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Student Voice: How the Presence of School-Wide Student Voice Initiatives at the Elementary Level Impact the School Community

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Student Voice: How the Presence of School-Wide Student Voice Initiatives at the Elementary Level Impact the School Community

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This thesis, written under the direction of the candidate's thesis advisor and approved by the program chair, has been presented to and accepted by the Department of Education in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Science in Education.

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Abstract

Although the presence of student voice in schools has diminished over the past few decades due to a nationwide focus on standardized testing and school accountability, recent student movements and a push for equity and engagement in school reform efforts have brought this topic back to the forefront. A large body of research shows that involving students in school decision-making increases their leadership skills and makes them feel more connected to their school community. Few studies, however, examined elementary-level student involvement and its impact on the school community. The purpose of this research was to examine how the presence of school-wide student voice initiatives at the elementary level impact the school community. This study utilized a qualitative approach and data was collected through interviews, questionnaires, and focus groups at a K-8 School in Northern California. The results of this study showed that the school's perception of students' leadership capabilities was directly related to the number of student voice opportunities on campus. The minimal attention given to developing student voice opportunities at the elementary level failed to meet the principal's vision of leveraging student voice to develop a strong sense of community. Results also revealed that elementary students want increased opportunities to use their voice, which emphasizes the need for schools to develop and effectively implement student voice initiatives at the elementary level.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

As educators have sought to create environments that foster student achievement in an era of high-stakes testing and school accountability, students frequently report that they have not been included in these reform efforts (Levin, 2000; Mitra, 2004; Quaglia & Corso, 2014a; Smyth, 2006). While many schools have struggled to improve student outcomes, few schools have listened to student opinions or involved them in school decision-making. Consequently, research has found that feelings of alienation result in disengagement between students and their school, which leads to poor attendance, low academic performance, and high dropout rates (Mitra, 2008). However, research has also shown that schools that involve students in decision-making not only make them feel part of the school community, but also foster academic achievement (Damiani, 2014; Klem & Connell, 2005; Manfield et al., 2007; Mitra, 2001; Mitra, 2004; Mitra, 2008; Mitra, 2012). These students are seven times more likely to earn higher grades, perform better on standardized tests, and be academically motivated than those who feel like they have no voice at their school (Damiani, 2004; Quaglia & Corso, 2016; Sellman, 2009). Therefore, more schools are now including students in the reform process due to the growing realization that student voice is a powerful tool for improving schools (Cook-Sather, 2006; Levin, 2000).

Student voice has emerged as concept encompassing a wide range of initiatives that involve students in school decision-making and large-scale educational change. At the simplest level, student voice consists of students sharing their opinions with staff members at their school. More extensive student voice initiatives include students working together with staff members to address problems within their school and schools developing students' leadership skills so that they can lead their own improvement efforts (Fielding, 2001; Mitra, 2005). In this study, the

term student voice refers to schools valuing students' perspectives and involving them in their decision-making process.

Statement of Purpose

The current literature shows that there are numerous benefits of promoting student voice, including increasing students' self-concept and leadership capabilities, strengthening the connectedness between students and their school community, and making schools more responsive to student needs (The Educational Alliance, 2004; Klem & Connell, 2005; Manefield et al., 2007; Mansfield, Welton, & Halx, 2012; Mitra, 2001; Mitra, 2004; Mitra, 2008).

However, despite these potential benefits of student voice, barriers such as not providing equitable opportunities for all students to be heard and silencing students from marginalized backgrounds need to be addressed in order for these initiatives to be effective (Cook-Sather, 2006; Mansfield et al., 2012; Mitra, 2001; Mitra, 2008; Robinson & Taylor, 2012; Silva, 2001).

Research has also shown that school administrators can break down these barriers by having clear purpose for developing student voice at their school site, building strong relationships with students, and providing students with authentic leadership opportunities that help them learn how to use their voice (Cook-Sather, 2006; Damiani, 2016; Fielding, 2001; Lac & Mansfield, 2018; Mansfield et al., 2012; Mansfield, 2014; Mitra, 2001; Mitra, 2008; Mitra et al., 2012; Rudduck & Fielding, 2016; Smyth, 2006).

Despite the large body of literature that has identified student voice as an avenue for achieving meaningful school change, the majority of this research has focused on students in high school and college and there remains a lack of research on how to promote student voice at the elementary level. If younger students are not afforded authentic opportunities to use their voice in schools, they may receive the message that schools do not value their potential

contributions to decision-making. Not being heard can make students feel like they are not part of their school community and decreases both their academic performance and attendance.

Therefore, this study examined the presence of student voice at the elementary level and addressed the following research questions: (1) How does the presence of school-wide student voice initiatives at the elementary level impact the school community? (2) How can student voice be increased at Hill School?

Overview of the Research Design

Data collection for this study took place at a public K-8 school in Northern California, referred to in this research by the pseudonym Hill School. During the 2018-2019 school year, Hill School had a population of approximately 450 elementary students and 150 middle school students, 40% of which are classified as English Language Learners and 74% of which are eligible for free or reduced lunch (Education Data Partnership, 2019). I have worked as both a student teacher and a substitute teacher at Hill School for the past two years. In order to better understand the presence of student voice at this school site, I interviewed two school administrators, administered questionnaires to eight elementary teachers, and conducted a focus group with five fifth-grade students. I also observed Hill's Student Advocacy Council, which is a group of eighteen fifth-grade and middle school students who meet twice a month to discuss ways that their school can be improved.

Significance of the Study

The findings of this study reveal that despite the lack of student voice initiatives at the elementary level in both the existing literature and at Hill School, elementary students do want opportunities to use their voice. As shown through data from a student focus group and observations of Hill's Student Advocacy Council, elementary students recognize a lack of

equitable opportunities for them to use their voices and believe that older students' voices should not be the only ones being heard by school administrators. These young students want to be given the same opportunities as older students are and are adamant that they have much to contribute to school decision-making.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

This study examined how the presence of school-wide student voice initiatives at the elementary level impact the school community and how student voice can be increased at Hill School. This literature review begins with an introduction of student voice, exploring how the term is defined by various educators and how its meaning has evolved throughout history. The next section describes the benefits of promoting student voice, as well as the barriers that need to be addressed in order for it to be effective. This is followed by research detailing how school administrators influence the presence of student voice at their school site. The fourth section showcases examples of student voice initiatives that have been implemented in schools across the United States. Finally, this literature review concludes by identifying the gap in current research.

What is Student Voice?

Historical context of student voice. Student voice has recently become a buzzword in the field of education; however, this concept is not new. Although the term '*student voice*' was not used at the time, Rudduck and Fielding (2016) provide three examples of how the idea of student voice has been present in schools since the late nineteenth century. In the 1890s, John Haden Badley wanted students to feel like they had a say in their education so he established an independent boarding school in England that gave high school students an active role in school decision-making. Similarly, in the 1920s, Harold Dent headed a middle school in London that recognized the value of students' perspectives and allowed them to design part of the curriculum. Two decades later, in 1945, Alexander Bloom provided student voice opportunities that extended beyond student learning, as he established a panel at his high school in London in which students and staff members met weekly to discuss ways their school could be improved.

These school leaders' decisions to "create spaces where students could explore and express their views" were tied to the larger progressive educational movement, spearheaded by philosopher John Dewey, which recognized schools as catalysts for social reform (Rudduck & Fielding, 2016, p. 222-223). Dewey (1916) believed that true education comes through hands-on, interactive experiences that encourage students to think critically and creatively. This type of learning helps students realize their full potential and develop skills that they will use both inside and outside of the classroom.

It was not until much later, however, that students also began to realize the power of their voices in a changing educational and political world. In the 1960s, there were numerous student movements that asserted that students have a right to participate in decisions about their own education (Levin, 2000; Mitra, 2008; Mitra, 2014). In the midst of the Civil Rights Era, at least 20,000 students participated in the 1963 Chicago Public Schools Boycott, marching to protest the segregation of the city's public schools and inadequate resources for Black students (Mansfield et al., 2012). This sparked student activism in other cities, such as a march in New York the following year in which more than 450,000 students showed their support for full integration of public schools (Civil Rights Digital Library, 2018). In 1965, a group of middle and high school students from Des Moines, Iowa were suspended from school after refusing to remove black armbands worn in protest of the Vietnam War. This case was taken to the Supreme Court, who recognized the students' constitutional rights and ruled that they could express their political views in school (American Civil Liberties Union, 2018). In 1968, thousands of high school students led a walkout to challenge the treatment of Chicano students in the California educational system. This week-long walkout concluded when the school board agreed to meet with the students and hear their demands (Mansfield et al., 2012). These events illustrate how

students used their voice to enact change and reiterate the critical role that they have in shaping educational policy.

Despite a push for equity and engagement in school reform, the presence of student voice has diminished over the past few decades (Levin, 2000). Mitra (2004) attributes this decline to the nationwide focus on standardized testing and school accountability. Smyth (2006) agrees, explaining how it is difficult to build a community where students feel heard when so much time is spent preparing for the assessments mandated by the No Child Left Behind Act. However, recent movements such as Black Lives Matter and March for Our Lives have received widespread media attention and pushed the topic of student voice back to the forefront (Lac & Mansfield, 2018). Students across the country have led protests and school walkouts to advocate against issues such as police brutality, immigration restrictions, and gun violence (Cook-Sather, 2006; Levin, 2000). These movements have helped students realize the power of their voice and opened the door for schools to involve them in their reform efforts.

Defining student voice. The current literature reveals that educators have conflicting definitions of student voice. Cook-Sather (2006), for instance, views student voice as students having opportunities to express their opinions, while other educators believe it also requires students to be actively involved in decision-making at the school level (Fox, 2016; Quaglia & Corso, 2014a). Rather than viewing these as different understandings of student voice, Mansfield et al. (2012) propose that these definitions are actually just different levels on the student voice continuum. These levels are represented through a five-tier pyramid that showcases the increasing role of students in a school's student voice initiatives. The bottom tier of the pyramid views students as quantitative data sources, as schools can look at students' responses to survey questions to understand how they feel about their school site and what needs

to be improved. However, some researchers caution that seeing students as numbers disregards the contextual realities of students and their experiences (Mansfield et al., 2012; Raymond, 2001). The next level of the continuum views students as expressing their opinions and being heard by school officials. This can take the form of allowing students to hang up posters on campus about a topic they are passionate about, taking their views into consideration when hiring a new teacher, or enacting change based off the results of a student focus group. Although student government is also categorized at this level on the continuum, Mitra (2008) critiques this form of student voice initiative, arguing that most student governments have little authority and tend to focus on planning social activities instead of looking at school issues. There is also a concern that that students' suggestions will not be taken into consideration when making decisions. The middle tier of the pyramid views students as co-researchers, meaning that they work together with staff members at their school site to identify problems within their school and implement solutions. The second highest tier features schools develop students' leadership capacities and allow them to lead their own projects. Unlike the previous levels that rely on school administrators' participation in student voice initiatives, this tier helps students gain the skills needed to lead their own reform efforts. Finally, the top tier of the continuum represents the student voice possibilities that have not yet been discovered, as schools are encouraged to continue expanding their student voice initiatives.

The continuum proposed by Mansfield et al. (2012) illustrate that student voice looks different at every school site and heightens the importance of having a clear understanding of student voice for my research. In this study, the term student voice refers to schools valuing students' perspectives and involving them in their decision-making process. This definition

encompasses the second and third highest tiers of the student voice continuum, meaning that it includes students collaborating with staff members and students leading their own reform efforts.

Impact of Student Voice

Benefits of promoting student voice. Prioritizing student voice in schools has numerous benefits. Perhaps most importantly, students report higher rates of confidence and self-worth when given authentic opportunities to use their voice (Manefield et al., 2007; Mitra, 2001; Mitra, 2004; Rudduck & Fielding, 2016). In fact, in addition to viewing themselves more positively, research has found that promoting student voice also improves students' academic performance (Klem & Connell, 2005). Mitra and Serriere (2012) explain that when students feel like their voice is heard, they take more ownership of their education, thereby increasing academic achievement. These students are seven times more likely to earn higher grades, perform better on standardized tests, and be academically motivated than those who feel like they have no voice at their school (Damiani, 2004; Quaglia & Corso; 2016; Sellman, 2009).

In addition to strengthening students' social-emotional capacities and academic performance, Lac and Mansfield (2018) and Manefield et al. (2007) report that increasing student voice also advances students' leadership skills. Having authentic opportunities for students to use their voice not only makes them feel like they can make a difference, but also empowers them to advocate for themselves and speak out against injustices plaguing their communities (Lac & Mansfield, 2018; Mansfield et al, 2012). This leads to an increased sense of agency and self-efficacy, meaning that students believe that their opinions matter and that they can work to create positive change (Cook-Sather, 2006; Lac & Mansfield, 2018; Manefield et al., 2007; Mitra, 2012; Sellman, 2009). It also ties into students' critical consciousness and encourages them to be active citizens in our democratic society (Lac & Mansfield, 2018).

Additionally, schools benefit from providing opportunities for students to use their voice. Mitra and Serriere (2012) found that promoting student voice allows students and staff members to learn from each other, and these positive interactions strengthens students' relationships with their school administrators and teachers. Moreover, students attending schools that promote student voice reported feeling more connected to their school community (Klem & Connell, 2005; Manefield et al., 2007; Mitra, 2001; Mitra, 2004; Mitra, 2008; Mitra, 2012). This sense of belonging makes students more likely to take on leadership roles and participate in extracurricular activities at their school (Mansfield et al., 2012; Mitra, 2012). Manefield et al. (2007) explain how this also aligns with psychological research that shows that the relationship between autonomy and motivation, as those who have a sense of control over their environment are more likely to participate. Furthermore, student voice initiatives make schools more responsive to the needs of their students (The Educational Alliance, 2004). Mansfield (2014) argues that giving students a voice is "the most authentic means of advocating for social justice and promoting change in communities" (p. 398), as it challenges hierarchal leadership structures and allows students to reclaim a sense of power. Students are also more likely to push issues of equity that schools are hesitant to bring up, such as policies that discriminate against students of color or dress codes that shame female students (Mitra, 2008).

Barriers to promoting student voice. Although there are many documented benefits to promoting student voice, there are also barriers that schools need to overcome in order to ensure that their initiatives are effective. One of these barriers is that some schools are introducing student voice initiatives without considering the deeper implications. Instead of genuinely wanting to learn from and work with students to enact change, some schools are choosing to promote student voice solely due to its increasing popularity and their desire to stay competitive

among other schools (Rudduck & Fielding, 2006). These schools do not have a clear purpose for promoting student voice, have not evaluated whether their initiatives are equitable and inclusive, and are not prepared to make change based on student opinions.

Likewise, other schools think that they are prioritizing student voice when the reality is that their initiatives do more harm than good. One way that schools do this is by failing to provide equitable opportunities for all students to voice their opinions (Mansfield et al., 2012; Mitra, 2008; Mitra, Serriere, & Stoicovy, 2012; Robinson & Taylor, 2005; Smyth, 2006). A common example of this is the creation of student groups that are not representative of the schools' student population. Robinson and Taylor (2005) explain how school administrators may only want to hear from students who will say the "right" thing and not bring up topics that are deemed controversial. They may also ask teachers to select students to participate in these groups, and those with poor grades, behavioral challenges, or special needs are typically not chosen. This exemplifies how schools consciously and unconsciously silence student voices by controlling who can speak and what they can speak about (Fielding, 2001; Lac & Mansfield, 2018; Quiroz, 2001; Robinson & Taylor, 2016).

Furthermore, making students feel that their opinions do not matter by restricting their access to student voice initiatives is only one of the detrimental consequences of silencing students. Mansfield et al. (2012) explain that silencing students can result in feelings of "alienation, anonymity, and powerlessness" and make students hesitant to speak out in the future (p. 25-26). This is illuminated by a student focus group that Mitra (2001) conducted, as a student shared "if you talk and people don't listen, you don't want to talk anymore" (p. 92). This is especially true for students from marginalized groups, as they face additional challenges to speaking out to due inequitable power dynamics and discriminatory policies (Mitra, 2001; Mitra,

2008; Robinson & Taylor, 2012; Silva, 2001). Therefore, schools need to look closely at their initiatives, asking whether they are raising the voices of marginalized groups or only reinforcing the power and privilege of those who are already supported (Silva, 2001).

The Role of School Administrators

The current literature shows that school administrators' perception of student voice influences its presence on their campus. For this reason, it is important that school administrators have a clear purpose for developing student voice at their school site. School administrators need to critically reflect on the contexts of their school to determine how they can effectively promote student voice for their specific population, as the reform process needs to develop within the school and meet the needs of all members of their community (Damiani, 2016; Mitra, 2001; Mitra, 2008).

The foundation of school administrators effectively developing student voice is knowing their students and building relationships with them. Research has shown that school administrators who had frequent positive interactions with students were more effective in promoting student voice on their campus because they had a better understanding of what their students needed (Damiani, 2014; Damiani, 2016; Lac & Mansfield, 2018; Smyth, 2006). Oftentimes school administrators are responsible for overseeing student discipline, so in order to establish these relationships, they need to interact with students for more than disciplinary reasons and show that they genuinely care about their educational success and personal well-being. Quaglia and Corso (2014b) provide an example of this at a school in California in which school administrators show students that they are a valuable part of the school community by checking in with those who were absent. Students are required to stop by the office if they miss school for three or more consecutive days so school administrators can welcome them back.

Quaglia and Corso (2014b) also discuss a program called “In Their Shoes” that is implemented in various schools across South Carolina, in which school administrators sit alongside students in their classrooms, eat lunch with them in the cafeteria, and work with them on their homework assignments. This provides school administrators with the opportunity to get know students and gain a perspective of what their life is like.

Although building these relationships with students is the first step in creating a community that encourages students to speak openly and share their perspective (Rudduck & Taylor, 2005), school administrators cannot assume that students know how to effectively use their voice to communicate their opinions. In alignment with the second highest tier on the student voice continuum proposed by Mansfield et al. (2012), schools need to develop students’ leadership capacities so they have the tools to lead their own reform efforts (Quaglia & Corso, 2014b; Raymond, 2001). One way that schools can do this is by holding trainings that teach students how to express their voice in a meaningful way and transform their ideas into action (Quaglia & Corso, 2014b). They can also position students in authentic leadership roles that encourage them to identify problems within their school and implement solutions (Lac & Mansfield, 2018; Mansfield et al., 2012). This comes full circle, as Quaglia and Corso (2014b) believe that schools need to provide students with opportunities to use the skills they teach, explaining how teaching students to communicate and advocate for themselves but not allowing them to practice these skills within the school sends contradicting messages.

Moreover, school administrators also need to examine the barriers preventing students from speaking out. School administrators need to consider the population of their students, as well as the ways that their policies and practices may shape power dynamics and contribute to marginalizing conditions (Lac & Mansfield, 2018; Mansfield, 2014). Mansfield et al. (2012)

state that it is essential for them to “critically examine the social, cultural, and economic dynamics of their school communities and reflect on how personal attitudes and beliefs are influenced by their own position of privilege and oppression” (p. 22). School administrators need to consider which students are representing the student voice of their school, and if the student who is involved in numerous school activities is heard more than the student who has poor grades and behavioral problems. If this is the case, Cook-Sather (2006) and Fielding (2001) believe that school administrators need to make a conscious effort to seek out the perspective of all students and reach those who are not as willing to speak out.

Once these barriers have been broken down and students feel comfortable speaking out, school administrators need to ensure that they are not only listening to students, but also willing to learn from them and provide the necessary resources to make proposed changes (Fielding, 2001; Quaglia & Corso, 2016). Quaglia and Corso (2014a) explain how listening is not characterized by simply hearing what students have to say, but about the steps that are taken afterward that acknowledge that students’ perspectives were heard and are being considered. Quiroz (2001) agrees and states that “voice is not synonymous with empowerment...for voice to be empowering, it must be heard, not simply spoken” (p. 329). In other words, schools cannot move up on the student voice continuum if decisions are made *for* students instead of *with* students (Robinson & Taylor, 2005). Rather than hearing from students and making changes alone, school administrators need to work alongside students to promote student voice and ensure that their initiatives have a lasting impact.

Examples of Student Voice Initiatives

Student groups. Although there are many possibilities for student voice initiatives, the current literature shows that student groups are a common way for schools to promote student

voice. For instance, a high school in Northern California invited a group of students to participate in what is called a fishbowl activity. During this exercise, students sat in a circle and answered questions asked by adult facilitators as staff members observed the conversation. The staff members reported being amazed at how honest and serious students took this opportunity to share their perspectives. When the students who participated in the fishbowl shared about this experience, one student commented that “we aren’t just names anymore. We’re actually important and teachers have to listen to us now as they didn’t before” (Mitra, 2001, p. 663). These students also reported feeling more confident and connected to their school, which shows the positive impact of giving students authentic opportunities to use their voice (Mitra, 2001; Mitra, 2004).

Another example of a student group occurred when the Center for Research in Educational Equity, Assessment, and Teaching Excellence (CREATE) at the University of San Diego partnered with eighteen low-performing schools in the area to develop and implement programs that increase diversity and social justice. After hearing school staff members’ frustration about students’ lack of engagement and low rates of homework completion, Jones and Yonezawa (2012) explain that CREATE decided to hear the students’ perspective. To eliminate the bias of schools only selecting students who match a certain criteria, the organization randomly selected students from each school site and invited them to participate in student inquiry groups. Unlike focus groups in which students answer a list of questions created by researchers, students have full ownership of the discussions in student inquiry group. These students chose to talk about school climate, teaching, and curriculum and their findings were shared with the schools during their monthly staff meetings.

A final example of staff members hearing students' perspectives is the annual "Strength in Voices" Symposium that is hosted by Nevada's Washoe County School District. At this event, students from all grade levels present their recommendations for how school administrators can improve their school site and tackle larger social issues (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, 2018). Students are randomly selected to speak at this symposium to ensure that diverse voices are represented. The district's student voice coordinator reports that "One of the best things about this event is that we work to ensure a representative sample of students so we have all voices at the table. When it comes to leadership opportunities, we often default to students perceived to fit certain criteria, but all kids have a voice and they deserve to express it. If we're really trying to drive change and improvement, we *must* have students with diverse experiences at the table" (p. 5).

All three of these examples fall on the second-lowest tier of the student voice continuum that recognizes students expressing their opinions and being heard by school officials; however, there are also examples of student groups that are on the above tier and position students and staff members as co-researchers. For instance, Chicago Public Schools have developed student voice committees in over one hundred of their middle schools and high schools (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, 2018). These committees are dedicated to enhancing campus culture and student well-being, as students and staff members work together to improve both student-staff relationships and school programs. This empowers students because they see their ideas put into action and realize that they have the power to create change. Furthermore, Mansfield et al. (2012) provide an example of a student group in Texas that participates in the selection process for new teachers. After participating in a training on

interviewing, these students have the opportunity ask candidates interview questions and observe them teaching a lesson, which shows that the school values students' perspectives.

Student-led projects. Another common student voice initiative is student-led projects, which is categorized under the second-highest tier on the student voice continuum. At this level, schools are helping students develop the capacity to lead their own reform efforts. This connects to research conducted by Morgan and Streb (2001) who found that students learn the most when they are more than a participant in a project. This means that students benefit when they have ownership of the project, are fully involved in the planning process, and hold a leadership role. Often this consists of students identifying problems at their school site, working together with peers to come up with solutions, and then presenting these findings to their school administrators (Mansfield et al., 2012; Robinson & Taylor, 2012) This model emphasizes the importance of allowing students to use their voice firsthand, as they learn more from seeing they can have a positive impact than solely hearing how it is possible (Morgan & Streb, 2001). Having an active role in a project not only gives students an opportunity to use their voice, but also develops their leadership skills and helps them understand that they have the power to make a difference.

Conclusion

As the above literature shows, researchers have done extensive studies on student voice. Prioritizing student voice increases students' confidence, self-worth, and leadership skills, helps students feel more connected to their school community, and makes schools more responsive to student needs (The Educational Alliance, 2004; Mansfield et. al, 2007; Mansfield et al., 2012; Mitra, 2001; Mitra, 2004; Mitra, 2008). Although there are many benefits to promoting student voice, Robinson and Taylor (2012) believe student voice can be "simultaneously transformative and oppressive" (p. 33) due to the barriers that need to be addressed for student voice initiatives

to truly be effective. These barriers include not providing equitable opportunities for all students to be heard and silencing students from marginalized backgrounds (Cook-Sather, 2006; Mansfield et al., 2012; Mitra, 2001; Mitra, 2008; Robinson & Taylor, 2012; Silva, 2001). However, school administrators can break down these barriers by having a clear purpose for developing student voice at their school site, building strong relationships with students, and providing students with authentic leadership opportunities that help them learn how to use their voice (Cook-Sather, 2006; Damiani, 2016; Fielding, 2001; Lac & Mansfield, 2018; Mansfield, 2014; Mansfield et al., 2012; Mitra, 2001; Mitra, 2008; Mitra et al., 2012; Rudduck & Fielding, 2016; Smyth, 2006). Two ways that schools are giving students these opportunities are through student groups and student-led projects (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, 2018; Jones & Yonezawa, 2002; Mansfield et al., 2012; Mitra, 2001; Mitra, 2004; Morgan & Streb, 2001; Robinson & Taylor, 2012).

While there exists an increasingly large body of data regarding student voice, most of this research focuses on students in high school and college and there remains a lack of research on how to promote student voice at the elementary level. Therefore, the purpose of my research was to examine how the presence of student voice at the elementary level impacts the school community and how student voice can be increased at the elementary level.

Chapter 3: Methodology

Although there is a large body of research detailing the benefits of promoting student voice, there is limited research on student voice at the elementary level. Therefore, this study addressed the following research questions: (1) How does the presence of school-wide student voice initiatives at the elementary level impact the school community? (2) How can student voice be increased at Hill School?

Description and Rationale for Research Approach

I chose both the constructivist worldview and a qualitative approach to research because this design allowed me to draw upon the participants' experiences to gain an in-depth understanding of how student voice is promoted at my school site. A constructivist worldview is founded on the belief that individuals construct meaning of their experiences (Creswell, 2014). In using a constructivist approach to conduct research at Hill School, I was able to examine the meanings that the administrators, teachers, and students constructed about student voice based on their own experiences. This insight helped me understand how members of the school community feel about Hill's current student voice initiatives and how they can be improved. A constructivist approach also focuses on the context of the situation being studied in order to understand the historical and cultural settings of participants and their experiences (Creswell, 2014). Therefore, it is important to consider the demographics of the student population when examining the benefits and barriers of promoting student voice at Hill School.

Moreover, a qualitative approach is used when examining the meaning individuals attribute to a specific setting or situation (Creswell, 2014). Unlike a quantitative approach that relies on numerical data and statistics, a qualitative approach places value on the experiences of participants. This approach is appropriate for my study as I am conducting interviews, a

qualitative questionnaire, and focus groups that examine the complexity of participants' views. The broad, open-ended questions will allow participants to describe their experiences in their own words, while actively creating new meanings by sharing these stories (Seidman, 2013). I will construct meaning from their shared experiences and rely on their perspectives to shape my understanding of student voice at this school site.

Research Design

Research site. Research was conducted at a school in Northern California that serves students from kindergarten to eighth grade. In order to protect the participants of the study, pseudonyms are used in lieu of identifying names, and this school is referred to as Hill School throughout my research. Hill School was established in 1980 for families living at a nearby military base, and now also welcomes children from the growing residential community. This influx of students prompted the school to expand to a middle school in 2009. It is classified as a Title 1 School, meaning that at least 40% of the students are considered economically disadvantaged. During the 2018-2019 school year, Hill School had a population of approximately 450 elementary students and 150 middle school students, 40% of which are classified as English Language Learners and 74% of which are eligible for free or reduced lunch (Education Data Partnership, 2019)

I completed my general education student teaching at Hill during the 2017-2018 school year. I am now completing my special education student teaching and working as a substitute teacher at Hill for the 2018-2019 school year. This site was selected due to this connection, and because the principal is very passionate about promoting student voice. I discussed the purpose and methods with the principal, and he gave written permission for me to conduct my study at the school.

Participants. Participants were school administrators, elementary teachers, and elementary students at Hill School. Two school administrators, the principal and the assistant principal, were invited to participate in this study. The principal, Mr. Roberts, was an elementary teacher at a neighboring school for seven years before becoming the assistant principal at Hill. After serving as the assistant principal for five years, he became the principal at Hill in 2011. The assistant principal, Ms. Lee, worked as a middle school math teacher for eight years at a neighboring school before becoming the assistant principal at Hill, a role she has held for the past six years.

Seventeen elementary school teachers were invited to participate in this study and eight chose to participate. No demographic information was collected about the participating teachers to maintain confidentiality; however, it is known (through personal interactions not related to data collection) that all the elementary teachers are white, female, and have worked at Hill School between three and eighteen years as of the 2018-2019 school year.

The fifth-grade students who are members of Hill's Student Advocacy Council were invited to participate in this study. The participants were Hannah (Hispanic/Latino female), Gabe (White male), Lindsey (White female), Luis (Hispanic/Latino male), and Nikko (Hispanic/Latino male). In addition to these fifth-grade students, there are also thirteen middle school students who are members of the Student Advocacy Council. Students were selected by their teachers to become part of this group, and although half of the students are English Language Learners, there are no students with behavioral challenges or special needs.

Sampling procedure. Administrators, teachers, and students at Hill School were recruited for participation in the study. Mr. Roberts and Ms. Lee were asked to participate in two one-hour individual interviews. I attended a monthly staff meeting to explain the purpose of my

research and asked 17 elementary teachers to complete a qualitative questionnaire. I also attended a Student Advocacy Council meeting to invite the five fifth-grade students to participate in a thirty-minute focus group. These students and their parents/guardians signed a consent form in order to participate in the focus group.

Methods. The first interviews with the school administrators occurred at the beginning of the project, and the second interviews occurred after the student focus groups. Interviews occurred at a time, date, and location agreed upon by me and the participant. Interviews were audio recorded and interview protocol (Appendix B) was used. During the first interviews, I asked both administrators to describe their typical day, talk about a student who is a leader on campus, and provide insight on the school community. Their responses provided me with a strong understanding of how the administrators view their school and their roles in shaping the presence of student voice at Hill. During the second interviews, I asked both administrators about the evolution of student voice at their school site. They were asked to explain how they came to understand the value of student voice, what it looks like at their school site, and the challenges they face in promoting it. Their responses helped answer the first research question that explores how school-wide student voice initiatives at the elementary level impact the school community, as well as the second research question that looks at how student voice can be increased at Hill School.

Elementary teachers were asked to complete a qualitative questionnaire through Google Surveys. Participants responded anonymously to a set of five questions (Appendix C) that asked them to describe the school community and the current student voice initiatives at Hill School. Their responses helped me better understand teachers' perceptions of these topics, and answered

both research questions by looking at how school-wide student voice initiatives at the elementary level impact the school community and how student voice can be increased at Hill.

Finally, fifth-grade students from Hill's Student Advocacy Council participated in a focus group. This focus group occurred after one of the monthly meetings of the Student Advocacy Council. It was audio recorded and a focus group protocol was used (Appendix D). This format allowed me to hear directly from the fifth-grade students and better understand how they feel about the current student voice initiatives at their school. Asking students to describe a time when they felt part of the school community and a time when they felt like they could effectively use their voice at school helped me answer the first research question that explores how school-wide student voice initiatives at the elementary impact the school community. Asking students to describe a time when they felt that they could not use their voice at school and having them explain what prevented them from using their voice helped me answer the second research question that looks at how student voice can be increased at Hill School. Additionally, I observed four Student Advocacy Council meetings and took notes during each of these forty-five minute observations.

Data Analysis

Data was collected concurrently. To prepare the data for analysis, I used Temi, an online transcribing service, to convert the audio recordings from the interviews and focus groups to text. The transcribed data, along with the questionnaire responses and observation notes, were entered into a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet. I began the initial coding process by reading through the data and becoming familiar with it. This process began as deductive, as I had ideas of what the codes might be, then continued as inductive, as the rest of the codes were based solely on the data from the interviews, questionnaire, focus group, and observations. After completing the

open coding process, I utilized focused coding to re-code the data based on the identified themes. These codes were organized into comprehensive themes through concept mapping, which facilitated further analysis and allowed me to detect overarching themes for the data (Bazeley, 2013).

Finally, the data from the interviews, questionnaires, focus group, and observations were presented as a side-by-side comparison and triangulated, meaning that I examined evidence from several sources of data and used it to build a coherent justification for themes (Creswell, 2014). This comparison allowed for a deeper understanding of student voice, as it highlighted all participant data for a specific theme in the same section, making parallels and disparities apparent.

Validity and Reliability

Steps were taken to ensure the validity and reliability of this study. Attempts to ensure validity, which Creswell (2014) defines as the accuracy of findings, included disclosing researcher bias and having the researcher conduct all of the interviews, focus group, and observations. Triangulating the data from the interviews, questionnaire, focus group, and observations also showed coherent themes among multiple data points (Creswell, 2014). In order to ensure reliability, which Creswell (2014) defines as consistency, procedures were consistent and distinct protocols were used to ensure that the questions were the same for all participants (Creswell, 2014). For example, the same teacher questionnaire was given to each participant. I also provided a rich, thick description of the research site and participants increase the reliability of the study (Creswell, 2014). Additionally, it is important to note that although these findings are not generalizable to other contexts since this study focused on the perspectives

of participants at a single school site, readers can still make connections between these findings and the presence of student voice at others school sites.

Researcher positionality. I have an existing bias toward the belief that student voice is important; however, I am aware of this bias and analyzed the data as objectively as possible. Moreover, I am privileged due to the color of my skin and know that I will never fully understand the experiences of students of color. I am also in a position of power over the students due to my role as both a student teacher and substitute teacher at Hill School. I tried to reduce these effects during the focus groups by assuring students that their responses are important and will be kept confidential. I frequently interacted with these students at the school site and hope that my relationships with them made them feel comfortable and honest during the focus groups.

Chapter 4: Findings

While a large body of research has detailed the benefits of student voice, this study specifically looks at the presence of student voice at the elementary level and its impact on the school community. Observations of Hill's Student Advocacy Council and conversations with administrators, teachers, and students led to the emergence of three main themes that reveal how the presence of student voice at the elementary level impacts the school community. The first is a clear disconnect between the principal's vision and teacher perception of student voice. Although Mr. Roberts's experiences as an administrator have contributed to his clear vision of what student voice looks like at Hill, the elementary teachers had difficulty articulating how it was promoted at the school and were unaware of the current student voice initiatives. The second theme is a relationship between perceived leadership capabilities and student voice opportunities. Some staff members do not believe that elementary students are capable of being leaders, and this leads to a lack of student voice opportunities for these students. In contrast, middle school students are recognized for their leadership potential and have numerous opportunities to use their voice at Hill. The final theme is the stratification between elementary and middle school grades. There is not only a divide between these two groups, but also a desire among elementary students to have more student voice opportunities.

Disconnect between Principal's Vision and Teacher Perception of Student Voice

Principal's vision. Hill School has undergone many changes since Mr. Roberts became an administrator twelve years ago, and he credits these changes with teaching him the value of student voice. In his first years as principal, Mr. Roberts recalls the police officers and social workers who were called to Hill multiple times a week, as well as the students who were regularly sent to the main office for disruptive behavior. Much of this behavior stemmed from

economic hardship and unstable home environments, as a large population of students had parents who worked multiple jobs in order to put food on the table and have a roof over their heads. Others had caregivers who were incarcerated, struggled with addiction, or communicated with fists instead of words. Many families spoke little English and were struggling to create a new life in the United States after escaping the violence plaguing their homeland. Ultimately, students were not receiving the support they needed to cope with these adverse circumstances and struggled to regulate their emotions, behave appropriately, and focus on academic instruction in their classrooms.

Mr. Roberts knew that something had to change; however, these challenges remained despite his attempts to improve the school culture. Eventually, he realized that he had failed to take the students' needs into consideration, and this prompted him to invite students to participate in fishbowls. During these fishbowls, students sat in a circle facing each other, while administrators and teachers sat on the outside of the circle and listened to the students' discussion. An outside facilitator asked students to share their experiences at Hill and how staff could better support them. These students expressed their need to feel safe at school and their desire for their teachers to believe in them, as many did not have this sense of security and comfort at home. They also wanted a place at the table, assuring Mr. Roberts that they would excel once they were listened to and had a say in school decision making.

These fishbowls prompted Mr. Roberts to come to terms with the true meaning of student voice, which he believes is getting "a barometer feeling of how things are going in your community." In this case, the fishbowls examined students' experiences at Hill and showed administrators that there were things they needed to improve upon. However, Mr. Roberts believes that listening is only the first part of student voice, as there is no reason to ask students

for their opinions if they will not actually be taken into consideration when making decisions. This idea aligns with his second vision of student voice, which is for the school to enact change based on the students' feedback, and this is exactly what Mr. Roberts has spent the past five years doing.

Inspired by the fishbowls, Mr. Roberts began to transform the school community to better meet the needs of the students. He engaged teachers in professional development centered on culturally responsive teaching to help them identify their own biases and discuss how Hill can better support students from marginalized backgrounds. He encouraged teachers to learn new strategies to better support the school's large population of English Language Learners and promoted teaching to the whole child. He replaced clip charts and other punitive behavior management systems with classroom agreements and a system of logical consequences. Mr. Roberts also formed partnerships with community organizations to bring classroom volunteers, free-after school programs, and a food pantry to the school. He believes that the combination of these components led to a culture of caring and the notion that every student can learn and will learn at Hill School. Although many students are still experiencing adverse circumstances, this school-wide belief system strives to support all students both academically and emotionally.

The idea of giving students a place at the table remains strong at Hill School. When asked about opportunities for students to have a voice, Mr. Roberts explained that he provides the things that students ask for. An example of this is when students wanted more choices at lunchtime and Mr. Roberts responded by creating a chess club and book club for students. He says that students "know when they tell me something that I am going to work at it to make sure that happens for them," and that this has encouraged more students to use their voice. Moreover, Mr. Roberts asserts that all students are heard at Hill. He explains that Hill provides numerous

opportunities for students to speak out, such as the Warrior Wednesday program he created last fall. The purpose of this initiative is to bring the elementary students together for an hour each week to develop their social-emotional skills, teach them the importance of advocating for themselves and their communities, and ultimately “build leaders who go out and change the world”. Though the programming varies each week, previous Warrior Wednesdays have included guest speakers from the community, discussions about the school’s monthly character traits, and interactive activities led by Mr. Roberts. Initiatives such as Warrior Wednesday not only remind Mr. Roberts of the potential these students have, but also help Hill School make progress toward his goal of “stepping back and letting the students run the school.”

Teacher perception of student voice. Despite Mr. Roberts’s clear vision of what student voice looks like at Hill School, teacher questionnaire responses reveal a major disconnect between his vision and what other staff members see happening. Four of the teachers mentioned that they hold class meetings or provide other opportunities for students to authentically share their thoughts on various topics; however, it was challenging for them to provide examples of student voice that occurs outside of the classroom. Although one teacher mentioned Warrior Wednesday and another discussed how the results of school-wide surveys can be used to drive school decision-making, the other six teachers were unclear or unaware about the current initiatives at Hill. For example, an elementary teacher who has worked at the school for twelve years noted that “there is a new student voice committee, but I don’t know much about it.” The committee that this teacher is referring to is the Student Advocacy Council. In contrast to what this teacher included in her questionnaire response, the Student Advocacy Council is in its fourth year and informs staff members about their work through bi-monthly newsletters. Another

elementary teacher who has been at the school for four years stated that “student voice is not apparent or obvious” at Hill School.

Ms. Lee, the assistant principal at Hill, also disagreed with Mr. Robert’s belief that all students are heard. When asked how she makes sure that all voices are heard, Ms. Lee identified this as a problem that she “doesn’t know how to fix,” which contradicts Mr. Robert’s belief that all students are heard. She explains that she tends to only hear from students involved in groups such as Leadership or Peer Court, which are solely for middle students.

Perceived Leadership Capabilities Influence Student Voice Opportunities

Limited student voice opportunities for elementary students. Based on interviews with administrators and responses to the teacher questionnaire, it is apparent that student behavior is a challenge at Hill. Although the teacher questionnaire solely asked about the presence of student voice and its impact on the school community, three teachers responded to these questions with frustration about elementary students’ challenging behavior. An example of this is when a teacher was asked to “describe the community at Hill” and responded by stating that “students have freedom to do whatever and there is little to no consequence for negative behavior.” Similarly, another teacher critiqued the lack of clear discipline guidelines in place for student misbehavior saying that this “leads to them believing they are allowed to disrespect and talk to teachers, fellow classmates, and other adults however they want.”

In alignment with elementary teachers’ frustration toward the lack of school-wide behavior management, Ms. Lee also struggled to see past the elementary students’ behavior. For example, when asked to describe an elementary student who is a leader at Hill, Ms. Lee replied that it was too difficult for her to think of one. Her disciplinary role as assistant principal requires her to spend a large part of her day supervising elementary students during recess time

and documenting misbehavior; therefore, the students who frequently get in trouble come to mind and she does not see these students as leaders. Although not all the elementary students misbehave, her intensive involvement with students struggling to meet the behavioral expectations of the school prevented her from considering how the leadership potential in other elementary students might be fostered. This perception of elementary students contributes to the lack of student voice opportunities at this level at Hill, as the only school-wide initiative inclusive of elementary students is Warrior Wednesday. Although fishbowls were utilized to hear from elementary students in the past, almost all the current elementary students were not students at Hill when these fishbowls were last conducted five years ago so it cannot be considered a current initiative.

Moreover, while the Student Advocacy Council does have elementary representatives, the five elementary students on the Council are all in fifth grade so this is not representative of the elementary student body. The structure of this group also prevents these students from actively contributing, as observations from these bi-monthly meetings show that the sole focus of the Student Advocacy Council is to improve the school for middle school students. For example, one of the top priorities of the Student Advocacy Council is to create a student lounge for the middle school students and the group is currently writing a proposal to present to Mr. Roberts. When brainstorming ideas for this lounge, the group facilitator acknowledged that it was challenging for the fifth graders to contribute and told them “I know it’s hard working toward something that you won’t get to enjoy.” She told them to picture themselves as middle school students and think about what they would want in the lounge when they gain access to it the following school year. Another exclusionary practice occurred when the Student Advocacy Council looked at the results of a school-wide survey. Although Ms. Lee could have pulled data

at the elementary level as well, the group only looked at the survey results of the middle school, so the fifth-grade students were not able to contribute to the discussion of why the middle school students responded the way they did. In addition to not verbally participating, this disengagement was apparent in the fifth-grade students' disinterested behaviors, which included rocking in their chairs, chewing on their fingers, and fidgeting with their clothing.

Speaking with these fifth-grade students in a focus group reinforced the lack of student voice opportunities at the elementary level. None of them considered the Student Advocacy Council as an opportunity to use their voice, which reinforces what was seen during observations of these meetings and reveals that participating in a student voice initiative does not automatically equate with having opportunities to share and be heard. When asked what opportunities there are for elementary students to use their voice, all five students struggled to think of examples, which indicates the lack of opportunities available at the elementary level. Ultimately, only two out of the five students were able to provide examples of opportunities they have to use their voice. Lindsey described how restorative circles are used in her classroom for students who do not abide by their set agreements. During a restorative circle, the class has a conversation about the students' behavior and decides on a logical way for them to repair the harm they caused. Lindsey stated that this process allows students to "say how we feel about what's happening and come up with solutions." In addition, Luis mentioned that he is able to share how he is feeling when talking with the school counselor, as she listens to him and makes him feel heard. Yet, neither restorative circles nor talking with the school counselor are school-wide student voice initiatives since they are limited to the classroom.

It is also important to note that Nikko and Hannah did not answer any of the seven questions during the thirty-minute focus group. This behavior illustrates another challenge to

promoting student voice at Hill, which was highlighted by Ms. Lee. During her interview, she shared that “adults don’t ask students their opinions, so students are surprised when adults are asking and don’t know how to respond.” Although Warrior Wednesday is helping combat this practice, this initiative does not provide opportunities for all elementary students to be heard or allow them to be part of the school’s decision-making process. Furthermore, the lack of participation in the focus group was supported by the elementary teachers’ perspectives on student voice. On the teacher questionnaire, elementary teachers were unable to articulate how student voice impacts the school community, saying that they “have not seen it,” “are not sure,” “do not know,” and “are not aware of any impact.” These responses align with the limited opportunities available for their students to use their voice.

Student voice opportunities are designed for middle school students. Unlike the elementary students, the middle school students are viewed as leaders who can make a difference at Hill. When asked to describe a student who is a leader at Hill, Ms. Lee immediately commented that it is very difficult to think of a specific middle school student because they are all leaders. She ended up choosing to talk about an eighth grader who is involved in both Leadership and Peer Court, describing her with adjectives such as “kind,” “organized,” and “mature.” She also talked about how this student had great ideas and is creative about solving problems. It is important to note that this question did not specifically ask her to describe a middle school student, although this is how she perceived it. This response was an extreme contrast from when she was asked to describe an elementary student in the same capacity and could not pinpoint a single student who she viewed as a leader.

This perceived difference in leadership capacity leads to the creation of more opportunities available to middle school students. As previously discussed, observations of the

Student Advocacy Council illuminated that this group solely focuses on middle school initiatives. In addition to creating a student lounge for middle school students, the group is also working to give racial equity presentations in middle school classrooms and have middle school students become part of the School Site Council. Outside of the Student Advocacy Council, Hill's 150 middle school students have the option of participating in Leadership, Peer Court, and various service projects.

The focus on leadership opportunities at the middle school level has contributed to a strong sense of community for these students. Ms. Lee states that these students "really love each other," explaining that many of them have overcome similar adversities and understand that they are all dealing with something. She says that the majority of the middle school students have been going to school together at Hill since kindergarten and this has allowed them to build strong relationships with one another. This connects with what the middle school students shared during a Student Advocacy Council meeting; when they were asked to name their favorite part of Hill, they unanimously agreed that it was the school community.

Stratification between Elementary and Middle School Grades

Not a unified school community. The lack of student voice opportunities at the elementary level has failed to achieve Mr. Roberts's vision of developing a unified community at Hill. Although the student voice opportunities for middle school students has contributed to a strong sense of community at the middle school, this inequity has led to stratification between the elementary and middle school students. In a literal sense, the campus is divided as the elementary and middle school classrooms are physically located on separate sides of the school, and this layout restricts their ability to connect with one another and see themselves as students at the same school. Hill's school administrators and teachers also contribute to this stratification,

as they perceive the elementary grades as chaotic and undisciplined and the middle school as a loving community where students are capable of being leaders. This contrast heightens the divide between the elementary and middle school students as staff members view the student population as two separate groups instead of a unified school community. Their perception also fails to address why the leadership capabilities of elementary students are suddenly recognized when they transition to sixth grade.

This divide is also very apparent at the Student Advocacy Council meetings, as the elementary and middle school students choose to sit separately and rarely interact with one another. It also appears that the middle school students feel like the fifth-grade students do not belong in this group, which perpetuates their disengagement and hesitancy to participate. An example of this occurred when the group was working on the proposal for the student lounge and Ethan, a fifth-grade student, suggested that students should be able to choose to work on homework in the lounge. Instead of explaining to him that there was already a place for middle school students complete their assignments during lunchtime, understanding that he would not know this as a fifth-grade student or being open to his suggestion, the middle school students immediately shut down his idea by showing their disapproval and shouting reasons why this was not a possibility for the student lounge. Throughout the entirety of this discussion, the middle school students repeatedly said that this lounge was only for them and were adamant that they were not open to the idea of sharing it with younger grades. Each time this was brought up, many of the middle school students turned and looked at the table where the fifth-grade students were sitting, as if to remind them that they are not welcome there. The fifth-grade students already felt that they could not contribute to the conversation, and these type of comments from the middle school students made them even less willing to share during the Student Advocacy

Council meetings. It also validates the discomfort of the fifth-grade students, as Luis revealed that he “sometimes doesn’t feel comfortable with the middle schoolers.” Observations also showed Lindsey hesitantly raising her hand multiple times to share during a Student Advocacy Council meeting but putting it down after middle school students were repeatedly being called on.

Elementary students want to be included more. Despite their difficulty generating responses for most of the focus group questions, the fifth grade students were all eager to share their thoughts about more elementary students joining the Student Advocacy Council. When this question was asked, all five students immediately smiled and nodded their heads in agreement. Lindsey said that “the school should hear from younger grades’ voices and not just fifth grade and middle school,” with Ethan agreeing that more representation is needed from the younger students. Luis also concluded that “I wanted to be in this group when I was younger. I wanted to change things about the school. I want the opportunities that the middle schoolers have.”

Conclusion

The findings of this study illuminate the relationship between perceived leadership capabilities and student voice opportunities, as the school’s perception of students’ leadership capabilities directly relates to the presence of student voice opportunities at Hill School. School administrators and teachers view the middle school students as leaders and provide them with numerous student voice opportunities, while in contrast, the elementary students are seen as incapable of using their voice and this results in limited student voice opportunities at this level.

The consequence of not providing equitable opportunities for all students to use their voice connects to the first research question which asked *How does the presence of school-wide student voice initiatives at the elementary level impact the school community?* The lack of

attention to developing student voice opportunities at the elementary level has failed to achieve Mr. Robert's vision of leveraging student voice to develop a strong sense of community across the entire school. Instead of creating a unified community at Hill, the lack of student voice initiatives at the elementary level has created a divide between the elementary and middle school students. It has also made the five elementary students who are part of Hill's Student Advocacy Council less likely to speak out, as observations of these meetings showed their disengagement and hesitancy to participate after their ideas were not listened to. Silencing these students further divides the school community by elevating the voices of the middle school students who are already heard by school administrators.

The second research question asked *How can student voice be increased at Hill School?* As shown through data from the student focus group and observations of Hill's Student Advocacy Council, the elementary students are adamant that they have much to contribute to school decision-making and believe that older students' voices should not be the only ones being heard. The elementary students want to have the same opportunities to use their voice as the middle school students, which illuminates how student voice can be increased at Hill School.

Chapter 5: Discussion

The findings of this study join an existing body of research that shows that there are benefits and barriers to effectively promoting student voice. In terms of benefits, research has shown that students feel more connected to their school community when there are opportunities to use their voice and this was apparent with the middle school students at Hill School (Manefield et al., 2007; Mitra, 2001; Mitra, 2004; Mitra, 2008). The middle school students can choose to participate in the Student Advocacy Council, Leadership, Peer Court, and various service projects, and these student voice opportunities have contributed to a strong sense of community among this group. The students' close relationships were apparent during observations of the Student Advocacy Council meetings and brought up by assistant principal Ms. Lee during her interview.

Moreover, the barriers preventing Hill School from effectively promoting student voice also aligned with existing research. One of these barriers is not providing equitable opportunities for all students to use their voice and this is shown at Hill through the lack of student voice initiatives at the elementary level (Mansfield et al., 2012; Mitra, 2008; Mitra et al., 2012; Robinson & Taylor, 2005; Smyth, 2006). In contrast from the middle school students who have various opportunities to use their voice, the nearly five hundred elementary students have very limited opportunities to share their perspective. Although five elementary students are part of the Student Advocacy Council, they are all in the fifth grade and find it challenging to participate in a group that solely focuses on improving things at the middle school level. In addition to limited representation of elementary students, the Student Advocacy Council also excludes other populations of students. All eighteen members of the Student Advocacy Council are high-achieving, well-behaved students who were recommended for their leadership capabilities.

There are no students who have behavior challenges or special needs, which means that the opinions and ideas coming from this group are not representative of the entire student body.

Not providing equitable opportunities for all students aligns with another barrier to effectively promoting student voice at Hill School. Cook-Sather (2006) and Mansfield et al. (2012) found that students are hesitant to speak out when they feel like they are not heard and this was seen during observations of the Student Advocacy Council. Since this group is mostly comprised of middle school students and is solely focused on initiatives at the middle school level, the fifth-grade students do not feel like their opinions matter and are shut down when they do speak out. An example of this occurred when Ethan, a fifth-grader, made a suggestion about the student lounge and the middle school students immediately disregarded his idea. Another example of this is when Lindsey stopped raising her hand at one of the meetings because all the middle school students were being called on instead. After these instances of not being heard, the fifth-grade students reported not feeling comfortable speaking up during Student Advocacy Council meetings and observations showed them becoming increasingly disengaged.

Implications for the Literature

In addition to supporting much of the research on student voice, my findings build on the existing literature by expanding the current theoretical frameworks and providing new insights about student voice. The first of these theoretical frameworks proposes that school administrators' perception of student voice influences its presence on their campus (Damiani, 2016; Mitra, 2001; Mitra, 2008). Although research has shown this to be true at many schools, the results of my findings found that this was not true at Hill School. Hill's principal, Mr. Roberts, has a clear vision for student voice and is confident that all students are heard at his school, failing to acknowledge the lack of student voice opportunities at the elementary level.

His perspective of student voice at Hill School also contradicts the views of the school's assistant principal, Ms. Lee, and most of the elementary teachers who do not see opportunities for all students to use their voice. This disconnect illuminates the importance of ensuring that all staff members understand their schools' vision for student voice and contribute to the ways in which it is promoted. It is more likely that student voice will be effective if a team of staff members are working together to promote it instead of a single school administrator. This also makes it easier to recognize when student voice initiatives fail to align with their school's vision.

Another significant finding was that solely having student voice opportunities does not automatically equate to a strong sense of community. This contradicts the theoretical framework that advances the idea that promoting student voice strengthens students' relationships with staff members and makes them feel more connected to their school community (Klem & Connell, 2005; Manefield et al., 2007; Mitra, 2001; Mitra, 2004; Mitra, 2008; Mitra, 2012). Although there are numerous student voice initiatives at Hill School, these opportunities are restricted to certain students, meaning that a large population of students are not able to participate. Instead of contributing to a unified school community, this creates a divide between those who have opportunities to use their voice and those who do not. Furthermore, it reveals that having opportunities for students to use their voice is not enough; these opportunities need to be inclusive and equitable in order to contribute to a strong sense of community.

Perhaps the most important finding was that despite the lack of opportunities for elementary students to use their voice both in the existing literature and at Hill School, elementary students do want opportunities to use their voice. Although there were barriers preventing the fifth-grade students from fully participating in the Student Advocacy Council meetings, all five elementary students agreed that the middle school students should not be the

only ones being heard. Ultimately, the elementary students want the same opportunities as the middle school students and believe that they have much to contribute to school decision-making.

Implications for Policy and Practice

Within Hill School, these findings reveal the need for a clear vision for student voice and more equitable student voice opportunities. Since the interviews found that Ms. Lee views student voice differently than Mr. Roberts and the questionnaire revealed that many teachers are unaware or uninformed about the current student voice initiatives at Hill, the first step to effectively promoting student voice is ensuring that all staff members have a clear understanding of student voice and are working toward the same vision. There are also conversations around student behavior that need to be had, as it is apparent that this is not only a concern for Ms. Lee and some of the elementary teachers, but also seems to be restricting the presence of student voice initiatives at the elementary level. However, the perception of elementary students is only one of the barriers that needs to be addressed at Hill, as there is also a lack of student voice opportunities at the elementary level. Although Warrior Wednesday develops elementary students' leadership capacities, only the five fifth-grade students who are members of the Student Advocacy Council have the opportunity to utilize these skills and participate in school decision-making. In addition to creating more opportunities for elementary students to use their voice, school administrators need to reevaluate their decision for including these fifth-grade students in the Student Advocacy Council. The experiences of these students raise important questions about why these students are part of the Student Advocacy Council if it is solely focused on improvement at the middle school level. Developing a clear vision for student voice and providing more equitable opportunities for all students to use their voice are the first steps in creating a unified school community at Hill.

Both at the school level and from a social justice standpoint, these findings reveal the need for schools to critically examine how their policies and practices are controlling who has a voice and work together to make their initiatives more equitable. Research has shown that staff members often need training in order to dismantle these power imbalances and effectively promote student voice, and Lac and Mansfield (2018) address this through their framework titled *Principal Orientations for Critical Youth Educational Leadership*. This framework details how schools not only need to provide opportunities for all students to use their voice, but also ensure that these initiatives seek the participation of students who are traditionally not included, such as those with behavior challenges or special needs. These initiatives should also not be limited to those in high school or college, as younger students want schools to help them develop their leadership skills and give them authentic opportunities to use their voice.

Limitations of the Study and Directions for Future Research

Limitations. While this study yields meaningful findings, there were also several limitations. One limitation of this study was that the research was conducted at one school site with a small sample of participants. Although Hill School has a diverse student population, all the elementary teachers are white and female, meaning that other perspectives are not represented. Also, despite reaching out to elementary teachers in a variety of ways, only eight of the seventeen teachers responded to the teacher questionnaire so it is important to consider how these findings may have been different if more teachers participated. Another limitation of the study is that the researcher had limited time to collect data. This prevented the researcher from inviting students from outside the Student Advocacy Council to participate in her study, which would have resulted in findings that were more representative of the student population at Hill School.

Directions for future research. As noted, the purpose of this research was to examine how the presence of student voice at the elementary level impacts the school community, and how student voice can be increased at the elementary level. My findings revealed the need for schools to have a clear vision for promoting student voice as well as equitable opportunities for all students to use their voice; therefore, I would encourage further research in one of two ways. The first would be to look at how schools develop a clear vision of what student voice looks like on their campus. Prior research has only looked at the influence of school administrators and student voice; however, my findings show that all staff members need to be part of the vision for student voice to be effective so it would be interesting to see how this is achieved. The second suggestion for future research would be to investigate ways schools have acknowledged and addressed inequities in their student voice initiatives.

Conclusion

Student voice is not a checklist or a set of criteria; rather it is an understanding that students' opinions are important and should be heard. Too often, schools view students as the problem instead of the solution, failing to realize that involving students in school decision-making processes has the potential to increase academic achievement and make their school community more equitable and inclusive. From the walkouts protesting segregation during the Civil Rights era to the recent marches pushing for stricter gun regulations, student movements throughout our nation's history show the impact that young people can have and why our schools must ensure that student voices continue to be heard.

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Appendix A: IRB Approval

December 19, 2018

Danielle O'Reilly
115 Kelly Drive
Novato, CA 94949

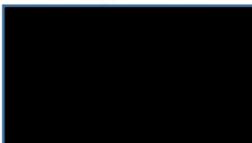
Dear Danielle,

On behalf of the Dominican University of California Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Participants, I am pleased to inform you that your proposal entitled *Student Voice* (IRBPHP application #10715) has been approved.

In your final report or paper please indicate that your project was approved by the IRBPHP and indicate the identification number.

I wish you well in your very interesting research effort.

Sincerely,



Randall Hall, PhD
Chair, IRBPHP

Appendix B: Interview Questions for Administrators

First Interview

- 1) Tell me about Hill. How is it different from other schools?
- 2) How has Hill changed under your leadership?
- 3) Tell me about the community about Hill.
- 4) Describe your typical day as an administrator.
- 5) Tell me about a student who is a leader at Hill. What makes this student a leader?
- 6) With such a diverse student population, how do you ensure equity among all students?

Second Interview

- 1) How did you come to understand the value of student voice?
- 2) How do you define student voice?
- 3) What does student voice look like at Hill?
- 4) How do you promote student voice at Hill? What opportunities are there for students?
- 5) Tell me how you help Hill students develop the skills to use their voice.
- 6) Tell me about the challenges to promoting student voice at Hill.
- 7) How does the presence of student voice impact the school community?
- 8) How do you make sure that the voices of all students are heard?
- 9) In what ways do you work *with* students rather than *for* students?
- 10) Are there other student voice initiatives or programs that you want to bring to Hill?

Appendix C: Questionnaire for Teachers

- 1) How would you describe Hill? How is it different from other schools?
- 2) Describe the community at Hill.
- 3) How is student voice promoted at Hill?
- 4) Describe the ways that student voice is being used to create change at the school.
- 5) How do student voice initiatives at the Hill impact the school community?

Appendix D: Focus Group Questions for Students

- 1) Tell me about a student who is a leader at Hill. What makes this student a leader?
- 2) Tell me about a time when you felt part of the community at Hill.
- 3) Tell me about a time when you felt you used your voice to create change at Hill.
- 4) Tell me about a time when you felt you couldn't use your voice to make changes even though you felt change was needed. What do you think prevented you from using your voice?
- 5) What is the biggest accomplishment of the Student Advocacy Group at Hill?
- 6) What is the most important change you want to make at Hill this year?
- 7) What advice would you give to students at other schools who wanted to start their own student voice group?