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STUDENT VOICE IN SCHOOL REFORM:
FROM LISTENING TO LEADERSHIP

Although many high schools have struggled with how to improve academic outcomes, few have gone straight to the source and asked the students. In recent years, the term "student voice" increasingly has been discussed in the school reform literature as a potential avenue for improving both student outcomes and school restructuring (including Carbonaro & Gamoran, 2002; Fielding, 2002; Mitra, 2003; Rudduck & Flutter, 2000). The concept addresses a core issue that has been missing in the discussion of school reform—the dilemma of ownership. Simply put, student voice initiatives push schools to reevaluate who gets to define the problems of a school and who gets to try to improve them. Typical student activities in U.S. high schools include planning school dances and choosing a homecoming court. Student voice denotes considerably different opportunities for young people. It describes the many ways in which youth could actively participate in the school decisions that will shape their lives and the lives of their peers (Fielding, 2001; Goodwillie, 1993; Levin, 2000).

At heart, the expectation behind student voice is that students are included in efforts that influence the core activities and structures of their school, yet student voice opportunities vary from school to school in terms of the expectations about youth capacity and the desire to foster youth leadership. In practice, student voice can entail youth sharing their opinions on problems and potential solutions. It can also entail young people collaborating with adults to address the problems in schools or youth taking the lead on seeking changes, such as improvements in teaching and learning, as well as school climate.

Drawing on my previous research of three student voice initiatives in U.S. schools, this chapter conceptualizes how schools can engage students in school reform by providing detailed illustrations of what student voice looks like in practice. The examples illuminate the lessons learned by these groups and consider both the benefits of their chosen strategy to increase student voice and the difficulties of their chosen path toward reform. The first example will describe a minimal form of involvement of students—adults *listening* to students through interviews and surveys. Teachers and other school personnel

then interpret the data. The second example discusses students engaged in *collaboration* with adults. In such situations, students and teachers work together to conduct research and to seek changes at the classroom or school-wide level. Decisions are shared at this level, but most often adults have the final say. The final example describes a *leadership* initiative in which youth sought to make changes in their schools and communities. This last case describes a rare opportunity in which the young people assumed much of the responsibility for making changes happen, and they took the lead in making decisions.

LISTENING: ELICITING STUDENT PERSPECTIVES AS DATA

To understand reform at the ground level, some schools have asked students directly how they have experienced changes in their schools. When gathering student information, this listening to student voice consists of adults seeking student perspectives and then interpreting the meaning of the student data as a part of a reform initiative. While it is the most common form of using student voice reported in the research, students have little ownership of listening efforts.

Such initiatives can provide great benefits to school reform, however. Gathering information from students is a key data collection strategy for learning about student experiences and ways to improve schools, as seen through the repeated use of focus groups, surveys, interviews, and shadowing young people as they move throughout the school day. Students are often neglected sources of information in a school reform efforts; yet asking students' opinions reminds teachers that students possess unique knowledge and perspectives about their schools that adults cannot fully replicate (Kushman, 1997; Levin, 2000; Rudduck, Day, & Wallace, 1997). Most often reforming schools and outside researchers have sought student perspectives on learning, pedagogy, and curriculum (Cushman, 2000; Daniels, Deborah, & McCombs, 2001; Nicholls, 1993; Pope, 2001; Powell, Farrar, & Cohen, 1985; Thorkildsen, 1994; Turley, 1994), including students' opinions on teaching and learning and what should be changed in schools. A common theme across such studies was the students' desires for positive, strong relationships with their teachers as opposed to the isolation and lack of respect and appreciation that students reported they often feel (Lynch & Lodge, 2002; Phelan, Davidson, & Cao, 1992; Poplin & Weeres, 1992; Yonezawa & Jones, 2003).

My research at Seacrest High School [all identifying names have been changed in this chapter] provides an example of a reforming school that benefited from listening to student experiences—particularly the impressions of alienated and struggling students (Mitra, 2001). Situated in a bedroom community containing a mix of working- and middle-class students from

primarily Caucasian, Filipino, and Hispanic backgrounds, the school received a large grant from the Bay Area School Reform Collaborative (BASRC), a $112 million education initiative in the San Francisco Bay area that encouraged schools to collect data on problems in their school and develop tailor-made reform strategies based on their findings.

The teachers and administrators at Seacrest examined why a large percentage of ninth and tenth grade students in their school were failing their classes. After considering what data would be most informative for deciding how to improve their school, teachers and administrators decided to ask failing students why they believed they were unsuccessful in school. Four students who had received at least three Ds or Fs the previous year joined teachers during a summer professional development day. The students were asked to speak truthfully to help their teachers understand how they might make the school a better place to learn.

On the day of the focus group, the students sat in a circle called a "fishbowl." Teachers sit in a bigger circle outside the students watching intently and taking notes:

Adult facilitator: What works and what doesn't work that teachers do to help students learn?

[silence]

Student 1: In a lot of my classes, the smart people raise their hands. [Teachers] always listen to them more than the people who barely raise their hands.

Student 2: Often there might be favoritism in some cases. Like, you could have one student who comes in late but does his work but he won't get in trouble. Another comes in who doesn't do all this work but enough to pass and he'll get in more trouble.

Student 3: Some teachers gave up on me instead of encouraging me. I think they gave up on me because I gave up.

Adult facilitator: How do you learn best?

Student 1: I need to see it, act it out, you know?

Student 2: I learn a lot better from people who sit next to me than the teacher. The teacher puts me near all the people who earn good grades and the people who are passing. I learn from them.

[The two other students nod in agreement.]

When asked to explain why some students do not succeed in school, the students in their own words talked about having differences in learning styles,

needing additional counseling and tutoring, and having a sense of mutual respect between teachers and students. Their responses provided teachers with specific reform issues to target in the upcoming year.

Students' frankness, as exemplified in the discussion above, in discussing the problems was greatly appreciated by the Seacrest faculty. A teacher present at the focus group described the student responses as "very honest, very serious, their chance to contribute. They were careful to say what they really felt. They were not trying to mislead us. They weren't saying what we thought we wanted them to say. I was in awe." The student data encouraged Seacrest staff to jump right into tackling some of the tough issues of reform rather than spending much time easing into the process.

Gathering perspectives from students not only provides rich data for school reform efforts; it also provides a distinctly different kind of information for consideration. When not involving students, and particularly those who are failing subjects or rarely attending school, it is easy to shift the blame of failure to these students rather than look at problems with the school's structure and culture (Fine, 1991; Kelley, 1997; Stevenson & Ellsworth, 1993; Wehlage, Rutter, Smith, Lesko, & Fernandez, 1989). Adults tend to blame problem behaviors on a lack of motivation or neglectful parenting; the youth instead talk of wanting respect from adults and supportive opportunities to learn and to gain responsibility (Heath & McLaughlin, 1993).

Seacrest High School supports this contrast in perspectives. When Seacrest compared teacher survey response to what they learned during their student focus groups, the faculty was shocked at the differences in opinion. According to teachers, the top two reasons for student failure were motivation (30% of responses) and attendance (16.5%). As the schools conducted more focus groups, students of all backgrounds and academic tracks pointed to specific problems with the school itself as the basis of the failure of many classmates rather than locating their difficulties in themselves or their neighborhoods, as many of their teachers did. The Seacrest students raised concerns similar to those mentioned in other efforts to listen to students. As was the case in other research using student focus groups, Seacrest youth attributed their failures to a lack of fit between their needs and what the schools provide (Cusick, 1973; Nieto, 1994; Soohoo, 1993). They suggested structural and classroom procedures that hamper their learning, the lack of opportunities to build caring relationships with adults, and blatant discrimination as being the actual problems in the school.

While listening to students can provide many benefits, a potential limitation of listening to students stems from not involving students in the interpretation of data gathered in research. In most instances, adult researchers analyze

student responses by transforming their responses into analytic themes and drawing conclusions from their assumptions. This strategy is particularly problematic when adult researchers attempt to fit youth responses into preset categories. Lumping the perspectives of young people into one mold rather than recognizing that youth face different challenges depending on their communities and backgrounds can lead to stereotyping youth rather than understanding the unique challenges faced by the students and their school community (Strobel & McDonald, 2001). To have student perspectives sufficiently understood requires having youth more actively involved in the reform process.

COLLABORATION: ADULTS AND YOUTH PARTNERING TO CONDUCT RESEARCH AND EFFECT CHANGE

Student voice activities focusing on collaboration consist of adults and youth working together to share in the planning and decision making in their endeavors. Students share ownership of such efforts with adults. The adults tend to initiate the relationship and ultimately bear responsibility and have the final say on group activities and decisions. Students often report experiencing a feeling of empowerment by actively participating in school reform initiatives, such as the design and analysis of inquiry-based reform practices (Mitra, 2004). In other words, collaboration in part encourages students to research themselves rather than just being researched (Fielding, 2004).

Student voice efforts at Whitman High School illustrate a collaborative student voice relationship (Mitra, 2001, 2003). Located in a bedroom community in northern California, Whitman High School serves a community comprising first-generation immigrants from Latin America and Asia as well as working-class African Americans and European Americans. Half of Whitman High School's students are English-as-a-second-language learners, and half qualify for the free or reduced priced lunch program. With the school graduating just over half (57%) of the students that start in ninth grade and with one third of its teachers electing to leave each year, Whitman High School staff felt compelled to make changes.

When Whitman received a major grant from BASRC to launch a three-year reform effort, the school's reform leadership team made the unusual decision of asking students what they felt needed to be improved. Fourth-year English teacher Amy Jackson partnered with the school's reform coordinator, Sean Martin, to develop a process for students from all academic levels, races, and social cliques to share their views on why students were failing at Whitman, to analyze their perspectives and those of their peers, and to decide collectively upon actions to take.

Like Seacrest, the reform leadership at Whitman asked students what needed to be improved in the school for them to be successful. While initially intending to solely listen to students, as the process unfolded the reformers decided to involve students in data analysis, in addition to their serving as a source of data. Jackson and three other adults worked with students to make sense of the results of the data they collected. The youth and adults worked together to develop a shared language and a set of skills that created a shared knowledge base and understanding from which the group could communicate and proceed with their activities. The adults offered assistance to the students by asking probing questions and providing informal assistance with research methods. The students particularly needed help with learning how to break the data into chunks and to organize their work so that they accomplished the tasks identified as the joint work for each meeting. The adults also taught the students education lingo, such as the concept of "standards-based reform," to help them to identify themes in the data.

The students did their share of teaching during this process as well—particularly through translating student explanations into language that adults would understand. The reform leadership at Whitman was struck by the difference it made to have students interpret the focus group data rather than adults alone. They noticed that when adults analyzed the data, they translated student speak into adult words, which often strayed from the intentions behind the students' words. Having Whitman students at the table preserved the integrity in the student voices by ensuring that the adults understood the issues students truly felt were most important. For example, the adults interpreted a student's comments in one focus-group transcript as meaning that she did not see the value of coming to school. The students in the group explained to the adults that this interpretation was incorrect. The student was missing school due to family problems, and when she came back to school, her teacher seemed very angry with her for missing so much class. Ashamed of the possibility of letting down her teacher and mentally tired from the problems at home, this student did not want to engage in such a confrontational situation with the teacher, so she stopped coming to class entirely.

The students divided the data and worked in small groups in subsequent meetings to identify recurrent themes in the focus group data. Over the course of three months, the students and adults worked together to identify four main themes in the transcripts as the most pressing areas for reform at Whitman: (1) improving the school's reputation; (2) increasing counseling and information resources for incoming ninth graders; (3) improving communication between students and teachers; and (4) raising the quality of teaching. The students then presented these findings to the school faculty.

The enthusiasm generated from the focus group experience caused the student participants to want to continue to work on some of the problems that they had identified. The students decided to call themselves Student Forum. By considering the focus group themes and talking to teachers and students further about what changes were most needed in the school, they chose to focus their efforts on building communication and partnership between students and teachers due to the tense school climate the pervaded the school. They developed two complementary strategies for building communication between students and teachers that have been classified in previous writings as 'teacher-focused' activities and 'student-focused' activities (Mitra, 2003). By developing this two-pronged strategy, teachers and students taught each other about their perspectives, and both learned to be open to the other's point of view.

Teacher-focused Activities

Students learned about teacher-focused activities from Amy and from Sean Martin—the school's reform leader who had been a guidance counselor in the school for 25 years and who assumed responsibility for running the school's reform efforts once the BASRC grant began. The students participated in many professional development sessions with teachers. At these activities, Student Forum members served as experts on the classroom experience in a variety of activities.

Through participation in teacher professional development sessions, Student Forum members provided teachers with feedback on how students might receive new pedagogical strategies and materials. In the words of one teacher:

It focused [us] on the reason we're here. A lot of staff remarked [on] how you get a very insightful perspective with a student at the table. You don't have to second guess what they would think. Because so many teachers seem to think . . . they're the experts on how students would react and what they would think. People find it refreshing. And it's a little intimidating for some people to have them there, but I've heard positive comments.

Teachers found the student perspectives extremely helpful to their reform process.

Students also suggested ways that pedagogy and curriculum could be changed to improve student learning. For example, a consistent concern of Whitman students was the school's math curriculum, because the textbooks did not provide them with sufficient examples or explanation. Student Forum critiqued all of the possible new textbooks and identified which books seemed to provide the best explanations and which appeared confusing and unhelpful. They recommended to the math department that they adopt two particular

textbooks that they believed would best meet the needs of Whitman students based on criteria such as whether the book had clear and specific explanations to the problems.

Student Forum members helped teachers to translate their words into language that students would understand. For example, the youth helped to translate curricular standards into terminology that students could grasp. Junior Troy Newman explained that they focused on ". . . breaking down vocabulary that some students may not understand. So we were trying to put it [the rubrics and the departmental standards] in a way where all students understand. I guess you could say we were translators."

Similarly, Student Forum developed the questions for the school-wide writing assessment that all students took twice a year to measure writing competency after learning that students did not take the assessment seriously because they did not see its relevance to their lives. Student Forum member Joey Sampson explained, "One of the main things about the writing assessment is that the students don't like the topics or the prompts they had to write on." Student Forum developed new questions for the assessment for the following year so that the topics would be relevant to students and phrased them in language that the students could understand. To develop good essay questions, one Student Forum member explained, "We went out to the classrooms and asked students what issues they wanted to write about. And now we're taking them and trying to write the prompts about things [that] we think the students would have no trouble writing on." The resulting questions focused on violence in the media and drug abuse among teenagers.

Students also served as an accountability mechanism during teacher meetings, and they expressed great pride in this role. Senior Student Forum member Joey Sampson commented, "When teachers are with each other, they're with their peers. But with students around, their teacher part engages and they want to show that they can be on task." Likewise, teachers noticed the difference. Just having students present in the room changed the tenor of meetings. Resistant teachers particularly were less likely to engage in unprofessional behaviors such as completing crossword puzzles during staff meetings or openly showing hostility toward colleagues.

The students also benefited from teacher-focused activities. They developed a deeper understanding of the changes teachers were trying to make, which allowed them to see teachers as both fallible and sincere. For example, participation in teacher research groups on teaching reading helped students to gain a greater understanding of what their teachers were trying to teach them. A student participant explained, "One of the things that [teachers in the group learned to use was] reading circles. My teacher used it on us today [in class].

Knowing where it came from, having the background, that was cool knowing what we were going to be doing." The student's participation in the reading research group helped her to improve her own learning and to gain a greater understanding of the classroom from a teacher's perspective.

Student-focused Activities

In addition to teacher-focused activities, Student Forum also developed student-focused activities in which the group helped teachers to gain a better understanding of student perspectives. In their first attempt at a student-focused activity, pairs of students took teachers on tours of their neighborhood. In the words of one student tour guide, "It was cool. They [teachers] learned where we lived, worked, the different territories, where we stay away from, where people get killed and hurt for being in the wrong areas. I thought it was really successful."

Students felt that they truly did come to know their teachers better, and they believed that teachers came to understand them better as well. During a pizza lunch, the tour guides reflected on their experience. One guide remarked, "I was in the car with the principal, and we took him right down the street. We got fifty yards away and he got lost. Now he knows where I live. And I see him down the hall and he says 'hi' to me. He'll go out of his way. I've seen a lot more of the teachers try to make an effort to say 'hi' and include students in their conversations."

Students also learned that teachers could provide advice and support in tough situations. A guide commented, "It brought out a better student-teacher relationship. A girl was talking about how she walked home at night and how someone took her purse. The teachers were thinking of ways they could help her out. From doing this process, we can better the teacher and student relationship."

Over one third of Whitman's 90 teachers participated in this student-focused activity. They found the experience valuable and commented that they developed a better understanding of students' lives. In the words of one teacher praising her experience on the tour, "You guys inspire us." The teachers were so enthusiastic about the experience that the administration made the tour a regular part of new-teacher orientation at the beginning of the school year.

As a second student-focused activity, the group wanted to address the school's reputation—a pressing concern that was mentioned repeatedly during the focus groups. Student Forum member Joey Sampson explained, "Ghetto is an important topic because we're classified as 'ghetto'—our school is. And the neighborhoods that we come from are. We were like, 'Well, our reputation is that we're perceived as a ghetto school. So it's like where does that come from?' We wanted to deal with that directly."

The group decided to initiate the conversation by hosting a student discussion on the issue, which they called a "Ghetto Forum." By creating opportunities to openly engage in a discussion of language, Student Forum encouraged their peers to discuss their identities and to consider what sources they draw upon to define that identity. Student Forum facilitated a similar conversation with all of Whitman's teachers about what "ghetto" means, how it applies to Whitman, and the consequences for the school. The group found that some students used the term as a source of identification and pride amongst their peers but viewed it as a derogatory term when used by people who did not live in their neighborhood. Others viewed "ghetto" as a state of mind that lowered expectations for themselves and for others.

An adult reform leader at the school also noted a change in teacher-student communication during the Ghetto Forum activity that occurred later in the same school year. He commented, "It's fascinating what [students] were saying about how teachers responded to them—a lot less condescension! One young man was saying, 'I never thought I would agree with that teacher!' And really feeling much more of an equal basis . . . So we're going forward with a better relationship between students and staff." The group planned to continue the dialogues the next school year and to think about how to move beyond the stalemate that existed based on differing perceptions about students and their neighborhood. They hoped that by raising consciousness about the different interpretations of individuals and their neighborhoods, they could create a collective sense of the direction in which they wanted the school to move.

Overall, the student-focused activities helped to reduce tension between teachers and students, to increase informality, and to help teachers and students identify one another as individuals rather than as stereotypes. For example, one Student Forum member commented that in her tour group, "Teachers and students learned equally. We got off track talking about our lives in general instead of talking about the neighborhood. I felt like I was driving around with my friends. There was no tension." Given the history of tension between teachers and students at Whitman, students and teachers alike appeared to value the opportunities to build positive relationships.

The experiences also empowered the youth involved in Student Forum. As I have explained in previous research (Mitra, 2004) participating in these activities inspired youth to believe that they could transform themselves and the institutions that affect them. A leader of Student Forum, Sala Jones, explained, "Me being a student, I can really do something. I'm just not an ordinary guy. I have a voice . . . My opinion counts and people need to really respect my opinion, to value it." Students develop a greater sense of self-worth when they feel that people are listening to their perspectives.

Rosalinda Gutierrez, another member of Student Forum, transformed her role in school from forced compliance in which she attended school out of obligation to that of change maker. She explained that through participation in Student Forum, she believed that she could make an impact in improving the school:

> Now I'm very confident in myself. I know that even if there are people that I don't like working with, I could still work with them. I'm actually good at this type of thing—helping others. I know that I can make changes. Sometimes I used to think that our lives were kind of pointless. And it's like, you can make real changes. Now it's the school, and maybe in my career and my adult life I could actually do something, with a lot of determination and a lot of will.

Participating in the group also helped Student Forum youth to acquire the skills and competencies to work toward these changes, such as developing problem-solving skills, learning public-speaking skills, and collaborating with students from diverse backgrounds and possessing opposing opinions.

LEADERSHIP: YOUTH-LED INITIATIVES TO SEEK SCHOOL-WIDE CHANGE

Unlike collaboration efforts, one of the explicit goals of student voice initiatives demonstrating leadership is to increase student authority and decision-making power. To examine conditions that can enable student voice initiatives in which youth assume strong leadership positions in the endeavors, I conducted a broader examination of youth activism in 16 student voice efforts in Northern California. Through interviews with youth and the adult advisors in these groups, I examined different structures and designs for student voice and youth activism to study how they influence the types of outcomes that can occur in such work. The data from this research have suggested that the examples closest to autonomous student voice initiatives tend to occur in community-based organizations rather than coming from groups working within the auspices of school personnel. An example of such a construction is Unity of Youth, which began as a community-based response to racial conflict and violence at five schools in the San Francisco Bay Area.

Unlike Whitman, Unity of Youth originated as a non-profit organization, not as a school-based club sponsored by someone on the school payroll. Unity of Youth received permission from Hillside High School, a large, struggling, comprehensive school in an urban area, to hold its meetings in an empty classroom once a week after school. The group developed campaigns to address injustices and to build alliances with students from backgrounds different from their own as well as with adults. Campaigns

addressed concerns about school-specific issues, such as surveying students at Hillside about the school's pressing needs and subsequently lobbying for cleaner, open bathrooms. The group also developed a long-term project to create a Student Unity Center that would provide students with a range of services in one location, including health services, academic support with tutoring and mentoring, after-school programs, job placement, an ethnic studies library, and conflict resolution resources.

Most striking about Unity of Youth was the way in which youth were at the forefront of these initiatives. When outsiders called to request information about the group, youth answered the phone and scheduled interviews with me. When it came time to apply for grant funding, youth wrote the proposals. Graciela Soliz, one of the student leaders of Unity of Youth explained, "Working with Unity of Youth, I learned how to write a grant, and it really helped me with my public speaking. It actually got me back together academically, it helped. It's helped me in so many ways with my leadership skills, getting other students involved, getting along with adults and definitely with other youth."

Students in Unity of Youth emphasized that youth make the decisions in the group. Regina Johnson, a Unity of Youth leader, explained, "Adult advisors can only do as much as the youth do. If we don't do our part, then they don't have a job. We are the ones who do the most work." Regina continued to explain the role of adults as only engaging in activities that youth cannot do. For example, Regina explained "They'll set up meetings with the school board or set up meetings with the city council."

The group's adult advisor, Elsa Managua, demonstrated that youth leadership is as much about the adults in the process consciously stepping back to allow young people the space to lead (Mitra, 2005a). As an adult advisor, she focuses on being clear on her role as a facilitator of youth development. She explained:

I think the more I do it, the more I'm just clear about okay so what are, what's my objectives? What are my motives? I'm here to facilitate the information for [youth]. I tell them, "If I'm doing what I intend to do really well then you guys will have this job in four years." That's the leadership development. There's this process for [youth to] go [though] and I'm just here to see that [they] go from step, step one, step two, step three, step four. With youth organizing, I mean if we wanted to open up a center, all the adults could get together and open up a center in six months, but that wasn't the process. It was the process of getting them to understand, "What do people want in the center?" and then having them talk to people. We could have looked in any book that said we would need, we need anger management and caring adults, but that wasn't a goal. It's a youth development organization.

Fitting with other research on the role of adult advisors, Elsa demonstrates that adults must relinquish much of their power in the interaction and work to build

a tone of trust among adults and students (Cervone, 2002). The goal of Unity of Youth was the process of developing youth leadership, much more so than accomplishing any specific task.

The combination of Unity of Youth's individual campaigns led to what the group considered its biggest victory—a shift in discursive politics at Hillside. The result of the blossoming of youth leadership at Hillside High, Elsa explained, was "a school culture change of the role of young people, even to the point that students sat on the principal's selection committee." Regina Johnson, a student leader of Unity of Youth, described the change-making process as educating themselves about issues, organizing their peers, and communicating their goals. Through this process, the group pushed against the institutional inertia of the school and worked to make changes. Regina explained, "You have to challenge authority at one time of your life. Just because they're older doesn't mean they get it. You have to keep on trying over and over. There's always an answer to everything."

Unity of Youth's location outside of the educational institution permitted the group not only to tackle school-specific problems but also to voice their opinions on community and statewide issues as well. Hillside Unity of Youth members met monthly with youth from other Unity of Youth sites. Together, they tackled such issues as securing free bus passes for students in the county, informing students of the state's high school exit exam and why many believed it to be unjust, and participating in community marches to object to budget cuts at the district and state level, to protest the Iraq war, and to oppose efforts to increase criminal penalties against youth.

Unity of Youth members asserted that the group benefited from keeping its collective identity separate from Hillside. Student members of Unity of Youth worried not only that a teacher would not have enough time for the group but also that the group would not be able to address many injustices that they identified if it was advised by an adult affiliated with the system. When asked about whether Unity of Youth would have been successful as a school club, group member Regina Johnson stated, "I think it would be more censored." She said that she had heard rumors of a teacher trying to start a similar club in the school prior to Unity of Youth's work and the teacher being fired the following year. Whether or not these rumors were true, Regina strongly believed that one of the strengths of the group was its independence from the school.

When asked about whether a teacher could be in charge of Unity of Youth, adult advisor Elsa Managua agreed that if the group had operated as a school club, it would have suffered from the lack of a dedicated adult ally who could give the group the support that it needed. She commented, "That takes a lot of

planning and time. And they don't have that. Most of the campus clubs [which are all run by teachers] aren't really in existence. They might meet once every other week or maybe they'll meet to get prepared for something. But they're [not] consistently meeting to talk about what students need." Elsa believed that Hillside had many caring teachers who would be interested in such a task, but they did not have the time that would be required to work on youth voice and empowerment.

Locating itself outside of the school system meant, however, that the group needed to establish legitimacy within the system. Elsa explained that:

[Initially it] was a struggle. A lot of administrators were very resistant to the idea that young people can promote these kinds of changes. They saw them [Unity of Youth] as just revving up people as opposed to really [identifying] what students were needing to succeed and having the schools come up with structures to address them.

Unlike Student Forum, which had some rapport with insiders from the start by initiating from within the system and also by having a trusted teacher heading up the group, Unity of Youth had to build a support system within the school.

Unity of Youth understood the importance of appealing to the values of decision makers within the school. Unity of Youth accomplished this task by demonstrating similarities between youth- and adult-concerns about the school. Elsa explained:

[When] you asked [youth] what they need to succeed, it's really on the same page that what a lot of the faculty members were thinking—additional services, additional tutoring services, wanting a collaboration of services. This produced a school-community collaborative because they were recognizing that to get to the real causes of some of the problems, this school needed to have more resources [for] students.

When teachers and administrators saw that young people wanted to work on many of the same issues, many school personnel were accepting of Unity of Youth's efforts and served as allies for the group.

Eventually efforts to build trust resulted in a strong working relationship with the teachers and administration. Hillside saw that Unity of Youth members gained important skills, and they worked with teachers to make important changes in the school. Based on the group's efforts, school personnel started identifying Unity of Youth members as true leaders in the school. Elsa explained that this leadership role came from speaking of the needs of all students rather than a select slice of the school. She commented:

There's a good relationship between the administrative staff and teachers and the Youth Together students. I think most of them identify them as student leaders more than they identify some of the student government leaders, because the Unity of Youth students come to them with issues that all students are facing, [instead of] just advancing some campus get together or something like that.

An example of a pressing need facing all students was the need to improve the condition of the bathrooms, based on a survey of 500 students in the school. Nearly all students identified the school bathrooms as an extremely pressing concern. According to Unity of Youth Member, Marissa Martinez:

> Most people were saying that they wanted clean bathrooms. So we threw out the idea, "This is a problem and how are we going to go about the problem . . . as students?" Because it's the students that are making the bathroom dirty. But we [also] don't have doors on our bathrooms and the doors were always locked so we can't get in. We presented [the findings of our survey] to a principal . . . We told her this is what we need and this is what students need. And it's not just us; it's the whole school. We're just representing them.

By using data as evidence of student perspectives, the group was able to show the administration that they were representing the views of the student body and demonstrate the level of concern.

Unity of Youth became such a voice in the school they decided to hold a retreat for the student government to train them on how to assume a greater leadership role in the school. Graciela Soliz, a Unity of Youth member, explained:

> We're working on like getting the student government together [to have a retreat so that we can sit] down and talk about the issues with the student government, [including] how they're running things around school and [how] student government should represent the voice of all the students. But some students feel as though they're not being represented. That the only thing that student government kind of looks at is into the parties and all the unnecessary things when they're really supposed to be like being more aware of what's going on.

As a result of the dialogues with student government, Unity of Youth not only established themselves as student leaders, they also worked to build the leadership of their peers as well.

The successes of Unity of Youth suggest that student voice can be the loudest when raised from outside of the system. Student voice initiatives that position themselves outside of school auspices, such as in community-based organizations, have a greater ability to confront injustices within schools and to raise concerns about institutional practices, while students working within schools have little authority to conduct activities without the sanction of school authorities for legal and political reasons (Mitra, 2005a). The strength of youth leadership in Unity of Youth contrasts the barriers that Student Forum youth faced as an organization positioned fully inside Whitman High School. Despite the group's many successes, Whitman students faced definite limits in terms of the amount of power and authority that they could assume. For example, school regulations drastically limited the scope of an effort to design a peer tutorial system because students could not convene during school hours without adult supervision. Any time the group wanted to have a tutor available, an adult

needed to be present to supervise the tutor's activity. The roles that the group defined for students could not be fulfilled, and the school was unwilling to negotiate this restriction (Mitra, 2005a). Future research on the types of changes possible from the inside versus the outside of school walls will help to inform the field on the scope and limits of student voice activities.

THE CHALLENGES AND BENEFITS OF STUDENT VOICE STRATEGIES

While the three examples of student voice presented in this chapter offer a range of student roles, one form of student voice is notably missing from this chapter—autonomous student projects. Few instances exist of such efforts in which students initiate an effort and assume responsibility for its activities. When student-run initiatives do occur, they tend to happen within a broader umbrella of collaboration and support from adults, such as the students at Whitman or Unity of Youth, the strongest example of youth leadership presented here in this chapter. Yet, even in successful examples of student-led partnerships, adults needed to enable students to conduct the work. In most cases, empowering students requires adults to be willing to relinquish some of their control.

The lack of examples of autonomous student groups suggests that there are limits to the types of roles and voice that students can assume within the school walls. Often the institutional and normative features of schooling prevent substantial student power. The institutional constraints of schools also require adults and youth to spend a great deal of their time ensuring the basic survival of their student voice activities (Mitra, 2005a). Groups working to increase student voice in schools must find a way to remain focused on enacting their vision of change while at the same time taking steps to ensure the preservation of their group so they can continue the work that they started (Mitra, 2005b). It is difficult, however, for a group to challenge an institution about the ownership of decision making and authority while also having to ensure its own existence.

Given the challenges of increasing student leadership, schools may find that listening to students is a natural first step in introducing student voice into their reform work. It is the least threatening form of youth participation, and it offers great rewards to the school in terms of encouraging school personnel to challenge their current assumptions about the problems and solutions available to them. The examples in this chapter suggest, however, that listening to students is insufficient as an endpoint of student voice. If increasing student voice truly means sharing the ownership of school decision making with

students, then youth must do more than speak their minds about problems; they must have the opportunity to lead the way toward innovative solutions.

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