Balancing power in communities of practice: An examination of increasing student voice through school-based youth–adult partnerships

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Abstract This article examines how power imbalances influence the formation of student voice initiatives, which are defined as school-based youth–adult partnerships that consist of youth and adults contributing to decision making processes, learning from one another, and promoting change. Using the concept of *community of practice* as a lens, the paper examines the ways in which power influences the mutual engagement, shared repertoire, and joint enterprise of youth–adult partnerships. Specifically, the study finds that the following strategies can strengthen student voice initiatives: building meaningful roles based upon mutual responsibility and respect among all members; developing shared language and norms, and developing joint enterprises aimed at fostering voices that have previously been silenced from decision making and knowledge-building processes.

Keywords Student voice · Community of practice · Youth–adult partnerships · Power · Educational change · Civic engagement · Professional learning community · Knowledge generation

Introduction

While many youth have few opportunities for civic engagement (Flanagan and Faison 2001; Honig et al. 2001), a growing body of research has examined the potential role of increasing *student voice* in schools. Called a variety of names including student participation, active citizenship, youth leadership, and youth empowerment, the concept of student voice describes the many ways in which youth have opportunities to share in the school decisions that will shape their lives and the lives of their peers (Fielding 2001; Goodwillie 1993; Levin 2000). When placed into practice, student voice can range from the most basic level of youth sharing their opinions of problems and potential solutions; to allowing young people to collaborate with adults to address the problems in their schools;

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to youth taking the lead on seeking change (Mitra 2005a). All types of student voice, from limited input to substantial leadership, are considerably different from the types of roles that students typically perform in schools (such as planning school dances and holding pep rallies).

While the conception of student voice tends to be under-theorized in educational research, it fits well with the concept of *youth–adult partnership* (Camino 2000) discussed in the field of human development. Youth–adult partnerships are defined as relationships in which both youth and adults have the potential to contribute to visioning and decision making processes, to learn from one another, and to promote change (Jones and Perkins 2004). With appropriate guidance and coaching by adults (Camino 2000), collaboration consists of creating a learning environment in which individuals come together in groups with the willingness to share authority, accept responsibility, and highlight individual members' abilities and contributions (Panitz 1996).

A growing body of research has documented the benefits of school-based youth–adult partnerships for schools and the young people involved. Youth–adult partnerships have the potential to create a synergy that transcends what youth or adults alone can do, including sparking great strides in crystallizing an organization's vision and accomplishments (Eccles and Gootman 2002; Kirshner et al. 2003; Mitra 2007, in press; Zeldin 2004; Zeldin et al. 2005). Youth collaboration with teachers and administrators reminds adults that students possess unique knowledge and perspectives about their schools that adults cannot fully replicate (Kushman 1997; Levin 2000; Mitra 2007, in press; Rudduck et al. 1997; Thorkildsen 1994). Through open conversations about injustices in schools, student voice can raise equity issues that tend to get swept under the rug by administrators and other adults in the school who would rather avoid controversy. By involving students—and particularly students failing subjects or rarely attending school—school personnel cannot easily shift the blame of failure onto the students. Instead they must assess the problems within the school's structure and culture (Fine 1991; Mitra 2007, in press; Wehlage et al. 1989). Furthermore, school personnel learn that youth have access to information and relationships that teachers and administrators do not, such as providing a bridge between the school and families reluctant to interact with school personnel, including first generation immigrant families (Mitra 2006a). In addition to fostering new knowledge, such partnerships can help students to develop positive relations with teachers that did not exist previously (Cook-Sather 2001; Mitra 2003).

While research is growing on the outcomes of school-based youth–adult partnerships, less is known about *how* to engage students as active partners in school change. Youth–adult partnerships must develop new ways to communicate effectively and to learn how to work together in more equitable ways. To do so, adults must relinquish some of their power and work to build a tone of trust among adults and students (Cervone 2002). Without an intentional focus on building relationships, student voice can easily become tokenism. True engagement requires a "rupture of the ordinary" (Fielding 2004), which demands as much of teachers as it does of students.

Developing 'communities of practice'

A community of practice framework provides a useful lens for examining ways in which groups collaborate in the process of developing new forms of knowledge and ways of thinking about common problems and concerns. Communities of practice are groups of people who share a common concern about a problem and seek to deepen their

understanding of this problem through interacting on an ongoing basis. The heart of a community of practice is knowledge generation (Brown and Duguid 2000), which occurs through a negotiation of meanings and involves a transformation of the collective identity of the group and of individual identity. Through interacting with one another, group members share insight, advice and build a collective knowledge base (Wenger et al. 2002). The community of practice concept emerged out of traditions of sociocultural (Rogoff 1990) and situative theories of learning (Greeno and MMAP 1998; Lave 1988; Lave and Wenger 1991), which claim that we learn and become who we are through interaction with others. Through a reciprocal process, learning transforms individuals, and individuals collectively reproduce and transform the social and cultural structures in which they are situated (Lave and Wenger 1991). The social construction within a group and individuals' subsequent learning occurs through an "activity" or "practice." The group constructs new forms and features of reality that subsequently changes the individuals themselves and the collective (Davydov 1999). Schwartz (1999) describes this reciprocal process as "productive agency" because the group actively works to construct shared meaning, often through learning about and negotiating understanding.

For research examining group dynamics, a "community of practice" framework has proven to be a useful framework because it can help to examine how individuals collectively engage in joint work and how they learn from one another through this collective activity. The frame provides a lens for meso-level analyses of teacher and student experiences in reform efforts (Gallucci 2003; Kirshner 2003; Mitra 2005b). The community of practice framework has been used, for example, as a research tool for identifying individual identity formation and inter-individual interaction in classrooms and other organizational settings (Maynard 2001; Yamagata-Linch 2001). The frame has also been used as a design tool for tracking the growth of community and for understanding instructional environments (Barab and Duffy 2000; Palinscar et al. 1998).

The use of the community of practice frame in educational research increased dramatically[1] after the publication of Etienne Wenger's book *Communities of practice: Learning, meaning, and identity* in 1998. In fact, an examination of the ERIC database demonstrates a marked growth of the use of the communities of practice frame, with over 100 citations since 1998, as compared to just a handful of citations prior to that time. Wenger's greatest contribution in his book was a specification of the components of a coherent "community"—mutual engagement, joint enterprise, and shared repertoire. The three dimensions, respectively, offer a way to: examine the roles and identities of members of a group, the tasks and vision of their work, and the tools and processes they develop to help them move forward. Table 1 details Wenger's three dimensions of communities of practice.

While the concept of community of practice provides an important way of examining individuals working in educational change efforts, many scholars have lamented the lack of attention to *power* in the community of practice framework (including Brown and Duguid (2000)). As Engeström and Miettinen (1999) stated in the introduction to the volume that they co-edited, "What seems to be missing is movement outward and in unexpected directions: questioning of authority, criticism, innovation, and initiation of change. Instability and inner contradictions of practice are all but missing" (p. 12). Fox (2000) similarly emphasizes that learning is discussed in Wenger's framework in the context of

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[1] Only nine citations exist in the ERIC database for the term "community (ies) of practice" in 1999. In 2000, the number doubled to 19, it nearly doubled again to 31 citations for 2001, and then jumped to 46 citations for 2002, and remained steady thereafter.

Table 1 Summary of community of practice dimensions

Dimension	Definition
Mutual engagement	Building relationships and establishing roles with others through direct interaction and reflection on previous interactions and identities
Joint enterprise	Developing and negotiating group activities, including reconciling conflicting interpretations and holding each other accountable for this work
Shared repertoire	Producing and adapting tools—styles, discourse, symbols, routines, artifacts, language

identify formation in which conflict can be beneficial or harmful. Wider issues of power are only discussed in passing.

Power imbalances are critical for understanding educational reform, since change efforts are often about shifting power relations. Questions of who has a voice in decision making become important in many instances involving school improvement, including: whether teachers should have a voice in determining curricular reform, whether students should help to identify the problems in their school and try to address them, and whether parents should help to develop school-wide standards. The power and status distinctions in school settings especially provide a dramatic form of asymmetry due to institutional norms of deference to adult authority and the separation of adult and youth roles in schools. Altering such working conditions requires developing new norms, relationships, and organizational structures (Della Porta and Diani 1999; Oakes and Lipton 2002).

Examining power relations and status within communities of practice is particularly important in order to understand how conflict might prevent knowledge generation and the creation of a collective identity. Efforts to increase student voice through school-based youth adult partnerships[2] provide an opportunity to examine questions of power in communities of practice because of the established differences in power and authority of students and adults in schools. In this article, I weave together previous research on communities of practice, on student voice initiatives, and on youth–adult partnerships with my own empirical research to synthesize and articulate a deeper conception of communities of practice that face strong internal power imbalances. The focus of the article examines conditions that enable and constrain group dynamics of youth–adult partnerships rather than focusing on ways in which these communities of practice question and challenge broader power imbalances in schools and society.

Methods

Sample

The study consisted of a purposive design specifically to examine the process of developing strong school-based youth–adult partnerships (Strauss and Corbin 1990). Building on previous research examining student voice initiatives (Mitra 2002, 2007, in press), the sampling strategy sought out youth–adult partnerships that were identified as stable and

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[2] This article uses the term school-based youth–adult partnership to connote a specific form of community of practice that includes as part of its goals to increase student voice in schools.

promising rather than finding schools with representing a range of student involvement from none to actively involved. The sample (see Appendix A) consisted of 13 schools that received funding from a local foundation in the San Francisco Bay Area to work on building a student voice initiative in their school. The grant initiative was targeted at schools in urban settings that possessed a diverse population, a public school system that lacked sufficient funding, and high concentrations of poverty.

The selected schools received $5,000 in seed funding based on their demonstrated ability to propose a reasonable plan for strengthening their youth–adult partnership and an indication that they possessed sufficient capacity to enact their plan. The staff of the foundation worked closely with potential applicants to learn more about both the goals and process of the groups. This interaction before the funding decision helped to inform the selection committee of the extent to which young people were actively involved in the grant writing process, since preference was given to applicants that actually had youth write the grant request themselves.

Data collection

Data collection for this study sought to gain the perspectives of participants in the youth–adult partnerships at the beginning and end of their grant cycle. Semi-structured telephone interviews were conducted with a minimum of two and a maximum of five individuals participating in each of 13 groups. Care was taken to gain perspectives of youth and adults in all of the cases in the study.

When conducting semi-structured interviews, the intent was not to follow a pre-determined protocol, but instead to allow the interviewees to tell their stories in a manner that could best describe their group experiences. The protocol (see Appendix B) ensured that all the questions were discussed by the end of the interview, if not in the same order. The interviews lasted between 30 and 60 min. All interviews were recorded on audiocassette and transcribed to preserve the words of the interviewees.

Observations[3] were also conducted of the organizational meetings held by the foundation for schools wanting to apply for funding along with subsequent meetings for the funded schools. The purpose of these meetings was both to share information and expectations about the grant process but also to encourage schools to broaden the possibilities of their work by learning from each other and by reflecting on the work of their communities of practice. The meetings included small group discussions and collective brain storming on how to improve the work of all of the groups. These opportunities allowed for a comparison of the plans and interaction styles of the 13 groups. Observations were conducted by transcribing conversations (verbatim when possible) using a laptop computer during the meetings. Data collection also included reviewing the web sites and publications of the groups as well as learning about the broader contexts of the schools and communities of the case through school web sites and newspaper clippings.

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[3] While it would have been preferable to conduct observations of the groups at their school sites, the project did not have sufficient funding to support the extensive travel costs that observations would have required. Observation opportunities were therefore chosen to maximize the opportunities to observe as many groups as possible.

Data analysis

This study builds upon a previous in-depth case study that identified the similarities between youth–adult partnerships and the communities of practice literature (Mitra 2005b). The analysis of the data began in this study with a community of practice conceptual framework developed in this previous study, with the expectation that the new data would revise and improve the previous work (Miles and Huberman 1994; Strauss and Corbin 1990). Special care was taken to search for discrepant evidence and claims that could be considered contradictory to the original framework. A preliminary round of data collection that consisted of ten interviews confirmed that a community of practice framework continued to be a useful lens for understanding the process of adults and youth working together. The remaining interview and observational protocols were developed based on a conceptual framework that focused on using community of practice as a lens for examining youth–adult partnerships. Interview questions and observational protocols therefore focused heavily on group process and how learning occurred in the 13 cases as they focused on activities geared toward increasing student voice. Moving back and forth between the data from this study and the literature on youth–adult partnership partnerships and the literature on communities of practice led to the creation of an *explanatory framework*, which illuminated how youth–adult partnerships tried to address issues of power within their communities of practice. (Miles and Huberman 1994; Strauss and Corbin 1990).

Results

Wenger's three components of communities of practice—mutual engagement, shared repertoire, and joint enterprise—provide a useful set of concepts for explaining the ways in which school-based youth–adult partnerships work together and focus on activities to accomplish. In turn, experiences of efforts to increase student voice through school-based youth–adult partnerships highlight the role of power balances influencing how communities of practice interact. The cases in this study also offer lessons regarding how relational patterns can improve or inhibit working relationships.

Mutual engagement

Mutual engagement consists of the roles and participation patterns among the actors in a community of practice (Wenger 1998). Through direct interaction, a community of practice learns how to work together, including developing roles based on of the diversity of individual strengths, talents, and perspectives so that specialized tasks can be created and persons can gain individual identities within the group. For example, Greeno et al. (1999) offer the metaphor of a rope to represent the importance of all members of a community of practice relying upon each other. Their research described their community of practice as consisting of three fibers—the researchers, teachers, and curriculum builders—which together contained the knowledge and experiences that maintained the strength and function of the group. Mutual engagement therefore does not entail homogeneity but instead requires relationships among people to establish that all group members both teach and learn from each other.

Inclusion of young people in knowledge creation

Youth–adult partnerships require inclusion of young people in the creation of knowledge and sharing of ideas. While schools and organizations often like the idea of increasing student voice in conversations, the implementation of such an effort requires intentional effort and energy to be successful. Often, this level of effort is not maintained. An example of a failure to include youth occurred during a culminating event of a large educational reform initiative in the San Francisco Bay Area. During an all-day conference, sessions were designed to serve as a forum for schools to exchange ideas and to begin to build communities of practice that would continue beyond the small conference. The conference planners wanted to include students in these conversations, but the effort backfired because little thought was given to how students were to be engaged in the proceedings. While students were invited to attend the conference, they were not asked to present at the sessions, and they responded that they did not feel welcome to share their experiences during the sessions that they attended. Students from Fremont High School wrote a stinging review of the conference in their newspaper that they handed out at the event. Challenging that the conference developers and its participating schools wanted student involvement in name only, the student editorial stated:

> To our chagrin and disappointment, we did not feel welcome when we attended sessions, which were aimed primarily toward adults and anyone who was especially familiar with the jargon of educational processes … In the end, we are left feeling that our participation is more about creating public relations for [the sponsoring organization] than it is about creating meaningful student voice in the process.

The example indicates that developing communities of practices containing individuals with large status and power differences requires a need to attend to equity issues so that the lowest status individuals in the community of practice actually do have the opportunity to co-construct the joint enterprise. Problems arose since lower status individuals were included in community of practice but were not given the opportunity to be a part of the joint enterprise. True collaboration with students in this venture would have necessitated a change in participation structures.

What is remarkable about the failures of this initiative is that the conference did not even take basic steps to facilitate the inclusion of students other than inviting them to attend. Yet, previous research suggests that the extension of collegiality need not be large for a newcomer to feel welcome. Drever and Cope (1999), for instance, found that student teachers are extremely grateful just to be welcomed by a community of practice, even if they are not truly members. Such a welcomed entrance into a community could be a first step toward apprenticeship learning and deeper forms of membership. In the above example of student participants at the conference, the students did not even receive a welcome as a gesture of belonging within the conference.

Sharing power between adults and youth

A big reason for the reluctance of adults to increase student voice in communities of practice is that the institutionalized roles of teachers and students in school contradict much of what an adult-youth partnership is about. The power and status distinctions in school settings provide a dramatic form of asymmetry—especially due to commonly-held norms of deference to adult authority and the separation of adults and youth roles in schools.

Within the walls of schools, adult and youth often fall back to their expected teacher/
student roles, even when they are intentionally trying to foster new types of relationships.
Learning how to enable youth to assume more leadership is particularly challenging in
school settings where teachers are often used to being in control. The teacher advisor at
Hoover High School explained the struggle of being a teacher who is working on building
a youth–adult partnership: "I'm an organization freak, and I can see what needs to be done
to create movement. Often in my experience as a teacher, kids tend to procrastinate and
leave things and think it will all work out. It makes me nuts." A teacher advisor at
Whitman High School similarly expressed the tensions between learning to be a strong
advisor and the training of a traditional teacher. Working in a youth–adult partnership is a
different form of relationship, she explained. It is "trying to step back while also giving
them some perspective when necessary …. But maybe they're going in a way that seems
totally frivolous, and it's actually what really needs to be happening. It's so hard to know
…. It's a fine line of learning how to foster, and encourage, and also guide." Because
institutional norms of schools define the roles of teachers and students, becoming a partner
with youth requires adults to step out of teacher mode. Instead, previous research has found
that adult advisors must learn to be a coach who provides meaningful leadership oppor-
tunities and fosters the skills of youth to be able to assume these positions (Camino 2000;
Denner et al. 2005).

Often adults want to be sure that youth have the ability to assume leadership before they
are willing to share power with them (Muncey and McQuillan 1991; Zeldin et al. 2005).
The paradox of such a situation is that young people can lose the opportunity to develop
leadership skills because they do not currently possess them (Zeldin 2000). Adults must
walk a fine line then of taking the risk of sharing leadership with young people even if at
times doing so may cause the project to fail. An adult advisor at Sierra High School
discusses this dilemma by explaining, "What we, the adults, are trying to do is show them
all how to funnel their best skills …. I want them to do a youth-led program, and they're
doing it, but teaching them leadership [is tough] when their skills are so bad." The adult
worked to celebrate the talents of young people in the group but also remain conscious of
ways in which students were not prepared to assume other tasks, such as students skilled at
administrative tasks but not at facilitating meetings of their peers.

Developing mutual respect and responsibility

To push past these tensions, successful communities of practice must foster mutual respect
and responsibility. A youth at Sierra High School explained that, "She doesn't sit here and
breathe down our necks and say, 'You'd better do this.' We're all on the same page."
Similarly, a youth member at Midland High School explained, "You got to be on the same
page. You got to be able to talk about something and respect each other's point of view."
While equal power and equal roles among members of a community of practice are never
expected, in order for all members to have a valued role in the collective, all must feel that
they have a role to play in the sharing of knowledge and information. The young person
felt that these critical components of a community of practice were not always present in
the Midland partnership.

Mutual engagement does not mean equality among group members. A common mis-
conception, however, is that to empower some members of a collective others must give up
power, and in the case of youth–adult partnerships it is often assumed that an increase in
youth leadership means that adults must simply "get out of the way" (Camino 2005; Mitra

2005b). This assumption suggests that power is a zero-sum game. Young people can also bring unreasonable expectations of "equal power" as they enter into a community of practice. Instead, adults and youth need opportunities to share what they have learned based on their experiences and their beliefs. For example, at Sierra High School, one of the youth leaders of the group explained how each student assumed a particular role on the video project. He explained, "I do most of the interviews. And … Allen writes flows and poems. Edgar [uses the] video cameras and … he helps the people that are 'camera-ing' Janelle does poems and interviews too." To encourage the development of talents and skills among members of a community of practice, it is also important to encourage both youth and adults to try out new roles and responsibilities. For example, previous research has found that the facilitator of the group might instead take a turn as the documenter, or the peacemaker of the group might be encouraged to raise an issue that she is passionate about even if it might initially cause a disruption of group harmony (Denner et al. 2005; Zeldin et al. 2002).

The concept of legitimate peripheral participation (Lave 1988; Lave and Wenger 1991) is particularly helpful in discussions of power in communities of practice because it emphasizes that levels of expertise and authority will inevitably be imbalanced. Through apprenticeship, experienced participants help to guide newcomers through activities. In the process of apprenticeship, novices increase their mastery as they have the opportunity to observe more experienced individuals, to practice their ability to perform the task, and to ask questions of the more experienced individuals. As suggested by Vygotsky's concept of zones of proximal development (1978), more experienced members of a community of practice assist their colleagues with activities so that the novice learners can move beyond their current capabilities to learn new tasks and acquire more sophisticated skills. Such relationships are characterized by shared goals of the novice learner and more experienced teacher (Rogoff 1990). In essence, learning among group members requires asymmetries of knowledge so that experts can impart skills and advice to novice members.

It should be stressed that, as in other communities of practice, young people are not always the novice in the youth–adult partnerships. In this research, the opportunity to experiment with and assume these different types of roles tended to occur through an apprenticeship model in which group members test out their interest in the group through small tasks and gradually add on responsibilities as they become more engaged in the group work (Lave and Wenger 1991). As group members continued to participate in the group, they learned skills and were able to take on more responsibility. For example, the Highlands High School youth president felt that she was prepared for her role because of her previous group experiences. She explained, "When they put me in certain leadership roles like last year [as the financial coordinator], it helped to prepare me … I was always around last year; I was always seeing what the executive director last year was doing." With young people only staying in a high school for three to four years, communities of practice not only need to increase responsibilities, but they also need to think about succession planning. A student leader at Hoover High School explained, "With a lot of other groups, they've had a really strong leader for you know 3 or 4 years, maybe 2, and then they leave. But no one's been trained to take their place … I'm weaning the group off of me a little bit so that she has practice running the group and dealing with all these things." In both of these examples, the process of assuming smaller responsibilities and engaging in legitimate peripheral participation (Lave and Wenger 1991) prepared newer students to acquire the skills and confidence become group leaders over time.

Establish clear expectations of individual identities

Communities of practice also can be strengthened by establishing clear expectations of individual identities within the collective. The importance of mutual respect and responsibility should be explicitly expressed as well efforts to intentionally build upon the expertise of all group members. At Highland High School, the group expressed deep appreciation for all group members—even the person whose job it was to carry the shoes of the presenters was viewed with respect and valued as an integral part of the team. Intentionally seeking out the talents and strengths of group members can also enhance the productivity and outcomes of a collective as the group maximizes its talents in hopefully a synergistic way that can help the community of practice to generate new knowledge and ways of thinking about problems. In youth–adult partnerships such a synergy includes fostering new ways for student voice to contribute to school reform.

Shared repertoire

The concept of shared repertoire focuses on the resources and tools used by the community of practice to complete its work and to collectively construct and negotiate meaning. Wenger defines shared repertoire as including "routines, words, tools, ways of doing things, stories, gestures, symbols, genres, actions, or concepts" (Wenger 1998, p. 83). Issues of reification particularly take precedence in the shared repertoire dimension since the shared repertoire develops the symbols that create shared imagery and a short-hand form of communicating group identity. The shared repertoire provides a history of the group's interactions and provides symbols through which current interactions can anchor themselves. Scholars examining knowledge generation and teaching communities also have emphasized the value of home-grown knowledge as a component of shared repertoire (Brown and Duguid 2000; Cochran-Smith and Lytle 1999; Nonaka 1994).

Shared language

The data from this study indicate that developing shared language is an important way to build a shared repertoire in youth–adult partnerships. The development of shared language includes the creation of common stories that provide a source of identification for the group and the creation or co-optation of terminology to explain the group's activities (the joint enterprise) and group processes (the mutual engagement). A strong connection exists in this research between developing a vocabulary for change and the ability of groups to move forward with their joint enterprise as a community of practice. Eraut (2002) emphasizes the cultural language that must develop through a community of practice. Holmes and Meyerhoff (1999) similarly discuss the linguistic resources necessary to build a shared repertoire.

The articulation of a group's purpose, codified in language, helps to crystallize the focus of knowledge creation and group activities. Whitman High School provides an important example of how a clarification in language can jump start the formation of a community of practice. For over a year, the student voice initiative at this school struggled to examine what students wanted to achieve as a collective related to increasing student voice in schools. The clarification of the language about the purpose of the youth–adult partnership correlated with a more intentional vision for the group. This shift happened when the group

was able to describe their intentions as "building a system" of actions and beliefs that would seek to establish a "fifty–fifty" relationship between students and teachers. These simple phrases provided guideposts by which they communicated their vision and developed activities to enact it. The group also consciously chose the name of "Student Forum" after spending over a month deliberating which name to choose because it most clearly articulated the types of activities that the group wanted to pursue. Group members spoke their name whenever possible and identified themselves as the name: "We are Student Forum. We want a voice in the system." Once the group clarified their language about their identity, it made great gains in developing activities to increase student voice at the school and subsequently in creating opportunities to start cultivating a community of practice comprised of students and teachers focused on school improvement.

Some schools have found that the language young people in school-based youth–adult partnerships use to communicate concerns can reveal the systemic problems in a school more effectively than among adults alone. The students participating in the student voice initiative at King High School received training on how to communicate effectively with adults. The administrator at the school explained, "We teach about speaking voices. Speaking with peers [requires] a different voice than a school board. When our kids speak, they're very eloquent." After a student-driven needs assessment of the problems of their school, the students addressed the district school board about their concerns. The administrators of the school believed that their students' concerns were "heard" more than at other schools or among other youth because they had developed the ability to speak in a style and language that the board members would appreciate. The language of youth–adult partnerships is therefore capable of helping to serve as a catalyst for generating new forms of knowledge and solutions than are otherwise available.

Common norms

Another important strategy for pushing against these institutional constraints that maintain power imbalances is the development of common norms (Della Porta and Diani 1999; Oakes and Lipton 2002). Youth and adults must learn how to work together in more equitable ways while pushing against the tendency to revert back to traditional roles (Binder 2002; Gamson 1992; Snow and Benford 1992). To combat these challenges, successful student voice initiatives must involve a process by which youth become empowered and adults learn to share the power that they hold.

The most common norm discussed with regard to community of practices is the need for safe and caring relationships. During data collection, students frequently mentioned the importance of being able to share problems and concerns with the adult advisor. A youth at Hoover High School explained, "If I had a problem I'd be able to talk to her, and not just about teacher stuff. You feel comfortable talking to somebody you know … It's a different kind of relationship." With such deeply held expectations about the roles of adults and young people in schools, attention to creating a safe and caring space is especially crucial.

Student voice initiatives intentionally worked at creating safe and caring spaces. For example, the group at Latin High School developed team building exercises to break down barriers between group members. One of the student members explained, "In the beginning of the semester you play games to like break the ice so that people get to know each other. We do like things called five minute speeches where each person talks about themselves for five minutes … to really get to know each other. And that really breaks the ice and people are very, very honest towards each other." The goal of such

exercises, the student explained, is to create "a safe and comfortable environment at Latin that anyone can come in to … You learn how to talk to different kinds of people and I think it challenges people to be open minded and to be a good listener." The group also developed shared norms that created a structure for discourse among group members. Through icebreakers and intentionally setting norms of discourse, Latin created an environment that encouraged risk taking and that set expectations for mutual engagement in their community of practice.

The experiences at King High School suggest that establishing common norms in particular in efforts to develop youth–adult relations is much easier when these common norms are also part of the wider school culture. Tasha Smith, an administrator at King, believes that the success of the youth–adult partnership at her school is due to the fact that the groups' goals and process are an extension of the way that King makes decisions overall. She explained that the students at King "help to shape the rules of the school— although the students haven't ever voted to change a rule yet." Additionally, two students and two teachers conduct the admission interviews to this charter school. The teachers in the school also model the partnership process by collaboratively working together themselves and sharing in the administrative roles of the school.

Not only do thriving communities of practice emphasize safe spaces, but communities of practice that struggled in this study to complete tasks and who eventually disbanded lacked a sense of caring and safe spaces among group members and were subsequently much less successful at accomplishing efforts to address problems in their school. The experiences of Whitman High School also suggest that establishing mutual respect and responsibility must be an ongoing process. The group lost the trust that it had developed due to large turnovers of youth and adults in their formerly strong community of practice. One student who was present for both the successful and struggling years of the partnership lamented that in the new structure of the group, "I don't have any power … [The new advisor] has the ultimate say and sometimes what she wants you to know is how it has to be." Keeping communities of practice strong requires continued attention to group dynamics. Similarly, one young person at Midland High School said in the same interview both that the adult advisors of their group were "in charge of us" and "we're on the same page as the adults." The contradictions between these statements mirrored the paradoxes that the group experienced in their reform activities as it espoused the importance of youth leadership in the broader community but never had young people step forward as strong members of their community of practice. The group disbanded toward the end of data collection.

Joint enterprise

According to Wenger (1998), joint enterprise is the work of the community of practice. What sets communities of practice apart from other groups is that this focus consists of some form of knowledge generation, which is developed through building shared understandings about what groups are working on and "what that means in their lives and for their communities" (Lave and Wenger 1991, p. 98). Communication and shared problem solving links old and new knowledge together to develop new frames and to resolve different understandings of individuals participating in the process (Rogoff 1990). The cases in this sample provide rich information on the knowledge related to the ideas and talents of students and their ability to contribute to the shaping of the school's vision and practices.

When careful attention is paid to mutual engagement and shared repertoire, the process of involving students in school-based youth–adult partnerships can create a space in which previously unheard voices can contribute to the conversation of reform and change. As a result of attention to fostering common language, establishing common norms and attending to group roles, the new knowledge generated in communities of practice including student voices tends to frame school-wide concerns very differently than they previously. In fact, the actual process of hearing new perspectives is both a process of communities of practice, but also a product of their collaboration since creating structures allows critique to emerge that may not have been heard before. The communities of practice in this study created spaces to hear youth articulations of school problems, they developed opportunities for youth to share their experiences and concerns about societal injustice, and they created opportunities for youth to mediate and help to solve problems among their peers.

Identifying school problems

King High School focused specifically on increasing student voice in the problem solving focus of the school by hosting a series of dialogues throughout the school year in which students shared their problems and concerns about the school. A youth leader of the effort explained, "In our school it gives the students a chance to speak their mind without limitations, without holding their breath." As a result of these discussions, the school increased the number of electives that it offered.

Morgan High School identified that school textbooks did not reflect the voices and backgrounds of youth in the school. They decided to create a textbook that classes in their school could use that would reflect the lives and experiences of youth at Morgan. A youth on the project explained, "We're trying to get everybody's story—like an experience that you had in your life. Something happened to you or you went through something." The advisor explained that this book was needed because "a lot of the things that they read in school don't relate to them … They wanted a way for youth to understand themselves, to understand each other—that they all come from different paths of life and different circumstances. And for teachers to understand youth." Thus, the sharing of youth experiences could help to both emphasize the value of the youth themselves and to educate their peers and teachers about both the diversity and commonality of the school.

Examining broader issues of injustice

In addition to reframing issues, many groups also focused on opportunities for students to express their experiences and concerns about societal injustices and how they affect their school experiences. Latin High School's youth–adult partnership spent a semester researching questions of racism, classism and what they called "nativism" (discrimination against immigrants) and "adultism" (discrimination against youth). The adult advisor explained that they looked at how these issues "connect in our school community and into systems of power." The following semester, these youth would present workshops on these topics to their peers. The shape of the workshop would be the decision of the youth. The advisor explains, "Because it's up to them what direction they'll go from here … We're

looking at doing a school-wide change project based on making presentations and getting a core group of youth talking about racism and classism at school."

College Center High School focused its efforts on creating a Student Unity Council, which, according to its student leader, would be a "committee of all the clubs" in the school. The youth leader explained that the school has had a "huge problem for the last 30-plus years of African Americans and Latinos getting two or more F's. Last year, two-thirds of the freshman class got two or more F's, meaning they really wouldn't go on to being juniors, or sophomores." The purpose of the council would bring together two undergraduate representatives from each of the clubs in the school—many of which are ethnic clubs representing the incredible diversity in the school. In the words of the student leader of the project, "It's basically started an 'all-student union' on campus—a place to not only unify students, but to protect their rights; and a place where they could come in if they need help of any sort." Through dialogue and a common meeting place, the intention was to increase the voice of students to try to help to address the achievement gap problem in the school, to reduce racial tensions through a source of dialogue, and to provide a focus point for community celebrations.

Hoover High School, along with Morgan and Sierra High Schools created videos and written materials to articulate youth experiences. These personal stories highlighted the injustices experienced by these young people in their schools and their communities, including racism and intolerance. For example, Hoover High School worked on a video to share with their school and other schools about gay rights and intolerance. According to a student leader in the group the video is "about stereotypes and what it's like to be gay in high school." Sierra High School instead developed a video about the economic, racial, and social injustices of their neighborhood, specifically focusing on the prevalence of drug and alcohol abuse and domestic violence in their community. The adult advisor explained that the youth also "want to highlight the lack of grocery stores in [their neighborhood] when there's all kinds of liquor stores. But you walk over the hill to [an affluent neighborhood], they have bakeries and coffee shops and … just the disparity. They ask the question, 'How does a child feel when they grow up here as compared to over there?'" A youth member of the group added that the video sought not only to raise awareness of these disparities but also to talk about positive ways to address these inequities head on. The youth commented that they wanted the video "to let everybody know that there's other ways to deal with situations than with violence. Speech is powerful too … and trying to find out a lot of positive things that teens are doing out there."

Mediating peer problems

Some youth–adult partnerships also focused their work on ways in which youth could develop new ways to solve problems by peer mediators that were more effective manner than strategies used by adults. For example, youth could aid in resolving conflicts and tensions among their peers, could develop positive peer pressure mechanisms to reduce bullying, and could provide an initial source of counseling and support to struggling classmates. Morgan and Latin High Schools worked on peer helping and mediation activities. A youth member at Latin High School explained, "I'm involved in this program called Peer Theater. Every semester we learn a new topic that has to do with social issues that high schoolers go through, like drugs, peers, identity … crises, and body image. Then we try to reach out to teach to other people in our school …. We have an assembly day

when we perform [skits] throughout that day." Another youth project leader of the same group described a second program at Latin High School called Peer Advocates, which pairs up a young person with a student who needs support. She explained that the youth "meet once a week. They can talk about anything they want and the peer advocate offers support and different choices that they could decide on. They don't necessarily give them advice but listen … and list options … It's like a one-on-one kind of help stuff for that person." Thus, this group worked on both peer education and peer mentoring as ways to help young people work through challenging issues.

McGuire High School's project instead focused on peer mediation and conflict resolution. A youth in the project explained the need for the project by explaining that McGuire "is actually a continuation school, and some of the kids here have a lot of problems … with their friends and with their family outside of school [because of] drugs, fighting, and stuff like that." Student volunteers for the program received 16 h of training from an outside organization to serve as mediators. An adult advisor of the group explained the delicate nature of preparing youth for conflict resolution. She explained:

> It's one thing to teach them how to do it. But a lot of it is doing it and making the mistakes. So we do a lot of mock situations and they've been able to see [what] could happen. It's been an excellent opportunity to address issues that already affect them personally and then also to train them how to deal with those things both as a peer but also as a member of a family or [as a] student.

Through direct experience, students both faced their own problems and learned how to help others.

Another group focused on reducing stereotyping and bullying behavior through an intervention approach. Working with a non-profit organization, the group offered intensive all day workshops for 100 or so students with the purpose of breaking down stereotypes and showing the commonalities among youth from different cliques and backgrounds. An adult coordinator of the program explained that the day has a three-step philosophy of "inclusion, influence and affection. You include them by doing an icebreaker that [connects] everybody; you teach them whatever the lesson is; and then you send them off with affection and love them up." According to the adult advisor, activities throughout the training include, "breaking down those walls and stereotypes of what people think about." The training included opportunities for youth to apologize to others in the school and to acknowledge that they have been hurt by stereotyping themselves. The coordinator explained, "A lot of times kids get up and apologize to teachers, to friends, to kids they've teased. They make amends, and they say what they never want to see in their school again. It's a really, really powerful day."

Discussion

Like the experiences of students from High Hills High School at the regional conference, many attempts to involve students in school reform efforts are clumsy and poorly defined (Fielding 2004; Holdsworth and Thompson 2002; Muncey and McQuillan 1991; Silva 2003). Teachers and administrators may choose how to empower students rather than conferring with students about how this might happen, and often adults focus on preserving their power rather than engaging in co-constructing the roles of the group with students. Using examples from original data in conjunction with research on forming youth–adult partnerships, student voice initiatives, and communities of practice, this

article has examined ways in which power dynamics and pre-established roles can affect the creation of communities of practice. The findings from this article consider ways in which power relations and status can influence the development of communities of practice. The power imbalances present in efforts to increase student voice in schools offer a magnified view of issues that can arise in any effort to build a community of practice.

The findings stress the importance of attending to the *mutual engagement* of a community of practice so that expectations do not exist that all members of communities of practice will have the same voice or authority. Nevertheless, opportunities for knowledge generation and developing creative solutions to long standing problems will be constrained if group members do not have the ability to share their expertise and opinions. Such a silencing can occur if group members do not feel that they have the legitimacy and respect to share their ideas, as was the case for the students at High Hills High School who did not feel included in the school reform conference. Silence can also occur if the norms of the community of practice do not foster a space of safety in which risk taking can occur and in which members can have the confidence to try on new roles and to expand beyond the traditional and expected ways of thinking about problems. Indeed, many of the strong communities of practice in this study intentionally fostered the creation of safe and caring spaces through training exercises that encouraged group members to reach out to one another (sometimes literally) and to break down barriers of awkwardness and formality that hampered interaction. Previous research has similarly found that successful student voice initiatives consisting of efforts to actively include students in decision making developed a "civil discourse" that created trusting, respectful and open communication between teachers and students. This baseline of respect created conditions in which youth were included "in critical decisions on matters ranging from expectations concerning student behavior to curriculum and instruction individual classrooms" (Wasley et al. 1997, p. 159).

The creation of equitable mutual engagement patterns has limitations in schools due to legal restrictions and access to information. Previous research on youth–adult partnerships has noted that adults must legally bear ultimate responsibility for group safety and for establishing a baseline of a respectful and caring environment (Denner et al. 2005; Larson et al. 2005; Perkins and Borden 2003; Yohalem 2003). Adults also tend to have the job of keeping the partnership on task and providing technical expertise on content and bureaucratic issues (Mitra 2003).

The data also indicate that proactive attention to building a *shared repertoire* can help to create successful communities of practice that can spark new ways to facilitate educational change. In this research, attention to the use of language and the intentional development of new terms and concepts can help collectives to get "unstuck" in their thinking about an issue, both in terms of getting away from traditional concepts of the roles of people and ways of framing a problem and through developing new terms that can help to crystallize new patterns of interaction and innovative ways of conceptualizing ideas. Whitman High School was unable to conceive of how to move forward with their partnership until they settled upon language that expressed who they were as a collective and what they were trying to do. Once they could articulate their goals, suddenly the activities and reforms that would move them toward their vision were much easier to plan and execute. This process fits with Freeman's (1999) explanation of how a community of practice becomes a "community of explanation" when it has solidified the shared construction of meaning and can therefore articulate clearly why it is engaged in the activity. A community of explanation has "common ways of

reasoning about the world or certain aspects within it" (p. 9). Fitting with the taken-for-grantedness of socially agreed upon facts, the lack of a need for clarification or elaboration provides an important indicator of when a community of explanation is beginning to gel.

Finally, communities of practices with large power differences have the opportunity to develop *joint enterprises* that otherwise were not conceivable. In this study, the youth–adult partnerships focused their joint enterprises on identifying school problems, examining broader issues of injustice, and mediating peer problems. Additionally, through close attention to the mutual engagement and shared repertoire of efforts to increase student voice through school-based youth–adult partnerships, the process of the group also became the joint enterprise as well.

The activities that addressed identifying school problems helped these schools to identify pressing needs of students, including the need for more electives at King and for curricular materials that reflected the students' experiences at Morgan. The process of letting those with little power in an organization speak gives legitimacy to issues and concerns that were not considered before, or that were at least framed very differently. In line with previous research on student voice initiatives, these activities provided fresh perspectives on ways to improve teaching and learning and school culture (Fielding 2001; Mitra 2003; Oldfather 1995; Rudduck and Flutter 2000), and they provide crucial information about their communities, cultures, and peer groups (Denner et al. 2005). None of these youth–adult partnerships participated in the systemic educational reform efforts occurring in their schools—although previous research does provide examples of students doing so in other cases (Mitra 2007). Instead, the groups in this study focused on issues that students identified as important and pressing rather than on their responses to institutional efforts at change.

The activities focusing on examining broader issues of injustice addressed institutional norms and societal biases. Such change efforts not only generate knowledge, but they also create possibility (Gamson 1992; Milofsky 1988). This new vision contrasts with the frames provided by the dominant institutional context. Indeed it is this passion for change and commitment to this joint enterprise that is often the glue that keeps communities of practice together (Wenger and Snyder 2000). Thus, the work of change makers is twofold: constructing an alternate vision and then developing activities to work toward it.

Last, the peer mediation activities helped to address positive youth development needs of young people, including developing leadership, caring, connection to schools and to peers, and resolving conflicts in a peaceful manner (Mitra 2004). By providing youth with opportunities to participate in school decision making that will shape their lives and the lives of their peers, increasing student voice in schools offers a way to re-engage students in the school community (Fielding 2001; Levin 2000). Participation can also increase youth attachment to schools, which in turn correlates with improved academic outcomes (Mitra 2004). Youth–adult partnerships can lead to powerful increases in the civic engagement of youth, including an increase in the belief of young people that they can make a difference in their lives and the lives of others (Eccles and Gootman 2002; Kirshner et al. 2003; Mitra 2004). Such student voice initiatives also help young people to develop competencies crucial to becoming an involved and productive citizen, including tolerance, getting along with others, respectfully and effectively questioning authority, and public speaking.

Conclusion

This article has focused on the ways in which power and status influence the group dynamics of communities of practice aimed at building school-based youth–adult partnerships. All of the groups in this study faced great power imbalances from the inception of their creation. The findings from this study offer important implications for the study of communities of practice and the development of student voice initiatives in schools.

First, the study speaks to the ability of power relationships to constrain voice in schools in the first place and the clumsiness that often occurs when students are invited to participate. Students are rarely included in school reform efforts, yet the growing body of research on the value of school-based youth–adult partnerships points to the potential benefits of student voice efforts for youth themselves and the school overall. The clearest examples of students directly questioning school policies occurred in the groups that focused on identifying school problems and on examining broader issues of injustice. Yet, in no situations in this study did the groups approach school administration in a confrontational manner. Midland most directly confronted authority by demanding student representation on the school board. The other groups that focused on identifying problems set out to improve conditions in the school but did not hold the administration accountable for the problems directly. Groups that worked on broader injustices raised challenging questions about issues such as racism, classism, and homophobism among others, but they did not directly challenge their schools as contributing to these problems. While limited research focusing on the concept of "youth activism" focuses on youth questioning authority, this research suggests that youth–adult partnerships look for spaces in which common ground and vision can be established rather than identifying and contesting differences. Much more research is needed on ways in which communities of practice can question and resist school-based and societal injustices.

Second, the creation of spaces that include the voices of young people must be developed in ways that avoid tokenism or further alienation of young people. The mutual engagement focus of most of the groups in this study included seeking out a broad range of perspectives within the school, including marginalized youth. Indeed, the video and textbook projects at Morgan and Sierra focused on giving a space to share the voice and experiences of silenced and marginalized young people. The restraints on shared power within institutional settings raise important questions about the limits of youth–adult partnerships with school walls. The types of activities conducted in the groups in this study support previous research (Mitra 2006b) that the "positioning" of a youth–adult partnership within school walls can be more effective for working on issues that share common concerns among students, faculty and administration. Positioning a youth–adult partnership outside of school walls might be more effective for contesting school policy.

Last, the article points to specific strategies for fostering student voice in communities of practice, including focusing on role creation, building a common language and establishing common norms. These ideas can serve as starting points for other schools and groups seeking to build youth–adult partnerships of their own. Future studies can examine if this set of conditions influences other types of power balances in communities of practice beyond including young people.

Appendix A

Description of cases

School name	Project goals and activities
College Center	Creating a unity council that would foster dialogue across racial groups
Great Valley	Creating a peace park honoring students who serve as school peacemakers by reducing bullying
Hillside	Tempering racial tensions and addressing inequities by developing a student unity center
High Hills	Improving the self-esteem of Polynesian youth by painting a large mural reflecting Polynesian history
Highland	Fostering business skills, including selling school lunches made by local restaurants and providing income tax assistance to the elderly.
Hoover	Championing gay rights and tolerance by developing a student-designed video of youth experiences with intolerance
King	Creating youth-driven dialogues and taking action, including creating more course electives
Latin	Helping peers through conflict mediation and issue workshops including suicide, body image, and racism
McGuire	Implementing a peer-to-peer conflict resolution program
Midland	Fighting for substantive student representation on the district school board
Morgan	Educating peers about youth rights and experiences through forums and a book of youth poems and essays
Sierra	Developing a student-designed video describing the injustices and structural inequities of their disadvantaged community
Whitman	Improving teacher-student collaboration through student-led tours of their community and youth participation in professional development

Appendix B: Interview protocol for youth and adults

Tell me about how things are going this year with your program.

What has changed from last year?

What is the purpose of your organization? (Making change? Youth development? Youth assistance? Something else?)

What kind of support do adults need to do this work?

What kind of supports do youth need to do this work?

What do teachers and students in the school think about your group? How do they perceive your work?

Who are the group's biggest allies (principals, teachers, outside nonprofit, other)

Who makes decisions in your group? Who is a leader?

What types of skills do young people need to engage in the work that you do?

What type of skills do adults need?

Have you seen any changes in the school as a result of their work yet?

Have you seen any changes in the youth involved?

What are your plans for continuing your work after the grant ends?

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