THE DUAL PRESENCE OF PROMISE AND INEQUITY: A PRAGMATIC INQUIRY INTO HOW HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS PERCEIVE THEIR VOICE

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I try to follow my grandpa-in-law Pat's advice whenever I can and will do so here by first acknowledging my family (he often guided us to put "family first, fun second, and work third"). My wife Thera, Teddy (4), and Rorie (2) have supported me through my professional and academic journey with love and care. They are the best part of each day and provide the support that makes me believe no challenge is too great. Thera has taught me how to love. She has sacrificed so much for me to have the professional experiences I do. Teddy and Rorie have their mom's heart. They have come to understand my days at the computer, and have actually typed a few words in this paper. I am filled with joy to spend the rest of my life with you as a family. Thank you.

My mom and dad taught me how to work hard. They also taught me the importance of education and that it is okay to take risks. Thera's parents have spent weekend after weekend caring for and loving Teddy and Rorie, while encouraging me every step of the way. I have four grandparents who all were/are passionate believers in education and in me. Making them proud remains a driver for me today. Thank you all.

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I submit this paper with gratitude and humility. I commit to a relentless pursuit of improvements within the areas it considers. Our students deserve it and our world needs it.

ABSTRACT

In the present study, I attempted to understand how students perceive their voice in the 2900 student public high school where I serve as principal. The study is a qualitative inquiry that combines human-centered design and action research for its conceptual framework. My dual roles of researcher and principal influenced every aspect of this project, from its initial imagination all the way to the construction of this dissertation.

Data on how students perceive their voice at Valley View High School (VVHS) were collected via focus groups, interviews, surveys, and specific student voice initiatives directly involving a total of 31 students. Participants were diverse by race, age, and gender. A schoolwide student survey and crowdsourced innovation event provide contextual insights. Across the data sets, participants' deep interest in having their voice heard was apparent, as was their belief that their voice improves the school. Inequitable perceptions of who was heard were also consistently found. These two findings combine to create what is referred to here as the "dual presence of promise and inequity." Additional specific findings include students' interest in having a voice in the classroom, crowdsourcing as an effective student voice strategy, and the importance of follow-through from adults following student voice experiences.

The dissertation concludes with a discussion of how the dual presence of a belief in the promise of student voice and inequitable experiences can be navigated. Recommended work areas within this dual presence are disrupting whose voice is (and is not) at the table, intentional creation of opportunities for student voice, creating and supporting a culture of student voice, and following through on our commitments. Recommendations for further study are in the areas of adult perception of student voice,

specific student voice strategies at the classroom level, and, more specifically, Black or African American and Hispanic/Latino student voice experiences in the classroom. Future actions will be taken within the same conceptual framework of the present study, which is based on an iterative relationship between action and investigation.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Attention to student participation in schools has increased in recent years in policy, practice, and research (Anderson, Graham, & Patrick 2019). *Student voice* has become a widely-used term across school efforts that range from instructional to operational to cultural. As I co-wrote in 2019,

> In our work as principals, it is apparent that student voice impacts school culture. Students feel connected. Students feel ownership of their school. Students care. Students build strong relationships with staff. The research shows that all these factors lead to students' academic and personal success. (Erickson & Virgin, p. 10)

Student voice can range from the most basic level of youth sharing their opinions on problems and potential solutions; to allowing young people to collaborate with adults to address the problems in their schools; to youth taking the lead on seeking change (Cook-Sather 2002; Fielding 2001a; Levin 2000; Mitra, 2007). Though student voice is supported by research on theoretical, pragmatic, and empirical levels (Kirshner & Pozzoboni, 2011), it is far from business as usual in U.S. schools (Beck, 2019). This very gap between research and practice provided fuel for the present study, which sought to better understand how students perceive their voice in the public high school where I serve as principal.

The overall intention of student voice is lofty—a restructuring of relationships, power dynamics, and overall ways in which youth and adults interact in school spaces. This is "counter-normative" thinking (Fielding, 2004). Schools, like other

institutions, historically have not elicited input from lower levels of the structural hierarchy, such as students (Mattson, 1991). Kozol's 1991 assertion on the importance of the student perspective to schools remains pertinent, "Voices of children, frankly, have been missing from the whole discussion. This seems unfortunate because children often are more interesting and perceptive than the grown-ups are about the day-to-day realities of life in school" (pp. 5-6).

The notion that students' positionalities differ from adult educators' positionalities in additive ways to school reform is a foundational assumption of the present study. This is a disruptive notion to traditional school leadership, which has been adult-centered, heavily influenced by hierarchy and time in the role. Leaders are too often afraid to venture beyond what has been strictly deemed as "best practices." They are also slow to act in unknown areas as they place priority on orderly school functioning. On the other end of the continuum of school leadership stances are design-based approaches, which are user-(student) centered, recognize the intelligence in the group regardless of organizational status, are not afraid to go beyond what is known to experiment with new solutions, has a bias toward action, and is comfortable with the messiness of learning (Gallagher & Thordarson, 2018). When educators authentically partner with students, students' opportune positionality becomes apparent (Mitra, 2007) by students helping educators consider beliefs, practices, and philosophies invisible to them (Friend & Caruthers, 2015). "Students possess unique knowledge and perspectives about their schools that adults cannot fully replicate" (Mitra, 2006, p.8). This is particularly helpful when students not finding success in the system are provided a voice (Mitra, 2021).

Student voice is defined in the present study as a range of student opportunities to interact, collaborate, and partner with adult educators to improve the school experience for students (Cook-Sather, 2020; Beck, 2019; Mitra, 2004, 2009; Mitra, Serriere, & Stoicovy, 2012; Toshalis & Nakkula, 2012). Agency is the defining feature of this conception of student voice. When students have agency in their own education, some efficiency, predictability, and other conveniences afforded when adults are the sole decision-makers are sacrificed. Student agency cuts in the direction of personalization and customization for learners, which runs in the opposite direction of educational policy trends toward standardization. Approaches to educational design that employ student voice can serve as reminders of who the system ought to be designed to serve (and not the other way around) (Toshalis & Nakkula, 2012).

In the present study, I attempted to understand how students perceive their voice at Valley View High School (VVHS) in suburban Minneapolis; I serve as principal in this school. The study is a qualitative inquiry that combines human-centered design and action research for its conceptual framework. My dual roles of researcher and principal influenced every aspect of this project, from its initial imagination all the way to the construction of this dissertation. As principal, I want all of my actions to improve the student experience in our school. As such, this project is rooted in pragmatism with the primary intent of improving the immediate setting. An important secondary intention of the present study is to inform the work school leaders can and do engage in on a regular basis, and the chronological organization allows for the most accurate reflection of the way the study played out in reality. More pointedly, high school principals are continuously tasked with assessing programs in suboptimal research conditions with

limited resources, including time, to do so. Patton (2015) provided "Ten General Pragmatic Principles of Inquiry" that informed the research design (p.157). Principles in play in the present study include a focus on useful answers to practical questions, the use of a variety of methods to garner a variety of perspectives (Creswell, 2019), an adaptation of designs to real-world contexts (Bamberger & Marby, 2019), the combination frameworks as appropriate (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018), the pursuit of actionable findings (Davidson, 2012), and explicit consideration of how values and positionality influence the study. Human-centered design and action research epistemologies were selected and combined to create the conceptual framework due to their shared pragmatic and iterative foundations.

Data on how students perceive their voice at VVHS were collected via focus groups, interviews, surveys, and specific student voice initiatives. Activities like these have become part of the fabric of VVHS. Across these data sets, participants' deep interest in having their voice heard was ever-present, as was their belief that their voice improves our school. Simultaneously, inequities in who was heard were also ever-present. Data analysis identified specific strategies for action and investigation that can be taken in response to this "dual presence of promise and inequity." Strategies call on educators to be intentional, innovative, and courageous as they disrupt the status quo to hear students' voices.

Outline of paper

Like many widely-used terms in education, student voice is a bit ubiquitous in its application, understanding, and implementation. As such, the literature review (Chapter

Two) begins by establishing working definitions and historical traditions of the primary concepts of the research project. From there, a deep consideration of the "why" of student voice is conducted. This is a key foundation to establish due to the counter-normative nature of student voice. Empirical evidence on improved learner outcomes, theoretical support positing student voice as a human right, and pragmatic illustrations of students as effective agents of change collectively convey the "why." The relationship between student voice and democratic education also contributes to the rationale due to the symbiotic nature of democratic schools and democratic classroom spaces. The shared intentions among student voice and democratic education provide opportunities for these two fields of study to serve as guideposts for each other. What is known about how student voice should and should not be implemented is then outlined to both inform the design of the study and, ultimately, assess where its findings might fit within the literature so that appropriate subsequent actions can be taken. The review of student voice literature concludes by identifying gaps in the field.

Chapter Two concludes with the conceptual framework. As noted above, the present study is a pragmatic qualitative inquiry; it combines action research and human-centered design. Action research is, "Any systemic inquiry conducted by teacher researchers, principals, school counselors, or other stakeholders in the teaching/learning environment to gather information about how their particular schools operate, how they teach, and how well students learn" (Mills, 2011, p. 5). Human-centered design, which has become more common in school settings in the twenty-first century, follows the five-step improvement process of: empathy, definition, ideation, prototype development, and testing (Hasso Plattner Institute of Design at Stanford University, 2021). The present

study lives most squarely in the empathy phase of design thinking. In fact, my overall disposition for leadership is grounded in design thinking (see Gallagher & Thordarson, 2018). Action research is included in the conceptual framework due to its deeper historical roots in education settings, its specific research methods for investigating and analyzing research questions, and the project's focus that is bound to the "particular school" in which the data were collected (Mills, 2011). Action research is also additive to the present study due to its track record of power-shifting (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999).

To be certain, my dual roles were never fully separated at any point in this study. My positionality, in fact, may be the study's defining feature. Since my positionality influenced every aspect of the project, from identifying the purpose of the investigation, the pursuit of that purpose, all the way through the final analysis, implications of my positionality are considered in each chapter. Within the conceptual framework, my ethical responsibilities, limitations, and affordances are addressed. Efforts to counteract researcher bias are explained within the research methodologies (Chapter Three).

Chapter Three is a description of the research project. Valley View High School is a public grades 9-12 high school with just under 3000 students in the suburbs of Minneapolis, Minnesota. The setting is further contextualized through demographic trends in student enrollment, a summary of its faculty and staff, a description of the greater community, academic performance indicators, and the influence of the COVID-19 pandemic on learning models.

All data were collected during the 2020-2021 school year. The study has an iterative nature where each phase is built off and extends previous phases. That is, the different research methods "emerged" throughout the study. In fact, no method was contrived for the sole purpose of the present study. In this way, the inquiry had "naturalistic" grounding tenets (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Because this is a pragmatic investigation, analysis of different data sets was done at different times. The first group of data were collected in the fall of the 2020-2021 school year via a focus group with nine students, a follow-up survey to the group, and individual interviews with three of the participants. Also in the fall of 2020, data were collected from students in two specific student voices activities—a culturally proficient curriculum work group and an associate principal interview team. In the second half of the school year, a schoolwide survey was administered. Items in the survey were built off findings from fall data, as well as surveys from previous years, and the overall vision of the school. Responses to open-ended questions illuminated students' interest in "Eagle Voice," a crowdsourced innovation website for students to submit ideas to improve their school. Along with data from the fall, both the survey and Eagle Voice were used to inform the design of April focus groups, which totaled ten new direct participants. Due to the iterative nature of this project and the more intensive design of the April focus groups, the findings from those groups are the most instructive to future work of any data set considered in the project.

Across this study, in total, 31 students provided in-depth data from focus groups, interviews, and specific student voice efforts. Participants were diverse by race, age, and gender. Additionally, 1,078 survey responses, 97 Eagle Voice ideas, and 14,964 Eagle

Voice votes provide contextual insights. All data are employed to better understand how students perceive their voice at VVHS.

While the research methods were not contrived solely for the purpose of the present study, the analysis was more sophisticated than what typically happens in the setting outside of this study. Three principles that guided the evaluation of data—(1) less than perfect data that are on time are more useful than perfect data provided after the fact, (2) rigor should be understood through the lens of utility and actionability in the context under consideration, and (3) "timeliness trumps comprehensiveness" (Patton, 2015, p. 156). Though this is a qualitative inquiry, quantitative analysis was done on some survey items. As noted above, combining different methods is common in pragmatic inquiries (Creswell, 2019). This analysis enriches the context and informed subsequent iterations of research methods. However, to be explicit, the survey's utility is contextual in nature.

Chapter Four describes findings from each methodology individually, with the most attention given to April focus groups. Findings include participants' desire to be heard, inequitable perceptions of their voice, interest in having a voice in the classroom, the positive impact of specific student voice efforts, and the importance of follow-through from adults following student voice experiences.

Chapter Five is a discussion of how the dual presence of a belief in the promise of student voice and inequitable experiences can be navigated. Future interdependent work areas within this dual presence are provided based on the most salient findings. The work areas are disrupting whose voice is (and is not) at the table, intentional creation of opportunities for student voice, creating and supporting a culture of student voice, and

walking the talk. Within the work areas, I make recommendations for school leaders, student voice researchers, and social studies education. All recommendations for future work remain within the conceptual framework of the present study. Recommendations for further study are in the areas of adult perception of student voice, specific student voice strategies at the classroom level, and, more specifically, Black or African American and Hispanic/Latino student voice experiences in the classroom.

The construction of the paper attempts to honor both the iterative and pragmatic design of the study. To review, the paper defines student voice, considers why it is important, summarizes findings from previous studies, combines human-centered design and action research to create a conceptual framework, describes the research project's setting, participants, and methodologies, presents findings across each data set, and discusses future work areas in response to the most salient findings. I depart this study with clarity in four interdependent areas—(1) student voice is good for students, (2) student voice is good for schools, (3) the need to take deliberate actions to make student voice more equitable at VVHS, and (4) the need for further investigation. In the pages that follow, I attempt to describe a process that positioned me to more effectively engage student voice so that each student can feel *heard*; so that each student can feel like they *belong.*

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature review provides essential concepts and context for understanding the present study. It begins by establishing a working definition of student voice, followed by three different models (Mitra, 2018; Hart, 1992; Toshalis & Nakkula, 2012) to conceptualize student voice. Given the counter-normative nature of student voice, a thorough exploration of why educators would pursue it is provided. Support for student voice takes theoretical, empirical, and pragmatic shapes. The interdependent relationship between democratic schools and democratic classrooms is then explored. Research on schools as democratic spaces, connections among the purpose of social studies education and the purpose of student voice, and specific pedagogies for democratic education with consideration for their potential application to broader student voice efforts are all included. Literature on what is known about how student voice is both successfully and unsuccessfully implemented is also summarized in the review, along with a historiography of student voice research and consideration of research gaps. The chapter concludes by combining action research and human-centered design epistemologies for a conceptual framework.

Defining Student Voice

Because the concept of "student voice" is more general than specific, it is helpful to unpack what researchers and practitioners have meant when they have used the term (Toshalis & Nakkula, 2012). This is important with any term and seems particularly important with student voice as Gonzalez, Hernandez-Saca, and Artiles wrote in 2017,

> The concept of student voice has generated excitement in the education field in the last two decades. However, it is not clear whether there is consensus on how

> the notion of student voice is conceptualized, studied, and how it may advance educational research. (p. 1)

Further, the literature on student voice reveals inconsistencies in the construct definition. While some researchers define voice as feedback, others suggest that voice exists through formal structures, such as the school newspaper and student governments. Student voice has also been applied to describe any time a student is active in any school activity, while others work from a conceptualization of it as involving students as lead stakeholders in their school and overall learning (Beck, 2019; Fielding, 2001b; Friend & Caruthers, 2015; Mitra, 2004; Toshalis & Nakkula, 2012; Mattson, 1991).

Student voice can be understood in simplest terms as agency (Toshalis & Nakkula, 2012). Other scholars (e.g., Holdsworth, 2000; Lundy, 2007) have noted the potential gap between voice and agency. I acknowledge that distinction, however, teasing out those differences between voice and agency is not the focus of the present study. Instead, I carry the assumption that when students authentically have a voice, they also have agency. Mitra (2009) contends the term student voice refers to activities and pedagogies in which youth have opportunities to influence decisions that will shape their lives and those of their peers either in or outside of school settings. It is within this understanding of student voice that the present study was conducted.

Again due to the counter-normative essence of student voice, a further consideration of its lineage is necessary. Understanding and application have shifted over time, often with minimal understanding (Gonzalez, Hernandez-Saca, & Artiles,

2017). Several scholars (e.g., Charteris & Smardon, 2019; Mitra, 2004; Beck, 2019) connect the launch of student voice to "student power" movements of the 1960s and 1970s. Gonzalez, Hernandez-Saca, & Artiles (2017), see "rootedness" in the 1890s, 1920s, and 1940s. While Levin (2000) asserts that it was not until the 1970s that students had a real presence in school governance.

Among the terms that have proliferated to describe student voice-related work are "student participation," "youth-adult partnership," "youth activism," at the primary and secondary levels (Mitra, 2018), and student-staff/student-faculty partnerships and students as partners at the tertiary level (Cook-Sather et al. 2014; Healey et al. 2014). The terminology "pupil voice" (in the United Kingdom and Australia) and "student voice" (in the United States and Canada) emerged from what Fielding (2001a) called a "new wave" of student voice work during the 1990s and early 2000s. In Fielding's work in K-12 contexts, students were consulted regarding their learning experiences and invited to contribute to school reform efforts (2001b). Both terminology and practices have expanded since then, growing in different ways depending on context and conditions (Cook- Sather, 2006). In this way, student voice has the potential to be incorporated into all adult-student interactions. Unfortunately, the literature has consistently indicated that the voices of students are often disregarded (Cook-Sather, 2002; Mitra, 2018).

The most common framework for U.S. student voice research emphasizes the connection of student voice activities with the concept of *youth-adult partnership* (Mitra, 2018). Youth-adult partnerships are defined as relationships in which both youth and adults have the potential to contribute to decision-making processes, to learn from one

another, and to promote change (Jones & Perkins, 2006; Mitra, 2009; Wu et. al, 2014). Collaboration comes with an expectation of youth sharing in the responsibility for the vision of the group, the activities planned, and the group process that facilitates the execution of these activities. Youth-adult partnership efforts tend to focus on examining the process and outcomes of engaging young people in shaping the organizations and schools that are intended to serve them (Mitra, 2009).

In review, student voice is defined in the present study as a range of student opportunities to interact, collaborate, and partner with adults to improve the school experience for students (Cook-Sather, 2020; Beck, 2019; Mitra, 2004, 2009; Mitra, Serriere, & Stoicovy, 2012; Toshalis & Nakkula, 2012). This definition is operationalized in the context of school improvement due to my positionality as principal of the school where the study was conducted, which is described in Chapter Three. The definition of student voice is now further explored and elaborated on through typologies developed by other researchers.

Typologies

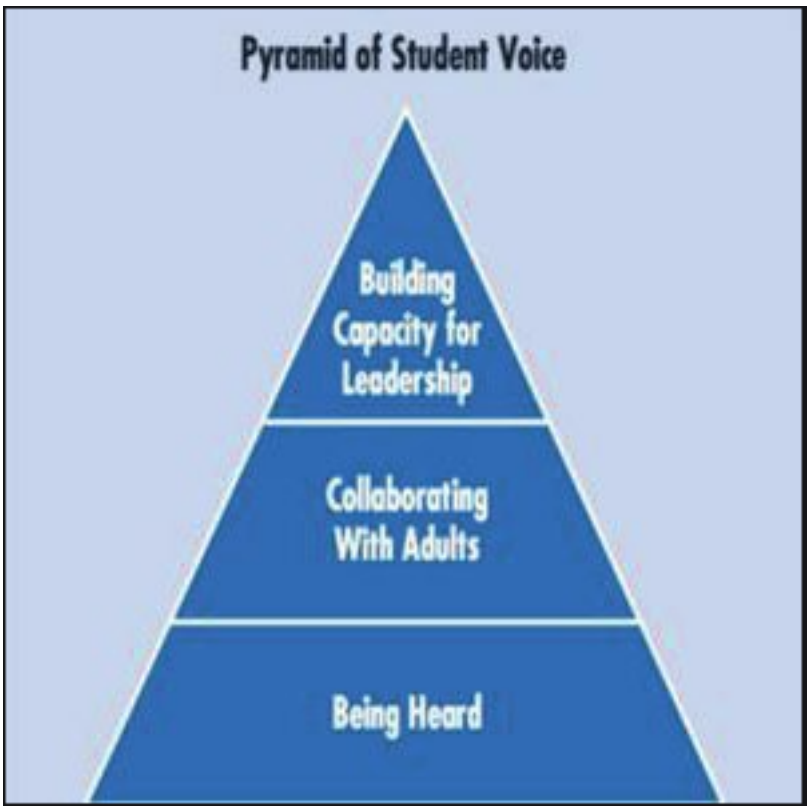
Researchers have found utility in creating different visual representations of student voice through continuums and other progressions. Three prominent typologies are outlined and synthesized below.

In 2018 (Figure 1), Mitra adapted her 2005 pyramid to include three levels of student voice activities—listening/being heard (at the bottom), students collaborating with adults (middle), and building capacity for leadership (top). Each level of the pyramid occurs less frequently than the one below it. Mitra contends that the higher

levels of the pyramid are more difficult to attain because they stray further from the status quo of school norms (p.3).

Figure 1.

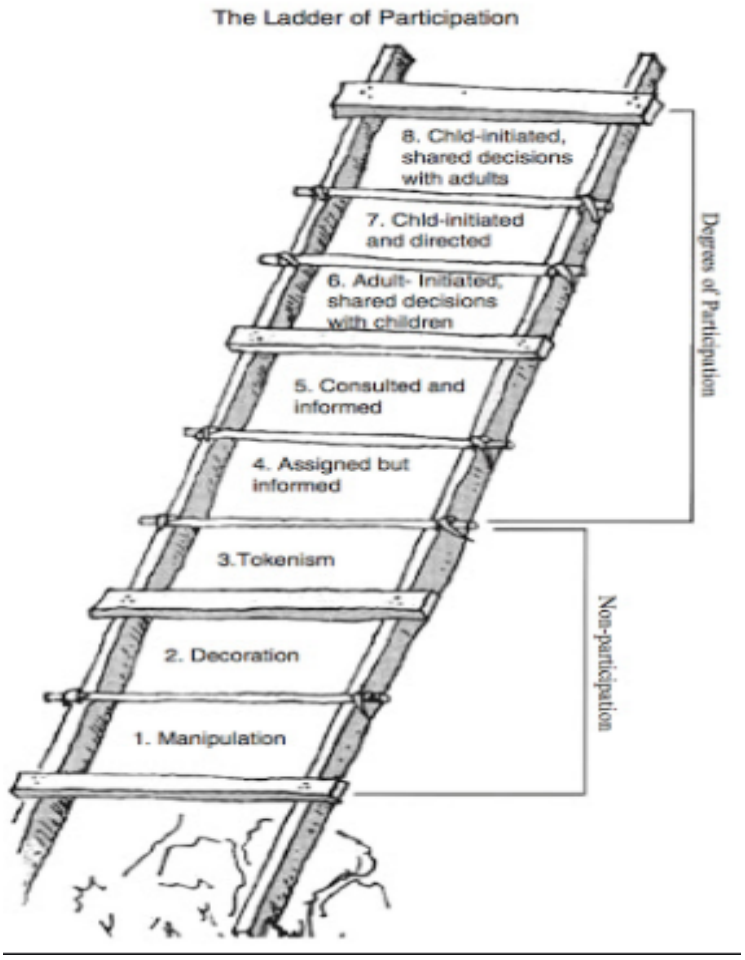
Mitra's Pyramid of Student Voice (2018)



Hart (1992) organized student voice and participation into an eight-step ladder with two categories (Figure 2). The bottom three rungs (manipulation, decoration, and tokenism) are categorized as non-participation. The top five rungs describe levels of participation. Again, the higher levels yield better learner outcomes and reduce in frequency at each level. Respectively, they are assigned but informed, consulted and informed, adult-initiated shared decisions with children, child-initiated and directed, and child-initiated shared decisions with adults.

Figure 2.

Hart's Ladder of Youth Participation (1992)

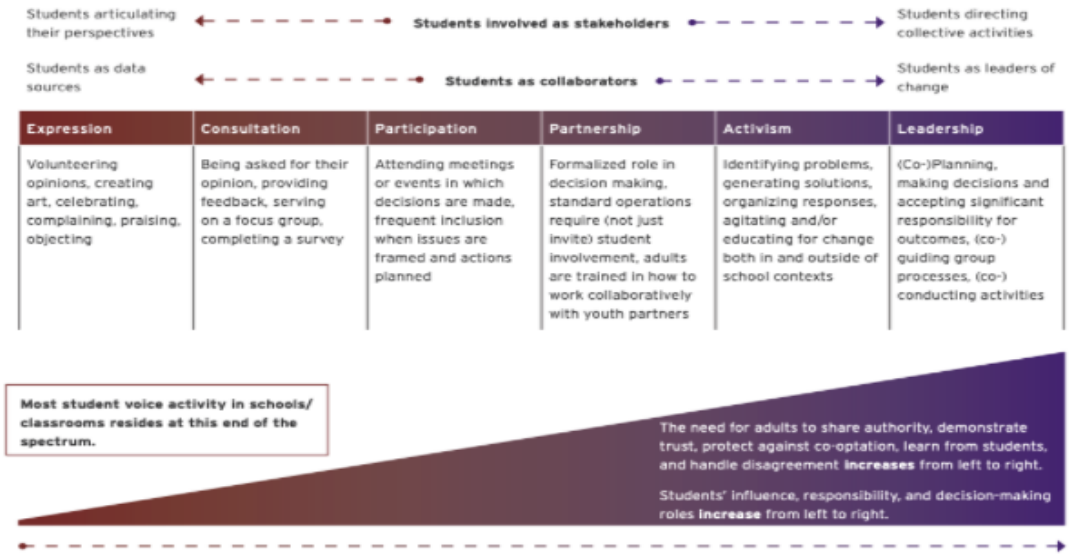


Toshalis & Nakkula (2012) depict ways students share voice through a spectrum with six phases (Figure 3). Similar to Hart's ladder, the spectrum begins with students in more of a feedback or consultative role as they articulate their perspectives. Students then move into shared decision-making with adults. The model culminates with youth activism and leadership as students direct collective action. Written differently, on the left side of the spectrum, students are data sources to inform changes led by others (typically adults within the system) and as they move to the right, they become the agents

or creators of change. This spectrum acknowledges the role that students can play in affecting school culture and provides a framework to examine the role of students within their school system. At the far right of Figure 3, youth are understood as leaders and problem solvers with the skills and insights to complete challenging work (Camino & Zeldin 2002; Osberg, Pope, & Galloway 2006). Such manifestations of student voice involve what Fielding (2007a) calls "radical collegiality."

Figure 3.

Toshalis & Nakkula's Spectrum of Student Voice (2012)



Taken together, these models communicate that all student voice efforts do not look the same and are not all created equal in terms of their level of authentic engagement for youth. The more common interactions are passive and can come with potential negative outcomes. As student voice transitions into more authentic leadership activities, it veers further from the norms of schooling and adult-youth partnerships. Generally, this requires an openness to power sharing (Hartley, 2010). Consequently, educational

leaders need to carefully construct and communicate a rationale for engaging in student voice efforts.

The "Why" of Student Voice

Supports for student voice efforts have taken theoretical, pragmatic, and empirical shapes (Kirshner & Pozzoboni, 2011). On a theoretical level, the rights of young people have been advanced. Pragmatically, educational reformers have argued that students' unique positionality in the school situates them to be positive contributors to improvement efforts. Empirically, researchers have demonstrated that student voice efforts can serve as a catalyst for change and improve student academic performance, sense of belonging, agency and efficacy, and citizenship learning and development. Given this trio of support bases, it is not surprising that student voice has gained traction. These three lines of reason are explored below, followed by an outline of the interdependent relationship between democratic education and student voice to extend the "why."

Improved learner outcomes (empirical support)

In our current era of educational accountability, it seems that quantitative data indicating improved learner outcomes needs to be included in topline justification in order for an initiative to move forward with the necessary support. Such data are available for student voice in both straightforward academic outcomes (e.g., improved grades and graduation rates) and other skills schools seek to equip their students with (e.g., agency and citizenship development). Indeed, these two themes of outcomes can be intertwined and circular. That is, when a student has more agency and is more efficacious, they are also more likely to be successful in their classes. Stated in the inverse, when students are not

engaged in school, they do not perform as well (Fullan, 2016; Lukes, 2015; Noguera, 2002). That is, specific studies on academic outcomes have been conducted with favorable findings. Conner and Slattery (2014) linked Grade Point Average with youth activism; Mitra (2004) and Shah (2011) both correlated student voice with strong literacy skills; and Toshalis and Nakkula's (2012) review of the literature drew a direct link between student voice and academic achievement.

The connection among student voice and improved agency, belonging, competence, deliberation, civic efficacy, self-determination, self-regulation, student engagement, motivation, competence beliefs, and stereotype threat has an even greater literature base. Mitra's research has been at the leading edge of this, and she notes that her findings are consistent with previous research in the field of positive youth development (Eccles et al., 1997; Lerner et al., 2005; Klein et al., 2006). This is particularly noteworthy because disengagement is a common phenomenon in schools.

In describing uninspiring school conditions, students have drawn connections among not feeling heard, known, and cared for (Cook-Sather, et al, 2015; Earls, 2003; Heath and McLaughlin, 1993). Cothran and Ennis (2000) found that the majority of students feel alienated and disengaged from high schools (Cothran and Ennis, 2000), which contributes to lower achievement (Delialioglu, 2012; Klem & Connell, 2004). To then know that students are consistently disregarded is a chilling reality (Beck, 2019). This reality becomes even more problematic when we consider that historically marginalized students feel even more alienated and less listened to. Coupled with potential home life barriers to overcome, adverse outcomes like lower achievement and drop-out are more likely (Gorski, 2013). Because, "Student voice has the potential to

open up spaces and capacities 'for racial and ethnic historically marginalized youth to play key roles in school change and hybrid learning spaces' (Gonazalez, Hernandez-Saca, & Artiles, 2017); support more socially just school environments (Mansfield 2014; Salisbury, et al. 2019; Taines, 2014), ensure that disenfranchised youth are included in decision making processes (Ginwright & Cammarota, 2006; Cammarota & Romero, 2011; Salisbury et al., 2019), it is a worthy topic for further investigation (Cook-Sather, 2020).

Additionally, student voice efforts have helped to identify why young people struggle in school identifying structural and classroom procedures that hamper learning, the lack of opportunities to build caring relationships with adults, and blatant discrimination as real problems (Colatos & Morrell, 2003; Smyth, 2007). Student voice efforts can lead to improved focus on curricular content, teacher training, and changes in discipline policies (Cook-Sather, 2002; Fielding, 2001; Mitra, 2004). Listening to students can help teachers question stereotypes and reconceptualize their role from being the authority of educational practice (Cook-Sather, 2002), toward a co-constructor of knowledge. Safir and Dugan (2021) call on Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970) to advance a shift from a "pedagogy of compliance" to a "pedagogy of voice" characterized by the democratization of power, collectivism, active learning, and choice (p. 109). Educators stand much to learn from our students but need to caution against an overreliance. To illustrate, we will, "*never know* about experiences, oppressions, and understandings" of all the voices of our students, particularly those who have been marginalized in ways we have not (Ellsworth, 1989, p. 310). Educators also still need to

internalize the professional obligation of learning best practices, including cultural competence, and not shift that responsibility to our students to teach us.

Student voice as human right (theoretical support)

In addition to empirical research, the student voice advocate camp includes calls on more general logic and reasoning on human rights. An overarching line of reasoning is that young people have rights and that adults should not act in ways that impact children without their active collaboration. In fact, the subtitle for the *International Journal of Student Voice* is "Nothing about us without us!" In 1989, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) made a seminal statement that provided a legal and ethical foundation for student voice (Cook-Sather, 2002). Article 12 states that children have the right to share their opinions on matters that affect them, and their opinions should be considered in deciding such matters (Anderson, Graham, & Patrick 2019). This notion is more commonly realized in places outside the United States (see MacBeath (2008) in England and Prieto (2001) in Chile). Akiva, Cortina, and Smith (2014) contend that youth have a right to participate in decision making from a democratic perspective, in effort to counteract what Bell (1995) refers to as adultism, which fosters feelings of powerlessness and minimized efficacy among youth (Hall, 2019). In 2018, Mitra wrote that the United States might become the only developed nation to have not ratified the CRC.

Students as effective agents of change (pragmatic support)

Pragmatically, students have demonstrated effective change initiation. Including their unique perspective stemming from their positionality as the "end-users" in education systems, young people have qualities that can contribute to school reform. Mitra (2018)

lifts-up three distinct characteristics. The first, young people are often more willing to raise issues that adults might avoid due to organizational norms or concerns. Secondly, when students are involved in the change process, they more fully understand it and are then better able to assess the effectiveness and speak to it (Kushman, 1997; Rudduck, Day, and Wallace, 1997). It is also meaningful and worthwhile learning for students to understand change processes (Mitra, 2004). Lastly, students are effective mobilizers of faculty, staff, and parents (Zhao & Watterston, 2021). Young people can serve as connecting points among stakeholders as they are often the group that has cross-cutting relationships.

Distributed leadership to radical collegiality (empirical, theoretical, and pragmatic support)

A progressive implementation of distributed leadership can also lead to engaging student voices in decision-making.

> A distributed leadership perspective moves beyond the Superman and Wonder Woman view of school leadership. It is about more than accounting for all the leaders in a school and counting up their various actions...moving beyond the principal or head teacher is just the tip of the iceberg… (Spillane, 2012, p.2).

Distributed leadership has increased in application in the twenty-first century (Mitra, 2007). It has demonstrated promise in achieving outcomes by increasing the fidelity of implementations due to wider-spread support and understanding of change efforts than more traditional, top-down approaches (Visone, 2020; Copeland, 2003). Collective efficacy (Hattie, 2016) is a related term that has also gained in study and application in

recent years. Student voice aggressively broadens the notion of distributed leadership into a different paradigm. It goes beyond signaling to staff members that they have unique and important ideas by making the same signal to a group both younger and further removed from traditional power structures (Mitra, 2007). This is what Fielding (2007a) calls "radical collegiality."

Student Voice and Democratic Education

In the 2017 *Handbook of Social Studies Research* edited by Manfra and Bolick, Castro and Knowles structured their chapter titled, "Democratic Citizenship Education: Research Across Multiple Landscapes and Contexts" around the question of, "How ought educators to prepare future citizens for an ever-changing, culturally complex, globally connected democratic society?" (p. 287). The present study is not isolated to social studies classrooms, but the connections to democratic education are deep and instructive in both directions. Additionally, I taught social studies courses in secondary schools for the first seven years of my educational career, and those experiences inform the thinking and overall disposition I brought to this research project. Since the present study explored student voice from a more global, schoolwide perspective, it is first appropriate to consider research on schools as democratic spaces. From there, connections among the purpose of student voice and the purpose of social studies are outlined. The section concludes with pedagogical contributions the social studies could make to school leadership and other academic disciplines.

Trafford (2008) asserts three key features of a democratic school—(1) an ethos of expressing and exploring ideas, (2) structures for students to voice their opinions, and (3) encouragement of student leadership. All three of these features are readily apparent in

the student voice literature considered above as well as in the present study. The interdependent nature of classroom and schoolwide culture exemplifies the relevance of the work of democratic educators to school leaders advocating for student voice.

Figure 4.

All three features can be enacted at the classroom- and school-levels. When these features are present, they help cultivate the social trust needed for democratic behavior within the school (Cohen, McCabe, Michelli, & Pickeral, 2009; Flanagan et al., 2010) and have been demonstrated to contribute to democratic behaviors in years following school (Duke et al., 2008). In sum, student voice fosters positive youth development around agency and civic engagement (Brasof & Spector, 2016; Mitra & Serriere, 2012 in Cook-Sather, 2020).

However, despite such research, schools tend not to be democratic spaces. Instead, the norm is for students to view schools as highly regulated, non-friendly, and hierarchical places (Schmidt, 2013) that are, "suffused with rules and regulations" (Biesta et al., 2009, p. 21). Research on practices within social studies classrooms shows a similar "adult- or teacher-centered" culture (e.g., Barton & Levstik, 2003; Cuban 1991; Russell, 2010). Given social studies' track record of disengagement (e.g., Voekler & Armstrong, 2013; Apple, 2008; Obenchain, Orr, & Davis, 2011), consideration of how student voice might be enhanced is fitting. An evaluation of who has a voice within democratic education increases the urgency as a middle-class bias has been identified (Castro & Knowles, 2017). Civic education classroom spaces have been

found to be organized around white, middle-class, and male norms (Reay, 2008), indeed an echo of the power structures of society (Apple, 2008). Biesta et al (2009) assert that this is why civic educators need to start from the lived experience of the students in the classroom.

The purpose of social studies extends the importance of the relationship between social studies and student voice research. Social studies courses have the potential to uniquely connect to student-centered learning and teaching because "culture, society, and the communication of ideas" are the foundations of the discipline (Alexander-Shea, 2011, p. 95). Social studies teachers could "help students critically engage – read and write – the world" perhaps more than teachers in any other field (Segall, 2002, p. 10). The National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS) is in-line with these points as they define the purpose of social studies as: to improve students' lives through the promotion of the "knowledge, intellectual processes, and democratic dispositions required of students to be active and engaged participants in public life" (NCSS, 2011). In 2014 the NCSS published a framework for State Social Studies Standards to prepare students for College, Career, and Civic life known as the "C3 Framework." C3 is organized into four dimensions—(1) Developing questions and planning inquiries, applying disciplinary tools and concepts, (2) evaluating sources and using evidence, (3) communicating conclusions, and (4) taking informed action. The thread of student voice could readily be pulled through all four dimensions of the Framework and is particularly present in the bookends of developing questions and taking informed action (Baumann, Millard, & Hamdorf, 2014).

With social studies educators' charge as such and the student as the public participant in-the-making, it stands to reason that the student be at the center of learning-design processes. Thus, placing social studies in an opportune position in terms of engaging adolescents, particularly given its "required status" in United States schools (Parker, 2008). Barton and Levstik (2004) wrote of the inclusive potential of student voice in history classrooms, "By allowing students to pursue their own investigations…those whose experiences have not traditionally been represented in the official curriculum" will now have a chance to identify with the curriculum and create more meaningful connections (p. 190). I (Virgin, 2014 & 2015) applied this logic to history classrooms, specifically, and Brasof and Spector (2016) applied this to the overall function of the school, all with promising outcomes. However, "open" classroom climates hosting a significant exchange of ideas remain the exception and not the norm in the social studies (Ho et al., 2017; Barton & Avery, 2016; McAvoy & Hess, 2013; Levstik, 2008; Bain, 2005).

Though open classrooms are not the norm in social studies, educators in other academic disciplines and school leaders who are looking to increase voice can benefit from pedagogies that have shown promise in social studies classrooms. Similar to Trafford's (2008) description of the features of democratic schools, Hess & Avery (2008) describe the "democratic ethos" of open classrooms where thought exchange is comfortable for students. Beyond the ethos, specific instructional practices for sharing ideas are used in open classrooms. Parker (2010) wrote that "listening to strangers" is "crucial to citizenship formulation" (p. 2815). Schools serve as ripe grounds for this because their classmates can be exposed to perspectives that are more diverse and less

familiar than those of family and friends, there are real social and academic problems for them to take up, and the context of schools is intentionally educational. The importance and complexity of this type of thought exchange is well grounded and substantiated (e.g., Geller, 2020; Ho et al., 2017; Hess & McAvoy, 2014; Westheimer & Kahne, 2003). Students can listen to peers' ideas and share their own through discussions, deliberations, Socratic seminars, simulations, and inquiry-oriented learning design (e.g., Flynn, 2009; Hahn, 1998; Levy 2013; Parker & Hess, 2001; Parker, 2006). Technology has also been found to be able to help cultivate democratic orientations (Blevins, LeCompte, & Wells, 2014). Because these pedagogies break from the historical norm and that the trend in education is toward common curriculum, instruction and assessment (i.e., via practices like Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) (DuFour & DuFour, 2016) and the Common Core), teachers may need to "convince colleagues" before shifting practices (Bordwell & Virgin, 2018). All these pedagogies could be adopted across the school, again lifting up the interdependent nature of democratic classrooms and democratic schools (Figure 4).

The "How" of Schoolwide Student Voice

With a working definition of student voice established, including how it is a departure from traditional approaches to schooling, a three-pronged rationale for its use, and its unique importance to democratic education, the literature review shifts its consideration to what is known about *how* student voice efforts are effectively implemented. Common shortcomings of student voice efforts are also presented.

Like most significant shifts in practice, successful student voice efforts require both students and adults to shift their mindsets. Specifically, students need to see

themselves as able to influence the educational process. In Kehoe's 2015 investigation of students' conceptualization of their role as change agents and what is needed for that to happen, he found that (1) students need to be provided legitimate avenues of power, (2) when empowered, students initial reactions are of discomfort, and (3) the overall school culture influences how students conceptualize their agency. Adults need to authentically want students to have power and embrace that this will change their own ways of operating (Biddle, 2017; Camino 2000; Denner et al., 2005). Adults also need to acknowledge that deep-seated power dynamics cannot be altogether eliminated and should be explicitly acknowledged (Cook-Sather, 2002). To this end, adults can lean into an "acceptable imbalance" of power in effort to use it to create conditions for liberation (Ellsworth, 1989, p. 307). Both of those mindset shifts require trust-based relationships. Intentionality around trust-building is needed in all behaviors, particularly at the outset (Ellsworth, 1989; Cervone, 2002) where it is important that establishing trust takes priority over completing tasks. Stated differently, successful student voice leaders tend to value process over product (Mitra, 2021). The ultimate success of the youth-adult partnership depends on the successful cultivation of trust (Biddle, 2017; Richards-Schuster & Timmermans, 2017; Camino, 2000; Friedman & Duffett, 2000; Zeldin et al., 2005).

The need for careful planning of specific implementations is elevated due to student voice's counter-normative nature. That is because when specific plans for roles, timelines, assignments, and so forth are not in place, adults and students alike revert to their traditional behaviors. Plans can begin with the co-creation of a shared vision (Mitra, 2005). From there, roles should be established in more formal ways than in typical group

formulation. These should include expectations for decision making, communication, and accountability (Fielding 2007a; Flutter & Rudduck 2004; Osberg, Pope, & Galloway 2006; Rubin & Silva 2003; Smyth 2006). Role generation presents an opportune time for stakeholders to recognize the unique assets and talents among the group as they work toward meaningful contributions from each (Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2015; Mitra, 2007; Perkins & Borden, 2003). Mitra's (2009) recognition of the common misconception that adults need to just "get out of the way" is important to consider when establishing vision and roles. Mitra, Serriere, and Stoicovy (2012, p. 104) write, "Often adults either perpetuate hierarchical relationships or assume the other extreme and 'get out of the way,' allowing the students to take charge." The skills of the adult advisors have been consistently shown to be an essential component in successful student voice initiatives (Richards-Schuster & Timmermans, 2017; Ginwright, 2005; McQuillan, 2005). In essence, adults should adopt a coaching-like mindset as they are still essential in successful student voice efforts.

As written above, student voice can be viewed as an *extension* of distributed leadership among adults in the school into students. This is no small feat. However, for student voice to be an extension of distributed leadership, such structures and processes must already exist (Senge, 2006). Bauch & Goldring (1998) and Muncey & McQuillan (1991) wrote that teachers need to be empowered themselves before they can empower others. This starts with general collaborative cultures among adults that have proliferated throughout the twenty-first century through movements such as the Professional Learning Community (PLC) (DuFour & DuFour, 2016). Distributive leadership moves beyond collaboration by providing frontline employees opportunities to lead in their current roles

and develop into advanced roles. The line of reason here is that when adults feel they can work together, have their views heard, and share in decision making, they will be more willing and able to support students with similar behaviors. Again, similar to other improvement efforts in education, careful training and preparation are needed as people take on new responsibilities (Fullan, 2001).

Common shortcomings of student voice efforts

It is also necessary to consider themes in what has led to unsuccessful student voice efforts and implications thereof. This again is necessary due to schools' long history of exclusively empowering adults to make decisions (Taines, 2014). That tradition leads right into a challenge of student voice—administrators take an "undeniable risk" when they advocate for an increase in student voice (Mitra, 2007, p. 251). The drawbacks to school culture can be adults feeling left behind and undervalued (York & Kirshner, 2015; Zeldin 2004). This is particularly salient when youth and adults are partnering in work where the "solution" is not yet clear. Adults operating from a traditional power structure mindset struggle with this "messiness" (Mitra, 2007, p. 239). This again raises the importance of the strong collaborative culture among adults outlined in the preceding section.

Another common shortcoming of student voice is that the voices of the entire student body are not reflected. This can be the case for several reasons. The first, quite literally, voices included in projects are not representative of the whole (Mays 2016; Bragg, 2007; Kozol 1991). Mitra (2018, p. 15) wrote, "Many scholars have called for greater diversity of ethnicity (Cook-Sather, 2014), gender (Groundwater-Smith, 2011), and ability (Flynn, 2014; Pazey & DeMatthews, 2019). Research on indigenous

populations calls into question values of voice and empowerment when juxtaposed with cultural values and beliefs (Hynds, Faircloth, Green & Marc, 2014)." Ellsworth (1989) extended her analysis beyond the literal consideration of who is included to what happens when historically marginalized students are included. In working with university students, she found that just because a platform for voice is provided, does not mean students then shed their negative memories of previous experiences to engage in actions of "empowerment." Student voice efforts tend to invite students to share thoughts, without addressing the root causes of power imbalances in schools. Or, as Ellsworth described, efforts "treat the symptom and not the disease" (p. 306).

A third overarching theme in the shortcomings of student voice is students not seeing their voice lead to change. A specific area of concern is that student voices are not heard when they provide perspectives that differ from what adults may want to hear (Bragg, 2007). More generally, students often do not see the follow-up actions from adults they were hoping for. This can be the result of foundational misunderstandings (e.g., students having a misguided understanding of what is possible), communication lapses (Ruddock, 2007) (e.g., school leaders not having the capacity to make changes visible to students or failing to do so), or what some have considered ethical shortcomings (Bragg, 2007) (e.g., school leaders tokenizing student voice and not making good on the originating commitments). Regardless of the cause, the outcome can be increased alienation and disconnection from schooling and a perpetuation of relations of domination (Ellsworth, 1989); indeed, the opposite outcomes of the original intentions of student voice (Mitra, 2018).

A final area where student voice has commonly fallen short is a lack of systemic support, leaving the work up to individual actors. Like most movements that are not systemic, advantages and disadvantages are afforded. On the positive side, when working with a "guiding coalition of the willing" (Kotter, 1995), there tends to be high levels of engagement, innovation, and authenticity—all desirable consequences, particularly given the courage required to disrupt traditional practices. The drawbacks here are inequitable implementation within and across schools (i.e., students in classrooms or schools that do not formalize student voice do not benefit from the experience), and sustainability over time across educational leaders. Each of the four shortcomings described in this subsection are considered in relation to the present study's findings in the discussion in Chapter Five.

Historiography of student voice research

In 2017, Gonzalez, Hernandez-Saca, and Artiles, studied the conceptual characteristics of student voice studies in K-12 settings (Table 1). Their study provides a summary for researchers to conceptualize future work. Student voice research was broadly defined as any inquiry aiming to "document the ideas, perceptions, opinions, or perspectives of students within situated schooling contexts and for specific purposes" (p. 9). Their analysis was focused between 1990 and 2010, noting an upward trend beginning in 1996. In terms of research design, most studies combined theories and most were qualitative case studies. Another common design had participatory tenets (e.g. Ayala and Galletta 2009; Kroeger et al. 2004; Yonezawa and Jones 2009). Studies with intentions similar to the ultimate intent of the present study of school improvement tried to achieve this through changing policies or practices. Whereas studies aimed at empowerment

(though improvement and empowerment can certainly be viewed as circular or intertwined concepts as they are in the present study), attempted to make schools more democratic, disrupt traditional power structures, and lift-up students' individual lived experiences. The vast majority of studies were done in urban high school settings. Students involved were primarily non-white, with the experiences of white and non-white students rarely compared.

Table 1

Conceptual Characteristics of US Student Voice Studies at K-12 levels

	Percentage (number) of studies
FOCUS OF STUDENT VOICE RESEARCH	
School change or improvement	*59.2* (29)
Personal or group empowerment	*63.3* (31)
Teaching and learning (the school) curriculum	*20.4* (10)
THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK	
Explicit theoretical framework	63.3 (31)
Feminist	6.5 (2)
Critical theory	22.6 (7)
Sociocultural	19.4 (6)
Combination of theoretical frameworks	9.7 (3)
Use of theoretical constructs	42.0 (13)
Theoretical signals (terms, phrases)	28.6 (14)
Theoretical framework not specified	8.2 (4)

Note: Italicized percentages will not add up to 100 due to studies that fell into one or more coding category or instances where studies that did not include what was being coded.

Looking to future research that could be additive to the field, Mitra (2018) wrote that "the field of student voice has established itself as a legitimate focus of study, and therefore 'existence proof' studies are not as needed." Skiba et al. (2016) call for studies that move beyond "identities as group traits" that acknowledge the intersectionality and uniqueness of student identities. Of particular interest may be students with disabilities, immigrant populations, and LGTBQ+ identities (Gonalzez, Hernandez-Saca, & Artiles, 2017). Future research might also broaden the scope to leadership practices, which

would then broaden our collective understanding of how student voice can thrive in schools, and subsequently help schools themselves thrive (Mitra, Serriere, & Stoicovy, 2012). It would also be useful for administrators to have opportunities to learn from colleagues on promising practices in this important space (Mitra, 2007). A deeper understanding of school leadership and other larger structures influencing student voice might contribute to the unifying, overarching framework Hall (2019) calls for. He contends that a universal framework including precise language is needed to enable researchers, policymakers, and practitioners to work together to combat the deeply institutionalized systems of "adultism." The present research study attempts to contribute to the literature by better understanding how students perceive their voice. The framework within which the study was conceptualized is now described.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Action research and human-centered design are combined in the present study to create a pragmatic qualitative inquiry. In this study, I explored an open-ended question of deep interest to our school in effort to improve our real-world setting. Scholars have referred to similar inquiries as "generic qualitative inquiry" (e.g., Caelli, Ray & Mill, 2003; Merriam, 1997). Patton (2015) provided "Ten General Pragmatic Principles of Inquiry" that informed the research design (p.157). Principles in play in the present study include a focus on useful answers to practical questions, the use of a variety of methods to garner a variety of perspectives (Creswell, 2019), an adaptation of designs to real-world contexts (Bamberger & Marby, 2019), the combination frameworks as appropriate (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018), the pursuit of actionable findings (Davidson, 2012), and explicit consideration of how values and positionality influence the study. Three principles that

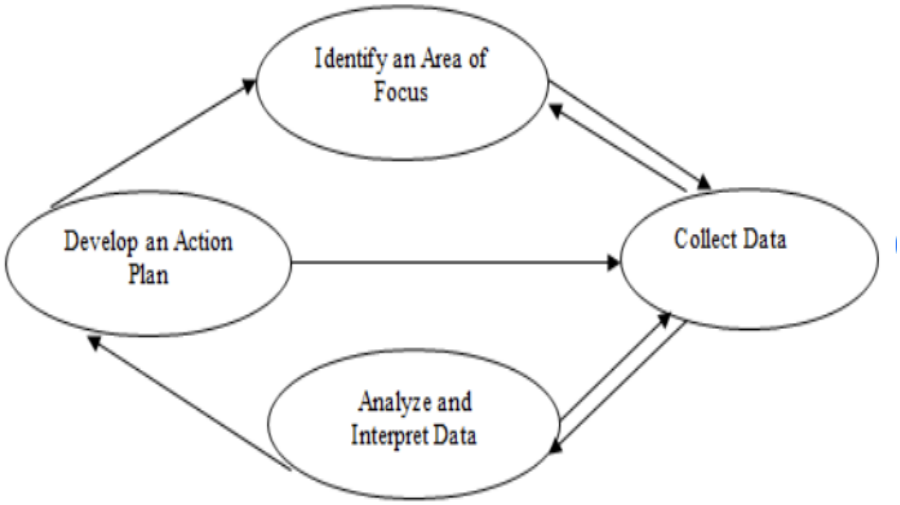
guided the present evaluation are—(1) less than perfect data that are on time are more useful than perfect data provided after the fact, (2) rigor should be understood through the lens of utility and actionability in the context under consideration, and (3) "timeliness trumps comprehensiveness" (Patton, 2015, p. 156). Action research and human-centered design are further described and put in concert below.

Action Research

Mills (2011) identifies action research as, "Any systematic inquiry conducted by teacher researchers, principals, school counselors, or other stakeholders in the teaching/learning environment to gather information about how their particular schools operate, how they teach, and how well students learn" (p. 5).

Figure 5.

Action Research Cycle (Mills, 2011)



Action research strives for improvement in three ways—(1) direct improvement of practice(s), (2) improved understanding of practices by practitioners, and (3) improvement of the situation in which the practices take place (Carr & Kemmis, 1986). Action researchers employ an iterative process that begins with planning, followed by small cycle actions, studying of those actions, and implementing new actions based on what is learned. "Change is a primary aim of action research...linked to Dewey's pragmatic approach to developing knowledge through action" (Manfra, 2017, p.134). This process has shown to improve student achievement (Hendricks, 2017) and staff development (Zeichner & Noffke, 2001). The present study does not use a "pure" action research design as it does not directly investigate how specific practices can be improved (numbers 1 and 3 from Carr & Kemmis). Instead, the study sought to first understand how students conceptualize their voice (number 2 from Carr & Kemmis). Further action research designs are consequences of the present study.

Human-centered Design

Human-centered design/design thinking frameworks share many of the same grounding tenets as action research (Mintrop, 2016). Popularized in educational settings in the twenty-first century, design thinking frameworks follow a five-step process in which educators empathize, define, ideate, prototype, and test.

Figure 6.

Human-Centered Design Process (Hasso Plattner Institute of Design at Stanford University, 2021)

Both action research and design thinking are pragmatic and iterative. My approach to school leadership is grounded in design thinking and our school is organized in this way (see *Design Thinking for School Leaders* by Gallagher & Thordarson (2018) for more on this leadership approach). For example, our school's strategic efforts are mobilized via our School Improvement Plan, which was made up of five strategy areas in the 2020-2021 school year (student belonging, instructional excellence, student support systems, equitable grading, and higher-level course access). Each area has a strategy

team made up of faculty, staff, and students who engage in design thinking cycle throughout the school year as the method to accomplish our goals.

The present study rests most squarely in the empathy stage of the design thinking process as I attempted to better understand how students perceive their voice at VVHS. The present study is not this tidy, however, for three important reasons. The first is that the design thinking process has been completed several times in the setting previously, so data collected are influenced by previous designs. To elaborate, in student interviews, participants referred to experiences they have had at VVHS, which were the outputs of design-based leadership. The second reason is the bias I brought to the study for student voice as a worthy practice for schools. This means the notion of student voice itself was not under investigation as it was assumed that student voice efforts will continue regardless of what is learned in the present study. The third reason the study does not fit neatly into the empathy phase developed through the iterative process of the study. As research methods built upon themselves, lines of inquiry developed at varying rates, with some stretching into deeper phases of empathy toward definition and some all the way to ideation. For example, since the finding of students wanting to be heard was sufficiently defined early in the study, ideation on how that could be realized was done in later phases of the study. Therefore, this project was not strictly bound to the empathy phase. Nonetheless, the overall spirit and intent of the present study are consistent with the first phase of human-centered design.

With the present study resting most squarely in the empathy stage of the human-centered design process, it is worthwhile to enumerate why action research is still essential to the present study. First, with deeper historical roots in education settings,

action research provides more specific research methods to draw from to investigate and assess the research question. Within these methods is a focus bound to the "particular school" in which the data are collected (Mills, 2011), which contributes to the pragmatic imagination of the study. Action research is also additive to the topic of the present study due to its power-shifting nature (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999) and democratic forms of inquiry consistent with the civic aims of social studies (Parker, 2003; 2008). With the conceptual framework as such, it is now essential to further describe specific implications of my positionality within the study.

Researcher positionality & implications

As principal of the school setting, I did not enter the research project as a neutral party. My positionality influenced every aspect of the project. My tenure as principal began in July of 2018 and continues at the time of this project. I conceptualize my responsibility as school principal to improve the educational experience for each of our students. That conceptualization of responsibility not only followed me into this study but in fact drove it. To be explicit, the research focus was developed with the ultimate goal of improving the high school experience for our students. The same should be said for all the methods and actions that pursued the focus. Additionally, the setting influenced my worldview through our ongoing interactions. Thus, the "knower and known are (were) inseparable" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 37).

An assumption I carried into the present study is that student voice can serve as the catalyst for transforming interactions students have with adults and schooling itself, ultimately toward a more positive overall school experience for students. The evidence

base for this hypothesis is deep (e.g., Mitra, 2004; Fielding, 2001b; Anderson, Graham, & Patrick 2019; Stefanou, Stolk, Prince, Chen, & Lord, 2013; Sungur & Tekkaya, 2006; Holdsworth, 2000; Mager & Nowak, 2012). Toshalis and Nakkula (2012) described the relationship among the inputs and outputs under consideration in student voice research well, "Although we primarily approach motivation, engagement, and student voice sequentially, we see the three constructs as fundamentally interrelated. Each is built around or represents various experiences of human emotion, rationality or cognition, behavior or action, and socialization processes" (p. 2).

"Action research requires a high level of ethical behavior" (Henning, Stone, & Kelly, 2009, p. 10). Action researchers need to demonstrate ethical behavior in how research questions are developed, pursued, analyzed, and reported on. These dimensions can be complicated when roles are intertwined. The power dynamics in play in the present study compound the complexity of my relationship with the setting and participants. To enumerate, my positionality as school principal influenced my access to data, participant willingness and unwillingness to participate, the lines of inquiry pursued, the nature of information shared, and my interpretation of the data. My identity as a white, cishet, male followed me into the study as well. The power-shifting and democratic aims of student voice increase the importance of a reflexive awareness of my positionality and identities. Though I conducted the study with such a reflexive awareness throughout all phases, the full influence of my positionality can never be known (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

The generalizability of the study to other contexts, particularly those without the principal as action researcher and schools led by principals with dispositions different

from mine, is limited. Generalizability is also hindered by the very purpose of the study, which is understanding and then improving the immediate setting. The study was conducted within the same setting it was intended to improve, or what Lincoln & Guba refer to as the "Natural Setting" (1985, p.39). Indeed, the purpose drove the design, which drove data collection, which drove analysis (Patton, 2015, p. 710). As such, this study should not be generalized. However, findings might still be instructive to other educational leaders and scholars.

The possible affordances of my positionality should also be considered. The uniqueness of the study might enhance relevance for some or be viewed as an "asset" (Manfra, 2017, pp. 157-158). Principals, in particular, have called for more practitioner-led investigations (Chenoweth, 2017; Mitra, 2007). It is possible that students more readily participated and shared their thoughts due to their familiarity with me given the important role of trust in student voice efforts (e.g., Biddle, 2017; Richards-Schuster & Timmermans, 2017). My position of authority (both real and perceived) within the school might have also increased engagement due to students believing that real actions might result from their participation. Finally, my intimate familiarity with the setting allowed data collection and analysis methods to be more precise. For example, when students referenced school programs like, "Connect 9," "CORE," and "Eagle Voice," I knew what they were referring to and could guide the conversation suitably.

Limitations and transferability are discussed again in Chapter Five. Research methods are further described in the following chapter.

CHAPTER THREE: THE RESEARCH PROJECT

In the present pragmatic qualitative inquiry, I sought to understand how students perceive their voice in the high school where I serve as principal (Valley View High School or VVHS). The setting is further described in the first section of this chapter through demographic trends in student enrollment, a summary of its faculty and staff, a description of the greater community, academic performance indicators, and the influence of the COVID-19 pandemic on learning models. A detailed description of each of the eight research methodologies is provided in the second section. For each methodology, participant selection and identity as well as procedures for data collection and analysis are provided. The iterative and pragmatic nature of the research design is evident, which culminated in four April focus groups. Though I did not enter the study as a neutral party, efforts to enhance validity and offset confirmation bias were enacted. Such efforts included the consideration of diverse data in terms of participants and methods for collection, careful abductive analysis, member checks, and triangulation across data sets.

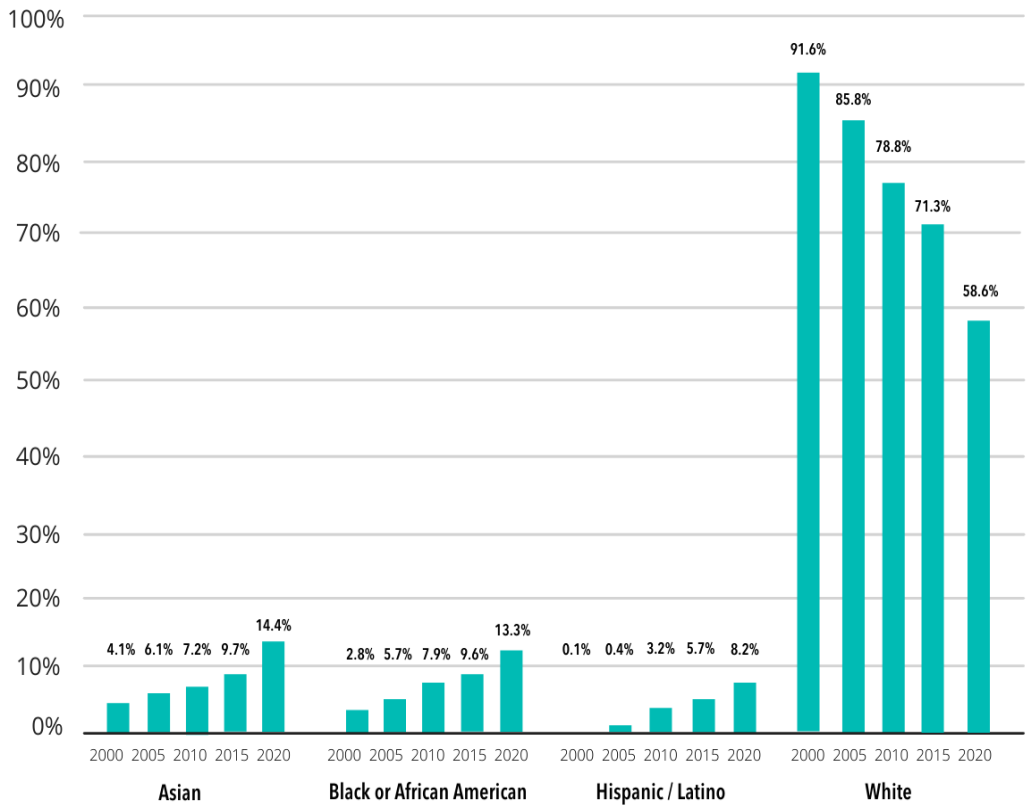
Setting: Valley View High School

Valley View High School is in Valley View, Minnesota, a southwest suburb of Minneapolis. It serves students in grades 9-12 and is the only high school in the Valley View Public School District. The District had six grades Kindergarten-6th grade elementary schools and one grades 7-8 middle school in the 2020-2021 school year. The Minnesota Department of Education (MDE) reported that VVHS had 2,836 students that year. The racial demographics of the student body were as follows: 56% white, 15% Black or African American, 14% Asian, 9% Hispanic/Latino, 5% two or more races, and less than 1% American Indian, Alaskan Native, Native Hawaiian, or Pacific

Islander. These are the race designations used in Valley View's official Student Information System and are therefore the terms used throughout the paper. As depicted in Figure 7, VVHS has become more racially diverse in the twenty-first century. In 2000, 92 percent of students were white, compared to 79 percent in 2010 and 59 percent in 2020. Asian, Black or African American, and Hispanic/Latino students all increased by at least 250 percent between 2000 and 2020, with Hispanic/Latino students growing at the fastest rate by percentage. Asian students are the largest non-white student racial group narrowly outnumbering their Black or African American peers. The English Learner program served 6 percent of students, 9 percent were served in special education, and 20 percent of students participated in the Free & Reduced Priced Meals Program.

Figure 7.

VVHS Student Population by Race (2000 – 2020)



The entire faculty and staff of VVHS included 317 people: 163 teachers (62 percent of all employees), 14 other licensed professionals (e.g., school counselors, deans of students, instructional coaches) (5 percent), 44 paraprofessionals (14 percent), 4 administrators (1 percent), and 92 other non-licensed staff (29 percent). The ratio of licensed educators to students was 18:1. Educators with more than three years of experience are considered "experienced educators" by MDE. MDE compares low-poverty schools (as it classifies VVHS) with high-poverty schools in terms of students' access to experienced educators. Statewide, 89 percent of educators in low-poverty

schools are experienced while 88 percent of the educators at VVHS were experienced; high poverty schools were staffed by 79 percent experienced educators. At VVHS, 99 percent of teachers were licensed, above the low-poverty state average of 97 percent and high-poverty average of 93 percent. The disparity in advanced degrees is greater with 76 percent of VVHS teachers holding an advanced degree, while 66 percent of teachers in low-poverty schools across the state do and 47 percent in high-poverty schools.

The southwest metropolitan area of Minneapolis has a strong educational reputation. School districts in the area are often rated highly and receive local and national recognition. Valley View participates in the Classic Conference for athletics, arts, and activities. The Conference includes six neighboring schools that are also large, one high school districts. The competitive environment among Classic Conference communities influences school culture and operations. This is most readily visible through student enrollment trends.

In Minnesota, families have the option to open-enroll to a different school district. This option has been provided since 1988 with the intent of honoring family choice. Because state funding dollars follow students to the school they enroll in, many districts work diligently to retain resident students and to attract students who live outside of their boundaries. This is particularly prevalent in the southwest metropolitan area of the state. At Valley View High School, 313 students or 11 percent of the total student population were open-enrolled in 2020-2021. The racial demographics of open-enrolled students were as follows: 38 percent white, 28 percent Black or African American, 15 percent Hispanic/Latino, 8 percent Asian, 10 percent two or more races. When compared to whole school demographics, these breakdowns show an over-representation of

students who are Black or African American, Hispanic/Latino, and two or more races, and an under-representation of white and Asian students.

Resident families of Valley View also open enroll in other systems. There is a narrative in the southwest metro around open enrollment as "white flight." As Valley View has become more racially diverse than its neighbors in the twenty-first century, more families of color have been interested in the District, while white families have looked for whiter spaces. Data here are more difficult to track, but the District projects approximately 550 high school-aged residents of Valley View opt for other schools. Thus, VVHS has a net loss of approximately 240 students annually in terms of open enrollment. The two most common destinations are Pelican High School and Oak Grove Academy. Pelican High School is similar in size and a whiter space (80 percent of its students in the 2020-2021 school year were white), while Oak Grove Academy has roughly similar racial demographics to VVHS and is significantly smaller at approximately 600 total students.

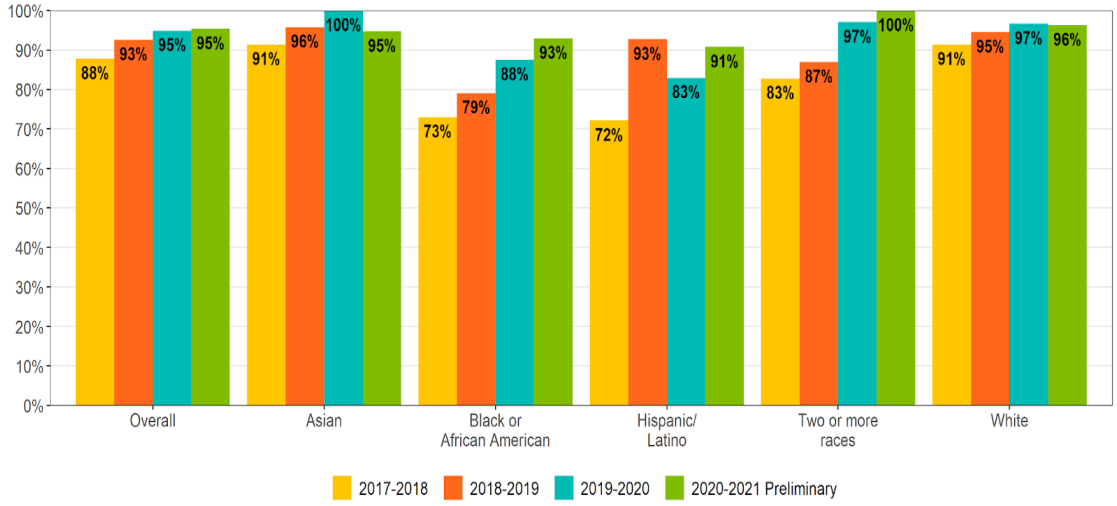
Like many high schools across the country, the four-year graduation rate (the percentage of students who graduate within four years of beginning 9th grade) is valued in Valley View's context. In the summer of 2018, MDE identified 485 schools across the state for needing support as required under the federal Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) of 2015. Support was categorized as general, targeted, or comprehensive. Data from 2014 to 2017 were used to determine identification. Identified schools were partnered with Regional Centers for Excellence (RCE) to enact improvement (RCEs are teams of educators funded by the State). Elementary, middle, and high schools each had different criteria for identification; high schools with four-year graduation rates below

two-thirds for any student group were identified to receive comprehensive support. Valley View High School was identified for Comprehensive Support and was the only school in the Valley View District identified for support in any category. VVHS was identified based on the graduation rate of four student groups: Hispanic/Latino, English Language Learners, Special Education, and Free and Reduced Priced Meals. Between 2014 to 2017, the overall graduation rate at VVHS ranged from 87 percent to 90 percent.

Stakeholders across Valley View Schools were surprised and disappointed by this identification. This ran contrary to the regard many held for VVHS. As the only suburban high school in Minnesota with multiple identifications and the only high school in the Classic Conference with any identifications, emotions were high and the path forward (and backward) was unclear. Graduation rates increased to 93 percent for the Class of 2019 and 95 percent for the Class of 2020. The projected graduation rate for the Class of 2021 is 95 percent (see Figure 8). The rates for all ten federal student groups, including the four identified by MDE, rose in 2019 - 2021 to above the two-thirds threshold used for initial identification.

Figure 8.

VVHS Four-Year Graduation Rates (2018 – 2021)



Influence of the setting on the design of the study

The setting is not described with the depth above to make the case for why student voice should be employed within it. Neither general academic monitoring nor the nature of the continuous improvement effort initiated by the ESSA/MDE identification is the focus of the present study. Similarly, I do not believe that an understanding of how students perceive their voice should be used to monitor the effectiveness of continuous improvement efforts. The rich setting description is provided to help the reader more fully understand the context within which the participants were making sense of their voice. My unique positionality as principal and researcher enhances the importance of this. More specifically, because the project is conceptualized through the lens of school improvement via human-centered design and action research epistemologies, all research

moves were informed by the context (regardless of whether I realized it). The contextual influencers that I am most aware of are:

1) The racial demographics of Valley View High School have significantly changed in the twenty-first century (Figure 7), creating a need for me and all VVHS staff to better understand our students' identities. This is a primary reason why student voice has been employed as an improvement strategy at VVHS (along with the three-pronged rationale for student voice and my design-based leadership disposition described in Chapter Two).
2) Via the frameworks of human-centered design and action research, the present study is conceptualized in alignment with my leadership disposition. My bias withstanding, the confusion Valley View Public Schools stakeholders showed in response to the MDE/ESSA identification made the empathy phase of design thinking appear as an appropriate domain to work from to meet the needs of the context.
3) Though the study resides most squarely in the empathy phase of design thinking, which is open-ended, I knew that efforts to hear from historically marginalized students would be enacted before any of the data included in the present study were collected. Consequently, 20 of the 31 participants are students of color, and 22 of the 31 direct participants are female (see Anderson (2020) for a discussion specific to "Girls Voices"). Note that "Male" and "Female," are the "Gender" designations used in the official Student Information System and are therefore the terms used throughout the paper. Additionally, for the schoolwide data sets of the student survey and Eagle Voice, comparisons are made across student groups

considering race, age, English Learner status, Special Education status, and gender. Nonetheless, the demographics of direct participants are still a limitation that readers should be aware of. To state that point differently, though demographics of participants are in part the result of efforts to hear from students who have been historically underrepresented in student leadership, the over- and under-representation of student groups within each methodology should be top of mind when assessing actions to be taken in response to findings.

4) The identification for continuous improvement from MDE via ESSA created a sense of urgency for change, specifically around racial achievement disparities; this is the primary focus of the school and district. The design of the present study was certainly influenced by this. That is, methods to understand how student perception of their voice varied across racial groups was an interest area prior to any data collection or analysis. Additionally, the overall appetite for change within the setting also increased in response to the identification, which generally made change implementations swifter.

In sum, the desire to better understand how students perceive their voice at VVHS is not a direct response to any contextual factor. Nonetheless, due to my positionality within the present study, the context influenced every aspect of the study and with the strongest connections in the four areas outlined above. Consequently, a deep understanding of the context is essential to interpret the study.

Changes in learning models due to COVID-19

The learning model for VVHS was disrupted during the time of this study by the COVID-19 Pandemic. Consequently, all interviews and focus groups were conducted virtually. For school years 2019-2020 and 2020-2021, in-person, distance, online, and hybrid learning were employed. Here are some brief working definitions of these models:

- In-person: all students learning in-person at school every day
- Distance: all students learning online not from school
- Online: students learning online from a teacher who is simultaneously teaching students in-person
- Hybrid: students learn from school two days per week so that a maximum of 50 percent of students are in the school building at the same time. Students learn online for the other days while the teacher has other students in the classroom.
- Synchronous: students and teachers working together (either in-person or online) at the same time
- Asynchronous: Students engage with learning materials independently, not at the same time as their teacher

Below is a timeline of learning models at VVHS. Though the present study was conducted during the 2020-2021 school year, the 2019-2020 school year is included for context.

- September, 2019 - March 13, 2020: In-person for all

- April - June, 2020: Distance learning delivered asynchronously (note that a two-week preparation period was provided to all Minnesota schools before Distance learning began)
- August - November, 2020: Students chose between hybrid and online models
- December, 2020 - January, 2021: Distance learning delivered synchronously
- February - March, 2021: Students chose between hybrid and online models
- April - May, 2021: Students chose between in-person and online models

Approximately one-third of VVHS students selected online learning in the 2020-2021 school year. Students had multiple opportunities to change their selection throughout the year.

RESEARCH METHODS

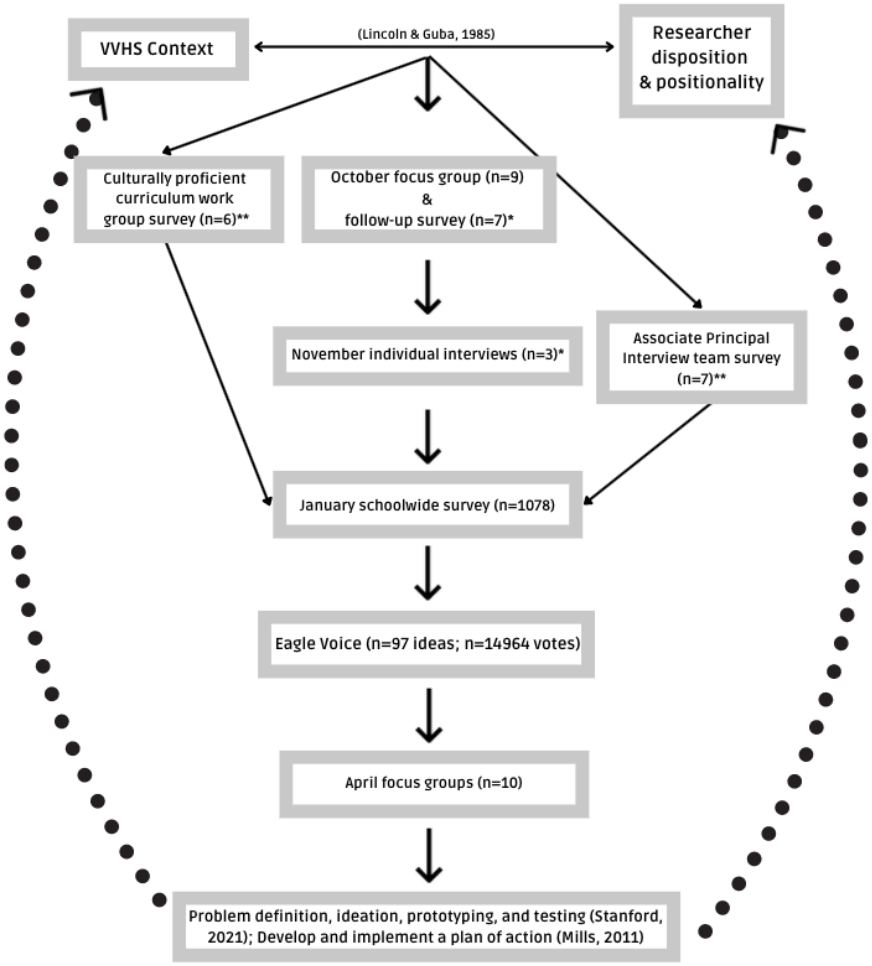
All data were collected during the 2020-2021 school year. Data were collected from a focus group with nine students and a follow-up survey, three individual student interviews that were follow-ups to the focus group, a qualitative survey of six participants in a working group on culturally-proficient curriculum, a qualitative survey of seven participants on an associate principal interview team, mixed method survey with 1078 respondents, submissions to a website (Eagle Voice) where all students could share ideas for improving the school, and four culminating focus groups totaling ten students. In all, 31 students were directly involved in the study (See Appendix A for a full list of

participants; this excludes participants in the schoolwide student survey and Eagle Voice). Twenty-two of the participants were female and twenty were students of color. Taken together, the data provide insights into how students perceive their voice at VVHS. For each of the eight data sets, participant selection and identity, and data collection and analysis procedures are outlined. Intentional actions were designed at each phase of the project to enhance validity and to offset the threat of confirmation bias (Manfra, 2017). All data are put into conversation with each other to triangulate for salient findings in Chapter Four.

The iterative nature of the research design is evident in the data collection and analysis of each data set as the research methods built upon themselves throughout the project. The study's open focus on student perception of voice allowed for lines of inquiry to emerge throughout. As lines of inquiry were refined, corresponding methods were developed. That is, methods were not designed prior to the study commencing, instead, they were emergent and natural (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; 2013) (it is also important to note that these types of interactions have become regular occurrences at VVHS far beyond the scope of this paper). Due to all these considerations, methods are presented in the order they were enacted. Figure 9 depicts the order in which methods were enacted and their cumulative relationship.

Figure 9.

Progression of Research Methods



*These participants are also included in the 9 who participated in the October focus group

**The design of these methods was not influenced by previous methods in this study. Their design was informed by the context and researcher. Analysis was informed by previous methods in this study.

The pragmatic roots of the study also led to the chronological organization of this dissertation. An important intention of this paper is to inform the work school leaders engage in regularly, and the chronological organization allows for the most accurate reflection of the way the study played out in reality. More pointedly, high school principals are continuously tasked with assessing programs in suboptimal research conditions with limited resources, including time, to do so. The methods presented in this chapter attempt to provide design-inspired principal strategies to collect data as part of their improvement efforts, take small-scale actions in response to what is learned, and design further methods to gain deeper understandings of their identified areas of interest. The methods are also carefully presented one by one here in hopes that researchers can interpret the method deeply enough to assess relevance for their own setting. Findings from these methods are presented in the following chapter.

October Focus Group

In October, a group of nine students participated in a focus group to gather their general perceptions of student voice at VVHS. In September, all VVHS students were invited by email and online sign-up to indicate interest in various student leadership opportunities throughout the school year. Students could indicate interest in the categories of "student culture/climate/student life," "instructional design," "student support," "equitable grading practices," "higher-level learning opportunities," and "student voice" in general. These areas align with Valley View High School's School Improvement Plan for the year. Sixty students identified interest in "student voice." An email invitation to the focus group was sent to all 60 students; 13 students expressed interest in the focus group; nine attended. One participant was in 12th grade, three participants were in 11th grade,

three were in 10th grade, and two were in 9th grade. All participants were female. Four participants were Asian, three were Black or African American, and two were white. Table 2 summarizes the demographics of the group.

Table 2

Participants in October Focus Group

Name	**Grade**	**Race (as indicated in Student Information System)**	**Gender (as indicated in Student Information System)**
Alia	10	Black or African American	Female
Allie	11	White	Female
Ari	10	Asian	Female
Ashley	11	Black or African American	Female
Jessamy	9	White	Female
Kamel	9	Black or African American	Female
Miah	12	Asian	Female
Payal	10	Asian	Female
Vmishali	11	Asian	Female

Pre-written questions to guide the conversation were:

1. What times have you participated in student voice at VVHS?
2. Generally, to what degree do VVHS students have voice?
3. How do you know when student voice is *actually* heard or listened to?
4. How does student voice impact VVHS students' high school experience?

5. Tell us about a student voice activity that you have participated in that has had a positive impact on you…
    a. What was it?
    b. Why was it positive?
    c. In what ways did it impact you?
6. Student voice activities that did not make an impact (or made a negative impact on you):
    a. What was it?
    b. Why was it negative?
    c. In what ways did it impact you?

These questions were developed using Mitra's student voice model, past research identifying student impact themes and questions (Mitra, 2004, 2008; Mitra & Serriere, 2012; Morgan & Streb, 2001; Zeldin, 2004), and from themes found in the analysis of VVHS student surveys from the previous two school years (Virgin & Bennett, 2020). A transcript of the focus group conversation was collected using an add-on to the virtual meeting platform that recorded captions from the conversation. The transcript from the focus group was analyzed using thematic analysis. Analysis followed an abductive process working back and forth between the specific and the general (Patton, 2015). The initial analysis identified primary themes based on the frequency the theme was mentioned (considering both the number of mentions throughout the focus group and the number of students mentioning the theme). The entire focus group transcript was then coded based on these primary themes. Member checks were conducted electronically. Quotes exemplifying primary themes were identified.

Participants were invited to complete a feedback survey immediately following the focus group (see Appendix B for the full survey). The survey consisted of three multiple choice items that were not specific to the focus group, but are the three driving questions of the school (Do I belong here?; Is this meaningful?; Can I do this?). I ask these questions every time I survey students. The survey also included three open-ended items on how students perceive their voice at VVHS, the impact that has on their overall experience, suggestions for VVHS leadership, and an additional open-ended item asking for any further information. All items were optional, including whether students shared their name. Seven students completed the survey and five shared their name.

November individual interviews

Following the October focus group, students were selected for follow-up individual interviews. Participants were selected based on their level of participation in the focus group and in student voice activities. Four students were asked by school email if they wanted to participate in individual interviews, with three accepting the invitation. Participants included two 11th grade students and one 9th grade student. All participants were female. Two students were Black or African American and one student was white. Table 3 below captures the demographics of the interviewees.

Table 3

Participants in November individual interviews

Name	Grade	Race (as indicated in Student Information System)	Gender (as indicated in Student Information System)

Allie	11	White	Female
Ashley	11	Black or African American	Female
Kamel	9	Black or African American	Female

A semi-structured interview question format was utilized. Individual interview items were identified from initial analysis of the focus group transcript and feedback survey. Pre-written questions to guide the interviews were:

1. During the focus group, most students mentioned student voice is important; tell me more about this…
2. Generally, to what degree do VVHS students have voice? Why?
3. What's more important - student voice in the classroom or throughout the school? Why?
4. How do you know when someone values and really cares about what you are saying and what you think? How can you tell when they are really listening?
5. Are all students' voices heard at VVHS (across different races, ethnicities, genders, grades)?

Transcripts of two individual interviews were collected using an add-on to the virtual meeting platform that recorded captions from the conversation. The third interview was summarized through notes immediately following the interview as the transcription recording did not happen due to a technological malfunction. Analysis followed an abductive process working back and forth between the specific and the general (Patton, 2015). Each transcript was analyzed and coded initially using the themes

identified from the focus group. Then, transcripts were once again reviewed for any new themes. After all the transcripts were initially coded, and the new possible themes were identified, each transcript was reviewed once more to determine whether the new themes identified in one individual interview were present in the others; additional coding occurred as needed. Coding was reviewed to identify similarities and differences between individual interviews, and for alignment with the focus group themes. Member checks were conducted electronically. Quotes exemplifying primary themes were identified.

Two specific efforts involving student voice—culturally proficient curriculum work group and Associate Principal interview team

Student voices are regularly engaged in project-specific ways at VVHS. Consistent with our overall approach to continuous improvement, data are regularly collected from participants as part of these efforts. Two such projects from the 2020-2021 school year were groups dedicated to creating culturally proficient curricula and hiring our Associate Principal of Student Activities. Following both processes, students were invited to complete a feedback survey with both open- and closed-ended questions. The research design of both efforts is now outlined.

Culturally proficient curriculum work group

Each fall, VVHS conducts a course revision process. In this process, all faculty members can submit proposals for new courses, course name changes, course requirement changes (e.g., number of credits/terms, prerequisite courses), and significant changes to curriculum. This is in addition to the formal Curriculum Improvement Cycle (CIC)

conducted by the District's Director of Curriculum every five to seven years on a rotating departmental basis. The annual site-based process was added to the CIC process in the 2019-2020 school year to allow for more responsive and ongoing innovations. As the High School Principal, I oversee the process in collaboration with the District's Director of Curriculum.

A goal for the 2020-2021 VVHS course revision process was to create more culturally proficient curricular opportunities for students. On two separate occasions toward the beginning of this process, six students were engaged in open-ended workshops on how this goal might be realized. The students were invited based on their previous expression of interest in various ways. For example, two participants requested a meeting in the summer of 2020 to discuss texts used in English classrooms. Five participants were seniors and one was a junior; five were female and one was male; two were Black or African American, two were white, one was Asian, and one was Hispanic/Latino. Table 4 below summarizes the demographics of the work group participants.

Table 4

Participants in Culturally Proficient Curriculum Work Group

Name	**Grade**	**Race (as indicated in Student Information System)**	**Gender (as indicated in Student Information System)**
Johana	12	Black or African American	Female
Hanifa	12	Black or African American	Female
Marc	12	White	Male

Autumn	12	Asian	Female
Meg	12	White	Female
Dagney	11	Black or African American	Female

Following the workshops, students were sent a survey (Appendix C) to share their reflections on the experience. The survey itself was voluntary as was each item, including participants' names. All six participants completed the survey and five shared their name. The survey included three multiple choice questions on the three driving questions for the school (Do I belong here?, Is this meaningful?, Can I do this?). Participants were also asked open-ended questions on how these meetings impacted their view of voice and belonging at VVHS, what suggestions they had relating to voice and belonging, and any other thoughts they wanted to share. Note that the survey items do not directly align with the research question of the present study. This is due to the natural emergence of this survey administration, which was germane to the purpose of the curriculum work group and our school overall. Nonetheless, the data collected inform the present line of inquiry and are therefore included. Responses were first coded for themes identified in the focus group and individual interviews. They were then re-coded for new themes.

Associate Principal Interview Team

In November through December of 2020, VVHS conducted a hiring process for our Associate Principal of Student Activities (this position is more commonly referred to as

Activities Director). For the first time in any hiring process during my tenure in Valley View Public Schools, students were directly involved. The hiring process included multiple stages including an online assessment, structured phone interview, in-person screening interview, panel interviews, and final interview with the District Superintendent, Associate Superintendent, and me (High School Principal). On the day of panel interviews, one panel was made up of staff members, and another was made up of seven students. The student panel was facilitated by an associate principal who did not provide feedback on the candidates. The activities department is supported by two coordinators who provided recommendations for student participants. I requested students from diverse racial, gender, age, and activities backgrounds that would both be interested in the experience and would benefit from it. Four of the students were female and three male; four were juniors, two seniors, one sophomore; three were Black or African American, three were white, and one was Hispanic/Latino. Table 5 relays the demographics of the interview team members. Collectively, the team members brought experiences from over a dozen school-sponsored activities including athletics, arts, and clubs.

Table 5

Participants in Associate Principal Interview Team

Name	**Grade**	**Race (as indicated in Student Information System)**	**Gender (as indicated in Student Information System)**
Blake	11	Black or African American	Female
Chelsea	11	White	Female

Hanifa	12	Black or African American	Female
Hannah	10	White	Female
Luis	11	Hispanic/Latino	Male
Peyton	12	White	Male
Rava	11	Black or African American	Male

Students were invited to submit questions to ask candidates from which the facilitating associate principal wrote the questions used in the interview (Appendix D). Following the interviews, students were invited to complete a survey to share their thoughts on the experience (Appendix E). All seven students completed the survey and provided their name. Responses were first coded for themes identified in the focus group and individual interviews. They were then re-coded for new themes.

Schoolwide survey in January 2021

In the spring of 2019, I worked with various students and staff to develop what would become an annual schoolwide student survey. Our work began with students in marketing and statistics courses who were learning about surveys. It extended to members of our student support teams (composed of social workers, deans, and school counselors) who asked students they worked with to share at least one question that they would like to see included in the survey. The finishing touches were conducted by students in DECA (a national organization preparing students to become entrepreneurs, business leaders, and college- and career-ready) who conducted think-aloud feedback

sessions with classmates to ensure students were interpreting the questions as they were intended.

The uncertain and evolving context of the 2020-2021 school year led us to administer the survey earlier in the year in hopes that we could garner actionable insights for the remainder of the year. For the same reason, questions relating to transition between learning models, student voice, and school culture and community with specificity for racial equity and inclusion were added. Findings from the October focus group and November individual interviews informed the design, particularly the additions of classroom-focused questions. The survey was administered on the Panorama Education platform, which allowed for more precise analysis than Google Forms had in previous years. Using Panorama in this customizable way was a new practice for Valley View Schools as its previous uses were exclusive to instructor evaluation.

The survey's scope extended beyond the present study. Questions were on the themes of: Student voice and leadership (nine multiple choice items, two free response), valuing of school (four multiple choice items), self-efficacy (four multiple choice items), sense of belonging (six multiple choice items), school culture and community (four multiple choice items, one free response), and transition in learning models (four free response items). A total of 33 questions were asked (see Table 6 for full survey). Some questions in the 2019 and 2020 surveys were removed but were asked again in the annual spring administration. These questions were specific to the principal and free response items on what the school should keep doing, stop doing, and start doing as we look ahead to the next school year.

Table 6.

Schoolwide Student Survey from January 2021

1. Has there been a learning experience you've particularly enjoyed or found helpful this year? What was it like?
2. As we transition to hybrid learning, what are you most excited about?
3. As we transition to hybrid learning, what are you most unsure of?
4. We won't have school on February 4 & 5 for teacher planning. How would you like to use these days? What would be helpful for you to do on them?
5. Students in this school have a say in how things work
6. My ideas are valued at school
7. I have opportunities to lead in school
8. I have opportunities to get involved in school beyond my classes
9. I feel comfortable speaking up about school issues with an adult at school
10. Overall, student voice and leadership has a positive impact on our school
11. Skip logic question: If yes, please provide an example; If no, please provide a suggestion
12. I like my school
13. I feel part of my school community
14. To what degree do students have "voice" when it comes to what they are asked to learn about?
15. To what degree do students have "voice" when it comes to how they are taught?
16. To what degree do students have "voice" when it comes to how they demonstrate what they have learned?
17. How well do people at school understand you as a person?
18. How connected do you feel to the adults at your school?
19. How much do you matter to others at this school?
20. Overall, how much do you feel like you belong at your school?
21. How interesting do you find the things you are learning in your classes?
22. How often do you use ideas from school in your daily life?
23. How useful do you think school will be to you in the future?
24. Overall, how meaningful has your high school experience been so far?
25. How confident are you that you can complete all of the work that is assigned in your classes?
26. How confident are you that you can learn all the material presented in your classes?
27. How confident are you that you will remember what you learned in your current classes next year?
28. Overall, how much do you believe that you can find success in high school?
29. How fairly do students at your school treat students from different races, ethnicities, or cultures?
30. How fairly do adults at your school treat students from different races, ethnicities, or cultures?

31. How often do you spend time at school with students from different races, ethnicities, or cultures?
32. At your school, how common is it for students to have close friends from different racial, cultural, or ethnic backgrounds?
33. What is the most important thing your school can do to support students of different races, ethnicities or cultures?

All VVHS students were provided one week to complete the survey. The survey was sent via school email. Additionally, teachers of third period classes (the longest class period due to lunch times) were asked to provide time within that week for students to complete the survey. The survey was completed by 1078 students, 38 percent of the student body. The racial demographics of respondents are as follows: 62 percent white, 16 percent Asian, 8 percent Black or African American, 7 percent Hispanic/Latino, and 7 percent two or more races. Respondents by grade-level: 35 percent from grade 9, 23 percent from grade 10, 20 percent from grade 11, and 22 percent from grade 12. Females comprised 55 percent of the respondents, 45 percent were male. Demographic information was not collected for 325 students (30 percent of respondents) because they were not logged into their Valley View Single Sign On accounts when completing the survey. We were not aware of this requirement prior to survey administration.

Table 7 summarizes the demographics of the 753 respondents for which those data are available. It includes a breakdown of over- and under-representation of student groups in the results as compared to whole school demographics. The most significant racial under-representation was Black or African American students. Asian and white

students were overrepresented, as were students in grade 9 and females. Students with two or more races were also overrepresented.

Table 7.

Summary of Survey Respondents

Student Group	**% of total student population**	**% of survey respondents**	**% of over- or under-representation in survey**
Grade 9	24	35	46
Grade 10	26	23	-12
Grade 11	26	20	-23
Grade 12	24	22	-8
White	56	62	11
Black or African American	15	8	-47
Asian	14	16	14
Hispanic/Latino	9	7	-22
Two or More races	5	7	40
Male	51	45	-12
Female	49	55	12

Survey analysis & utility

For multiple choice items, descriptive statistics were generated by Panorama (i.e., the percentage of respondents that selected each item). Bivariate and multivariate analysis was used to make comparisons. Most attention was given to analysis across the current data set; this was done in multiple ways. First, comparisons were made across student

groups considering race, age, English Learner status, Special Education status, and gender. Responses from student groups were then compared to each other and to the whole group. Findings of inequitable perceptions of student voice in the fall focus groups and interviews led to this analysis. Items were also clustered for comparison in terms of "direct feedback on student voice" (e.g., Students in this school have a say in how things work) and "indirect feedback on student voice" (e.g., I have opportunities to get involved in school beyond my classes). Also in response to fall findings, survey responses relating to items within the classroom (e.g., How much voice do students have when it comes to how they are taught?) were compared to items that were on schoolwide topics (e.g., My ideas are valued at school). Finally, completion rates themselves were considered.

Free response analysis followed an abductive process working back and forth between the specific and the general (Patton, 2015). "Non-answers" (e.g., "not sure") were removed. Each submission was coded using NVivo software. Frequency counts from NVivo were used to create themes. Within themes, sub-themes were created. For example, responses including "Student Council" varied in nature with some students viewing it as a positive platform for student voice and some relaying that it was not fulfilling its mission. After themes and subthemes were created, each response was read again to identify any responses that should be added to a theme and to create any additional themes. Quotes exemplifying primary themes were identified.

Limitations of the survey include that it was voluntary, it was completed by 38 percent of the student body, demographic data was not collected for 30 percent of respondents, and certain student groups are represented more than others, with

historically marginalized racial groups underrepresented. All of that withstanding, survey responses convey some of the thinking of nearly 1100 different students, and the data collected can be disaggregated by demographics for 70 percent of respondents. Though imperfect, the survey results are included in this pragmatic qualitative inquiry. The results were used to inform the design of subsequent student focus groups. Design decisions influenced by the survey results include how students were invited, which students were invited, and the questions that were asked. Survey results also led to the analysis of Eagle Voice ideas and participation, which is outlined in the following section. Additionally, survey results contribute to a richer contextual understanding of the research setting and future analysis might yield additional findings. As noted in the Conceptual Framework, using and combining different methods to garner a diverse set of perspectives is among the guiding principles of pragmatic qualitative inquiry (Creswell, 2019). However, to be explicit, the survey is not used to draw conclusive findings across the student body on how voice is perceived at VVHS and must be analyzed with its limitations in mind.

Eagle Voice in Winter 20-21

Eagle Voice was developed by VVHS students and staff in the 2019-2020 school year and conducted again in the 2020-2021 school year. A staff version of Eagle Voice began in the 2018-2019 school year with promising results (Virgin & Swanson, 2019). Eagle Voice is a website where stakeholders submit ideas to improve their school. In 2020-2021, 97 ideas were submitted by students. Following the approximately one-month submission window, students vote on the ideas they like best for approximately two weeks. To vote, students are presented with two ideas at a time, and they select the idea

they like better. Students are then presented with a new pairing of ideas. Prior to voting, similar ideas were consolidated, resulting in 50 ideas available for voting. In all, 14,964 votes were cast.

VVHS administration makes a commitment at the outset of the process to test/pilot the top ideas. Eagle Voice is included in my direct leadership responsibilities. Though we want to implement as many ideas as possible, implementation specifics depend on the nature of the ideas submitted and voting results. To explicate, if the top idea requires a lot of human and financial resources, it might be the only one we are able to implement that year. If there are several ideas that are low or no cost and show favorably with the crowd, we may implement ten to twenty. Two general parameters we have in place are (1) if possible, test/pilot the top three ideas and, (2) consider any idea with more upvotes than downvotes.

Eagle Voice data are included in the present study for two reasons. The first is that Eagle Voice was the most common response to the schoolwide survey question of, "What is one way you see student voice making a positive impact?" Participants in fall focus groups and interviews also referenced Eagle Voice. The second reason for including these data is that they contribute to the research question of how students perceive their voice at VVHS by gaining insights into what areas students want to see change in, the areas which they feel they can share opinions on, and who accesses this platform for voice. Analysis of Eagle Voice included the nature of ideas submitted, who submitted them, and which were most popular with the student body. Ideas and voting results were coded by theme. Demographics of idea submitters were broken down by race, age, and gender. Votes are anonymous so they were not disaggregated in any way.

April 2021 Student Focus Groups

Valley View High School was in its fourth quarter of the 2020-2021 school year in April. At this point, as both school principal and action researcher, I had a more informed understanding of the role student voice was playing in our school and how students were perceiving their voice than I did at the start of the study. Data from the October student focus group and follow-up survey, November individual student interviews, surveys following the culturally responsive curriculum work group and associate principal hiring team, January schoolwide student survey, Eagle Voice submissions and voting results were used to design student focus groups in April to better understand the research focus. Due to the iterative nature of the research design that calls for each research method to build off previous methods, the April focus groups have the most informed design of all the research methods of the present study (see Figure 9).

A total of ten students participated across four focus groups. Students were invited based on recommendations from nine certified faculty members (i.e., purposive sampling (Lincoln & Guba, 1985)). The nine recommenders were selected based on their involvement in our Student Support Strategy Team and/or our Instructional Excellence Strategy Team. These two teams of educators were identified to make recommendations based on findings earlier in the project. Specifically, Student Support Strategy Team members were identified in response to the finding of inequitable access to student voice, and Instructional Excellence Strategy Team members were identified based on the higher than anticipated interest in classroom-related topics. The faculty members worked in the departments of Business & Marketing, Counseling, English, English Learners, Math, and Special Education. They were asked to recommend students who would represent

differing perspectives in our school, taking student race, gender, age, courses load, involvement in extracurricular activities, and overall disposition toward VVHS into consideration.

The tables below describe the focus group participants by race, gender, and age. By race and gender, the group roughly represented our school. By age, older students were overrepresented with no 9th grade participants and seven 12th grade participants. The request for differing perspectives specific to our school might have steered recommenders away from younger students (due to the pandemic, 9th grade students had not experienced VVHS as it "regularly" functions). Students were given three time slots to choose from; the fourth slot was added due to a schedule conflict for the participant. None of the ten participants is known to have participated in a different portion of the study, though they may have completed the schoolwide student survey or voted in Eagle Voice (those processes were anonymous).

Table 8.

Participants in Focus Group #1

Name	**Grade**	**Race (as indicated in Student Information System)**	**Gender (as indicated in Student Information System)**
Carda	10	Asian	Female
Matt	10	White	Male

Table 9.

Participants in Focus Group #2

Name	Grade	Race (as indicated in Student Information System)	Gender (as indicated in Student Information System)
Holt	12	White	Male
Misha	12	Black of African American	Female
Nikko	12	Asian	Male
Topher	11	White	Male

Table 10.

Participants in Focus Group #3

Name	Grade	Race (as indicated in Student Information System)	Gender (as indicated in Student Information System)
German	12	Hispanic/Latino	Male
Grace	12	Hispanic/Latino	Female
Rorie	12	African American	Female

Table 11.

Participants in Focus Group #4

Name	Grade	Race (as indicated in Student Information System)	Gender (as indicated in Student Information System)
Brynn	12	White	Female

Focus groups were designed based on the findings identified and inquiries developed through analysis of the data sets collected earlier in the school year. Findings from the January student survey are explicitly referenced in questions one, two, and three. A semi-structured set-up was used. The four meetings ranged from 45 to 70 minutes. The following questions were used to guide the group discussions:

1. In the recent student survey, about 4 out of 5 students reported that they feel they have a say in how things work at school and that their ideas are valued.
    a. What do you think leads the students who feel favorably (about 80 percent) to feel the way they do?
    b. What do you think leads the 20 percent to feel the way they do? This tends to go down as students get older. Why do you think that is?
2. In the recent student survey, about 1 in 3 of students reported that they feel they have voice in what they learn, how they learn it, and how they show what they've learned. What do you think about that?
    a. What do you think leads the 2 of 3 to feel the way they do (that they DO NOT have a voice)?
    b. What do you think leads the 1 of 3 to feel the way they do (that they DO have a voice)?
3. In that survey, students were asked to share one way that they see student voice making a positive impact. The most common responses were about Eagle Voice. Why do you think that is?
4. Where do you think students should (and should not) have voice? Why is that?
5. Who do you want to listen to you the most? How?

6. How do you know when student voice is *actually* heard or listened to?
7. Overall, what degree do you believe students have a voice at VVHS?
8. What recommendations do you have for me, as principal/our larger leadership team, in terms of student voice?

Transcripts of the four focus groups were collected using an add-on to the virtual meeting platform that recorded captions from the conversation. Each transcript was analyzed and coded using the themes identified from previous data sets. Then, transcripts were reviewed again for any new themes. After all transcripts were coded, and the new possible themes identified, each transcript was reviewed once more to investigate if the new themes identified in one focus group were present in the others; additional coding was then done as needed. Coding was reviewed to identify similarities and differences between previous data sets and across these four focus group themes. Member checks were conducted electronically. Quotes exemplifying primary themes were identified.

Summary of limitations of the research project

Limitations of the present study are revisited and summarized prior to a presentation of findings. With 31 direct participants, there are far more VVHS student voices absent from this analysis than included. Direct participants were disproportionately female (22) and of color (20) (see Appendix A for full summary of participants). Though this was in part by design in an effort to hear from students who have been historically underrepresented in student leadership, it should still be acknowledged when considering actions to be taken in response to findings of the proposed study. The inclusion of the schoolwide survey and Eagle Voice submissions and votes help offset these limitations.

Another limitation is that, though various methods for both invitations and modes of participation that differed in both the level of commitment and nature of participation were employed, participation was never "required" at any point in the study.

Perhaps the most notable limitation is my positionality as both school principal and researcher. The power dynamics between students and me likely influenced who was willing to participate and what was shared. My inseparable relationship with our school likely influenced what was investigated and how data were interpreted. An assumption I carried into the present study is that student voice can serve as the catalyst for transforming interactions students have with adults and schooling itself, ultimately toward a more positive overall school experience for students. All these considerations lend themselves to more favorable findings. However, intentional actions, including the very presence of multiple research methods, were designed at each phase of the project to enhance validity and to offset the threat of confirmation bias (Manfra, 2017); additionally, all data were put into conversation with each other to triangulate findings.

Many of the findings are specific to actions I can take and might be less relevant to readers in different roles. Thus, generalizability of the study to other contexts, particularly those without the principal as action researcher and schools led by principals with dispositions different from mine, is limited. Generalizability is also hindered by the very purpose of the study which is understanding and then improving the immediate setting. The purpose drove the design, which drove data collection, which drove analysis (Patton, 2015, p. 710). As such, this study should not be generalized. However, findings might still be instructive to other educational leaders and scholars. In fact, the uniqueness of the study might enhance relevance for some or be viewed as an "asset" (Manfra, 2017,

pp. 157-158). Principals, in particular, might find the proposed study useful as they have called for more practitioner-led investigations (Chenoweth, 2017).

Another limitation of the study is the COVID-19 pandemic. Schooling was substantially different during this time and students were subsequently influenced by those changes, so we might not find the same perceptions outside the pandemic; this is a line of inquiry to be studied in years to come across educational research topics. The research project can be further understood in Chapter Four which follows on "Findings."

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

Findings from the analysis of data collected are presented separately by research method in this chapter. Respectively, findings are from the October focus group and follow-up survey, November individual interviews, surveys following a culturally proficient curriculum work group and associate principal interview team, a schoolwide survey in January, a crowdsourced innovation initiative named "Eagle Voice," and four April focus groups. Following the findings from each data set is a summary of the findings across all data sets. Because this is an iterative study where data collected in earlier phases informed the design of later phases (see Figure 9 for the progression of research methods), findings are presented in the order they were collected. For this same reason, the April focus groups receive the most attention in this chapter on findings. The April focus groups also receive the most attention because of their intensive design that included ten unique participants who reflected the demographics of the school and were carefully invited to participate by faculty members whom themselves were carefully identified to recommend participants.

Beyond improving the immediate setting, an important secondary intention of the present study is to inform the work school leaders engage in regularly. Consequently, the chapter was constructed to provide the most accurate reflection of the way the study played out. Written differently and more pointed, high school principals are continuously taking in multitudes of data in natural research settings with limited time to determine the next steps. The findings presented in the chapter could arm design-inspired school leaders (Gallagher & Thordarson, 2018) with strategies to collect data as part of their improvement efforts, take small scale actions in response to what they learn, and design

further data collection methods to gain deeper understandings of their areas of interest. The findings are also carefully presented one by one here in hopes that the reader can interpret the data deeply enough to draw applications for their own setting. Following this chapter is a discussion of how practitioners and researchers alike can respond to the findings described below.

October Focus Group

"Being heard" typology as the norm & classroom experiences as the focus

Consistent with Mitra's 2018 typology, focus group participants tended to describe their experiences with student voice as "being heard." In fact, only one reference was made to a collaborative student voice experience. Participants focused their experiences on the classroom, with fewer references to experiences in broader settings across the school. More specifically, students made fifteen references to small group in-class voice experiences, eight references to one-to-one interactions with teachers, and two references that were outside the classroom. Small group experiences tended to be teachers asking for feedback and input in class. One-to-one interactions varied more and included before or after class conversations, emails and messages from teachers, and casual exchanges. The broader school references were leading a professional development effort and Eagle Voice. Participants reported their voices were solicited in both dialogue (twelve references) and survey (seven references).

In sum, student experiences with student voice were in the "being heard" typology and their focus is on what happens in classrooms. Below, the meaning of what was shared by the focus group is explored with four themes identified: students want to feel heard by adults however it can happen; students want to learn about and from their

peers' perspectives; environment matters; and students believe in the potential power of student voice, yet do not believe it is equally experienced.

Students want to feel heard by adults, however it can happen

Students in the focus group expressed a clear interest in making connections with teachers. Participants shared that this begins with adults asking questions. Participants did not have a specific preference on the type of questions as they shared appreciation for topics ranging from personal, to academic, to their opinion of how things are going in the class. Allie shared, "Whenever we get a moment to talk with our teachers and they like ask how things are actually going for us, what we prefer, it helps." Kamel shared how she appreciates when teachers use humor to make casual connections.

Students shared advantages and disadvantages to the methods by which such questions are asked. They appreciated the anonymity, ease, and space for honesty provided by written surveys. Miah offered, "It's good to have like a form because then it allows those people who are really scared to speak up to do it kind of more privately and on their own time." The intimate connection created through dialogue was generally preferred, however. Specifically, students look for signs the adult is authentically listening and engaging with what they are saying. This can be described as two-way communication. Ashley shared a story of when a dean of students asked her about how COVID protocols were working for her. She shared some ideas with him, he came back to her a few days later to better understand, and she went back to him with more ideas. She shared that she felt seen and valued by this series of conversations and that she does not always feel this in school. In sum, the format by which their voice is solicited was not what participants were most interested in, instead, it was whether they are asked and

feel genuinely heard. Kamel summarized, "I see both points (survey and in-person)....both just help...whenever we are heard, it helps."

Students want to learn about and from their peers' perspectives

On three different occasions in the focus group, students expressed a desire to hear what their classmates think. They believe that when students share their voices, their peers benefit from hearing another perspective. Payal started this line of thinking, "I can be in my own little bubble. It is interesting to see other people's perspectives." She continued, "It's just really nice to hear what other people feel. We know that there are others out there and that is just a really nice feeling." As students discussed this notion, it was apparent that they both enjoyed hearing the thoughts of their peers and felt they learned from them. The difference between these two points is important as it adds to the depth of the potential influence of this desire of students. Focus group participants recognize the diversity of their school and the potential personal benefit of learning from each other.

Environment matters

Participants readily described the need for a safe and comfortable environment in order to share their voice openly and honestly. They shared that the current learning model was negatively influencing this (a reminder that VVHS was in hybrid learning at the time of the focus group). "Last year, it was much easier to make connections when it was in-person. Teachers would come to me after class and ask questions, like how is your day or how are you feeling about the material," said Payal. Allie shared, "I feel like we're just watching our teachers this year." Jessamy said that it seemed like teachers were asking for feedback early in the pandemic, but now they have become too overwhelmed

to ask, which she viewed as a missed opportunity because she now has better feedback to offer due to her experiences over the past several months. Taken together, these comments indicate students' attention to the impact of environmental factors on their voice.

Students believe in the potential power of student voice, yet do not believe it is equally experienced

The strong desire of focus group participants to share their voices was clear. Kamel summarized this well, "I believe that it is incredibly important that students' voices get heard because we're the ones who are being taught. So, I think that we have a right to have a voice about what goes on around here." Participants expressed that, in general, VVHS students do have opportunities to share their voice. They relayed that student voice is making a difference, but only in pockets. They do not believe student voice has reached its full potential at VVHS. The lead shortcoming is that not all students are sharing their voice and/or that not all voices are being heard. Note that not sharing and not being heard are different shortcomings with different causes and implications; both shortcomings are explored in later data sets.

Students offered solutions to improve the current reality through improved communication. Ideally, communication would rely less on email and more on in-class messaging from teachers. Payal, Kamel, and Ashley noticed a difference in involvement in school activities based on who among their friends checks email and who does not. They thought in-school posters and social media could be better used to promote opportunities as well. Miah also noted communication could be improved in terms of follow-through. She shared experiences of completing surveys in class but not receiving

any communication thereafter on what would happen next. She believes this leads to students believing that staff are not really listening and, therefore, students who are less willing to share their perspectives. In sum, the problem and opportunity lie both in how communication is shared and what is done with communication that is received.

Jessamy and Ashley touched on the compounding impact of student voice efforts. When students are asked for their opinion, they feel "valued." This leads to "connection" and "feeling like school is for us," "this is a place I want to be," and "I belong here." When this happens, students feel better about themselves overall. These are all outcomes Valley View High School is trying to achieve for each of its students, an affirming signal to the importance of student voice work early in this study.

October Focus Group Feedback Survey

Student free responses affirmed the themes identified in the focus group of students wanting voice, feeling they have some voice, but that not all students share in that same experience. Miah shared that she believes students do have "a really powerful voice" that is "capable of changing so much." The limitations of this voice were summarized by Kamel, "I believe that some (students) do (have voice) but not everyone and that is a problem." Ashley also shared that they have a voice "for the most part" and Allie shared that, "It honestly depends on the class and like the 'group' of people they (students) fall into." An anonymous student wrote that students "build the school, so if we are able to have a voice that is heard by teachers and staff, our school can really become OUR school." These responses indicate that perception of student voice is not a monolith at VVHS, but it is something that is wanted across focus group participants.

November Individual Interviews

The themes of students wanting to feel heard by adults, to hear from their peers, and the potential power of student voice were again evident across the three individual follow-up interviews. These individual interviews provided a more textured and nuanced perspective of what these students are thinking within these themes, including the important role of the student-adult relationships. The influence of environmental factors was less evident than in the focus group. Findings from the three interviews are summarized below.

Students want to feel heard by adults and it makes a difference when they do

Students' desire for intimate connections in the classroom was a theme of individual interviews. Kamel shared the classroom is "more personal," while the school is "more general." "The classroom is most important because that's, like, for your learning," said Allie. In building these relationships, participants advised adults to make both formal and informal time for connection in ongoing and consistent ways. Participants felt these connections when adults listened and displayed value and respect for students' perspectives. Participants felt their voice was heard when adults engaged with them across topics, including both personal and academic topics; ultimately, participants wanted to feel that adults cared about what was important to them.

Relationships matter outside the classroom, too, and students want the same things there—consistency, respect, and two-way communication. Ashley shared an experience with a dean of students:

> He really checks up on not just me, but all of my friends. We talk to him, and he is very open. It's just really easy. He talks every week. I like the consistency. We don't see other staff like we see him. We were obviously going to be respectful to any adult but for him, it's like we respect him a lot more as he talks to us. It makes us respect the staff. That makes us respect them because they can respect us enough to access our community.

The layers of the positive impact of Ashley's connection with the dean are worth enumerating—viewing him differently than other staff, mutual respect, and a belief that he is accessing her community. Allie's direct statement which she said emphatically provides an apt conclusion to this subsection, "If staff care about me, I'll share my opinion."

Students want to learn about other students' perspectives, especially students with backgrounds different from their own

Interview participants went deeper with their want to hear the perspectives of other students sharing that they want to ensure that diverse student perspectives are heard. "We should see what other students think because we all think differently," said Ashley. Specifically, participants wondered how to hear voices from peers who were not a part of majority groups within the high school. Kamel felt like there were opportunities for all student voices, but all students may not want to participate or lead. Ashley believed that more students feeling voice would allow for a safer school because, "I have some friends that don't go to parts of the school because there aren't enough people like them….but, if we know each other we'll be better." Again, the importance of this notion (student safety in all parts of the school) should not be overlooked as this is central to the vision of

VVHS. Allie added the additional benefit to students hearing each other's voice of learning to listen. "Students hearing each other is important, caring enough to listen is more about student character…and this is really important." The role of two-way communication is again evident here, and the connection to civic discourse is worth noting.

Students believe in the potential power of student voice

Individual interviews reaffirmed agency, belonging, engagement and motivation as outcomes of students perceiving voice. Specific to belonging, when adult-student connections were made, students experienced a sense of mutual respect and care. Ashley shared her journey around becoming and seeing herself as a leader. She believes her first leadership role, which was initiated by an adult seeking her perspective, has led her to want to lead and make a positive impact in other areas. She also mentioned building leadership skills through student voice, thus bringing forward the student voice impact domain of competency for the first time in this study. Ashley believes the success of VVHS hinges on students being heard, "For it to be a good healthy environment, for us to say yes to the three questions (Do I belong here?, Is this meaningful?, Can I do this?)...we need to be heard." Kamel shares this belief in the broad potential of student voice, "Student voice can help everywhere."

Culturally Proficient Curriculum Work Group

Direct involvement in specific student voice initiatives can shift student perception of voice

Feedback survey responses from the work group were consistently positive, affirming students' sense of voice. All six students responded "yes" to the driving questions of VVHS. Responses also indicated that the work group experience itself shifted their thinking about student voice. Hanifa offered the compliment of, "I really like the way you guys are going about this work." She went on to share that she really feels like her voice is making a positive impact. Others shared that these meetings changed their perception. Meg wrote, "I feel like my belonging matters more, and that we are pushing to make sure that all minority students feel like they belong and their voices are heard." Autumn shared similar thinking:

> Honestly, prior to this meeting, I didn't think that staff cared about the students of the school, namely the students that weren't white and popular. After this meeting, though, I know that there are faculty and administration that genuinely care about continuing to make VVHS a great school that refuses to take in the single narrative. Even though I personally won't be able to see the change, I have a sister currently in her sophomore grade and friends' siblings that will be incoming freshmen next year. I'm looking forward to hearing their opinions on how VVHS has changed to make sure that EVERYONE belongs.

The specific suggestions and free responses were encouragement to continue efforts like the curriculum work group.

Associate Principal Interview Team

Direct involvement in specific student voice initiatives can shift perception of voice

Similar to students from the curriculum work group, interview team participants communicated a shared belief in the strength of their voice at VVHS and that this experience shifted their thinking. Again here, all seven students responded "yes" to the three driving questions for the school. Hannah wrote, "This interview is a great example of how great it is that the leaders of our school give us an opportunity to voice our opinions as well." Rava wrote about the benefit of a "harmonious school environment" and "an environment that everyone enjoys." Blake wrote about her belief that students should have voice, "Because ultimately we are the ones directly affected by any decisions being made, when we can voice our opinions, it is useful." Responses also indicate that participants believe student voice is happening in ways that have positively impacted their high school experiences. For example, Peyton wrote,

> Student Voice has impacted my High School experience because it has allowed us students to make meaningful changes to our school that we all like. In my opinion, I truly do think that these changes positively impacted my experience at school.

A related example from Luis,

> I feel like student voice has impacted a lot since I got here freshman year which was your first year I feel like comparing that year to these two last years student voice is one of the most important things at school and it really shows.

Lastly, though this group was, by definition from the outset, an involved group of students, they felt they personally benefited from this experience as illustrated by Blake's response,

> I think I have always felt pretty involved in the school just from various opportunities and clubs like Dare 2 Be Real. I think this was a super cool experience because we are helping provide insight to what students want to see in our administration in order to create change.

January 2021 VVHS Student Survey

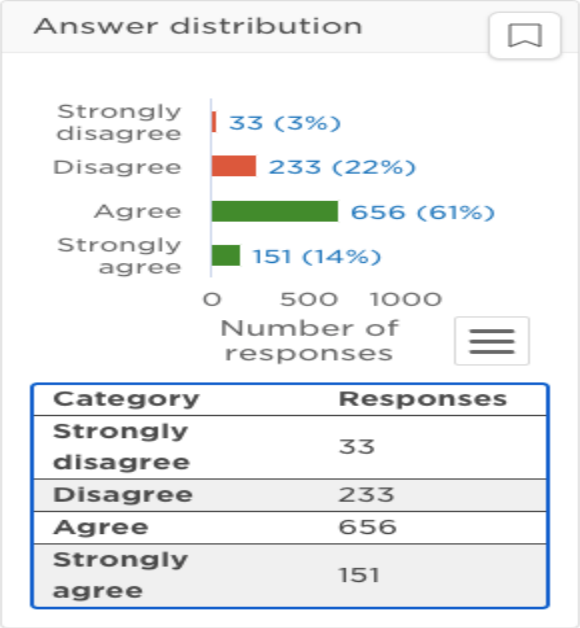
All VVHS students were encouraged to complete a 33-question survey in January, 2021. Findings from the nine multiple choice and two free response questions specific to student voice are described in this section (see Table 6 for full survey). The survey was completed by 1078 students. Table 7 summarizes the demographics of the 753 respondents for which demographic data are available. Analysis is based on descriptive statistics, bivariate and multivariate comparisons across survey items (i.e., direct feedback on student voice compared to indirect feedback on student voice; voice within classrooms compared to voice in schoolwide topics) and respondents (i.e., by demographic group). Free responses were coded using NVivo software. Frequency counts from NVivo were used to create themes. Within themes, sub-themes were created. Quotes exemplifying primary themes are provided. Findings from the survey analysis are outlined below.

Students generally believe they have voice and that student voice has a positive impact on their school

The two questions that most directly asked if students perceive they have a voice at VVHS were–(1) "Students in this school have a say in how things work," and (2) "My ideas are valued at school." For the first question, 75 percent of responses were favorable (Figure 10). For the second question, 81 percent of responses were favorable (Figure 11).

Figure 10.

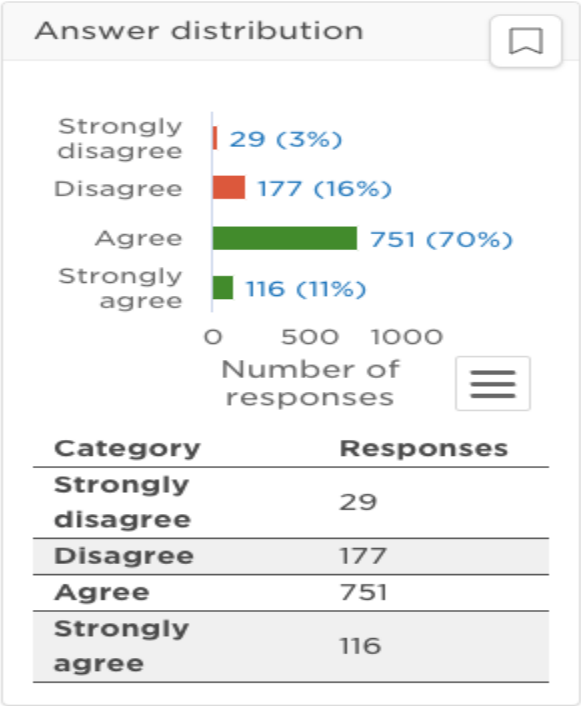
Students in this school have a say in how things work (all)



Category	Responses
Strongly disagree	33
Disagree	233
Agree	656
Strongly agree	151

Figure 11.

My ideas are valued at school (all)

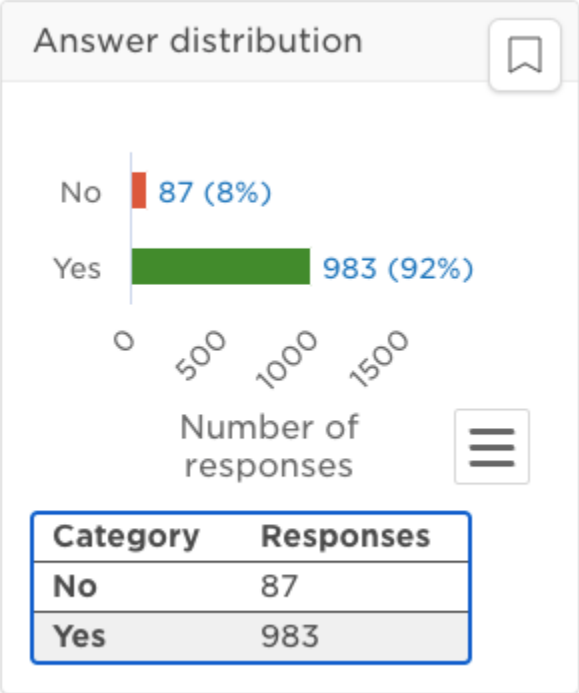


Category	Responses
Strongly disagree	29
Disagree	177
Agree	751
Strongly agree	116

The overarching question of, “Overall, student voice and leadership have a positive impact on our school,” was asked in yes/no binary form. Here, 92 percent of responses were favorable (Figure 12).

Figure 12.

Overall, student voice and leadership have a positive impact on our school (all)



Category	Responses
No	87
Yes	983

These views provide a general perception of positivity for student voice at VVHS among survey respondents but do not explore who is feeling this way, who is not, how these perceptions are manifesting, or why.

Students value specific ways to bring their ideas forward

There were 960 responses to the open-ended question of, “What is one way you see student voice making a positive impact?” Through the coding process, 104 responses

were eliminated as “non-answers” (e.g., “I don’t know,” “not sure,” a single letter or punctuation), leaving 856 substantive responses for analysis. Using open-coding and frequency counts, the following themes were identified:

- Eagle Voice (102)
- Student ideas being welcomed (85)
- Changes in the school driven by students in ways other than through Eagle Voice (60)
- Student Council (28)
- Student surveys (21)

Responses on Eagle Voice took different shapes. Many (80) simply noted Eagle Voice as their example for how student voice is making a positive impact. Others (18) described the process, noting their appreciation for it. Four students pointed to changes resulting from the process. Due to these survey responses on Eagle Voice (coupled with October Focus Group findings), Eagle Voice is analyzed separately in the following section.

The other most common themes share the thread of students valuing having their voice heard. Students describe an ethos or culture where they feel they can share ideas. For examples, “More people can share ideas now,” and “Students can state how they feel about school and give ideas to make it better.” Another student wrote, “They are making changes in the school that wouldn’t happen if students didn’t come up with the ideas.” Specific changes driven by students in ways outside of Eagle Voice that were shared include students starting new clubs, improving facilities and classrooms, new course

offerings, and teachers leading classroom discussions on topics that are important to students. Another student wrote, "Instead of adults assuming what we want and need there are changes being made by teenagers."

By race, Hispanic/Latino students have the least favorable perception of their voice

Hispanic/Latino students were ten points less likely to have a favorable response to "Students in this school have a say in how things work" than their Asian peers (72 percent compared to 82 percent) and three points less likely than the whole group average (75 percent) (Table 12).

Table 12.

Students in this school have a say in how things work (by race)

Percentage of Positive Responses by Race/Ethnicity		
	Jan 2021	Difference from Overall
Asian	82%	+7
Black or African American	74%	-1
Hispanic/Latino	72%	-3
White	75%	0
Two or more races	73%	-2
Other / Prefer not to say	72%	-3
Total	75%	

For the survey item, “My ideas are valued at school” Hispanic/Latino students were again three points less favorable than the whole group average (78 to 81 percent), and eight points lower than their Asian and Black or African American peers (79 to 87 percent) (Table 13).

Table 13.

My ideas are valued at school (by race)

Percentage of Positive Responses by Race/Ethnicity		
	Jan 2021	Difference from Overall
Asian	87%	+6
Black or African American	87%	+6
Hispanic/Latino	79%	-2
White	81%	0
Two or more races	76%	-5
Other / Prefer not to say	76%	-5
Total	81%	

In answering the summary question of, “Overall, student voice and leadership has a positive impact on our school,” Hispanic/Latino students were four points less favorable than the school average (88 to 92) and ten points below their Asian peers (88 to 98) (Table 14).

Table 14.

Overall, student voice and leadership have a positive impact on our school (by race)

Percentage of Positive Responses by Race/Ethnicity		
	Jan 2021	Difference from Overall
Asian	98%	+6
Black or African American	96%	+4
Hispanic/Latino	88%	-4
White	92%	0
Two or more races	93%	+1
Other / Prefer not to say	89%	-3
Total	92%	

The gap persisted in the in-direct question on student voice of, "I have opportunities to lead in my school." At 81 percent favorable, Hispanic/Latino students responded seven points lower than the school average and ten points lower than white students (Table 15).

Table 15.

I have opportunities to lead in school (by race)

Percentage of Positive Responses by Race/Ethnicity		
	Jan 2021	Difference from Overall
Asian	88%	0
Black or African American	85%	-3
Hispanic/Latino	81%	-7
White	91%	+3
Two or more races	85%	-3
Other / Prefer not to say	82%	-6
Total	88%	

Responses from Hispanic/Latino students to, "I have opportunities to get involved in school beyond my classes" were less favorable than the whole group average (89 percent to 91 percent) though Black or African American respondents were the least favorable (80 percent) here (Table 16).

Table 16.

I have opportunities to get involved in school beyond my classes (by race)

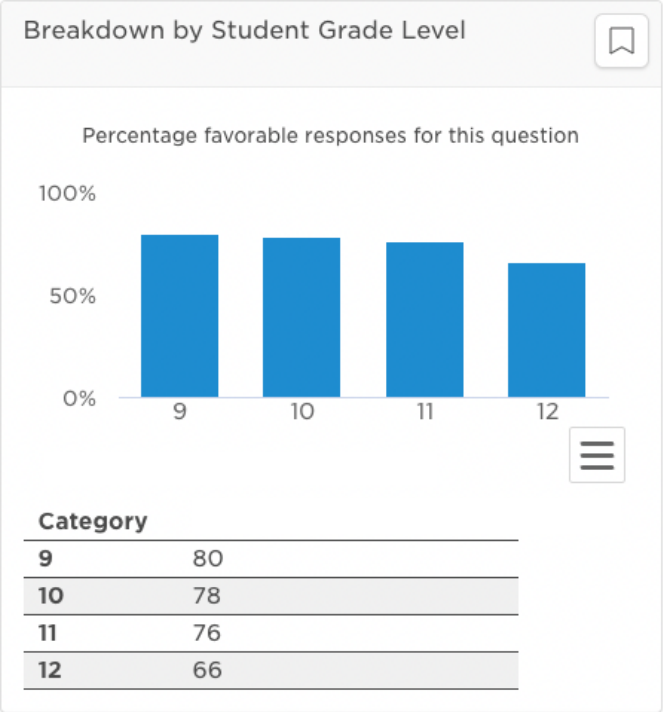
Percentage of Positive Responses by Race/Ethnicity		
	Jan 2021	Difference from Overall
Asian	89%	-2
Black or African American	80%	-11
Hispanic/Latino	89%	-2
White	94%	+3
Two or more races	95%	+4
Other / Prefer not to say	88%	-3
Total	91%	

Older students perceive direct voice less favorably than younger students, but perceive indirect voice similarly

Analysis of the three most direct questions on students' perception of voice indicates that older students, in general, have a less favorable perception than their younger peers. For the question, "Students have a say in how things work," 75 percent of responses were favorable, with a year-over-year decline from 80 percent in grade 9 to 66 percent in grade 12 (Figure 13).

Figure 13.

Students in this school have a say in how things work (by grade-level)

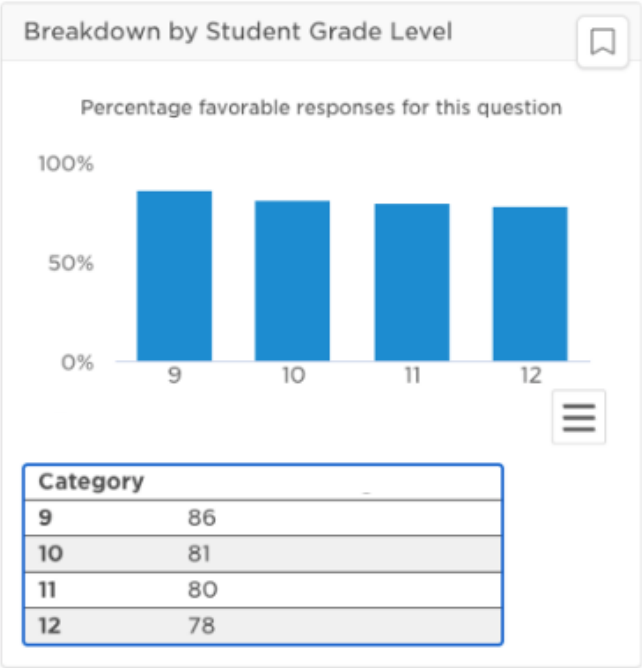


Category	
9	80
10	78
11	76
12	66

"My ideas are valued at school" garnered 81 percent favorability with the whole group, again with a decline across the four grades from 86 percent to 78 percent (Figure 14).

Figure 14.

My ideas are valued at school (by grade-level)

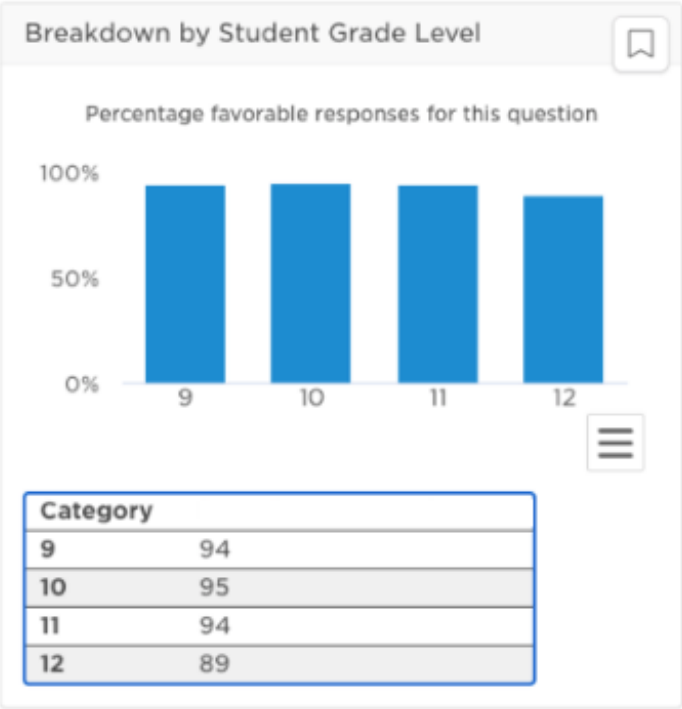


Category	
9	86
10	81
11	80
12	78

The overarching question of, "Overall, student voice and leadership have a positive impact on our school," received consistent responses across grades 9 through 11 (94, 95, 94 percent favorable, respectively) and a drop in grade 12 (89 percent favorable) (Figure 15).

Figure 15.

Overall, student voice and leadership have a positive impact on our school (by grade-level)



Category	
9	94
10	95
11	94
12	89

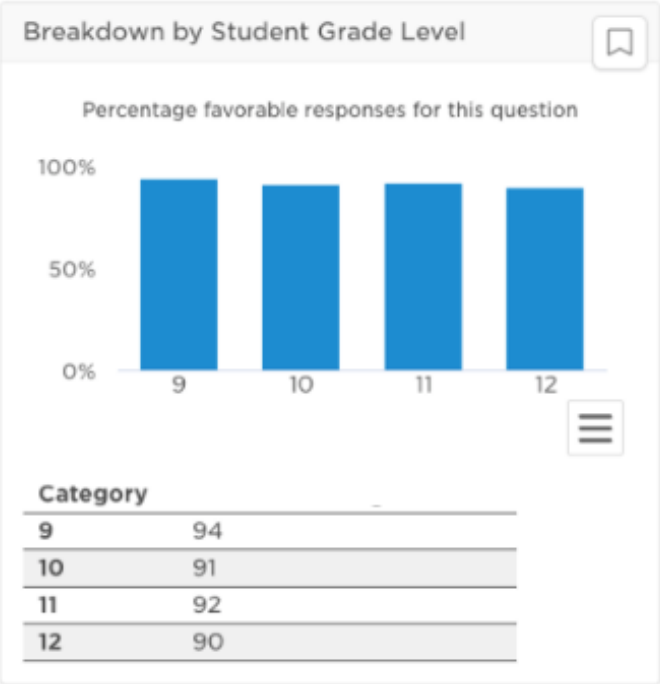
Completion of the survey itself is a data point to consider here as well, with 35 percent of respondents coming from grade 9 (46 percent over-representation) and 22 percent of grade 12 students completing (8 under-representation). Grade 10 and 11 students were more significantly under-represented in respondents than Grade 12, however, at 12 and 23 percent, respectively (see Table 7 for full description of survey respondents).

However, grade-level declines in favorable perception were not found in the in-direct questions on student voice. See Figure 16 for responses broken down by grade-

level on involvement, Figure 17 for leadership, and Figure 18 for comfort speaking with an adult at school.

Figure 16.

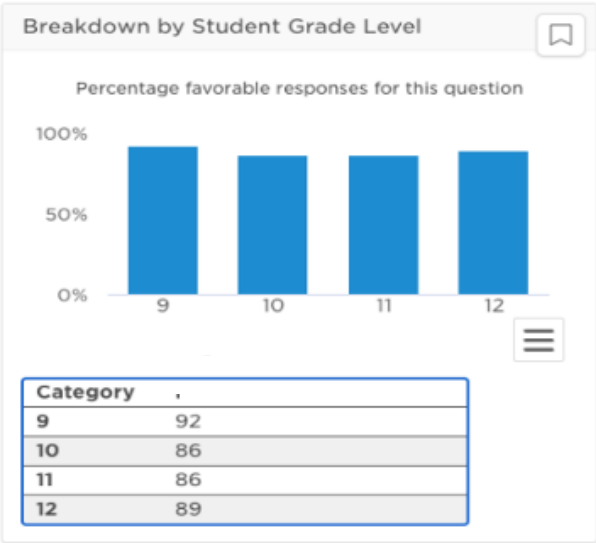
I have opportunities to get involved in school beyond my classes (by grade-level)



Category	
9	94
10	91
11	92
12	90

Figure 17.

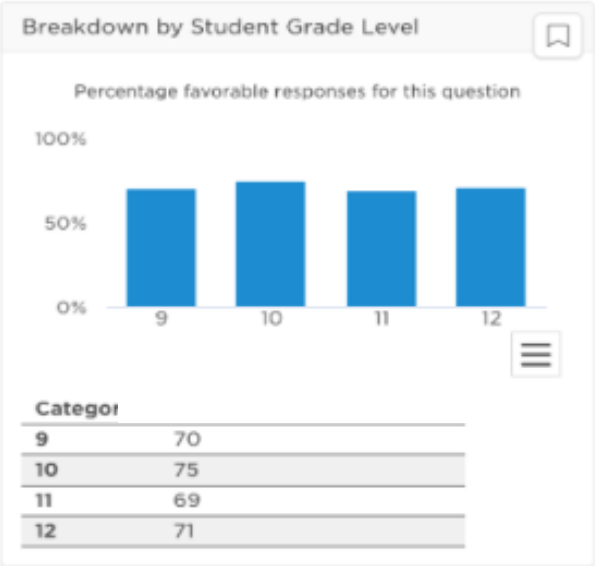
I have opportunities to lead in school (by grade-level)



Category	.
9	92
10	86
11	86
12	89

Figure 18.

I feel comfortable speaking up about school issues with an adult at school (by grade-level)



Categor	
9	70
10	75
11	69
12	71

Students perceive less voice in the classroom than in overall school experiences

Students were asked three questions on their voice in classroom practices—one on curriculum (To what degree do students have "voice" when it comes to what they are asked to learn about?), one on instruction (To what degree do students have "voice" when it comes to how they are taught?), and one on assessment (To what degree do students have "voice" when it comes to how they demonstrate what they have learned?). These three questions were formatted with five response options, whereas the other six multiple choice questions on student voice had four options. This is due to a change in format from the 2019-2020 survey to the 2020-2021 survey. Influential designers of the 2019-2020 survey (namely, students in the data science course) wanted four options. When using the Panorama platform for designing new questions in the 2020-2021 survey, we were guided by Panorama to have five response options.

To help with annual comparisons that were done outside of the scope of this study, the legacy questions remained in their original format (four response options) while new questions were formatted to match Panorama's recommendations (five response options). So, the three new questions on classroom experiences had five options with only two labeled "favorable" by Panorama (40 percent of response options), whereas the six legacy questions on voice across the school had four options with two labeled favorable (50 percent of response options). As a result, questions on the schoolwide items may be inflated. Thus, comparing "new" and "old" questions requires some closer inspection. In the present study, that inspection included an analysis of both percentage favorable and least favorable responses (i.e., the two lowest options). Nonetheless, action step decisions should not be made solely by comparing the questions

to each other. To use an example to illustrate, it should not be assumed that VVHS should prioritize work on student voice in curriculum over student voice in involvement outside the classroom based solely on the favorability of responses to these two items because the setup and calculation was not the same in these two areas. However, a close analysis of both positive and negative responses across the collection of six schoolwide questions and three in-class questions, allows for general findings to be drawn to inform the next iterative steps. This type of analysis exemplifies the overall intent of the present research project, and, specifically, the utility of the survey within it.

The six questions that explored school-wide experiences yielded favorable responses ranging from 71 percent to 92 percent. The negative responses to the six overall questions ranged from eight percent to 29 percent. For curriculum (Figure 19), 32 percent of responses were in the two most favorable options and 32 percent were in the two most unfavorable responses. For instruction (Figure 20), 26 percent were on the favorable end, 41 percent were on the unfavorable end. Lastly, for assessment (Figure 21), 44 percent were on the favorable end and 20 percent were on the unfavorable end. Taken collectively when compared to the six items on schoolwide experiences, these three questions show a less-favorable perception among respondents of their sense of voice within the classroom than outside of it. Considered individually, assessment received the most favorable responses of the classroom-based questions at 18 points ahead in favorable responses of instruction and 12 points ahead of curriculum; this was also the case with unfavorable responses as assessment lagged instruction by 21 points and curriculum by 12. Curricular voice is less experienced by upperclassmen at 24 percent favorable compared to 35 percent among underclassmen (Figure 22).

Figure 19.

How much voice do students have when it comes to what they are asked to learn about? (all)

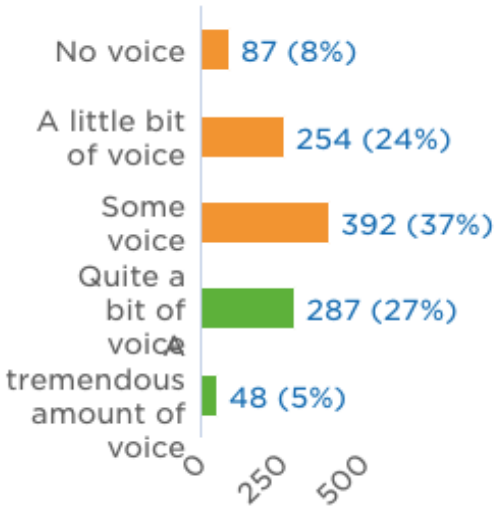


Figure 20.

How much voice do students have when it comes to how they are taught? (all)

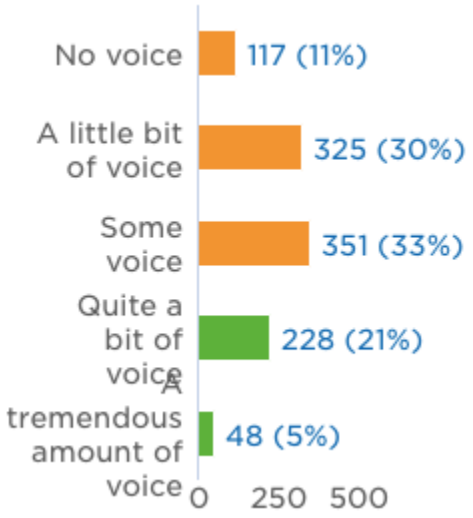


Figure 21.

How much voice do students have when it comes to how they have learned? (all)

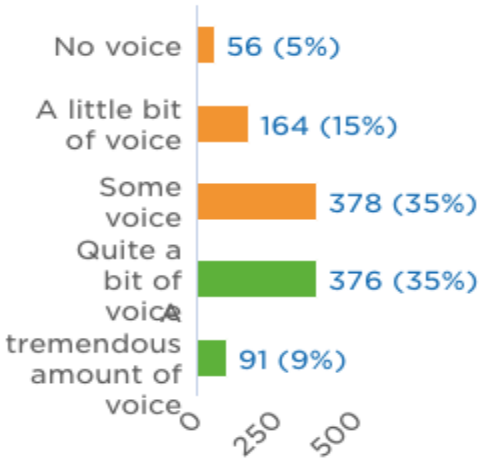
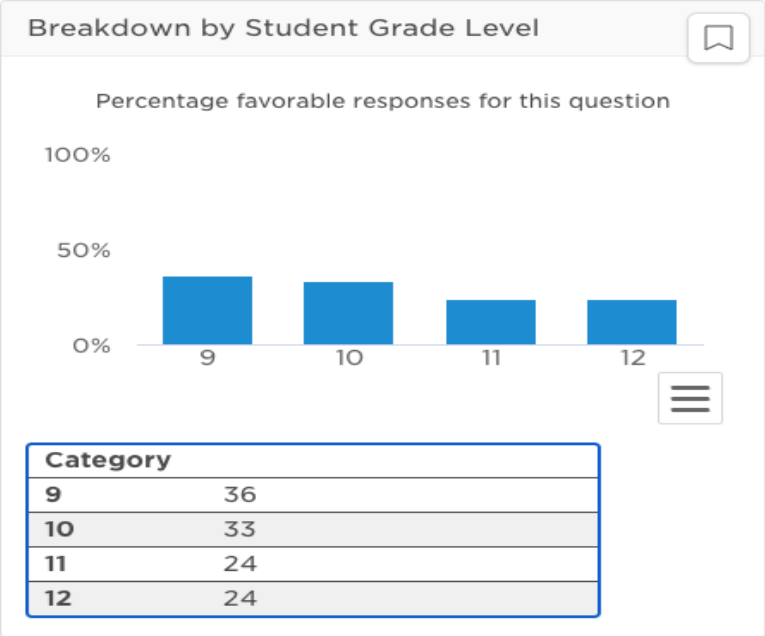


Figure 22.

How much voice do students have when it comes to what they are asked to learn about? (by grade-level)



Category	
9	36
10	33
11	24
12	24

Compared to their white and Asian peers, Hispanic/Latino and Black or African American respondents report more voice on classroom-specific questions

For concise review, across all racial student groups, survey respondents perceive less voice in the classroom than in the overall school experience. For their overall school experience, Asian and white students reported more voice than other student groups categorized by race. For the classroom, this is inverted with Black or African American and Hispanic/Latino students reporting more voice.

Table 17 communicates how each student group categorized by race responded to all three classroom-based questions and compares the favorable percentage to the aggregate. Black or African American students and Hispanic/Latino students reported more voice in instruction (both twelve points above the aggregate average) than their white (eight points below the average) and Asian peers (five points above the average). For curriculum, Black or African American students were thirteen points above the average (the highest of any student group by race) and Hispanic/Latino students were one point below. For assessment, Black or African American students responded at the same favorability rate as the aggregate and Hispanic/Latino students responded sixteen points above the aggregate (the highest of any student group by race). Though Black or African American students and Hispanic/Latino students did not both respond most favorably on each of the three classroom-based questions, the overall response trend is more favorable than their white and Asian peers, and particularly so when compared to their perception in other areas of the survey.

Large amounts of caution should be taken when considering these data. The methodological limitations (i.e., response rates, demographic collection, and analytical methods employed) and iterative intent of the survey within the larger iterative study are worth lifting up again here. Because these data are incongruent with data collected at earlier phases of the present study and the findings of other researchers prior to this study, specific subsequent actions were taken within this study (i.e., participant representation and lines of inquiry in April focus groups) and future research is recommended. These data are discussed further in the following chapter.

Table 17.

How much voice do students have when it comes to…(instructional practices by race)

How much voice do students have when it comes to...

Percentage of Positive Responses by Race/Ethnicity						
	... what they are asked to learn		... how they are taught		... demonstrating what they have learned	
	Jan 2021	Difference from Overall	Jan 2021	Difference from Overall	Jan 2021	Difference from Overall
Asian	33%	+2	31%	+5	48%	+4
Black or African American	44%	+13	38%	+12	44%	0
Hispanic/Latino	30%	-1	38%	+12	60%	+16
White	28%	-3	18%	-8	39%	-5
Two or more races	36%	+5	24%	-2	42%	-2
Other / Prefer not to say	32%	+1	30%	+4	45%	+1
Total	31%		26%		44%	

Eagle Voice

The second student Eagle Voice initiative was conducted in the 2020-2021 school year. In all, 97 ideas were submitted and 14,964 votes were cast. Eagle Voice is included in this study due to its prominence in the October focus groups and January student survey. The nature of ideas submitted, who submitted them, and which were most popular with the student body was analyzed. Ideas and voting results were coded by theme and demographic information of idea submitters was considered; votes are anonymous. Two findings relevant to this study were identified and are outlined below.

Students shared ideas on student technology, schedules, instructional design, and facilities

Ideas were most commonly on student technology (e.g., permissions and capabilities of student laptops), schedules (e.g., additional scheduled times for academic intervention), and instructional design (e.g., synchronous learning activities compared with asynchronous activities) (Table 18). In the previous year of Eagle Voice, ideas were most commonly about school food, the physical environment, and whole-school events like pep fests and other celebrations (Virgin & Bennett, 2020). Throughout the pandemic, students utilized technology more for coursework than before, their schedules/learning models were regularly shifting, and they were spending less time in the school building. Thus, the COVID-19 pandemic seems to have influenced idea submission and votes in the 2020-2021 edition of Eagle Voice.

Table 18.

Categories of Ideas Submitted in Eagle Voice

Theme	Frequency
Student technology	19
Student Schedules	18
Instructional design	15
Student schedules & instructional design	11
Facilities	8
Increased academic choice	8
Increased student to student connections	5
Academic record reporting	4
Food options	3
Special events	3
Funding/budget advocacy	2
Student behavior expectations	2
Curriculum design	1
Extracurricular choice	1

An analysis of the top voted ideas provides a deeper understanding of what topics students chose to use Eagle Voice to share their voice. Table 19 includes the amount of upvotes, downvotes, and overall ranking for each idea that received more upvotes than downvotes (21 total). Again here, the pandemic seems to have influenced the data. Ideas ranking 1, 2, 4, 11, and 12 were all designed to help students have more time and support to complete course assignments. Increased student academic stress and decreased performance were nationwide trends during this period. Ideas 7, 9, and 10 were all on

technology use, with 7 and 9 specific to how students can use their school-issued laptops. The third-ranked idea titled, “Outdoor eating area/cafeteria” appeared to be dissimilar from the other top ideas as it is a facilities change. Review of the idea description shows that its root cause was not as dissimilar, however, as students felt eating outside would be safer for their health. Ideas ranking 5 and 6 had longer-range intentions toward preparing students for life after high school; these were the only two in the top twelve that were not directly connected to the schooling conditions of the pandemic.

Table 19.

Voting Results for Eagle Voice

	Pairwise Up Votes	Pairwise Down Votes	Final Pairwise Ranking
Catch up	493	148	1
Asynchronous days	491	170	2
Outside eating area/cafeteria	440	158	3
Monthly Catch up day	429	156	4
Life skills	440	190	5
Classes for training, like jobs and experience for future life jobs.	393	187	6
Bring back chrome extensions	397	201	7
Daily class schedule	391	234	8
Enable FaceTime and Messages	377	225	9
Make it easier for students to use their Mac in an extra-curricular way	358	221	10
No essays/projects/tests all due on the same day	353	232	11
More CORE Time	334	233	12
Backpack hooks in bathroom	366	258	13
AP testing	368	266	14
Mental heath days, check ins and groups	350	253	15
Weighted GPA!!!	371	274	16
Accessibility for videos - captions!	339	252	17
More passing time	322	240	18
Dress Code	324	260	19
Heaters	322	270	20
Later start times	296	271	21

Overall, these data are consistent with previous findings in the study. As found in the October focus group and November individual interviews, students are most interested in what happens in the classroom. An initial interpretation of the ideas might

contradict this, however, as outside of instructional design, the ideas appear to be about larger structures/systems. That interpretation would be consistent with the finding in the student survey that students feel more voice outside of the classroom than within. However, when the ultimate intentions of the ideas are considered, students are most interested in ideas that will change their in-class experiences. These data points are included in the final summary section of this chapter and in the discussion in Chapter Five.

Younger students, Asian students, and female students were most likely to submit ideas

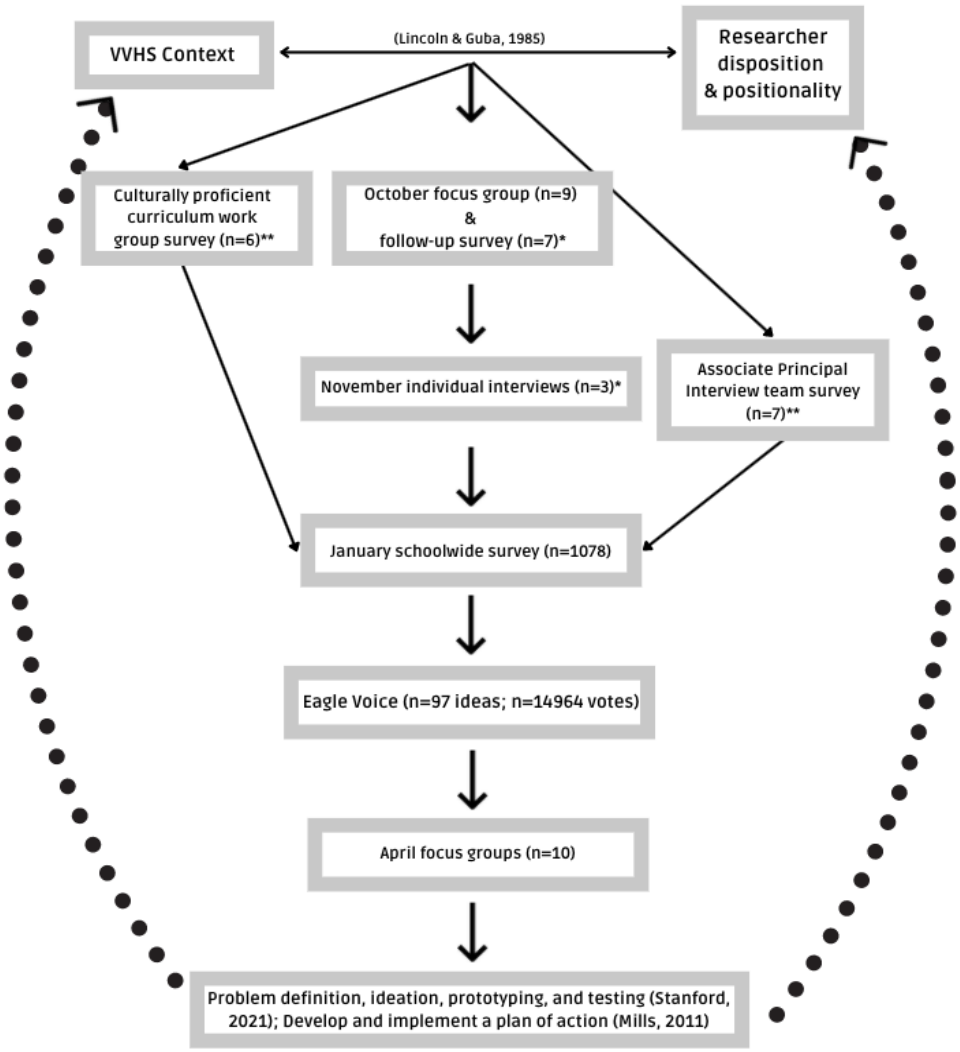
Eagle Voice engagement was highest among our youngest students with 38 ideas coming from grade 9, 30 from grade 10, 21 from grade 11, and seven from grade 12. By gender, engagement was higher among female students as they submitted 68 of the 97 ideas. By race, white students submitted 50 ideas, Asian students submitted 28, Black or African American students submitted 13, and eight ideas came from Hispanic/Latino students. A trend in the intentions of ideas/types of ideas by race, gender, or age of student idea-submitters was not evident. Increased participation in Eagle Voice, as evidenced by idea submission (again, voting results are anonymous), for younger students and female students aligns with participation rates in the January student survey (Table 7). Thus, for the two schoolwide platforms for student voice in the 2020-2021 school year, younger students, female students, and Asian (though to a lesser extent) were most likely to participate.

April 2021 Student Focus Groups

The present study culminated in four April focus groups (see Figure 9 below). In April, 2021, as both principal and action researcher, I had a more informed understanding of the role student voice was playing in our school and how students were perceiving their voice than I did in October, 2020 when the previous focus group was conducted and in November, 2020 when individual interviews were conducted. Data from the October student focus group, November individual student interviews, surveys following the culturally responsive curriculum work group and associate principal hiring team, January schoolwide student survey, and Eagle Voice submissions and voting results were used to design student focus groups in April to better understand how VVHS students perceive their voice.

Figure 9.

Progression of Research Methods



*Participants are also included in the 9 who participated in the October focus group

**The design of these methods was not influenced by previous methods in this study. Their design was informed by the context and researcher. Analysis was informed by previous methods in this study.

A total of ten students participated across four focus groups. By race and gender, the group roughly represented our school. By age, older students were overrepresented with no 9th grade participants and seven 12th grade participants. None of the ten participants were included in a different portion of the present study, though they may have completed the schoolwide student survey or voted in Eagle Voice (those processes were anonymous). The following questions were used to guide the group discussions:

1. In the recent student survey...about 4 out of 5 students reported that they feel they have a say in how things work at school and that their ideas are valued.
    a. What do you think leads the students who feel favorably (about 80 percent) to feel the way they do?
    b. What do you think leads the 20 percent to feel the way they do? This tends to go down as students get older. Why do you think that is?

2. In the recent student survey, about 1 in 3 of students reported that they feel they have voice in what they learn, how they learn it, and how they show what they've learned. What do you think about that?
    a. What do you think leads the 2 of 3 to feel the way they do (that they DO NOT have a voice)?
    b. What do you think leads the 1 of 3 to feel the way they do (that they DO have a voice)?

3. In that survey, students were asked to share one way that they see student voice making a positive impact. The most common responses were about Eagle Voice. Why do you think that is?

4. Where do you think students should (and should not) have voice? Why is that?

5. Who do you want to listen to you the most? How?

6. How do you know when student voice is *actually* heard or listened to?

7. Overall, what degree do you believe students have a voice at VVHS?

8. What recommendations do you have for me, as principal/our larger leadership team, in terms of student voice?

Due to the iterative nature of the present study and their more intensive design, the findings from the April focus groups are the most instructive to future work of any data set. Findings are generally consistent with those identified in previous phases of the study; however, that is not universally true and a greater depth of understanding within the finding areas was established via these groups. The findings described below are—student voice is not equally experienced across VVHS; students want to be heard, it makes a difference to them when they are, and they believe in the potential power of student voice; crowdsourcing as an effective strategy for engaging student voice; and students need to see follow-through after they share their voice.

Student voice is not experienced equally across VVHS

If the question of, "To what extent do students perceive voice at Valley View High School," was to be answered based on the April focus group data alone, the most direct response would be, "It depends." Four variables that influence if, where, and how students perceive voice were identified. Two variables originate with assets of students and two with assets of the adults or school. Each of these four variables is outlined below, beginning with those originating with the student.

Students' Identities

Focus group participants spoke to the role their identities play in their student voice experiences. Misha spoke most directly to racial dynamics. In assessing student voice overall, she stated that the modes of communicating voice opportunities are accessed less by people of color. She believes this is the case due to communication norms in communities of color that are less email reliant than white communities, access to technology and strong internet connections for people of color, and language barriers for stakeholders whose primary language is not English. Importantly and powerfully, she also spoke to how her racial identity influenced her perception of student voice. She shared that she was surprised to be invited to the focus group because of her racial and gender identity, "When the other day, when you asked me, like, hey, can you come on here and speak out? It's so weird for a Somali woman to be like, asked, like, hey, I want to hear your voice." Similarly, she continued, it is uncommon for her friend group to be involved in student voice and they have not been involved in official student leadership activities like "Student Council or DECA." Misha believes this is true for peers with her racial identity—that there are school activities Black students believe are not for them. She urged me to make more direct invitations like I did to her, "Encourage Black students to come in and talk and tell them your voice matters. We want to hear what you want at the school. This is your school as well." This makes students feel "so much better."

Participants also spoke to their self-perception as either limiting or supporting their perception of student voice. Carda shared that it is intimidating to go to teachers or administrators to share her thoughts on how the school can help her. Though she believes student voice to be a good idea, she does not see this as a natural part of her identity as a

VVHS student. Holt believes that reactions to sharing opinions on previous occasions influence students' willingness to share. If students had previous experiences of dismissiveness from adults, students are unlikely to want to share again. However, if students have been heard in the past, they will "keep driving at it" because they believe they can make a difference. He said this while advocating for easily accessible modes for students to share their voice (e.g., Eagle Voice, surveys). Racial and gender dynamics should not be overlooked as Carda's and Holt's comments are compared and contrasted.

Extracurricular participation

Students referenced the influence of participation in extracurricular activities on student voice experiences on ten occasions across the four groups. Participants shared that students formally involved in school beyond the classroom perceive more voice because those activities provide them opportunities to make an impact. German shared that it is through extracurricular activities (not classroom experiences) that students have opportunities to lead. Grace agreed and that is why she enjoys extracurricular activities. In discussing student survey responses on "Do my ideas matter," Nikko shared that the more pertinent question is, "Can you find the right outlet for them?" In his experience, the ability to bring ideas forward came through his involvement beyond the classroom. Topher saw a circular relationship between activity involvement and social circles, and then he extended that to student voice. In essence, if your friends are involved, then you are involved, and then you have voice. He said, "So there is equal access in a sense, but it comes down to your personal interactions."

Variations across course content areas, levels, and learning modalities

The final two variables have roots in larger school structures than individual student attributes. Students shared that their voice varies with the subject or department of the course. Matt, Carda, Nikko, Holt, Grace, and Brynn all spoke about experiencing more voice in social studies and English courses than in science and math. They appreciated when they had voice but did not expect it in the courses where they did not experience it. Misha shared that in higher-level courses (i.e., Honors & Advanced Placement), she experienced less voice, and, again, relayed that she expected and accepted this. Finally, students believed that the changes in the learning environment due to the COVID-19 pandemic were contributing to inconsistent experiences as students were literally divided into groups (Hybrid A, Hybrid B, and Online).

Interest of the teacher in student voice

Focus group participants believe the interest or disposition of teachers influences whether students perceive voice in classroom spaces. Matt shared that, by and large, his teachers want to hear from him to improve and that nearly all teachers conduct surveys to help with this. Though Carda's teachers also conduct surveys, her perception is that student voice varies by teacher. She has had some teachers where it "felt like my way or the highway," making offering suggestions "uncomfortable." Holt thought similarly to Carda,

> Some hear us, some don't. The thing is I feel like a lot of teachers I have been teaching for long enough and they're kind of so stuck to their ways and they know

> exactly how they like to deliver what they have… I feel like they're going to teach us what's best for them and what they're used to.

In Carda and Holt's comments, and across all four focus groups, the importance of students feeling a relationship with their teachers or an openness from adults to listen to students was evident. Participants also spoke to more technical or procedural ways for teachers to influence/student voice experiences such as whether the teacher shows the daily schoolwide video announcements or if they remind students to check emails for certain messages.

Students want to be heard, it makes a difference to them when they are, and they believe in the potential power of student voice

Students want to be heard and it makes a positive difference to them when they are. This could be inferred from parts of the preceding subsections including Misha's encouragement of me to do more outreach like I did with her; German, Grace, and Nikko's extracurricular experiences; and six participants'appreciation of voice in social studies and English courses. However, the influence of a positive perception of student voice on students' overall perception of school remains worth isolating here. Misha's comment of advice for connecting with Black students that concluded with, "This is your school as well" and that voice invitations make students feel "so much better," rings strongly again here and communicates the importance of students feeling heard. Misha's comment also suggests that feeling included and heard is not the norm for Black students. German said that student voice shows that, "we're evolving." Rorie shared in her final statement,

> You wouldn't expect this to happen (the focus group).... it just doesn't feel like that's very normal. That just says a lot about how Valley View is changing and how much you are trying to get student voices and it's not just all about adult authority. We are children here getting the credits to graduate and that's why we're here. But it's so much bigger than that, and you're making that apparent.

Similar to what students relayed in the October focus group and November individual interviews, though currently imperfect and unequal, April participants believe student voice has a powerful and positive influence on the student experience, and it could play an even stronger and better role.

It is worth stating that both the topics students want to share their voice on and how they want to share their voice were inconsistent in these focus groups. Some participants believe certain decisions should be reserved for adults, whereas others believe students should have direct participation on all matters within the school; some students prioritized direct conversations while others preferred methods that maximize efficiency.

Crowdsourcing as an effective strategy for engaging student voice

Perspectives shared in the October focus group and comments in January's student survey were positive, and overall engagement with Eagle Voice was high for a newer initiative. Consequently, Eagle Voice was directly investigated in the April focus groups to better understand why students saw this as a positive phenomenon in their school. In all four groups, Eagle Voice was referenced within the specific question on it, as well as in other areas of the conversations. In total, Eagle Voice was referenced thirteen times.

Students expressed appreciation for all ideas being welcome, seeing ideas from their peers, different entry points for engagement including submitting ideas, viewing ideas, voting, and helping to implement ideas, and the usability of the website. "Eagle Voice is a big part of students feeling like their ideas matter here," said Carda.

Appreciation for the visibility of the initiative was particularly salient. Students appreciated the online platform for its usability and visibility. As Brynn expressed, it is a clear expression to students that their ideas are wanted here. Participants acknowledged the vulnerability demonstrated by administrators leading the event that comes from all ideas being on public display; they also spoke to the empowerment for students that stems from leadership moves like this. Nikko shared how he appreciated the uniqueness of this type of student voice effort noting, "this is unlike other systems …it provides a direct line for students to school leaders." German reflected on his older siblings not having Eagle Voice as part of their high school experience. He saw this as an important sign that students are "helping the school and making it better."

Students need to see follow-through after they share their voice

Participants expressed a desire to see what was done with their voice after they provided it. They see examples of this happening at VVHS as well as opportunities for improvement. Matt said it is "awesome" to see spaces in the school redesigned by students and German shared that he first believed the administration cared about soccer when a new field was installed the summer after the team shared their concerns. Nikko spoke specifically to feedback loops with surveys and his desire to hear from whoever administered the survey about what they learned, their subsequent plans, and to provide

more communication after an action has been taken. Holt, Alex, and Misha had an exchange that got to deeper implications of follow-through. Holt shared that if follow-through does not happen, the conversation/exchange of thoughts itself will not happen the next time. He went on to say, "For me (what matters) it's just feeling a true response, a genuine feeling of knowing that they're actually going to try to help." Topher agreed and Misha extended the importance by sharing that she reads adult follow-up to her voice as a demonstration of care.

Participants shared that insufficient visible follow-through is why some of their classmates choose not to participate in student voice efforts. They shared that improvement in this area would help the overall student voice effort. Brynn's only suggestion for improvement in student voice was to make changes more visible and apparent. The duality of the positive impact of visible follow-through and the negative response of invisible or insufficient follow-through supports Brynn's assertion.

Summary of findings across the study

The iterative and pragmatic design of the present study makes necessary a summary of findings prior to a discussion of implications. Because the April focus groups were designed in response to data previously collected in the study, the four finding areas are treated as significant for future work. In particular, the two finding areas of students' desire to have voice and of unequal perceptions are closely attended to as they were explicitly identified across the study. To enumerate, prior to the April focus groups, students' desire to be heard, the difference it makes, and their belief in the power of student voice was found in the October focus group and follow-up survey, November

individual interviews, culturally proficient work group survey, associate principal interview team survey, and January schoolwide survey. Prior to the April focus groups, an unequal perception of student voice was found in the October focus group and follow-up survey, the January schoolwide survey in both who completed the survey and what respondents shared, and who submitted ideas in Eagle Voice. By student racial group, white and Asian students perceived the most voice. Students in extracurricular activities, social studies and English courses, on-level courses, and in classrooms with teachers interested in student voice were found to perceive more voice than students in other spaces. Younger, female, and Asian students were most likely to share their voice in the schoolwide platforms. Understanding of these two finding areas was enhanced at each phase of the study, culminating in the April focus groups. Together, they create "the dual presence of promise and inequity" of student voice at Valley View High School.

The third finding from the April focus groups was that crowdsourcing can be an effective strategy for student voice. This was also found in the October focus group, January schoolwide survey, and via engagement in Eagle Voice itself. The fourth finding of the April focus group (the importance of follow-through by adults after students share their voice), though not as evident in previous phases of the study, is connected to the third finding as much of what students appreciate about Eagle Voice is the visible action.

The differences between how students perceive their voice in the classroom compared to across the school was not isolated in the April focus group findings. However, it is included in this summary because it was found across the previous data sets of the study and indirectly supported by findings in the April focus groups. Specifically, students' interest in a voice at the classroom-level (though less frequently

realized than at the school-level) was evident in the October focus group, November individual interviews, culturally proficient work group survey, January schoolwide survey, and Eagle Voice. This was generally supported in the April focus groups, particularly as participants identified the classrooms where they have experienced more voice and the adults that have partnered with them in experiences of having voice. Connected to this is students' desire to learn about other classmates' perspectives, which was heard in November individual interviews and as part of what students described in their appreciation for Eagle Voice.

With the summary of findings as such, Chapter Five is a discussion of how the dual presence of both a belief in the promise of student voice and inequitable perceptions can be navigated by educators. Future work areas within this dual presence for both the practitioner and the researcher are described. These work areas build on the salient findings outlined above. Findings that were not found across the study but were isolated to specific datasets are also included in the discussion where appropriate.

CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION

In this pragmatic qualitative inquiry, I attempted to understand how students perceive their voice at Valley View High School. I did not enter the study as a neutral party as I was intimately tied to the setting, continuously navigating the dual roles of researcher and school principal. I depart this study with clarity in four interdependent areas—(1) student voice is good for students, (2) student voice is good for schools, (3) the need to take deliberate actions to make student voice more equitable at VVHS, and (4) the need for further investigation. Specific areas identified for further investigation are adults' perception of student voice, student voice strategies at the classroom level, and, more specifically, Black or African American and Hispanic/Latino student voice experiences in the classroom.

In this Chapter, I describe how I will respond to the most salient findings of this study—the dual presence of promise and inequity in student voice. I organize actions within this dual presence into the four interdependent work areas—(1) disrupting whose voice is (and is not) at the table, (2) intentional creation of opportunities for student voice, (3) creating and supporting a culture of student voice, and (4) walking the talk. Within the work areas, I make recommendations for school leaders, student voice researchers, and social studies education. Recommendations are made within the same conceptual framework of the present study that combined action research and human-centered design epistemologies (Figures 5 & 6). As such, I close my recommendations with terminology from the conceptual framework to guide both immediate action and further investigation, as well as a continued iterative relationship between action and investigation.

The dual presence of promise and inequity

The potential for student voice to positively influence the overall student experience at VVHS was evident throughout the study. Kamel shared, "Whenever we are heard, it helps," and "student voice can help everywhere." Ashley said, "For it to be a good healthy environment, for us to say yes to the three questions (Do I belong here?, Is this meaningful?, Can I do this?)...we need to be heard." In these and many other instances, study participants were speaking to what student voice scholars have demonstrated—that student voice can lead to improved agency, belonging, competence, deliberation, civic efficacy, self-determination, self-regulation, student engagement, motivation, competence beliefs, and stereotype threat (e.g., Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2015; Mitra, 2005; Eccles et al., 1997; Lerner et al., 2005; Klein et al., 2006). At the same time, throughout each of the research methods, the question of "whose voice?" was ever-looming. For example, Kamel also wrote, "I believe that some (students) do (have voice) but not everyone and that is a problem." Continuously, direct participants expressed that voice varied by students' race and status, and as a result of inconsistent adult actions. Such expressions were affirmed by participation and responses in the schoolwide survey, as well as engagement in Eagle Voice. Unfortunately, this, too, has been demonstrated in previous research (e.g., Cook-Sather, et al, 2015; Gorksi, 2013; Earls, 2003; Heath & McLaughlin, 1993). The dual presence of a belief in student voice and inequity in perceptions of it creates an urgency to strategically plan, enact, and study student voice practices.

In the following subsections, I outline the interdependent actions I will take in response to these findings. Recommendations are considerate of the same cautions for generalizability and transferability issued in Chapters Two, Three, and Four. The actions

are described to provide guidance for other school leaders, student voice researchers, and social studies education. I was never able to untangle my roles of researcher and principal throughout the project; the same will be true for future steps. Consequently, my recommendations for practice and research are intertwined and tend to be context-specific (Mills, 2011; Patton, 2015; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This construction honors two characteristics that made this study unique—(1) I served as both the principal of the school and researcher; and (2) it was conducted in a large racially diverse suburban high school. School principals have expressed a need for practitioner-led investigations like this across topics (Chenoweth, 2017). Thus, though my dual roles presented many limitations, they might have also been "assets" (Manfra, 2017).

Work area 1: Disrupt whose voice is (and is not) at the table

One of the four common shortcomings of student voice identified in the literature review was that not all voices are included (Mays 2016; Bragg, 2007; Kozol 1991). This was found to be true at VVHS, with multiple factors influencing student perception of voice. Across factors, the power structures of greater society were echoed as historically marginalized students were found to have a lower perception of voice (Apple, 2008). By student racial group, white and Asian students had the strongest perception of voice. VVHS's increasingly racially diverse student body (Figure 7) and historical academic achievement disparities by student racial groups (Figure 8) heighten the urgency for action and investigation specific to the inequitable perception of voice.

Consistent with the focus of the study and my leadership disposition, students' voices provide some guidance on the next steps in this area. Two of Misha's comments exemplify this, "When the other day, when you asked me, like, hey, can you come on

here and speak out? It's so weird for a Somali woman to be like, asked, like, hey, I want to hear your voice," and, "Encourage Black students to come in and talk and tell them your voice matters. We want to hear what you want at the school. This is your school as well." Autumn wrote after her involvement in the curriculum work group, "Honestly, prior to this meeting, I didn't think that staff cared about the students of the school, namely the students that weren't white and popular." Misha's and Autumn's comments remind us that voice inequities are not inevitable, but indeed are the results of our (adult educators) actions. That also means that future actions can disrupt the current reality. As a white, male, cishet principal, it is particularly important for me to make reflexive actions that open doors to students developing their perceptions of their voice. The importance of this work area is supported by a growing number of researchers who argue that "student voice has the potential to open up spaces and capacities 'for racial and ethnic historically marginalized youth to play key roles in school change and hybrid learning spaces' (Gonazalez, Hernandez-Saca, & Artiles, 2017); support more socially just school environments (Mansfield 2014; Salisbury, et al. 2019; Taines, 2014); and ensure that disenfranchised youth are included in decision-making processes (Ginwright & Cammarota, 2006; Cammarota & Romero, 2010; Salisbury et al., 2019) (Cook-Sather, 2020). At the same time, I need to recognize that I will "*never know* about experiences, oppressions, and understandings" the voices of our students who have been marginalized in ways I have not (Ellsworth, 1989, p. 310).

Misha's advice is straightforward and, when followed, I have seen it make a positive difference. However, to achieve our school's vision where each student feels a sense of belonging, the level of attention required should not be underestimated. Trust-

building actions like showing up in students' spaces for no specific reason other than to listen, understand, and support can build a strong foundation. As Ellsworth (1989), Cervone (2002), and Mitra (2021) all found across five decades, for students to share their voice they need to first believe that the adults value them as people. They advise establishing trust to take priority over completing tasks (stated differently, process over product). Ashley described regular exchanges with her dean that were open, natural, consistent, and not isolated to certain students. These experiences led her to believe he respected her enough to access her community. Allie shared in her individual interview, "If staff care about me, I'll share my opinion." What Allie is also communicating here is that if she does not feel staff care about her, she will keep quiet. A specific strategy to employ in response to this finding is to schedule unstructured time to be in spaces with students who perceive less voice. Another is to have personal conversations with students to describe various student voice efforts happening across the school to both invite students as well as understand why they are or are not interested in participating in the efforts. A third strategy is to include a more diverse team of educators in the design and facilitation of voice efforts. The richness of perspective and energy that is created via this final strategy cannot be overstated nor replicated in any way that I am aware of.

Similar to the final point above on collaboration among adults with diverse perspectives, student participants shared interest in hearing from their peers, particularly those from backgrounds different from their own. They shared that they both enjoyed and benefited from such experiences. Ashley described a grim current reality at VVHS, "I have some friends that don't go to parts of the school because there aren't enough people like them." She followed up with a belief that students hearing from each other

could change this reality. These student perceptions sound like Parker's 2010 piece titled, "Listening to strangers: Classroom discussion in democratic education." Parker posited that schools serve as ripe grounds for bridging differences because classmates can be exposed to perspectives that are more diverse and less familiar than those of family and friends, there are real social and academic problems for them to take up, and the context of schools is intentionally educational. As VVHS's principal, students' interest in hearing diverse perspectives is a particularly inspiring finding. Our work now is to ensure that students who do not perceive a voice at school authentically experience the appreciation for their perspectives that was described by study participants.

Other facets of students' identities found to influence their perception of voice included social circles, interests, and involvement in school-related activities. Topher summarized a circular relationship between activity involvement and social circles, then extended that to student voice, "So there is equal access in a sense, but it comes down to your personal interactions." In essence, if your friends are involved, then you are involved, and then you have voice. VVHS has significantly increased its efforts to engage students in official activities outside of their classes, via ideation that happened in part in response to this finding. These efforts have led to the creation of twenty-plus student-led clubs that originated from student proposals, reduced or eliminated participation costs, increased middle school programming, exposure to extracurricular options during the school day, and enhanced communication efforts that are targeted and multifaceted. With these ideas in motion, we now need to formalize our testing of them by collecting and analyzing data.

Work area 2: Intentional creation of opportunities for student voice

Eagle Voice was found to be a voice perception-enhancing strategy at VVHS. I encourage other school leaders to engage in similar crowdsourcing efforts with their students and staff. However, it is important to note that the characteristics contributing to this finding (i.e., openness to ideas, accessibility, and visibility across the school) are not isolated to crowdsourcing. In fact, these same attributes are what students positively described in surveys on the culturally proficient curriculum work group survey, associate principal interview team survey, and as a result of their participation in focus groups themselves. The implication here is that intentional actions for engaging student voice can shift students' perception of their voice; that is, again, we, as adult educators, can influence students' perception of their voice. A challenge is scaling such efforts across a school (especially one with 2900 students) in equitable ways. However, findings from the present study led me to believe students can contribute to and benefit from having a voice within all areas of a school—from curriculum review processes to space planning, to proactive and reactive behavior response plans, to hiring and evaluating staff, for a few examples.

A useful exercise for school leaders is to go through their leadership role and responsibility structures and ideate opportunities for student voice within each area. Student voice typologies from Chapter Two (Mitra, 2018; Hart, 1992; Toshalis & Nakkula, 2012) help generate possibilities as they describe different forms of student-adult partnerships. Most prototypes require an openness to sharing power to test them (Hartley, 2010; Camino 2000; Denner et al., 2005). More ambitious yet, school leaders could invite students to do this exercise with them. This might be the type of "radical

collegiality" Fielding described (2007a). As various efforts are tested, their impact should be investigated; the research methods employed in the present study could provide an instructive framework for future studies done in "real-world" (Patton, 2015) or "natural" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) settings. Such research fosters continuous improvement and is particularly important given the time and other resource constraints school leaders (and schools themselves) face.

Work area 3: Create and support a culture of student voice

Another of the four common shortcomings of student voice identified in the literature review was a lack of systemic support for student voices, which leaves the work up to individual actors. This shortcoming was found at VVHS in three different ways. Inconsistent experiences were found across both course subject areas (with students perceiving more voice in English and social studies spaces) and course-levels (with students perceiving more voice in on-level courses than Advanced Placement or Honors). Beliefs, comfort, and actions of individual teachers were also found to influence students' perception of voice.

Trafford's (2008) three features of a democratic school (an ethos of expressing and exploring ideas, structures for students to voice their opinions, and encouragement of student leadership) provide domains for school leaders to plan within as they create cultures of voice. Social studies educators should plan with these same features in mind as student voice fosters positive youth development around agency and civic engagement (Brasof & Spector, 2016; Mitra & Serriere, 2012 in Cook-Sather, 2020). At VVHS, we have found Trafford's three features to be complimentary. Eagle Voice is again our clearest example to illustrate this. Data collected at various points in the study suggested

Eagle Voice was a promising practice, with April focus group participants speaking directly to the unique *ethos* it created. Nikko said, "this is unlike other systems …it provides a direct line for students to school leaders." German reflected on his older siblings not having Eagle Voice as part of their high school experience. He saw this as an important sign that students are "helping the school and making it better." To Trafford's second and third features, Eagle Voice is a *structure* for students to voice their opinions, and *student leadership is encouraged* within it as students lead the event and encourage peers to participate. Crowdsourcing is just one way to create a democratic culture (see Blevins, LeCompte, & Wells (2014) for other ways technology can help cultivate democratic orientations).

The similar intentions of democratic education and student voice lend themselves to a symbiotic relationship. Pedagogically, students can listen to peers' ideas and share their own through discussions, deliberations, Socratic seminars, simulations, and inquiry-oriented learning design (e.g., Flynn, 2009; Hahn, 1998; Levy 2013; Parker & Hess, 2001; Parker, 2006). School leaders should borrow these practices from social studies educators with Trafford's (2008) features in mind as they do. However, it needs to again be acknowledged that a middle-class bias has also been identified in civic education classrooms (Castro & Knowles, 2017) with classrooms organized around white, middle-class, and male norms (Reay, 2008). Biesta et al (2009) assert that this is why civic educators need to start from the lived experience of the students in the classroom, which again shows the alignment between student voice and democratic education epistemologies.

The interdependent relationship between classroom and schoolwide culture is stronger than I anticipated (Figure 4.). In fact, participants spoke more to their desire for voice at the classroom-level than school-level. Participants reported having more voice schoolwide but wanting it in more intimate settings like the classroom. This is an essential recognition for school leaders to make as they work to create cultures of voice. We need to not only carefully plan our own actions, but also carefully plan support for teachers and other staff in implementing student voice strategies. Leadership visions will not be fulfilled without attention to both. As Wiseman & McKeown (2010) noted on leadership more generally, "multiplying" our impact is the essence of leadership.

Figure 4.

A lack of attention to adults' roles in student voice efforts might be what contributes to another common shortcoming of student voice—adults feeling left behind and undervalued (York & Kirshner, 2015; Zeldin 2004). This is the "undeniable risk" Mitra (2007, p. 251) describes when administrators advocate for a shifting of traditional power structures. Though this shortcoming was not found in the present study, it should not be assumed that it is nonexistent at VVHS. The absence of this shortcoming is likely the function of the research design as adult perspective was not included. In fact, individual adult interviews conducted in the spring of 2021 on student voice but separate from this study, suggest that indeed at least some adults have negative perceptions of student voice efforts at VVHS. I will extend this line of inquiry in the future.

Creating classroom cultures that support student voice

The importance of the classroom experience was so strongly communicated by study participants that consideration of classroom cultures deserves further specific discussion. Participants offered some direction on the classroom cultures they want—learning spaces characterized by consistency, respect, and two-way communication. Within these recommendations, rests some simplicity educators can draw confidence from. Across the data sets, specific pedagogical moves, resources, or individual attributes were not identified as prerequisites for students to perceive a voice. Instead, students shared a general craving for being heard and having agency. Participants were interested in sharing their perspectives in whatever way was afforded to them. Though the larger environment mattered at times, the contextual elements students called for are within the locus of control of educators. Considered together, this positions educators to look inward at the unique affordances of our roles to create and support avenues for student voice.

I have applied the design-based approach of a bias toward action (Gallagher & Thordarson, 2018) to expand student voice in classroom spaces. At the same time, additional investigation to more precisely understand what students desire is still needed given the highly nuanced nature of instruction. Based on what was found in the present study, such investigations should be contextualized to student identities, subject and level of courses, and dispositions of teachers. For me, this work will begin with classroom observations to identify both exemplars and non-exemplars of promising practices. This illuminates a limitation of the present study—students were not observed in real-time in spaces that were not explicitly created for student voice (i.e., real-time data was collected

from the culturally proficient work group, Associate Principal interview team, and Eagle Voice). Instead, students only reported on their experiences in the typical function of the school via focus groups, interviews, and surveys. An enhanced understanding of classroom behaviors that support student voice will allow for professional development to be more effectively designed. Our professional learning model calls for backward design across all topics (e.g., Wiggins & McTighe, 2005). However, to date, the desired instructional practices are not understood well enough to guide the design of professional learning.

A specific focus of classroom observations will be on how Black or African American students and Hispanic/Latino students experience a voice in these spaces. The January 2021 schoolwide survey finding of Black or African American students and Hispanic/Latino students reporting more voice in curricular, instructional, and assessment practices than their white and Asian peers (Table 17) is incongruent with other data points in the same survey, other research methods within the present study, and previous research by other scholars. The design, implementation, and analysis of the survey limit this finding. Nonetheless, it necessitates further investigation. April 2021 focus groups attempted to further understand this finding, but, again, more work is needed. Misha's comment about experiencing less voice in her Honors and Advanced Placement courses than her on-level courses will be included in this line of inquiry. At VVHS, and many other high schools nationwide, higher-level courses tend to be whiter spaces; this might explain why Black or African American and Hispanic/Latino students reported more voices in their classroom experiences.

In addition to classroom observations, adult perspectives will be collected via interviews. A diverse group of teacher participants by race, gender, department, level of course, and experience will be essential. Adult interviews might come with a supplemental benefit of adults feeling more included in student voice efforts. Another group of participants will be people in roles that commonly observe classrooms (e.g., associate principals and instructional coaches). The future research methods outlined in this section remain most squarely in the empathy phase of design thinking.

Work area 4: Walk the talk

The fourth and final common shortcoming of student voice that was included in the literature review but has not yet been included in this discussion is of students not seeing their voice lead to change. This shortcoming is particularly dangerous because it can lead to increased alienation and disconnection from schooling, as well as a perpetuation of relations of domination (Ellsworth, 1989); indeed, the opposite outcomes of the intentions of student voice (Mitra, 2018). A student perception of inadequate adult response to their voice could be the result of a lack of shared expectations of intended outcomes of the interaction, miscommunication (Ruddock, 2007), and/or adults not taking the actions they committed to either because they do not have the capacity to or because they choose not to (Bragg, 2007). Adult follow-through was identified as a primary area for improvement at VVHS in April focus groups.

With the stakes for appropriate follow-through high and multiple areas to attend to, action here requires *intentionality*, *innovation*, and *courage*. These notions are symbiotic but are presented below through separate examples to add clarity.

Intentionality

Intentional communication is particularly important at the beginning and end of student voice efforts. For example, at the outset of Eagle Voice, each student receives communications that describe timelines, processes, and what will be done at each phase. Students who submit ideas receive individualized communication on the status of their ideas. Prior to ideas and names being visible, the student guiding team and I develop metrics by which decisions will be made. All of these actions are taken on multiple platforms (i.e., email, social media, and in-school video announcements) and with students as co-creators. Following this study, more attention will be given to who the student co-creators are (and are not). Additionally, a showcase website prototype has been created for stakeholders to track the progress of ideas. We hope this website will also support the ideas themselves by providing a more dynamic option for collaboration across stakeholder groups. For example, a community member with experience in a specific area might use this platform to share their expertise. Both intended outcomes of the showcase website will be assessed.

Innovation

Student voice itself can be viewed as an innovation. Phases of student voice efforts where innovative approaches are particularly needed are when previously held beliefs or modes of operation prohibit student voice. For example, as is the case in Valley View Public Schools, school systems may have structures for curriculum review that are codified by Board Policy and reified by adult familiarity with past practices. So, when presented with student interest in curricular involvement, innovation was required to create a space for students to provide their perspective (i.e., the curriculum work group), while not usurping Board Policy. Similar thinking was required for student participation

in hiring processes—Human Resources Departments typically have strict protocols to follow on topics of confidentiality, lines of inquiry, preferred assets of candidates, and more. This was navigated by student participants receiving training in the School District's policies, procedures, and practices, and administrators facilitating the interview panel. These two examples yielded both a benefit to individual student participants and to the school as a whole. As a result of the present study, similar efforts, where the line between student and adult roles is blurred, will be scaled across our school.

Courage

In my final analysis, following-through on what we hear from students, as well as student voice work overall, comes down to courage. It is true that student voice work includes complexities, and that research is needed to better understand specific areas of this work, particularly the shortcoming of inequitable perceptions. However, whether to engage in student voice work is not a complex decision. Empirically, it is clear that student voice is good for students. Analysis from pragmatic and theoretical angles yields the same assessment. I believe the question educators are more commonly grappling with is whether student voice efforts are worth all the negative externalities that can come with them. Student voice presents an "undeniable risk" (Mitra, 2007, p. 251) to school leaders because it suggests a disruption of traditional power structures, which has been unwelcomed by the majority (Beck, 2019). The presence of this risk all too often leads to decisions that are adult-centered, hierarchal, slow moving, and influenced by a fear of a loss of control. In this sense, student voice is not dissimilar to other ambitious educational strategies in that what is best for students is not the unknown, but it is whether we have the *courage* to take the necessary action that remains to be seen.

Living into my values

Unfortunately, I have turned away from the "risk" Mitra describes on more occasions than I can count. When I have turned toward pedagogies and cultures of voice (Freire, 1970; Safir & Dugan, 2021), I have misstepped time and time again. I am grateful that the present study positions me to more confidently walk in the direction of voice and with tools that will help me along the way. As a principal trying to live into design-inspired approaches including an acceptance of the messiness of learning and willingness to move beyond the known to create *new* "best practices" (Gallagher & Thordarson, 2018), that is precisely what I set out to do in this study. However, this certainly does not mean that I leave the study without questions, areas needing further exploration, or misgivings about moves made within the study as both principal and researcher.

Inspiration also couples me out of this study. An anonymous student survey response wrote to the essence of the leadership approach I aspire to saying, "Instead of adults assuming what we want and need there are changes being made by teenagers." An anonymous focus group participant wrote in a follow-up survey, "Build the school so we are able to have a voice that is *heard* by teachers and staff, then our school can really become OUR school." Ashley spoke directly to the student experience I ultimately want for each student and the role of student voice within that, "For it to be a good healthy environment, for us to say yes to the three questions (Do I belong here?, Is this meaningful?, Can I do this?)...we need to be *heard*." I am deeply *humbled* and *convicted* to take intentional, innovative, and courageous "risks" so that each student is *heard*; so that each student can feel like they *belong*.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A

Complete Table of Direct Participants

Name	Grade	Race (as indicated in Student Information System)	Gender (as indicated in Student Information System)	Participant in
Alia	10	Black or African American	Female	October focus group
Allie	11	White	Female	October focus group, Individual interview
Ari	10	Asian	Female	October focus group
Ashley	11	Black or African American	Female	October focus group, Individual interview
Autumn	12	Asian	Female	Curriculum work group
Blake	11	Black or African American	Female	Interview team
Brynn	12	White	Female	April focus group
Carda	10	Asian	Female	April focus group
Chelsea	11	White	Female	Interview team
Dagney	11	Black or African American	Female	Curriculum work group
Grace	11	White	Female	April focus group
Hanifa	12	Black or African American	Female	Curriculum work group; Interview team
Hannah	10	White	Female	Interview team
Holt	12	White	Male	April focus group

Name	Grade	Race (as indicated in Student Information System)	Gender (as indicated in Student Information System)	Participant in
German	12	Hispanic/Latino	Male	April focus group
Grace	12	Hispanic/Latino	Female	April focus group
Jessamy	9	White	Female	October focus group
Johana	12	Black or African American	Female	Curriculum work group
Kamel	9	Black or African American	Female	October focus group; Individual interview
Luis	11	Hispanic/Latino	Male	Interview team
Marc	12	White	Male	Curriculum work group
Matt	10	White	Male	April focus group
Meg	12	White	Female	Curriculum work group
Miah	12	Asian	Female	October focus group
Misha	12	Black or African American	Female	April focus group
Payal	10	Asian	Female	October focus group
Peyton	12	White	Male	Interview team
Rava	11	Black or African American	Male	Interview team
Rorie	12	Black or African American	Female	April focus group
Topher	11	White	Male	April focus group
Vmishali	11	Asian	Female	October focus group

Appendix B

Follow-up Survey from October Focus Group

Question 1: Do I belong here?

a) Yes
b) No
c) Not sure

Question 2: Is this meaningful?

a) Yes
b) No
c) Not sure

Question 3: Can I do this?

a) Yes
b) No
c) Not sure

Question 4: Do students at VVHS have voice? Why or why not?

Question 5: How does student voice impact your high school experience?

Question 6: Do you feel any different about your sense of belonging at VVHS after engaging in this work today? Share what you can…

Question 7: How should the VVHS leadership team leverage student voice to improve your high school? Experience?

Question 8: Any other thoughts you'd like to share at this time…

Question 9: Name

Appendix C

Feedback Survey on Culturally Proficient Work Group Sessions

Question 1: Do I belong here?

a) Yes
b) No
c) Not sure

Question 2: Is this meaningful?

a) Yes
b) No
c) Not sure

Question 3: Can I do this?

a) Yes
b) No
c) Not sure

Question 4: Do you feel any different about your sense of belonging at VVHS after engaging in this work today? Share what you can…

Question 5: What suggestions do you have for what we (as a school) can do to help students with their sense of belonging? What can I (Mr Virgin) do?

Question 6: Any other thoughts you'd like to share at this time…

Question 7: Name

Appendix D

Associate Principal Student Team Interview Questions

1. Please tell us about who you are and some activities you enjoy.
2. What personality and energy would you bring to our school?
3. Please explain how will you make sure that all sports/clubs are treated equally and are balanced as the Activities Director?
4. What new facilities, equipment, practices, or policies would you implement?
5. What strategies would you use to raise money for activities especially in a pandemic?
6. Please give examples of how you currently engage with students. What will your relationships with current athletes and alumni look like here at Valley View?
7. Valley View High School is rich in diversity. How do you plan to utilize/incorporate that in your work and planning?
8. What are some key points for developing a good team?
9. Within our 3,000+ student body there are quite a few students who are actively involved in various activities. There are also many students who are not. What are your ideas to involve those who are not participating?
10. What do you envision as a day in the life of an athletic director and principal? What does a typical day look like?
11. What is your philosophy and plan of grade requirements for students in athletics/activities?
12. How would you approach a Covid situation on a team?

13. How would you handle a coach and athlete conflict? Can you offer an example where you have experienced this?
14. What attracts you to Valley View for this position?

Appendix E

Feedback Survey on Associate Principal Interview Team

Question 1: Do students at VVHS have voice? Why or why not?

Question 2: Is it important to you that students have voice at VVHS? In what areas/ways?

Question 3: Has student voice impacted your high school experience? How might student voice help improve your high school experience?

Question 4: Do you feel any different about your sense of belonging at VVHS after engaging in this work today? Share what you can…

Question 5: Any other thoughts you'd like to share at this time…

Question 6: Do I belong here?

a) Yes

b) No

c) Not sure

Question 7: Is this meaningful?

a) Yes

b) No

c) Not sure

Question 8: Can I do this?

a) Yes

b) No

c) Not sure

Question 9: Name