeholders in education. Discourse stratification is the process of student voices being intentionally or unintentionally categorized inequitably to other adult stakeholders. Discursive practices can happen in formal settings such as a research publication, or informal settings like small talk among stakeholders (Krippendorf, 2013). Students as stakeholders can exist when discursive practices lead to the re-positioning of students. Re-positioning can be understood as the process of the role of students being expanded from the default position of being a learner. This concept is the inverse of positioning, which can be understood as the limitation of the capacity to which students can participate in educational change (York, Kirshner, 2015). In the context of student voice, re-positioning can occur from any stakeholder group, where the role of students is expanded and readjusted. This may result in having multiple students on a school board in order to refrain from tokenizing students with a “sole” voice, or this may look like students having a formal vote in formal decisions conducted in a class, school, state, or national context.

### ***Climate***

These inputs inform a climate of any environment that students are in. The climate can be understood as the beliefs, attitudes, and relationships that exist within an environment. Within the context of student voice, the climate can either be conducive or

detrimental to the formation and cultivation of student voice. This does not have to be confined to a traditional learning environment such as a class or school. Climate within the physical domain, can be understood as the classroom and school as well as any place in which students can be catalysts for change (Sussman, 2015). This could be at the state legislature, city hall, the United Nations, or on a school board. The climate impacts students directly.

### ***Outputs***

Within the Ecology of Student Voice, outputs can be understood through the recommendations adult researchers and practitioners make for improving student voice. These recommendations have short term impacts that can change the delivery and perception of what student voice means for administrators, educators, as well as students. A common recommendation that adult researchers have made within their texts is the importance of, “listening to students” (Cook-Sather, 2002; Cook-Sather, 2006; Pozzoboni, 2015). Similar conclusions and recommendations are also stated by adult practitioners (Sussman, 2015). When decision making is discussed with adult researchers, it is usually confined to the school level or within local community organizations (Conner, 2015; Dolan, Christens, & Lin, 2015; Mitra, 2006; Mitra, 2015). By contrast, albeit in rare instances, practitioners recommend students share in the decision making at the state or federal level (Lang, 2018). This is also in contrast with student organizations and student voice movements who routinely consider the role of students to be state and federal decision makers (Oregon Student Voice, 2020).

Outputs for inequitable, adversarial relationships may look like students are molding, or changing their identity as students to appear as a dominant stakeholder. This

results in a loss of students' own identity in the hopes of being validated. Conversely, institutions may engage in vetting, where they cherry-pick students who may align either with their ideology, or identity, instead of letting students choose their own constituents. Student sequestration may occur, or the absence of students in making decisions on matters that pertain to them, or that have an impact on students. Other outputs could result in de-honorifics, or the process in which stakeholders use derogatory and demeaning language such as saying, "kids," or, "children." Using such language in formal partnerships with high school-aged youth infantilizes individuals and can be a way of dismissing the perspectives students have to offer. Political geographer Matthew Hannah also discussed how marginalized communities are regulated in the forms of social and spatial control. Dominant groups engage in observation, judgement, and enforcement to control marginalized communities. This can also be understood through the concepts of assimilation and resistance. If individuals engaged in resistance, then the places in which marginalized communities can be is heavily enforced and restricted (Hannah, 1993). In the context of student voice, this can look like determining when and where students can be present in educational change. Students who disagree with the school may not be permitted a platform or an opportunity to engage. This social and spatial control is a limitation of power and autonomy.

Outputs for equitable, collegial relationships are twofold: Students have established constituencies, where there is a formal network of partnership, engagement, and communication. There are also legitimate youth-adult partnerships taking place in which there is equitable power to catalyze change in a school, community, or society.

## ***Outcomes***

Depending on the balance of discourses, students will either have equitable and collegial relationships with those in the environment students are present in, or they will have inequitable, adversarial relationships with fellow stakeholders. Roland Barth (2006), conceptualized adversarial and collegial relationships in the context of teachers. He posited that adversarial relationships look like fellow teachers seeing each other as enemies or as a threat, whereas collegial relationships look like an active, collective partnership to improve professional practice (Barth, 2006). In the context of student voice, equity is an essential component. Stakeholders could engage in pleasantries and discuss that everyone here is working towards the same mission, but may engage in practices with students that are inequitable or tokenizing. Any form of tokenization, diminishing, or practice of inequity results in a relationship that cannot be collegial. This is due to other stakeholders not truly valuing and affirming the right of students to be stakeholders (Barth, 2006; Hart, 1992).

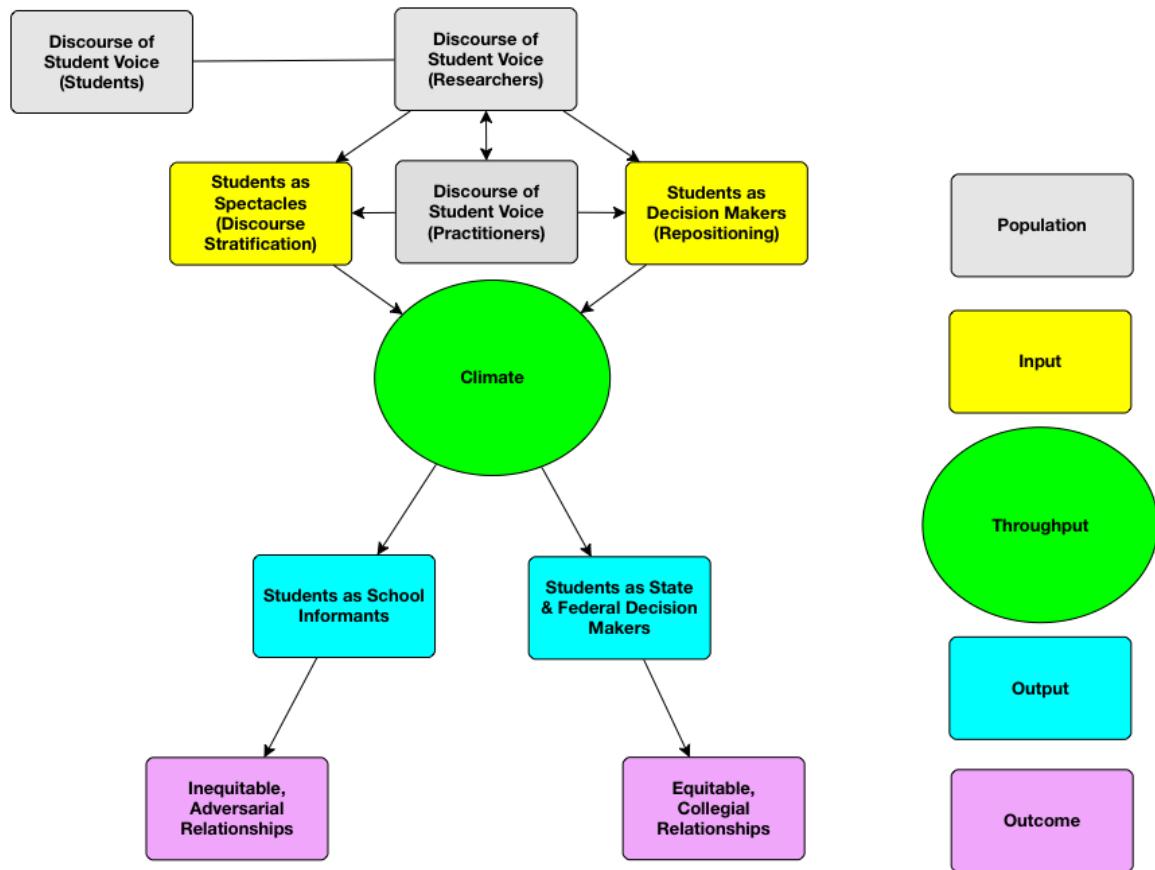
It is not always easy to discern the difference between equitable, collegial relationships and inequitable, adversarial relationships. For instance, a school committee could have a student liaison position and state the importance of hearing from the students. Despite what seems like a positive relationship, the student does not have any decision making capacity here, as they do not have a vote that counts. This diminishes the value of this student liaison. Additionally, if only having one student liaison, the student is being tokenized, as there are multiple adults to represent diverse perspectives. Having a single student representative reinforces the notion that students are a monolithic entity.

The two outcomes of having either an adversarial, inequitable relationship, or an equitable, collegial relationship have real ramifications.

These relationships impact the acceptable venues in which students are informants and more seldomly, decisionmakers. The outcomes of adult-driven discourses confine students to the class and school level. According to adult student voice researchers, U.S. student voice research predominately focuses on classroom and school improvement (Conner, 2016; Mitra, 2006; Mitra, 2015). The lack of student voice research in the U.S. that focuses on state level decision making, or civic participation can negatively shape the understanding of how administrators, educators, and decision makers outside of school conceptualize what it means to be a student. Texts and media are able to reinforce how students are conceptualized within student voice (Gilliam & Bale, 2001).

**Figure 1**

*Ecology of Student Voice Discourse*



*Note.* The discourse of student voice (students) intentionally omits an arrow with its relationship to the input. This is due to student discourse having relatively limited impact on inputs, in relation to adult researchers and practitioners.

The culmination of these factors contribute to creating an ecosystem that can promote or hinder student voice in any setting. This theoretical map is not intended to be definitive, but instead is an interpretation and exploration of how the discourses of student voice can impact outcomes and outputs for student voice in various ways. This theoretical map is a key finding within this study and also emerged from the literature review.

## **Ecology of Student Voice Findings**

### ***Inputs***

Students as spectacles and students as decision makers are the key inputs within the Ecology of Student Voice, as these writings of students and student voice can impact the way other stakeholders perceive the role of students within education and society. The writings of key stakeholders can either positively or adversely impact how students participate within relevant decisions affecting students.

**Students as Spectacles.** A key component of students being spectacles is an asymmetrical power relationship. An indicator of a power imbalance is the idea of granting power versus sharing power. An example of power needing to be granted comes from David Goncharuk, who was a member of Oregon Student Voice, which is a student-led organization dedicated to influencing education reform. In an op-ed he wrote during his senior year of high school, he titled the article, “A Student Asks: ‘Are Decision Makers Finally Going to Listen to Us?’ (Goncharuk, 2018). The title showcases that students are not conceptualized as decision makers, and that they are not part of the process as they are not being heard. The title also suggests that the act of listening and sharing power derives from a dominant class engaging in the act of listening. This is conceptualized further as David writes in the same op-ed, “I have watched as students have been given a platform on the national stage to influence change” (Goncharuk, 2018, para. 1). What is important here is the phrasing of, "given a platform." Goncharuk acknowledges that there has to be a recognition from other stakeholders that students are in fact stakeholders, and that they have a place in meaningful changes. Freire would

argue that the oppressor has to recognize and be transparent that there is an inequity between the adults and youth (1970).

The “spectacilization” of students within student voice movements can be attributed to tokenization, and a lack of shared understanding of what student voice is. This can be understood through David’s account of how adult administrators and practitioners solicit student voice:

I have found that decision-makers often use the term “student voice” to justify policies. I’ve heard phrases like: “This task force must prioritize student voices;” or “Student voice is core to education reform.” Despite these positive statements, the result is that decision makers talk to a few nervous students, hear the stories that align with their ideas, slap the sticker “STUDENT VOICE” on recommendations, and lobby these into policy. I believe the term “student voice” is misunderstood and tokenized. Student voice has been commodified into a widely used and admired term, but an inauthentic and incomplete practice.

Oftentimes, student voice is thought to merely consist of conducting student panels, focus groups, or surveys. The problem is that these student stories are funneled through adult decision makers, who are far too removed from schools to truly grasp students’ experiences. (Goncharuk, 2018, para. 2-3)

Goncharuk highlights that there is a misalignment in how adults and students conceptualize student voice. This lack of understanding, as Goncharuk notes, derives from students’ experiences being funneled through adult decision makers. The problem with filtering these voices as Goncharuk states, is that adults selectively hear or value students who agree with the priorities adult decision makers have. Similarly to

Goncharuk, two high school students from New York City, Aravis McBroom and Shamika Parham, shared how they have felt voiceless in the past as students. Both students offer different insight and perspectives regarding how the actions of adults made them feel devalued and dehumanized. McBroom recounted a particular incident that made her feel voiceless within a peer-reviewed article:

One time when I felt voiceless was on the first day of the second semester last year. When I received my schedule, I noticed that my first and second block classes were switched, even though I had requested that my classes and teachers stay the same. When I reminded my advisor of my request and asked if he would help switch my classes back, he simply said, “No.” When I asked why, he replied, “Life isn’t fair.” It was a poor excuse, and I felt disrespected. Student voice is about trying to make life fair, and I expected my advisor to support and advocate for me more than anyone. Switching classes was less important than being treated like an adult. (Parham, McBroom, 2015 pp. 173-174)

McBroom articulates that student voice is an emancipatory practice by, “trying to make life fair.” The feeling of disrespect and being devalued is not due to the fact that McBroom could not have her same classes and teachers, it was the way in which the advisor engaged with her. McBroom alludes to the notion that the advisor would not have spoken to adults this way by highlighting that she wanted to be treated, “like an adult.” Parham also feels like a spectacle within her education as well. Instead of actively being dismissed and devalued like McBroom’s account, Parham considers her experience as a more passive approach to dismissing students:

Like all students, I have felt voiceless at times in school. These moments usually occur in the classrooms of teachers who prefer the sound of their own voice to those of their students. They feel like what they have to say is more important than what we have to say. So, in the past—to avoid problems in these situations—I chose to be quiet, even when I had questions. I know now, however, that a student should never have to settle for this type of learning environment. When students are voiceless in classrooms, they become disengaged, question why they are there in the first place, and grow more likely to fail and drop out of school over time. So, teachers need to understand the consequences of not listening and the benefits of making sure all students feel heard. (Parham, McBroom, 2015 p. 175)

Something worth noting is that even if an educator or any stakeholder for that matter is not actively dismissing a perspective from students, one can still cultivate an environment that expresses that students' perspectives are not valued. This is germane to the idea of reciprocal relationships. As Parnham explices, there are consequences to being voiceless. Disengagement and dropping out of school are products, according to Parnham, are products of adults viewing students as objects of education, and not decision makers or stakeholders. These consequences of students as spectacles can have profound adverse impacts on students. In particular, students with marginalized identities appear to be the most vulnerable to being disenfranchised, even when presented with the opportunity to be agents of change. This phenomenon is explored in Dr. Paula Flynn's research regarding students in Ireland:

However, for some of the young people who were “silenced” on important issues in other parts of their lives, the experience of this voice process had less impact. It proved difficult to convince a young person that their opinions matter and that their voice can make an important contribution to a study like this if there are contradictions in what is happening around them. (Flynn, 2018, p. 78)

According to this peer-reviewed article, the implication for spectacalizing students is very serious. The ramifications of not having students see their value at a young age may permanently disengage individuals.

Other discourses are not as explicit in the creation of students as stakeholders. When students are considered spectacles, they are removed from the decision making and engagement of educational change. Dr. Helen Beattie, who is a researcher of student voice and practitioner of UP for Learning, created a rubric for practitioners and schools to understand the difference between youth s as recipients, youth as consultants, youth and adults as emerging partners, and youth and adults as full partners. In her rubric, “Roadmap to Agency,” Dr. Beattie identifies a critical example of youth as recipients of educational change: “Adults dominate communication as assumed experts based on what they feel is in the best interest of youth” (Beattie, 2020, p. 1). One common example of this domination of communication is manifested in the definitions of student voice. An example of this comes from prolific non-student student voice practitioner, Adam Fletcher, who provides challenges regarding defining student voice on his website,

*SoundOut:*

When [all of the previous definitions of student voice listed are] brought together, these understandings of student voice cast a massive net over a lot of different

assumptions, presumptions and biases. The challenge of all of these different perspectives is that none of them holds all the others, and because of that, all of them exclude something else. (Fletcher, 2015, para. 6)

What is critical here in Fletcher's passage is what is missing. Fletcher, and other non-students define student voice *without* students. This backgrounding and exclusion of students occurs within Fletcher's very first sentence on the webpage defining student voice on *Soundout*: "For many years, researchers and practitioners defined student voice according to their own intentions for the activities and outcomes" (Fletcher, 2015, para. 1). Students are removed from the process of what defines their movements. This can be seen in definitions from non-student practitioners and researchers.

The Glossary of Education Reform created a definition of student voice. This glossary is utilized by many people within education as a starting point to understand concepts and practices within education. The Glossary of Education Reform defines student voice as:

In education, student voice refers to the values, opinions, beliefs, perspectives, and cultural backgrounds of individual students and groups of students in a school, and to instructional approaches and techniques that are based on student choices, interests, passions, and ambitions. (Great Schools Partnership, 2013, para. 1)

Students are removed from this definition as the organization who created this site is composed of adult policymakers and researchers. It is worth mentioning that in addition to educational leaders, this glossary describes their own platform as a way to advertise and define terms for journalists, parents, and community members. With the exclusion of

students from the creation of this definition, adults are driving the definition of student voice. Many people who read this definition may understand student voice purely as an education practice confined to a class or school. Additionally, this definition does nothing to discuss students as decision makers, or even explicitly mentioning that students have a clear role as stakeholders. This is in contrast to student organizations who define student voice and their movements in contrast to this definition (Oregon Student Voice, 2020; PSU, 2020; SIYAC, 2020). The differences in how these student movements define student voice in their discourses will be presented later in this section.

Definitions of student voice may appear innocuous, or demonstrating that students share in decision making. However, even in definitions that directly refer to students as decision makers, the arena in which students are decision makers is limited. Dr. Dana Mitra provides a recent example of the way that students can impact change within the school arena through her definition of student voice at the 2019 Student Voice, Agency, and Partnerships conference: “Opportunities for youth to share in the school decisions that will shape their lives and the lives of their peers” (Mitra, 2019). It is important to state that Dr. Mitra is one of the most esteemed and preeminent student voice researchers not only in the U.S., but globally as well. Her work has influenced the discourses of many researchers, students, practitioners, and people within the field of education. Her contributions unquestionably have driven the field of student voice over the last two decades. This very recent definition (which did not include students in the creation of the definition), limited students to sharing in decision making at the school level. This is in contrast to the discourses of student voice movements who define student voice (Oregon Student Voice, 2020; PSU, 2020; SIYAC, 2020; Young Voices, 2020; Youth on Board,

2020). Another preeminent U.S. student voice researcher, Dr. Jerusha Conner, provided a definition of student voice within her peer-reviewed article:

Student voice can be understood as a strategy that engages students in sharing their views on their educational, school, or classroom experiences in order to promote meaningful change in educational practice or policy and alter the positioning of students in school system settings. (Conner, 2016, p. 406)

With this definition, Dr. Conner does not explicitly state that students were part of the creation of this definition. With Dr. Conner's definition, students sharing their views conveys that students have the capacity to vocalize perspectives, but are not necessarily active decision makers. Some researchers have posited as to why there is a disconnect with the term, "student voice." For example, Dr. Conner also points out that the term, "student voice," has lost its meaning due to a lack of consensus and clarity amongst researchers and practitioners:

Although the term 'student voice' has become a frequently invoked buzzword in educational circles in recent years, scholars of student voice note that the USA lags far behind other countries with respect to the implementation and institutionalization of student voice initiatives. (Conner, 2016, p. 405)

Similarly to Goncharuk, Dr. Conner notes that the buzzwordification of student voice in the U.S. can lead to both a disconnect in understanding, as well as diminishing the roles of students within student voice. Dr. Conner, Dr. Ebby-Rosin, and Dr. Brown remark on the present understanding of student voice within the U.S.:

The term student voice has entered the everyday lexicon of teachers, administrators, and education policy makers; however, some uncertainty still

surrounds the concept. What exactly does it mean when a principal says that he supports student voice, or a superintendent claims that she values student voice? Has student voice simply become a trendy term educators like to bandy about, or does it signify something more substantive that requires ideological commitments as well as concerted actions on the parts of adults? (Conner et al., 2015, pp. 1-2)

In this academic journal on student voice, there is an admission that there is a perceived trendiness to student voice. If adult scholars, practitioners, and students are observing that student voice has become nebulous and superficial amongst some key stakeholders, this can cause an objectification of students. These discourses suggest that students are sometimes spectacles.

**Students as Decision Makers.** A critical component of students as decision makers is the expansion of responsibility. In order to be seen more as stakeholders, these students and student organizations consider their role to be in the state and federal policy arenas. In the case of Youth on Board, a Boston-based youth-driven organization, the student-led organization state what the role of students are:

In addition to our work with BPS [Boston Public Schools], we are involved in several local and national projects. The local groups are student-led, student-centered groups that work to ensure that young people have a real voice in their education and in the policies that affect them the most. For our projects beyond Boston, we utilize what we have learned on the local level and bring it out nationally. (Youth on Board, 2020, para. 2)

Notice that despite being a district-wide student organization, they still conceptualize the role of students as a whole to be a part of the state and federal levels of educational

change. As previously discussed in the literature review, the Philadelphia Student Union, a citywide-based youth organization, also has discussed what the role of students has been at the state and federal level. The Rhode Island-based organization, Young Voices, also understands the role of students to be agents of change at the state and federal level, despite originally being an organization that was meant to serve students in the Providence school district:

Young Voices was founded in 2006 to address the desperate need for authentic youth voice in policy making in Rhode Island. What began as a small program, serving 40 Providence youth, has since grown to a powerful statewide model. Through Young Voices' Leadership Transformation Academy, our organization has provided over 400 youth with intensive leadership development, supporting young people to become skilled leaders who advocate for policy change at the state, local, and school levels. (Young Voices, 2020, para. 1)

It's not only student organizations that collectively envision their role at a state and federal capacity, individual students also value the role of students to reach beyond the classroom:

Eleanor Dolan is the executive director at Indivisible Students, a student led organization that engages students in progressive politics by providing them with job opportunities on campaigns and partner organizations, fundraising and event planning. On top of this, Eleanor is a leader of the gun violence prevention movement in Minnesota, a climate activist, and a sophomore at Minnetonka High School. She has recently organized the Climate Strike and Walk Out To Vote in Minnesota. (YELS, 2019)

Elanor Dolan was a student presenter at the 2019 Youth Education Leadership Summit (YELS) in Minnesota. Her biography highlights that she has worked individually, and collectively to have students within the state, federal, and international decision making arenas. Dolan's efforts were supported by the Minnesota Youth Council and Minnesota Alliance with youth, since she was invited to host a student voice workshop at the 2019 YELS event.

From a linguistic perspective, students when engaging in student voice discourse, tend to be more considerate than non-student discourses with pluralizing students, and creating mission statements that explicitly discuss the importance of diversity, equity, and inclusion in their work. Part of being a decision maker is being recognized as legitimate. Legitimacy can derive from key stakeholders acknowledging that students as stakeholders are a diverse body with competing interests and goals, similarly to any adult stakeholders. An example of this diverse and inclusive language is visible within the mission statement and values of Oregon Student Voice:

Participation is open to all Oregon students grades 6 through 12. No matter how you identify yourself or how others perceive you: we welcome you... We are an inclusive community welcoming of all students regardless of their unique perspectives, feelings, race, ethnicity, geographic location, age, socioeconomic status, gender identity, sexual orientation, ability, affiliations, ideology, religious beliefs, and background... We revere each individual's diverse experiences inside and outside of school, and recognize that everyone will be inclined to express their voice in a different way... We strive to attain equity and justice for all

students in Oregon's K-12 education system. (Oregon Student Voice, 2020, para. 4, 5, & 10)

There is not only recognition, but a celebration of the diverse perspectives students bring to the table. This concept of students being incredibly diverse and not a monolithic body has only recently been discussed by adult student voice researchers (Holquist, 2019).

Other organizations, such as *Student Voice*, a student-created journalistic enterprise also emphasize in their student bill of rights: "All students have the right to shape decisions and institutions that will affect their future" (Student Voice, 2020). This theme of decision making is key for most discourses from students, whereas decision making is a more contested component of student voice for non-student researchers and practitioners.

### ***Throughput***

**Climate.** The climate, whether at the class, school, state, federal, or international context, can be determined partially by the discourses of researchers and practitioners. If a school administration has read student voice research regarding direct decision making, YA-partnerships, and students interacting in the state arenas, there will likely be a more conducive climate to sustaining authentic student voice practices. The climate can directly impact how not only other educational stakeholders conceptualize students, but how students can conceptualize themselves. Parham shares her experience on how climate has impacted her self worth and value as a stakeholder:

When schools promote student-led programs, they let students know that the adults trust and value students' ideas and contributions. There is an important difference between hearing students and listening to them. When schools invite

students to share, and truly listen and respond, student voice comes alive. And when student voice takes hold in a school, self-esteem and student leadership spread quickly. (Parham, McBroom, 2015 p. 176)

Climate begins with the individual and being able to consider what one's values are, before connecting with others to develop a shared set of values and principles in which multiple people will be guided by. Sussman articulates the importance of introspection in regards to climate:

One of SVC's refrains has become the idea that before we can change our schools and our systems, we must change ourselves. By the end of our first year, it was clear that the seedlings of school change were a result of students beginning to transform the roles they played at their schools. (Sussman, 2015, p. 122)

In their mission, Oregon Student Voice details the importance of fostering a space for development and power:

We foster a space for students to express their voices, realize their individual and collective power, and lead change in Oregon's K-12 education system. We provide students with the tools and support to partner with education stakeholders and develop innovative ways to ensure all students have equal opportunities and access to achieve their full potential... We are an inclusive community welcoming of all students regardless of their unique perspectives, feelings, race, ethnicity, geographic location, age, socioeconomic status, gender identity, sexual orientation, ability, affiliations, ideology, religious beliefs, and background.

(Oregon Student Voice, 2020, para. 3, & 5)

Oregon Student voice recognizes that places and spaces can influence the climate for student voice. A physical place can impact accessibility, comfort, and belonging. Having a student organization meeting in a state department of education may convey legitimacy and ownership to some students, but for other students that same place could represent a place of historical oppression, invalidation, and exclusion. Similarly, student organizations choosing to meet in a city may limit the participation of rural students and vice versa. In some instances, a physical place may be too inaccessible depending on the geography of the state. Take for instance, the State of Iowa Youth Advisory Council (SIYAC), this organization recognizes that the population of Iowa is widely dispersed and highlights that they have online meetings in addition to quarterly physical meetings:

The State of Iowa Youth Advisory Council (SIYAC) is a non-partisan policy advising organization comprised of young people from across Iowa between the ages of 14 and 20. These youth leaders are selected to represent all Iowa youth and engage in topics important to young Iowans. Concerns are drafted and shared with policy makers during the legislative session... Quarterly meetings are held in Des Moines at the State Capitol Building; monthly meetings are held via conference calls. (SIYAC, 2020, para. 1, & 3)

SIYAC addresses that climate exists within the physical and digital realms. This is a climate that fosters accessibility and inclusion due to being able to meaningfully participate via conference call. It is crucial to recognize that the climate for one student is going to be vastly different for another student depending on race, socioeconomic status, gender identity, sexual orientation, religion, physical ability, and neurodiversity. It is possible for a place to be welcoming for one student and hostile for another student. Dr.

Mitra's peer reviewed article discusses how student voice is an important aspect of developing a more inclusive climate: "To address the alienation of young people and to strengthen school improvement efforts overall, a growing effort is focusing on increasing student voice in schools" (Mitra, 2018, p. 473).

### ***Outputs***

**Students as Informants.** Non-student researchers tend to either conceptualize students as informants, or limited decision makers, in which any agency is strictly confined to the class and school level. In the previous sections, discourses from students and student organizations articulated that they envision themselves as decision makers beyond the school. In one particular example of students as informants, Dr. Cook-Sather posited in a peer-reviewed article that schools should listen and consult students:

Even as we strive to change the current structures and power distribution in education, we must keep in mind that individual students move on. Just as we cannot once and for all learn to listen, we cannot once and for all consult students. This must be an ongoing process. No particular group of students can or should be invested with the responsibility for educational reform. However, all students should be consulted and their words and perspectives included in deliberations about schooling and school reform. It is the collective student voice, constituted by the many situated, partial, individual voices, that we are missing. (Cook Sather, 2002, p. 12)

This is in contrast with Hart's Ladder of Participation, in which consultation is not considered one of the lower degrees of participation (1992). Even though Hart's Ladder

is widely recognized and praised within the field of student voice, student voice definitions from adults tend to not reflect the higher rungs of participation in the U.S. In a peer-reviewed article, Dr. Mitra identifies consultation to be a key component of student voice. Dr. Mitra considers consultation to be a specific type of student voice: “Often this form of student voice is defined as consultation, which is defined as teachers partnering with students to discuss teaching and learning, including inviting students to provide feedback on instructional styles, curriculum content, assessment opportunities” (Mitra, 2018, p. 476,). Dr. Yonezawa and Dr. Jones share a similar reflection of student voice as informing school practices in their peer-reviewed article: “Students are an excellent source of data and a force for data collection and analyses” (Yonezawa & Jones, 2009, p. 206). Ari Sussman, who founded the Student Voice Collaborative (SVC), discussed how students were able to participate passively:

During the fifth and final phase of research, in partnership with the NYC DOE’s Office of School Quality, SVC members served as the first ever “Student Shadows” on official school Quality Reviews (QR). The research-related goal of the initiative was to introduce students to the school system’s definitions of school quality and student voice. At the same time, the experience offered an incredible opportunity to develop essential skills (low-inference observation, note-taking, questioning, analysis, communication, etc.) and see the process used to evaluate schools up close. (Sussman, 2015, p. 123)

It’s important to consider that students were operating within an adult created definition of student voice, as well students serving as, “shadows,” to the officials within the NY DOE. The idea of being a shadow, promotes an inequitable relationship. This passive

form of participation, where students observe and take notes, but do not share in the decision making is another form of consultation. Consultation is a lower level of participation for students, yet non-student researchers and practitioners define student voice in a consultative and informant role.

Students are reinforced with the idea that student voice is a largely consultative role and one that exists within the school. In one peer-reviewed article, SVC students Shamika and Aravis recount their conversation with non-student researchers: “We spoke with three researchers who added that students help *teachers and schools improve* when they are given the chance to define the agenda, serve as consultants, and develop and participate in vital processes and routines” (Parham, McBroom, 2015, p. 177). This is in contrast to how students aspire to participate as decision makers in the student voice movement, though some discourses reflect that students are cognizant of how they are viewed by adults. In a blog, Goncharuk concedes that student voice efforts that are initiated by adults tend to carry a level of inauthenticity. In reference to Oregon high school students participating on the state legislature’s education committee Goncharuk remarks:

Students will be watching these education committees closely to ensure that student voices are authentically represented. I, along with many Oregon students, am tired of being tokenized by an education system that is supposed to serve my learning needs, so I ask decision makers: are you finally going to listen to us?  
(2019, para. 6)

The intentional inclusion of the word “authentically,” highlights a disconnect in understanding among key stakeholders. Goncharuk, as a student himself, conceptualizes students as decision makers within the state and federal arenas.

### ***Outcomes***

**Equitable, Collegial Relationships.** For SVC leaders Shamika and Aravis, discourses regarding equitable relationships are about sharing in decision making, leadership, and instilling a sense of self worth in students:

When schools promote student-led programs, they let students know that the adults trust and value students’ ideas and contributions. There is an important difference between hearing students and listening to them. When schools invite students to share, and truly listen and respond, student voice comes alive. And when student voice takes hold in a school, self-esteem and student leadership spread quickly. (Parham, McBroom, 2015, p. 177)

The distinction between hearing and listening shows that adult decision makers actively engage with students. The Student Voice’s Bill of Rights places value in accessibility and sharing decision making: “All students have the right to shape decisions and institutions that will affect their future” (2020). An equitable student voice outcome looks like re-conceptualizing what students are in the U.S. Adult scholars Conner, Ebby-Rosin, and Brown discuss how students are critical to education: “...Students involved in student voice efforts assume critical roles as, for example, educational innovators, analysts, researchers, or agents of change—not just in their schools, but on local, state, and national stages” (Conner, Ebby-Rosin, & Brown, 2015, p. 1). Students are being talked about as experts and where they provide value.

**Inequitable, Adversarial Relationships.** Inequitable relationships look like non-student leaders looking down on students and not recognizing them as agents within education. Instead there is a sense of ownership or paternalism. Dr. Conner provides an example in one of her peer-reviewed articles, in which a Superintendent describes their relationship with students:

A journalist noted how the superintendent often described students as ‘her babies’, and a foundation officer explained that under her administration, the ‘babies’ are only permitted to cry about problems, not to recommend antidotes because the superintendent sees herself (and only herself) in the role of doctor.

(Conner, 2015, p. 412)

This Superintendent does not see value in the students who are a part of the Philadelphia Student Union. Instead the Superintendent conceptualizes students within a student voice group as irrelevant and incapable. In a peer-reviewed article, Dr. Smyth laments that the dropout rate in the U.S. is a product of not valuing students within education:

I [Dr. Smyth] assert that the so-called ‘dropout’ problem while real in its consequences is in fact mislabelled—more accurately, it is the result of a lack of system and societal care, respect and indifference towards young people. An absence of student voice in schools leads to resistance to learning, and the way to turn this around is to place a greater policy emphasis on the relational work of schools. (Smyth, 2006, p. 283)

As previously mentioned, Dr. Paula Flynn also had similar conclusions with marginalized students in particular becoming permanently disengaged due to a lack of belief in student voice (2018). Inequitable outcomes can also transpire in the agenda and activities that are

set out for students and adults. In the 2019 International Conference on Student Voice (ICSV), conference notes documented a disparity in opportunity for student leaders attending the conference. For one of the conference activities, there was separate time for students, adult practitioners, and researchers to convene to collaborate. Student leaders pointed out that while adult practitioners and researchers were able to meet to consider what future student voice initiatives should be via policy initiatives and collaborative research, students were assigned to make ice breakers (2019). Adults in this case led efforts in decision making regarding the future of student voice, while student leaders, CEO's and activists were not sharing in the shaping of student voice.

### ***Summation of Findings in the Ecology of Student Voice***

The Ecology of Student Voice provides a lens that illustrates how discourses can be understood as inputs to influence student voice movements, while also impacting climate, outputs and outcomes. These texts capture examples of how the term, “student voice,” may unintentionally be detrimental to students within the student voice movement. Additionally, these texts have demonstrated that there is a disconnect in understanding as to what student voice is amongst key stakeholders. Through data collection and data analysis of these discourses, broader themes of student voice began to emerge. The themes that emerged were: Disconnect between students and adults; aspirations for students within student voice; and students as spectacles. These themes will be discussed within the context of key findings.

### **Major Themes**

The major themes that emerged within this study seek to answer the following questions: How, if at all, does the term, “student voice,” position the role students have

as education stakeholders? How, if at all, do adult researchers, adult practitioners and student voice organizations have a similar understanding of what, “student voice,” means? How does the discourse amongst key stakeholders speak to the role of students in student voice? There are three key themes that emerged from this study: Disconnect between students and adults; aspirations for students within student voice; and students as spectacles. These themes are presented in greater detail within Table 3.

Table 3

*Key Themes for Student Voice Discourse*

| Theme   | Student Example   | Researcher Example  | Practitioner Example  |
|---|---|---|---|
| Disconnect Between Students & Adults          | “We strive to attain equity and justice for all students <i>in Oregon’s K-12 education system</i> ” (Oregon Student Voice, 2020). | “Student voice can influence education policy at the <i>school, district, and city level</i> ” (Mitra, 2015).     | “Student voice is as much about adults as it is about students, and as much about <i>listening as it is about voicing</i> ” (Sussman, 2015) |
| Aspirations for Students within Student Voice | Involvement with <i>national projects with a decision making capacity</i> (PSU, 2001; YOB, 2020).                                 | Students having <i>influence at the town/city level</i> (Conner, 2015).   | Students <i>provide input at class and school levels</i> (Great Schools Partnership, 2013).   |
| Students as Spectacles                        | Rubber stamping the term student voice, without <i>meaningful student decision making and respect</i> (Goncharuk, 2018).          | Students being <i>tasked with ice breakers</i> , while adults got to discuss collaborative research (ICSV, 2019). | Referring to students in a formal capacity as, “ <i>kids</i> ” (Hall, 2019; ICSV, 2019)   |

*Note.* Italics added to emphasize key differences in language and communication.

The major themes present that there is a disconnect in discourse between students and adults regarding student voice, that student discourses envision greater aspirations for students within the student voice movement, and that students can become a spectacle of the student voice movement. Findings from all key stakeholders will be categorized by each major theme. These findings, or discourses, will provide evidence to substantiate these major themes. Additionally, the codes utilized in this study will be used to further explain the major themes.

### ***Disconnect Between Students and Adults***

The most common disconnect between students and adults within discourses was the role that students have within education and society. Discourses from multiple student groups saw student voice as a movement in which students share in the decision making within the state and federal legislative arenas, while also sharing in the decision making at the class and school level. These discourses demonstrate that student voice encompasses leadership and decision making beyond the school. For instance, Oregon Student Voice leader David Goncharuk wrote in a blog his thoughts on what student voice means:

For education reform to truly happen, I believe students need to have an authentic seat at the decision-making table. While we are far from reaching this goal, we are making progress... The Joint Committee on Student Success will also be engaging students to construct policy recommendations for the 2019 legislative session. They will be holding private listening sessions and public hearings with students to understand their experiences. While this is not authentic student voice

per se, students are being engaged at the same level as adult stakeholders, which is a positive step forward. (2019, para. 4-5)

Goncharuk is clear that student voice must encompass students having decision-making power within the Oregon state legislature. Goncharuk's discourse is echoed by the actual mission of Oregon Student Voice: "Our mission is to reframe Oregon's understanding of the student's role in their learning by empowering all students to be active agents in shaping their education" (Oregon Student Voice, 2020, para. 2). Even locally focused student organizations like Youth on Board have discourses emphasizing the importance of state and national impact. Within their, "what we do," section of their website, Youth on Board discusses their role as students: "We [students within Youth on Board] are involved in several local and national projects. The local groups are student-led, student-centered groups that work to ensure that young people have a real voice in their education and in policy" (2020, para. 2).

This sharing of power is also instrumental with students developing methodologies. In particular, students have shared in the decision making of what student voice means by engaging key adult stakeholders. Two SVC students, Aravis and Shamika describe how they developed their definition for student voice in a peer-reviewed article:

In order to make sure we had a basic and common understanding of student voice before we started shadowing Quality Reviews, we analyzed the results we had collected so far from students, teachers, administrators and researchers—noting key information, grouping common responses, and highlighting big ideas.

(Parham, McBroom, 2015 p. 178)

In order to capture a more holistic definition of student voice, SVC reached out to key stakeholders. This is important, as the discourses from adult researchers and practitioners sampled within this study do not reflect collaboration with students to define student voice. Though not explicitly stated, backgrounding and exclusion are critical discourse concepts that can be employed to see that students are missing from the conversation pertaining to defining student voice. In one example, prolific student voice practitioner, Adam Fletcher concedes that fellow practitioners and researchers have struggled to create an encompassing definition of student voice: “The challenge of all of these different perspectives is that none of them holds all the others, and because of that, all of them exclude something else” (Fletcher, 2015, para. 6). In this online practitioner guide, Fletcher is referring to fellow adult researchers and practitioners. In the same passage, the absence of students in defining student voice is written more explicitly: “For many years, researchers and practitioners defined student voice according to their own intentions for the activities and outcomes” (Fletcher, 2015, para. 1). Dr. Mitra writes about how students were attempting to redefine their roles in the eyes of adult school leaders in a peer-reviewed article:

The positioning of a student voice initiative also can affect the scope of change that it can pursue. By remaining inside the system, youth in PSC and Student Forum were expected to fulfil the institutional roles prescribed to them. In the eyes of the faculty, they would first and foremost be recognized as ‘students’, no matter how hard they emphasized the importance of becoming ‘partners’. While the group worked on *redefining* the role of students in the schools so that they could have a place at the table when decisions were made, working within the

traditional structure of schooling made it impossible to fully revise the power structure within the school. (Mitra, 2006, p. 325)

Students in this case were trying to redefine student voice and the role of students. The key term, “redefining,” demonstrates that students felt a need to have to change the original definition of students. Students are having to operate within definitions created by adults. These definitions of students and student voice dominate the discourse of student voice, which amplifies this disconnect between key stakeholders.

This lack of working with students to define student voice speaks to concerns regarding methodology. Student voice researcher Dr. Fielding writes about how methodologies within student voice can be detrimental and objectifying in a peer-reviewed article:

Too much contemporary student voice work invites failure and disillusion, either because its methodologies and contextual circumstances reinforce subjugation, or because its valorization pays too little attention to the extent to which young people are already incorporated by the practices of what is cool or customary.

(Fielding, 2004, p. 296)

For context, it is important to acknowledge that Dr. Fielding is an adult scholar from the U.K. and is critiquing student voice globally, and not just the U.S. Other researchers explicitly state that student voice definitions and studies take on multiple meanings and may lose focus and clarity. This perspective is highlighted from Dr. Eve Mayes, who is known for bringing critical approaches into student voice research. Her peer-reviewed article highlights how adult discourses have difficulty reconciling with the nebulous nature of defining student voice:

Yet, studies of the ‘enactment’ (Ball, Maguire, & Braun, 2012) of student voice in schools produce analytic bewilderment; student voice may take on ““many meanings”” and can be deployed for a range of institutional purposes (Pearce & Wood, 2016, p. 2). In the student voice literature, ““two narratives”” are frequently constructed: ““student voice as democratic and transformational”” and ““student voice as policy”” and strategic initiative’ (Hall, 2017, p. 181). Accounts of the enactment of student voice in school reform initiatives at times border on an ““injudicious enthusiasm”” (Howell, 2018, p. 2) while, at other times, evoke a guarded scepticism towards student voice initiatives – as yet another way to govern students’ unruly bodies and voices. (Mayes, 2018, p. 1)

Dr. Mayes addresses the lack of clarity of what student voice means, but decides to confine student voice to the local context, while student organizations tend to see themselves serving in a broader capacity. This passage also excludes students being a part of the process of defining student voice. Out of all the adult researchers discourses sampled, only one discourse highlighted soliciting students feedback in their methodology. Dr. Mitra states how she shared her results and observations in her qualitative researcher:

To help ensure validity of my analysis, and particularly in the final year, I shared the youth development findings with Whitman adults and youth by describing the concepts of agency belonging, and competence and asking both adults and youth if they felt that these terms captured the changes that they saw in the youth participating in both groups. Sean, Amy, and current Student Forum members gave feedback on the Student Forum case. (Mitra, 2004, p. 661)

It is also important for context, that the definition of student voice that Dr. Mitra has used was not shared with students in order to capture authenticity. Adults are dominating the discourses around the definitions of student voice and this can have an impact on how students are conceptualized as key stakeholders and decision makers.

This disconnect regarding a lack of clarity in the definition of student voice also manifests in how students are referred to in adult driven discourses. In particular, some adult practitioners and researchers interchange student and kid when referring to high school students in the student voice movement. This interchanging of terms becomes more problematic when adult student voice scholars have already remarked on this being an issue. In one example, student voice researchers Dr. Robinson and Dr. Taylor write about how the terms, “student,” “pupil,” and “children,” have definitive age ranges that have been widely accepted:

Fielding (2006) described ‘student voice’ as ‘a portmanteau term’. The terms ‘student voice’ and ‘pupil voice’ are often used synonymously. In some cases, the former is used to refer to young people in secondary and tertiary education and the latter to refer to those in primary education. ‘Pupil’ can be used to refer to children and young people of any age in schools or colleges, while the term ‘student’ tends to exclude those very young children (for example, four-year-olds), who are in schools or nurseries. In the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, the word ‘children’ is used to refer to respondents under 12 and the term ‘young people’ to indicate respondents between 12 and 17. We do not have scope here to resolve this terminological problematic (if indeed it can/should be ‘resolved’ given the multiplicity of practices it encompasses). We

do acknowledge that it is important to justify the terminology that will be used and have decided to follow the practice of using ‘student’ and ‘pupil’ synonymously. This remains a necessarily strategic choice which reflects the orientation of the authors who have historical allegiances and practice bases within different educational sectors... Fielding argues that in the current climate of performativity student voice work is often co-opted into managerial agendas, but nevertheless he feels it retains transformational potential. (Robinson & Taylor, 2007, pp. 6-7)

Though the term “pupil,” seldom appears in U.S. discourses regarding student voice, the terms, “kids,” and, “children,” are more common. The usage of these terms were coded as, “de-honorifics.” De-honorifics is a way in which discourses utilize titles and descriptors to both diminish the value of students in the student voice movement, while also re-inforcing the notion that high school students are children.

The concept of de-honorifics and overall disregard of students as decision makers can also be better understood with Dr. Conner’s research showcasing the perspectives of school leaders within her peer-reviewed article:

Another common reason for discrediting youth organizing was that youth organizers advance policy solutions with which adults disagree. This reason was particularly prominent in respondents’ explanations about why other adults, particularly district administrators, charter school advocates, and the superintendent, view youth organizers unfavorably. For example, it surfaced in the following exchange with a foundation officer: A: There have been some complaints lodged against them, particularly PSU, that [the executive director]

didn't like charters and therefore she poisons the children's minds about charters. (Conner, 2015, p. 411)

It is worth highlighting the term "kids," and, "children" are usually used in discourses when adults either disagree with the position of students, or they do not value students as stakeholders and decision makers. One way in which this is rationalized by adult practitioners is that, "kids," must be manipulated by adults administrators and teachers disagree with. Meaning that if students have view points that key adult decision makers disagree with, these decision makers dismiss the perspectives of students as a form of other adults manipulating them. In Dr. Conner's interviews with key adult stakeholders, she notes that one of the most common reasons adults dismiss student voice is due to students being coopted by adults.

One respondent, for example, asserted, "'I think there's a very specific agenda that some of the organizers have and they're trying to figure out how to get the kids to that place.'" Similarly, a district administrator argued, "'The professional protesters, the adult leaders, they choreograph and orchestrate the kids' actions. Literally, they are scripting them.'" (Conner, 2015, p. 411)

Another example within Dr. Conner's discourse with practitioners, she notes that student members of the Philadelphia Student Union were taking a stance against charter schools. In response to these efforts, a local foundation officer exclaimed that this position was due to the adult director of PSU being anti-charter: "There have been some complaints lodged against them, particularly PSU, that [the executive director] didn't like charters and therefore she poisons the children's minds about charters" (Conner, 2015, p. 411).

Teachers within this same discourse also used dehonorifics to criticize students within the PSU: “A teacher voiced the viewpoint that ‘kids especially need to be able to handle arguments from many perspectives’” (Conner, 2015, p. 412). In the discourses that Dr. Conner has provided, there is a theme of students engaging in a community beyond the classroom to be decision makers.

The adversarial discourses from community leaders and the PSU may be a result of adults not recognizing students being agents of change outside a traditional classroom or school setting. When student voice is routinely confined to a class or school level in student voice definitions, community leaders may not see these student voice efforts being beyond the school as legitimate.

There are other examples in which the term, “kids,” and, “children,” are utilized in a way that is seemingly more innocuous given the context within the discourses. For instance, a practitioner at the 2019 International Conference on Student Voice discussed the value of youth leadership “That's what we have with our leadership, with the kids, I call them kids they're younger than my children. There's so much power in that [building youth leadership into organizations] when you have that youth leadership” (ICSV, 2019). What is absolutely essential to understand in this interaction is the idea of intent versus impact. This speaker intended to acknowledge that youth are deserving and capable of being leaders and sharing in power. However, the impact that students may have had when listening to this is that their fellow stakeholders, their partners and allies see them as children and kids. This conference in particular focused on the relevance of youth-adult partnerships, and the importance of equitable relationships between stakeholders.

The disconnect between student discourses and adult discourses becomes more apparent with how adults define student voice and write about student voice. Student voice is largely confined to schools and decision making is either limited or non-existent. For example, Dr. Mitra discusses the student voice movement as a school-based movement: “To address the alienation of young people and to strengthen school improvement efforts overall, a growing effort is focusing on increasing student voice in schools” (Mitra, 2018, p. 473). Practitioner Ari Sussman describes student voice and students as informants of school improvement: “When I reflect on education today, I realize that schools are run, for the most part, by principals and teachers without much student input. But, if we students are the target audience and the focus of schooling, it is vital that our viewpoints be taken into consideration” (Sussman, 2015, p. 173). There is no language in this particular discourse that demonstrates students as decision makers, or students being key stakeholders beyond the school. This disconnect between students and adult discourses becomes more clear when contrasting the aspirations of students within the student voice movement between students and non-students.

### ***Aspirations of Students within Student Voice***

Discourses from students within student voice aspire to be decision makers at the state and federal levels. Student discourses also write about their role as decision makers in a school setting, but often see their role beyond a traditional education setting. This is in contrast to the previous definitions of student voice provided by adult-driven discourses. Students also aspire to be equitable partners with key adult stakeholders and share in the decision making.

The student-created vision statement from the Kentucky-based Student Voice Team has language in which students aspire to be partners in improving all schools throughout the Commonwealth: “The overarching vision is to position students as partners in improving Kentucky schools” (Prichard Committee for Academic Excellence, 2019, para. 1). This same discourse also showcases students as experts within education: “...Many [students] have developed a set of expertise that they are able and more than willing to share to make the education experience better” (Prichard Committee for Academic Excellence, 2019, para. 3). This aspiration of students as experts can also be seen in the “about us,” section of the Rhode Island-based Young Voices: “Young Voices works closely with district staff to revise Providence’s discipline policy and Code of Conduct, to include restorative practices and limit the use of suspensions” (Young Voices, 2020, para. 5). In this example, Young Voices demonstrates how their involvement as decision makers and experts lead to specific outcomes that benefited the lives of students.

Other student discourses consider how student organizations aspire to be authentic partners who act as decision makers at the state level. The vision of Oregon Student Voice is an example of this aspiration: “Our vision is for all students to be authentic partners with other education stakeholders in making decisions that affect their K-12 learning experience and opportunities” (Oregon Student Voice, 2020, para. 1). This theme of authentic partners also transpires in the idea of students being respected and valued. In particular, SVC student leaders Shamika and Aravis discussed what fellow students had to share about student voice:

[we as students asked ourselves within the SCV] What is student voice? In addition to keeping journals of our daily encounters, we asked peers, staff, and researchers this question through focus groups, interviews, and surveys. During the process, each group shared how they have seen student voice make a difference. Our classmates told us it allows them to express themselves and feel safe, engage in school and learning, understand different points of view, and develop leadership skills. It also helps students feel empowered—giving them reason to believe in and care about what is going on at school. When students feel important, respected, and depended on, they strive to be responsible and do better.

(Parham, McBroom, 2015 p. 176)

Students aspire to feel safe, engaged, and respected by their community. Student voice acts as a powerful tool and movement that creates an intentional place where students can feel respected and engaged.

In the previous sections, adults have envisioned students as informants, consultants, and sources of data to improve schoolwide outcomes (Cook-Sather, 2002; Mitra, 2006; Mitra, 2018; Sussman, 2015; Yonezawa & Jones, 2009). Though there is a wide breadth regarding what student voice is, these adult discourses from practitioners and researchers share in the understanding that student voice is largely a school-based movement. In all of the definitions of student voice, no definition from adults included state or federal decision making capabilities for students. To avoid being redundant, definitions that have not yet been presented within this study from the sampled discourses will be explored to demonstrate that student voice is limited to a school setting. “Student voice’ as a term asks us to connect the sound of students speaking not only with those

students experiencing meaningful, acknowledged presence but also with their having the power to influence analyses of, decisions about, and practices in schools” (Cook-Sather, 2006, pp. 4-5). In this analysis of the term, “student voice,” Dr. Cook-Sather recognizes that students aspire to be decision makers, but confines these aspirations explicitly to the school level in her peer-reviewed article. Practitioners from the Center for American Progress wrote a policy report on student voice specifically. They provide a definition that positions students as informants at the school level: “The authors of this report define ‘student voice’ as student input in their education ranging from input into the instructional topics, the way students learn, the way schools are designed, and more (Benner et al., 2019). In this definition, students can aspire to provide input in classrooms and schools, but are not clearly recognized as being decision makers or having influence beyond the school. Practitioner Adam Fletcher’s research summary of student voice discusses student voice outcomes that are confined to the classroom and school level. Even when discussing civic engagement as an outcome for student voice, the discourse is still confined to a school-based outcome: “Engaging students in school improvement activities can lead to increased feelings of belonging and purpose in schools” (Fletcher, 2015, Outcome 9, para. 1). Other definitions of student voice may not explicitly confine student voice to the school level, but imply that student voice is a school-based movement. Dr. Conner’s definition of student voice demonstrates how students can aspire to share their perspectives:

Student voice can be understood as a strategy that engages students in sharing their views on their educational, school, or classroom experiences in order to promote

meaningful change in educational practice or policy and alter the positioning of students in school system settings. (Conner, 2016, pp. 405-406)

The language in this definition does not grant students decision making authority, and student voice is largely confined to the school level. Additionally, there is mention of altering the “positioning” of students in school systems. The language of positioning does demonstrate an understanding that students aspire for more within the student voice movement, but this, and many other definitions of student voice from adult discourses positions students. Students aspire for decision making beyond the school, whereas many adult discourses define student voice as a movement of students as informants and school-based decision makers.

The disconnect of understanding student voice between the discourses of adults and students demonstrate that there is a difference of how key stakeholders conceptualize students. Student discourses provide insight regarding students aspiring to be decision makers at the state and federal levels as well as schools. Adult discourses from researchers and practitioners largely conceptualize student voice as a process of school reform, in which students are informants and/or decision makers. This disconnect in understanding and aspirations for students can lead to students being spectacles within student voice. Students as spectacles can be understood in a variety of ways within student and adult discourses.

### ***Students as Spectacles***

One key pattern that emerged from students as spectacles, is that discourses from students conceded that despite their aspirations and efforts, they acknowledge that they are often times the spectacle of reform and change. In one example, the history of Oregon

Student Voice provides a description of how students are conceptualized: “Students are often seen as *objects of reform* and their voices are absent from decisions that affect their lives and the lives of their peers” (Oregon Student Voice, 2020, para. 19). There is a recognition that students are removed from the decision making process, and are objectified within education. In addition to objectification, there student discourses reflect upon how tokenization is a belittling process. For instance, Oregon Student Voice representative David Goncharuk shares his observations in an op-ed: “I have also observed as decision makers have tokenized students and belittled their viewpoints” (Goncharuk, 2018, para. 1). The language of observing “decision makers,” demonstrates that students are considered separate and disconnected from decision-making. Additionally, the word choice of, “belittling,” as opposed to saying, “disagreeing with their viewpoints,” suggests that there is inequity with the viewpoints of students.

The spectaclization of students also can be understood more tacitly. As mentioned in previous sections, the backgrounding and excluding of students’ perspectives in defining and writing about student voice can be a process in which students are inequitable decision makers in the student voice movement.

It is instructive to begin with a review of the terminology used by various commentators and theorists in their attempts to characterize student voice work... Thus, in the views outlined here, communication as dialogue is not only active, relational and dynamic, it is also emphatically normative in promoting a specific set of values and behaviours, centring on an approach in which young people are active participants in their own learning... If, as we contend, the value of communication as dialogue plays a key role in the writing and practical

engagements in student voice work of such writers, then which theoretical frameworks will enable us to gain a better understanding of these ideas?

(Robinson & Taylor, 2007, pp. 8-9)

In this passage from Robinson and Taylor's peer-reviewed article, they emphasize the importance of dialog being a key factor in the writing and practice of student voice. They also mention what theoretical framework will enable a better understanding of student voice. To provide additional context, the theorists and commentators to which they are referring are only adults. Adults are creating the frameworks to which key stakeholders understand and implement student voice. Students' discourses are either sequestered or excluded as key elements in shaping student voice, as understood with this passage, and previous discourses presented. Another way in which student sequestration occurs is when students are excluded from participating. In an official report from *Soundout*, practitioners Fletcher and King note that there are many states in which it is illegal for students to serve on local school boards, even as non-voting representatives: "14 states have laws that specifically do not allow students to serve on district school boards" (Fletcher & King, 2014, p. 8).

Another element of students as spectacles can be understood as institutional vetting and molding. Institutional vetting is when key adult decision makers determine which students are represented to either be informants or share in decision making. Molding is when students subscribe to similar behaviors, practices and language that is being used by key adult decision makers.

Establishing academic criteria is a common practice for selecting students to serve on local school boards as non-voting representatives. In one particular discourse, the

Utica Community School District states its official criteria to serve on their local school board: “Criteria for membership on the Board include: scholastic achievement, effort and determination; extra-curricular and/or community involvement, demonstrating leadership abilities; and critical thinking skills” (Utica Community Schools, 2019, para. 5). This institutional vetting privileges those who have benefited from the current form of instruction and school climate. For students who have been adversely impacted by school policies or students with marginalized identities, are less likely to be selected based on this criteria. For instance, English language learners (ELL) are significantly less likely to engage in extracurricular activities than their English proficient counterparts due to a lack of school and social connectedness (Lariviere, 2016). Adult Researchers Robinson and Taylor provide a theoretical framework as to why institutional vetting occurs within schools:

The language used by pupils can have a huge impact on the extent to which, and on the areas in which, pupils are listened to within schools. Bourdieu proposed that each social class possesses its own cultural framework or habitus. He argues that the structure of language plays an important role in the reproduction of habitus, and that people from different social classes possess different linguistic codes. He considers that pupils with a linguistic code similar to that transmitted by the school will be the most likely to achieve in that school. It may also be these pupils are the ones schools choose to listen to, and involve in, pupil voice work as they ‘speak’ the same language as the school. (Robinson & Taylor, 2007, pp. 10-11)

Schools may be more likely to listen to students they agree with and students who come from similar backgrounds. This could look like schools favoring students' perspectives based on race, socioeconomic status, gender, sexual orientation, neurodiversity, and native language. As Robinson and Taylor posit, the reproduction of habitus can diminish and outright exclude the perspectives of students from marginalized backgrounds.

Students may also feel compelled to alter their behavior in order to be taken "more seriously," as decision makers and informants. SVC student Shamika discusses how she wanted to present herself in relation to fellow students and the quality review experts:

The next Quality Review activity was a student meeting, which I thought was very interesting because students had a lot to say. During the meeting, I tried to be as mature and serious as possible because I wanted to be respected and not mistaken for a middle school student (because of my height). (Parham, McBroom, 2015 p. 184)

It should be noted, that Shamika was trying to differentiate herself amongst a younger cohort of students. Shamika, however, did write about changing her behavior in a way that would be considered more reflective of the adults in the room. Dr. Conner also reflects in her peer-reviewed article about how adult stakeholders disregard students' perspectives no matter what: "...If they [PSU students] seem too polished, they clearly have been scripted by adults because 'impressionable' youth could not generate such sophisticated analyses" (Conner, 2016, p. 412). In this example, practitioners within Philadelphia perceived students as impressionable and moldable, where they would try to match the behaviors and language of adults, because students within the PSU were disagreeing with some of the citywide school policies. Instead of recognizing that

students had a valuable perspective, these particular adult stakeholders instead assumed that students were being molded and coopted. Another example in a youth participatory action research project (YPAR), was a student commenting on reasoning why some rural youth were ostracized and not being listened to: “For example, some youth believed that a teen’s reputation was the result of individual actions or behavior; as one youth researcher said, ‘Youth are treated how they act’” (Pozzoboni, 2015 pp. 87-88). For context, this project was led by adults but had active youth participants. This quote from a student demonstrates that they are trying to remove their own identity by saying “youth are treated how they act.” This student isn’t saying, “we are treated how we act,” instead, this is a linguistic decision to separate this particular student from other youth within a research project. There is an effort linguistically to remove one’s identity.

The author of that study also felt compelled to appear to be, “as adult looking as possible,” when they were a student representative. The author felt that in order to be taken seriously by fellow state board members, he needed to be seen less like a teenager, and more like an adult. This molding transpired in how the author chose to dress, talk, and behave.

### ***Summation of Major Themes***

Students and adult discourses present disconnects of understanding in regards to what student voice is, as well as what the role of students is within student voice. Adult researchers and practitioners consistently framed the discourses of student voice as a practice in which students may share in the classroom or school-wide decision making efforts. These stakeholders also considered student voice to be a practice that is largely centered around school improvement and classroom management. Students’ discourses

however understood student voice as the process of sharing in the decision making at the school, municipal, state, and federal arenas. Student voice was not purely an educational practice for students, as noted within the discourses. The students' discourses reflected an early age of student voice discourse from the first wave of student voice, in which student voice was about civic participation and democratic practices. Adult discourses in the U.S. have instead shifted focus primarily on school improvement, and the element of democratic participation outside of the school is seldom mentioned.

Students discourse aspired for students to be agents of positive change in their communities beyond the classroom. These discourses uniformly understood students to be decision makers and be authentic partners with adults in most policymaking arenas. Adult practitioners and researchers tended to limit the aspirations to what students can do to the school specifically, or in the rarer instances in which a community-led youth organization was highlighted, these youth organizations would be positioned within the discourses to only recognize local impact. This is despite some of these local youth organizations writing about their aspirations and real impact in state and federal arenas.

Students discourses also reflected that they are often recognized as spectacles or "objects of reform" (Oregon Student Voice, 2020, Our Story, para. 1). Some student discourses attributed this to a misunderstanding as to what student voice is, leading to a lack of understanding as to what the role of students in student voice should be. These misunderstandings were also echoed by adult practitioners and researchers who conceded that the term, "student voice," is nebulous and a loaded term. This confusion is likely amplified by the lack of direct student partnership and feedback within the creation of these definitions for student voice. Perhaps the most striking finding is that out of the 35

discourses written by adult researchers and practitioners, *not a single definition of student voice* was explicitly created in partnership with students.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### CONCLUSIONS

Students are the largest stakeholders in education, and their discourses envision themselves as the decision makers in local, state, and national arenas. These values are at times contrasted with how adult practitioners and researchers have defined student voice. The consequence of competing student definitions and concepts is made more profound by the lack of inclusion student perspectives within the discourses of adult researchers and practitioners. This dynamic can be understood through the Ecology of Student Voice, in which discourses emerging from practitioners and researchers impact how students are seen as decision makers, and this can invariably lead to a change in the climate that either makes student voice more pronounced, or relegates the roles of students in education. The way that the climate and shared values of adult and student stakeholders can result in positive or negative outcomes.

The purpose of this study was to explore how adult researchers and practitioners' defining, framing, and implementation of student voice policies may have contributed to the positioning of secondary school students in education policy and leadership. The purpose also considers how the discourses distributed by adult voices may be inconsistent and create potentially adverse relationships between students and other stakeholders in educational decisionmaking. In regards to this purpose, key research questions were identified in order to guide this student voice study:

1. How, if at all, does the term, "student voice," position the role students have as education stakeholders?
2. How, if at all, do adult researchers, adult practitioners and student voice organizations have a similar understanding of what, "student voice," means?

3. How does the discourse amongst key stakeholders speak to the role of students in student voice?

These questions arose from an identification of significant gaps in the literature of student voice. Within the literature review presented in Chapter Two, the scholastic literature of the student voice movement has largely been focused on school improvement in the United States. This is in contrast to the actual student voice movements in the U.S. that have put a concerted effort into being decision makers at the state and federal level for policymaking. The student voice literature is also primarily driven by adult discourses, and lacks student participation and decision making in how student voice is being defined. The literature review also highlighted that student discourses regarding student voice as a whole had seldom been analyzed and compared with adult discourses. These gaps in literature and discourses led to the decision of creating a research project for this study that was centered on discourses in student voice.

In Chapter Three, Content analysis was chosen as the primary qualitative research methodology. As presented in the literature review of Chapter Two, there was recognition of asymmetric power between students and adults. In order to better analyze these power imbalances within a content analysis framework, critical discourse analysis was chosen as a subset methodology, in order to critically read these discourses. In order to analyze the term, “student voice,” itself, the concept of buried proposition was utilized to consider how singularizing students, and choosing the word, “voice,” can act as a potential detriment to students within the movement. The word, “student,” falsely homogenizes an incredibly diverse population, while voice connotes that students can speak and be listened to, but does not invoke the idea of decision making, which is what students had identified within Chapter Two. In addition to analyzing specific words, it was necessary

to consider what words or people were missing within discourses. In an effort to more systematically and reliably identify the latent content within these discourses, the social actors approach was utilized. Specifically, the concepts of backgrounding and excluding were heavily utilized within the research study to explore whether or not students were missing in the discourses of adult researchers and practitioners. These methodologies were in service of being able to purposively sample 50 different discourses from students, adult researchers, and adult practitioners. NVivo 12 was used in order to thematically code the discourses of these key stakeholders. The Ecology of Student Voice and three major themes (disconnect between students and adults, aspirations for students within student voice, and students as spectacles) emerged from the coding and literature review.

In Chapter Four, the findings from this study connect to the Ecology of Student Voice and major themes in order to address the key questions. The findings demonstrated that there was a lack of understanding in the definition of student voice amongst key stakeholders. Additionally, student discourses routinely discussed that the purpose of student voice is to have students share in the decision making within classes, schools, municipalities, states, and federal government. This was in contrast to adult researchers and practitioners who often wrote about student voice as a school-wide practice in which students either share in decision-making, or are utilized as informants and data for school improvement. Since the definition of student voice is incredibly varied, students can be positioned within student voice. The studied texts suggest that students aspire to be decision makers beyond the school, whereas adult-driven discourses in student voice position students to be school-wide informants and sometimes decision makers. The lack

of students being involved in the defining of student voice has contributed to a growing disconnect in understanding what student voice is within the United States.

This exploration suggests that the current state of student voice discourses has the ability to detrimentally impact the way students are seen as decision makers by adults. This realization is most visible when debating if students are decision makers in the state and national decision making arenas. Less pronounced realizations include whether or not students are decision makers, and if there is a limit on the capacity to which students can participate as decision makers. The author finds the lack of student perspectives in the formation of student voice epistemologies deeply troubling and antithetical to the purpose of the student voice movement.

It is also important to recognize that the purpose of this thesis is to explore how students, researchers, and practitioners *understand* student voice. In order to further substantiate the claims presented in this exploration, future research is necessary. Further research should pertain to directly asking students within student organizations how they define student voices, and compare this with how other stakeholders define student voice. Additionally, there was only a limited exploration of the stakeholders who have influence on student voice. More research is needed on the perspectives of teachers, as well as legislators, and community leaders. Practitioner perspectives were largely limited to policymakers, and school leaders. In order to have a more comprehensive understanding of how key stakeholders understand student voice, including more perspectives is important.

Even with this limited exploration, there are some tangible policy and research recommendations that can be made to more robustly enhance the legitimacy of students

as decision makers within student voice research. These recommendations will highlight ways of cultivating student voice that is more authentic to the discourses of students:

### **Reconsidering Methodologies & Topics for Student Voice Research**

Any future student voice research that attempts to define student voice needs to have some form of student consultation or partnership in the development of the definition. Even if the definition is shared with the group being researched and approved, explicitly stating that this is done will provide additional credence as to why this student voice definition authentically represents the population that was being studied. Future student voice research should also prioritize researching students participating in state or federal decision making in order to better understand how students act as stakeholders in these arenas. This is a critical area of student voice research as identified by student discourses, and this is a major gap in the current student voice research within the United States. Youth Participatory Action Research and partnerships with student researchers should also be more strongly encouraged to answer research questions pertaining to student voice. Literature reviews within student voice research should also place more value and emphasis on the contributions students have made within the field of education. This will better model how students are agents of change within education.

### **Encourage the Development of Student Constituencies**

Having student constituencies for existing student representatives on local and state school boards has been identified as valuable by students, practitioners, and researchers. Being able to create policy that incentivizes states and local school boards to engage in this type of policy will further legitimize the role of students as decision makers. This practices mitigates the tokenization of students on decision making boards

and committees. Student constituencies should be democratic and avoid institutional vetting practices that can alienate and exclude a diverse body of students from being active decision makers.

### **Use Language that Values Students as Decision Makers**

Whether in the creation of literature, or interacting with students, non-student researchers and practitioners should be cognizant of the type of language that is being used to describe students. Is the language that is being used dismissive or derogatory to the students? Avoid diminutives such as, “kids,” or, “children.” Consider asking students within stakeholder roles how they want to be addressed. Perhaps students will want to be addressed as researchers, policymakers, or students. Engaging in these kinds of practices will build a level of mutual respect and understanding between stakeholders.

### **Final Thoughts**

As an adult stakeholder participating in the development of student voice, consider how you frame your contributions and your efforts. When engaging in the practice of student voice, whether you are a researcher, practitioner, a policymaker ask yourself the following question: Are you doing this for students or are you doing this *with* students?

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