Journal of Educational Change (2019) 20:1–29
https://doi.org/10.1007/s10833-018-9326-3

Pragmatism in student voice practice: What does it take to sustain a counter-normative reform in the long-term?

Catharine Biddle[1]

Published online: 27 July 2018
© Springer Nature B.V. 2018

Abstract
Youth self-determination has been shown to be key to supporting youth engagement in school. However, the latent custodial and sorting functions of schooling often interfere with reform efforts that seek to change the nature of the central relationship of schooling—that of teacher and student. While many studies exist of short-term reform efforts, few long-term efforts in the United States have successfully persisted. This study is a longitudinal, embedded case study of a network of high schools, supported by an intermediary organization, committed to elevating student voice. Through a critical examination of the rapid prototyping approach the intermediary organization credits with the long-terms success of its program, I trace the adaptations of student voice theory and practice that occurred across 17 schools over a period of 5 years. I find that key adaptations that buffered organizational pressures—most notably teacher resistance to student voice—also moved the initiative away from the equity-focus that it embraced in early iterations. These findings point to the significance of value clarity in counter-normative reforms committed to developmental change and the challenges of avoiding the trap of only enriching the experiences of the most advantaged students.

Keywords Student voice · Youth–adult partnership · Rapid-prototyping · Youth activism · Narrative research

Introduction

The importance of youth self-determination in school settings is being recognized as foundational to student engagement (Baroutsis et al. 2016; Brasof 2015; Kennedy-Lewis 2015; Murphy 2016). However, policymakers and some educators continue to define and locate opportunities for youth agency within educational institutions in fairly narrow ways (Pleasance 2016). Extracurricular activities and student

✉ Catharine Biddle
catharine.biddle@maine.edu

[1] University of Maine, 333 Merrill Hall, Orono, ME 04473, USA

councils have historically been sites of student leadership development; nevertheless, these activities are often treated as peripheral extras or, in the case of student councils, have been circumscribed to working primarily on social activities such as dances, bake sales and fundraisers (Fielding 2001; McFarland and Starmanns 2009). Attempts by students, or adults in partnership with students, to carve out a space that moves beyond these sites of traditional student leadership can encounter significant resistance from administrators and teachers as beliefs about the roles and capabilities of young people are contested (Silva 2003; Taines 2014).

The United States has historically represented a challenging context in which to implement meaningful self-determination for youth in schools because of the lack of recognition of youth agency in policy (Cook-Sather 2010). A symptom of this disinterest includes the failure of the US to ratify the United Nations' *Convention on the Rights of the Child*. Within this context, efforts by educators and school leaders to elevate youth involvement in schools by including them in leadership and decision-making has occurred largely in pockets of success that are decentralized and uncoordinated (Mager and Nowak 2012). Without effective networks of support, many of these initiatives flounder after 1 or 2 years as individual educators or educational leaders struggle to overcome technical barriers or face resistance to institutionalizing a new positioning of youth within schools (Mager and Nowak 2012; Mitra 2009a). As a result, few studies exist of long-term efforts to involve students in meaningful decision-making in schools.

Excitement and interest in student-centered learning as a vehicle for college and career readiness in the United States has reignited discussions of youth agency and voice in schools (Freeland 2014; Toshalis and Nakkula 2012). However, in countries, such as New Zealand, that are pressing forward with these policies through incentive or mandate find that underlying beliefs about youth agency must change before student-centered learning can be effectively realized (Bourke and Loveridge 2016). Therefore, it is critically important that we understand the challenges and trade-offs that occur when schools work to sustain long-term efforts to involve students in decision-making and leadership. With 17 participating high schools across one Northeastern state, the Adults and Students Partnering in Reforming Education[1] (ASPIRE) program represents a unique case of a sustained effort to engage students meaningfully in school decision-making over the long-term. Schools participating in the program are supported by the ASPIRE intermediary organization whose mission is to provide technical assistance, training and support to schools interested in involving youth in meaningful decision-making in schools. Despite encountering many challenges in its implementation, the rapid prototyping philosophy embraced by ASPIRE has allowed some schools participating in the ASPIRE program to sustain these efforts over a period of five or more years. Therefore, this study explores the interplay of supports and adaptations that schools participating in the ASPIRE network have made to sustain long-term youth–adult partnership groups, with particular attention to the successes and compromises made to achieve this sustainability.

[1] Pseudonym.

Literature review

Schools represent a fertile context for meaningful youth involvement because of the large role that they have in the organization of youth's everyday lives (Sinclair 2004). There are many terms for referring to youth self-determination in schools emanating from a variety of countries and literatures, including student voice, youth–adult partnership, pupil voice, and meaningful student involvement. All of these refer to the involvement of youth in school decision-making processes in ways that are purposeful and authentic and are not tokenistic or manipulative (Cook-Sather 2002, 2010; Groundwater-Smith 2011). Research on the partnership of youth and adults for school reform, specifically, has been done under two umbrellas: that of youth leadership in schools, which includes research on both student voice, service-learning and citizenship education, and that of youth social activism (Mitra and Kirshner 2012). These two strands of literature, with broad roots in community organizing, positive youth development, community psychology, and student-centered learning practices, are rarely brought into conversation with one another but share remarkable similarity in the content of their concerns and their positioning of youth as agents in their lives and their education.

Youth leadership and student voice

Historically, youth leadership development in schools has been grounded in the cultural positioning of youth as becomings (Bragg 2007a), or in a state of preparation for the realization of their leadership potential in the future. This is the same paradigm that has historically seen student councils and other student-led extra-curricular opportunities as practice for adult civic life. However, more recently, a new paradigm of student leadership development has sought to involve youth in issues central to the communities in which they are situated. With roots in the field of positive youth development, this paradigm suggests that holistic youth development programs are more effective than targeted interventions that treat youth behaviors as problems to be excised (Larson 2000). These new types of opportunities include the redesign of student councils to include issues of community well-being, discipline, school climate, and teaching and learning, as well as the expansion of extracurricular and credit-bearing options in schools that address these critical issues through training, action-research, and service-learning (Beaudoin 2005; Fielding 2001; Rudduck 2007; Rudduck and McIntyre 2007; Smyth 2007; Zeldin et al. 2000).

Because of deep roots in the study of positive youth development, literature on youth leadership in schools has typically focused on the ways in which such opportunities increase youth's pro-social competencies, including their sense of belonging, self-efficacy, civic engagement, or care for others (Larson et al. 2005; Mitra and Gross 2009; Mitra and Serriere 2012; Perkins and Borden 2003; Pittman et al. 2001), in addition to more typical leadership development measures including self-awareness, the development of moral thinking, and interpersonal skill development (Larson 2000; Park and Peterson 2006). These attributes and benefits are often studied at the individual level, rather than examining the benefits for the school or the

community, in part because of the natural churn in student leadership created by graduation (Camino 2005; Shah and Mediratta 2008). Notable exceptions to this focus include the literature on service-learning, in part because of concerns for identity issues and power dynamics between students engaged in service-learning and those to whom they are providing service (Reeb and Folger 2012). This literature is one of the few areas of crossover between the youth leadership literature and the literature that examines participatory efforts in partnership with youth or youth-led social activism (Mitra and Kirshner 2012).

Youth social activism

Another paradigm for considering youth-led or youth–adult led school reform has been that of youth community organizing and youth activism (Ginwright et al. 2006). Student activism within the United States has a long history of attention to both educational and community justice issues from the student protests of the sixties and seventies to the occupy movement to the contemporary walk-outs regarding gun control and school safety (Cottle 2018; Keniston 1971; Pelletier 2012). While many of these efforts have been located within institutions of higher education, high school youth and community activists have adapted strategies of community organizing and participatory action research to address issues of social justice within K-12 educational and settings (Cammarota and Romero 2011; Christens and Dolan 2011; Kirshner 2009; Kirshner and Geil 2010; Kirshner et al. 2011; Yonezawa and Jones 2009). Such initiatives often address issues similar to those engaged through youth leadership efforts; however, youth organizing tends to explicitly situate these issues within the context of broader societal struggles over racial, socioeconomic and other types of injustice (Christens and Kirshner 2011). Rather than treat inequities as “a set of technical challenges solved through rational deliberation or incremental change” (Mitra and Kirshner 2012, p. 58), youth organizing approaches confront social and political barriers to community change, often by raising awareness of the experience of living, working and learning in organizations that are governed by inequitable policies and structures (Fine et al. 2007; Taylor and Robinson 2009).

Research on the power-sharing necessary for successful youth–adult partnerships within the context of social activism share many similar features with the literature on new student leadership. In fact, Tolman et al. (2001) make many of the same claims about youth organizing that advocates for student voice and youth leadership development make with regard to both positive organizational and community outcomes and individual positive outcomes for youth. Powers and Allaman (2012) document the ways in which youth participatory action research strategies, for example, help support the development of new literacies, communication strategies, and expand youth’s abilities to build relationships with school and community leaders. Adult advisors for such efforts often grapple with many of the same challenges as adults supporting student leadership programs, including knowing when to take the lead and when to let youth lead, how to maintain momentum and how to elevate youth perspectives in adult-only spaces (Cammarota and Fine 2010; Fox et al. 2010; Powers and Allaman 2012).

Youth–adult partnership efforts born from this paradigm tend not to suffer from crises of identity around purpose in the same way that partnership efforts born out of the student leadership paradigm might because of the strong foregrounding of social justice and the importance placed on addressing structural inequalities in schools and communities (Taylor and Robinson 2009). Nevertheless, as might be expected when inequitable power structures are challenged, youth–adult partnership work that seeks to directly address these issues can encounter significant opposition because of the conflict that such efforts create (Alinsky 1971). When this conflict happens within a school environment, students, subject to the custody and control of adults whose practices may be the object of their attention, become vulnerable (Christens and Dolan 2011; Taines 2014). For example, Taines (2014) discusses the sanctions that students attempting to advocate for social change faced from teachers who did not understand or were not supportive of their efforts. She argues that the youth activism paradigm could benefit from the exploration of cooperative strategies of organizing within schools that do more to buffer students from these vulnerabilities.

It is worth mentioning that there are several critiques of the potential of youth voice to meaningfully transform social relationships (Arnot and Reay 2007), as well as a body of work that has pointed to the necessity of critical framing for successful youth–adult partnership initiatives (Chávez and Soep 2005; Kirshner 2010). One of the complexities of youth–adult partnership is the necessary foregrounding of intergenerational collaboration in the work, while age itself rarely has master status for individuals when it comes to defining their social identities. As a result, some have argued the necessity of grounding all youth–adult partnership work within the intersection of these complexities (Kirshner 2010); however, the realization of youth agency, particularly within the traditional school context, can be itself so radically counter normative that these complexities may be compressed or ignored within such contexts in service of the continuance of the work without careful and constant attention.

The role of intermediary organizations in meaningful youth involvement

Students, teachers, and administrators must attend to a range of competing priorities related to their everyday work in schools. Redefining the central relationships to the institution, therefore, presents a challenge that many educational leaders are unwilling to take on alone (Beck 1992; Fullan 2007). While studies have examined what types of practices are most successful in supporting the meaningful inclusion of youth in school decision-making, including optimal group size (Mitra 2009a), role definition (Mitra 2008a, 2009b), collaboration with school leadership (Mitra 2008b; Mitra et al. 2012), and the necessary training and support (Mitra 2009a), fledgling youth–adult partnership initiatives must still buffer threats to their sustainability while they attempt to engage shared power between students and adults (Cook-Sather 2002; Taines 2014). Often, these threats take the form of adult resistance, but can also be as simple as finding time in busy school schedules to meet and plan, changes in leadership priorities, and pressure from other types of school reform (Mitra and Biddle 2012). One important innovation in this space, therefore,

has been intermediary organizations partnering with schools to provide resources and training to support more equitable relationships with youth (Mitra et al. 2010).

Intermediary organizations have taken on a variety of roles that help to support schools in exploring the possibility of youth–adult partnership. Mitra et al. (2010) suggest that intermediary organizations play an important role in both *sparking* the introduction of paradigm shifts around youth involvement in school decision-making and providing *stability* to nascent initiatives as groups attempt to shift perceptions of youth capabilities and agency within their schools. In their study of two such intermediary organizations, they note that intermediary organizations' support efforts in this space are often designed as one time or short-term provisions of training and technical assistance. Long-term, or multi-year partnerships, between intermediary organizations and schools working to elevate youth voices have proven to be extremely rare, and as such, are a poorly understood and little-researched phenomenon (Mitra 2009a). As a result, little is known about the ways in which these relationships evolve over time, or how such relationships respond to the variety of external and internal pressures that shape the daily practices of schools.

Background on the case

The ASPIRE program represents a case of an intermediary organization dedicated to providing long-term technical assistance to groups of youth and adults in schools interested in partnering. To participate in the program, schools make a minimum 3-year commitment to supporting a group of youth and adults in this effort. In exchange, the ASPIRE program staff provide schools with on-going training in facilitation, school change, and relevant educational research, as well as curriculum and long-term site-based coaching informed by best practices around youth–adult power sharing and partnership. ASPIRE helps to support schools through the successive organizational challenges they may encounter as they begin to experiment with increasing youth involvement in school decision-making, including competition for participant time, the need for capacity-building, and teacher resistance or school leader turnover (Mitra 2008a, b). First year schools, for example, must commit to recruiting a team of at least two teachers, at least 8–15 students and an administrator; be provided time to meet for 1 h during the week; attend a 2-day summer orientation; regularly document their work; and facilitate 2–3 faculty meetings a year. Additionally, all adults involved in the program are offered enrollment in a graduate course dedicated to reading and discussing how to be better partners to youth and providing on-going trouble-shooting for their site-based work. In this way, ASPIRE as an intermediary organization aims to provide stability to these youth–adult partnership initiatives during their early years when they are most likely to be derailed or abandoned (Mitra et al. 2010).

Contemporary ASPIRE teams always begin their work—an action-research cycle—with a survey designed to hone in on the state of youth–adult relationships, climate, and teaching and learning practices in the building. The design of this schoolwide survey is based in a framework called "The 4Rs", the central tenets of which are rigor, relationships, relevance and shared responsibility. The ASPIRE

framework suggests that these elements of teaching and learning are the most important for supporting student engagement. The purpose of ASPIRE groups' work is to enhance attention to these 4Rs within their school, and as a result, to increase student engagement in learning. The organization takes the position that issues of unequal access and equity—such as racism or economic marginalization—that have ramifications for individuals within a school will arise through the data collection process and be addressed through action-research guided by the 4Rs framework.

As will be described in more detail, the nature and focus of this work has shifted over time, with key decisions made at different points in order to minimize organizational conflict caused by the challenge to dominant perceptions of youth roles and abilities in school. The study sought to explore how the organization, working from its founding forward, developed and refined this model that has buffered nascent threats to their counternormative work in schools through a process the leadership of ASPIRE have termed "rapid prototyping."

Theoretical framework

Since its beginning, ASPIRE has embraced a rapid prototyping approach to the development and support of its work in schools. "This is such a dynamic organization," said one of the leadership team members in an interview, "we are never in a steady state." Within a rapid prototyping paradigm, there is the acknowledgement that no program will be perfect and therefore it is useless to strive for perfection, but rather to simply reflect on and refine the work as it unfolds (Gustafson and Branch 1997). Action is prioritized to maintain forward momentum and excitement, with theory following after in order to communicate the lessons of the work to new schools and stakeholders. Because of this approach, recognition of shifts in the operationalization of key organizational ideas or the implications of those ideas for practice tend to lag behind the implementation of those shifts, leaving the theory of the organization's work constantly in a state of catching up to the forward momentum of the work itself. The story of the development of ASPIRE's theory of change, then, is a story of action followed by reflection, followed by action, in a sequence of iterative revision that changes both theory and practice.

This approach is notable in its similarity to methods of inquiry based in philosophical pragmatism, in which experience, along with reflection, is assumed to be the best way of achieving effective praxis, or theory in action (Dewey 1916). Pragmatism is sometimes referred to as an anti-philosophy because of the contextual and dependent way in which it positions knowledge in relation to reality, eschewing traditional notions of ontology and epistemology in favor of pursuing knowledge in use—knowledge that is for a specific end in a specific context, gained through experience and gleaned from reflection (Biesta 2010; Biesta and Burbules 2003). This similarity between philosophical pragmatism and ASPIRE's rapid prototyping approach to its work is notable because of the way in which it raises questions about how utility and value are defined in long-term student voice practice.

Philosophical pragmatism has been critiqued for its underdeveloped axiological stance, most often through the invocation of the questions such as "Utility

for whom? And to what end?" (Himmelfarb 1994; Russell 1909). Early pragmatist philosophers saw the utility of action defined within the context of community, captured broadly within the concept of the "social good" (Fesmire 2003). They saw the social good as a context dependent phenomenon, recursively negotiated through democratic dialogue, and evaluated through the questioning of what practical difference one action made over another towards furthering that good (Maxcy 2003). Unfortunately, in practice, it is not always clear in pragmatic decision-making how the social good is being defined or what role power plays in determining good for whom.

This distinction is important in the context of youth–adult partnership work in schools. Schools are an institutional context in which good has traditionally been defined through the power and control of adults, while youth voices have played little or no role in those negotiations (Cook-Sather 2002). Social and cultural beliefs about the capacity of young people have excluded them from democratic processes implied by a pragmatic axiology, disallowing them to contribute to the definition of social good. Furthermore, critically informed analyses of these negotiations suggest that in practice these exclusions extend to many groups within society, and locate in these exclusions the failure of deliberative democracy to ensure equity (Delgado and Stefancic 2001).

These issues of access and equity within pragmatic approaches to school reform are critical to consider as youth voice struggles with imposed estimations of its relative value emanating from competing ideologies of school reform (Fielding 2001). Neoliberal education reform tends to define value as the creation of positive outcomes for individual youth, and in particular reifies student achievement and career-transferable human capital development (Au 2010). By contrast, reform approaches informed by community empowerment and social justice tend to define value creation within the context of good for the most marginalized within a community (Fielding 2001; Bragg 2007b).

This research seeks to answer the following questions:

1. How did ASPIRE and its partner schools sustain youth–adult partnership groups in their schools for 5 years or longer?
2. What actions and choices contributed to buffering nascent threats to ensure long-term sustainability?

To understand this, I examine their process of rapid prototyping through the lens of the controversy over axiology and value creation in philosophical pragmatism in order to understand the relationship between the evolution of ASPIRE's technical support for meaningful student involvement which created one kind of social good—long-term sustainability—and the perceptions of educators and students in their partner schools about the power, possibility, and authenticity of that work in their organizations.

Methodology

For this embedded case study of ASPIRE (Yin 2009), changes to the organization and its partner schools' praxis were examined over a period of 5 years by looking at the experiences and practices of the 17 partner high schools, as well as changes to the intermediary organization itself. The selection of ASPIRE as the focus of this study of longitudinal student voice work was informed by both practical and theoretical considerations. First, the organization's work has been lauded by the New England Secondary School Consortium and multiple university-based external evaluators for its careful attention to supporting the dynamics of equitable relationships between youth and adults—including shared responsibility for achieving group goals, space for the expression of youth voice, and providing capacity-building training for both youth and adults to strengthen and support their youth–adult partnership practice and ability as change agents. ASPIRE's meticulous documentation of their work since their founding provides a rich archive of documents and other artifacts to work with in analyzing their program and organizational history. Additionally, while the implementation of the ASPIRE program model may vary from school to school, the general features of groups such as size, age of students, and action-research goals, remain the same and thus are amenable to comparison and theory-building (Yin 2009).

High schools participating in ASPIRE are all located in a largely rural, Northeastern state. The participating high schools largely reflect the racial demographics of the state in which they are located, in which the population is 93% white, with the exception of three rural and suburban schools in which more than 20% of the population were students of color. The high schools themselves vary widely in size, with enrollments ranging from 44 students in grades 9–12 in a remote, rural school to 1032 in a small city with a population of 42,000. Median family income of the communities where ASPIRE schools were located ranged from $34,000 to $42,000, with free and reduced priced lunch rates in the participating communities ranging from 35% to over 65%. For a full understanding of the range of schools participating in the APSIRE program, see Table 1.

The first wave of data was collected as part of a yearly evaluation of the ASPIRE program in 2012. Interviews were conducted with 23 adult advisors and principals from 11 participating schools in the ASPIRE network, as well as with two State Agency of Education officials to understand the state context for student voice work. Additionally, observation of a 1-week summer training for all ASPIRE school members was conducted, along with extensive document review of organizational materials, including strategic documents relating to the short-term and long-term goals of the organization, curriculum and project guides that have been developed to support school-based group activities, as well as newsletters, social media posts, survey instruments, and data collected and analyzed by participating ASPIRE schools. In collecting these documents, attention was paid to achieving parity around the number and type of documents and artifacts that were collected from participating schools to avoid an unintentional confirmatory bias in the data that was culled from these (Yin 2009).

Table 1 Demographics of participating ASPIRE high schools

	Number of ASPIRE schools (n = 17)		
	Less than 100	101–299	Greater than 300
Student enrollment	4	8	5
	0–30%	31–50%	> 50%
Free or reduced price lunch	3	8	6
	Rural	Town	Suburban/urban
Geographic locale	11	3	3
	0–6% non-white	7–12% non-white	> 12% non-white
Racial demographics	9	5	3

The second wave of data was collected in the 2013–2014 school year and consisted of additional interviews with five members of the ASPIRE leadership team to understand the evolution of this work, two State Agency of Education officials to revisit the changing state context, and case studies of the two of the longest participating ASPIRE high schools—5 years or more in both cases. Interviews were conducted with adult advisors (3), students (9), principals, teachers and school board members (12) at both sites to gain perspective on the particularities of the work at each case site, with special attention to change over time. All of these groups were asked about the process and longevity of ASPIRE's work, as well as the changes they have seen as a result of ASPIRE in the school. Documents were collected from each of the case study schools, including survey results, handouts at ASPIRE meetings, and schools strategic planning documents, as appropriate.

In the first phase of data analysis, a longitudinal matrix was constructed in which adaptations in ASPIRE's stated best practices were mapped over time and systematically compared with youth–adult partnership practices being implemented in partner schools in order to understand how ASPIRE learned from its network of schools and how its learning in turn affected youth–adult partnership practice in its partner schools. From these matrices, a narrative of ASPIRE's organizational and network change was constructed, drawing on interview data and document analyses, documenting the changes happening at the organizational level and shifts in students and teacher perceptions of youth–adult partnership work in ASPIRE partner schools (Clandinin and Connelly 2000).

The restorying, or construction of the narrative is informed by both longitudinal case research focused on organizational change as well as case study research using the life history method (Clandinin and Connelly 2000). Abbott (1988) suggests that understanding organizational change over time must begin with a chronological narrative, rather than a thematic analysis, as it is only through a time-based narrative that the relevant sequencing of events can begin to inform the researcher's understanding of the antecedents to climactic and important decisions in an organization's history. This type of analysis and reporting of the data is appropriate for

understanding the changes in focus and praxis which resulted from the pragmatic rapid prototyping approach that allowed ASPIRE to remain sustainable and achieve its longevity within partner schools. From this narrative, key adaptations were identified by the effects which they had on youth and adult perceptions of both the purpose and nature of youth–adult partnership work in schools, allowing greater understanding of the compromises and trade-offs that such counter-normative initiatives must make to remain sustainable in schools. Member-checking this restorying was done with youth, educators and a member of the ASPIRE leadership team.

Findings

The ASPIRE program began as a collaboration between the State Principal's Association and the ASPIRE director, a youth development professional with 20 years of experience consulting with schools on student-centered and project-based learning experiences. Schools recruited into the pilot program were required to make a 3-year commitment to ASPIRE's mission, which was to [*emphasis mine*]

> increase student engagement in learning and desire and capacity for civic engagement, by shifting the culture of public schools from one dominated by **rules and adult control**, to a culture of **joint ownership** of learning through **collaborative decision making**.

The means to achieve this mission was conceptualized as an action research model to change embedded "attitudes, culture and structures"—according to a newsletter released at this time—that limit student involvement in curriculum design, school structures, policy development and civic engagement opportunities. At its outset, success measures were defined as the number of students reporting that they had a "say in their education," definitive changes in school culture, a decrease in discipline referrals, an increase in student academic performance, and the meaningful inclusion of students in decision-making areas traditionally reserved for adults.

Initially, four schools participated, each convening a group of students and adult advisors to create what were referred to in the first year as "Student Voice Groups." While the goal of increasing the role of youth in decision-making in schools was clearly shared amongst all of the first year ASPIRE schools, the documents which were generated during this early period indicate the extent to which the participating groups had to make sense of the desired ends defined by both ASPIRE and the State Principal's Association. With the desired results of this work so broadly conceived as changing a culture dominated by "adult rules and control", the question of how to operationalize "joint ownership" and "collaborative decision-making" remained a question for the groups largely to define themselves. The first newsletter shared by ASPIRE makes reference to the "fuzzy" quality of the work and compares the collection of student voice within each school to a "fishing expedition". A principal at a participating school expressed his gratitude for the external support provided by ASPIRE, saying, "Through this work, we are challenging the status quo. However, we are not sure of what we hope to put in its place. It comes back to trust. I'm thankful that I am not doing this alone."

While all of the groups loosely adhered to an action-research model, approaches varied significantly between schools, ranging from a box for student suggestions to focus groups. The groups felt free to concentrate on whichever issues their student participants were interested in, including changing the dress code, how teachers were changing their instruction to adapt to the new school schedule, and the relationship between the school and the community itself. The ASPIRE staff worked to support all of these variations; however, as each school's work began to receive attention, areas of tension increasingly revealed themselves.

Adaptation 1: Defining a niche and purpose for ASPIRE using a guiding framework

By the second year of the program, there were some simmering tensions for many participating adults around the foci of the work. A number of adult advisors felt that better boundaries were needed in order to more effectively leverage student voice as a tool for institutional change. Adults expressed dismay about students wanting to change the cafeteria food, or used examples of other "student voice" groups in the school that had advocated for more relaxed standards around senior privileges or sports participation being pegged to grade point averages, to the distaste of other teachers who then condemned student voice as a practice altogether. One principal was reported in an early evaluation of the program as saying,

> I don't think that everybody had gotten the vision of the cycle or what the work was really about. I mean I know this [ASPIRE] is like a student advocacy voice which I have always felt is a hugely important piece of any school climate and culture. But just getting the idea of how do we make this systematic and really address actual needs in the community rather than saying, "Well let's get a student lounge."

These statements implied differences in opinion between youth and adults about what projects had value or were worthy of attention within the school context, with adults largely favoring projects that intersected teaching and learning, rather than projects that were perceived to only affect youth lifeworlds (such as dress code, sports privileges, or cafeteria offerings). One adult advisor reflected,

> We [the adult advisors] felt like the ASPIRE work needed to be different than…doing activities to get Styrofoam out of the kitchen or whatever. We wanted a group that focused on how do we make meaningful change in the classroom. We learned that from not being diligent about that focus the first time around.

A school board member, citing his own experiences as a parent, seemed to capture the underlying dilemma that many ASPIRE-involved adults were trying to describe, by saying,

> There is a body of life experiences that occurs over time that positions you to be able to make informed – have important – have more or less informed options…[A teacher says], "What do you want to do? Let's do something for

> our school as a community. What do you want to do?" And if the students don't have a sort of a broader framing of how they would pursue that then they say "Let's bring in vending machines with junk food." I mean, kids really want junk food. And you're kind of saying "Well, you know, I think that's sort of outside the bounds of what's possible in this context."

This board member suggests that young people's experiences may point them in directions that seem, to adults, unimportant, unless provided with scaffolding or explicit value framing that directs them towards projects that adults find more acceptable.

It is possible that this would have continued to remain an unaddressed tension in ASPIRE's work; nevertheless, this concern was intensified by pressure within the schools to better define the contribution of ASPIRE teams as compared to existing outlets for student leadership, such as the National Honors Society, the Student Council or the Key Club. These groups also purported to enhance student voice and leadership through student decision-making and community involvement. As the majority of ASPIRE schools were small high schools of 300 students or less, they shared many students with these other initiatives, creating a zero-sum environment for participation in the initiative, and requiring them to better articulate their contribution to their schools. ASPIRE teams found it difficult to explain what their approach accomplished that student council, for example, was not positioned to provide. The challenge of articulating the institutional legacy and the historical positioning of student council versus what youth and adults saw as the unique contribution of ASPIRE led to some turf wars between these organizations within participating schools, and even the merging of two early ASPIRE groups with their student councils.

The introduction of a guiding framework

The ASPIRE leadership team responded to this escalating tension with the creation of a framework that could help to distinguish ASPIRE from other student leadership groups, as well as address the difference adults perceived between "cafeteria"-level concerns and concerns centered on teaching and learning. Towards the end of the program's second year, a new guiding framework was introduced for the organization's work—the three R's, or rigor, relevance, relationships, and a fourth R introduced several months later, Shared responsibility. The 4R's framework became one of the key defining features of the ASPIRE approach to youth–adult partnership work.

The "R's" were self-consciously based in educational research on the connection between student engagement and the quality of student–teacher relationships, creating rigor through developmentally appropriate challenges, and ensuring authentic connections between students and the content of the curriculum (see Cushman 2013; Dewey 1938; Dweck 2006; Hattie 2009; Medina 2008; Ormrod 1999; Sousa 2006; Toshalis and Nakkula 2012; Vygotsky 1978). At the center of the Rs was the issue of engagement, defined in ASPIRE trainings for youth–adult teams as teaching and learning practices informed by neuroscience

(such as mindset and motivation research) and connected to twenty-first century skills such as leadership and responsibility, technological literacy, initiative, self-direction, flexibility and productivity. Although social and cultural awareness is named as a twenty-first century skill in the ASPIRE curriculum, in its actual trainings, these issues were not highlighted or in some instances, mentioned at all. The boundaries created by the framework of the 4Rs addressed the tension that adults were expressing around the need to address the issues in school which were most important (to them). The framework accomplished this by cultivating a shared understanding amongst participating youth and adults that issues related to the 4Rs were the only ones that would be addressed through their work. As one adult advisor said

> ASPIRE provides this great foundation [of the Rs] so there's kind of a clear idea of the overarching purpose of what we're doing without really knowing what each step is going to be and what the action is we're going to take because we don't know, it has to be guided by the data but that there is this really clear process … so there's no kind of confusion about what everybody is doing there. I think there's a real sense of purpose that those kids bring to the table when they get together.

Within the 4Rs framework, the focus of the work shifted more towards the mission of increasing classroom engagement, rather than challenging a culture of "adult rules and control" or increasing civic engagement, as it had been conceived of in the previous year. Some key descriptors to characterize student engagement at this time were "not wasting students' time" "getting their money's worth" and "understanding how to engage myself when I get bored." Notably absent were framings that characterized engagement as an access issue related to cultural or social positioning.

The 4Rs as a framework focused the field of ASPIRE action-research projects away from broader civic engagement or access to learning towards issues of "shared responsibility" for learning, as can be seen through a comparison of the projects groups chose to take on in 2009 and those groups chose to take on in 2012 after the introduction of the 4Rs (See Table 2). The 2009 projects address a broad variety of school and community needs, reflecting the diverse interests of youth in the groups at various partner schools. These included the nutritional, academic, student lifestyle, and relational needs of both students and their families. By 2012, however, the focus had clearly shifted towards concerns bounded by the framework of the 4Rs, focused on this concept of "engagement."

In adopting this framework, adult perspectives on what was most important no longer needed to conflict with their desire to involve students meaningfully in school decision-making. It had been difficult for adults to find a place for themselves in a partnership that included issues they perceived to be exclusive to youth culture or lifeworlds—i.e. issues of dress code or cafeteria food. Now, with the aims of the group defined so that all of the group's work touched on concerns that were also important to adult professional identities as educators, the importance of adult's lived experience and professional knowledge was reaffirmed and given central importance. As one adult advisor put it,

Table 2 Comparison of ASPIRE projects from 2009–2010 to ASPIRE projects in 2011–2012

Examples of ASPIRE team projects in 2009–2010	Examples of ASPIRE team projects in 2011–2012
Earned the privilege of 'outdoor lunch' for students	Hosted a 'fishbowl' dialogue between teachers and students about the format of mid-term exams and how they could be restructured to meet more students needs
Created a Principal Advisory Committee of four students to assist in the creation of school policies	Hosted faculty and student wide dialogues about survey data; hosted follow up dialogues with small groups of 10–15 teachers and students to better understand root causes and solutions
Created student–teacher feedback forms	Created student–teacher feedback forms
Increased the number of families eligible to enroll in the free and reduced price lunch program	Created a system for mapping 9th grade students interests to the curriculum in order to make more relevant connections between student interests and the curriculum
Raised money to buy new gardening tools in order to create a school garden and raise awareness about proper nutrition	Presented a skit at a faculty in-service day to introduce research on how the brain processes information to faculty and administrators
Created a 'muscle your way to school' campaign to promote healthy lifestyles	Created a video through interviews of teachers, students, administrators and parents about the power of self and teacher expectations in shaping students' learning

> I think the teachers know a lot, and it's our job to help kids learn what we know. There's a lot we don't know…I think in terms of having a voice in what they're learning, and having a voice in how they're learning it, that doesn't necessarily mean that their voice vetoes. It's having a voice and partnership with the adults, and being able to have their opinion, and being able to give their feedback. It's not youth's voice is vetoing and saying, "This isn't how it's gonna be." It's youth's voice in a way of developing an understanding. Sometimes when the youth comes to the table and says, "I don't understand this. I think it's wrong." The adult has the opportunity to say, "Here's the why." Then you find your common ground.

As a result of this shift in focus, the organization's mission statement was revised to read [*emphasis mine*]

> The mission of ASPIRE is to increase **student engagement in learning** and **voice in decision-making** by creating a **partnership between students, faculty and the community** to increase rigor, relevance, relationships and shared responsibility in learning through action research.

The focus on "civic engagement" or a description of the school environment as one characterized by "rules and adult control" was removed from the mission statement of the organization. The focus instead was on how to create equitable power dynamics between youth and adults focused specifically on teaching and learning as seen through the lens of neuroscience and twenty-first century skills.

This introduction of the 4Rs framework was accompanied by reflection from the organization about the implications of this for their work. Advisory board minutes from a meeting about the initiative at this time read,

> Is there a built-in problem with the two goals of ASPIRE? It is easier to provide symbolic "voice" than to create "engagement." It is also easier to "solve" the problem of lack of voice than to solve "a problem of lack of engagement" – is voice the easy way out? Voice comes from engagement, but engagement (of ALL students) rarely comes from "voice" (e.g. a voting student member on the school board isn't going to do much for engagement).

Here, the board expresses how it grappled with issues related to access around the technologies of formal student voice within partner schools, but with little reference to the barriers that might cause these challenges to access. Around this same time, the ASPIRE advisory board put together a list of 11 "Founding Beliefs" for ASPIRE, which reiterated issues of disengagement as the core focus of ASPIRE team's work. "Youth are uniquely positioned to provide insight into core issues of disengagement and to develop effective solutions," the document reads. "Involvement of students in school transformation is a critical, missing piece of school transformation efforts." The document goes on to focus on the relationship between twenty-first century learning and student voice, the importance of ownership over your daily activities, and the negative messages to youth about their capabilities by not involving them. The second to last belief mentions equity, saying "Exploring and addressing equity issues in schools will raise an awareness of equity issues in life." However, participating youth and adults did not mention or describe equity as a guiding value in shaping their work in schools.

The benefits and costs of the 4Rs

The 4Rs changed the way in which ASPIRE teams worked within their schools, as well as the way in which the ASPIRE program staff were able to support school teams. The introduction of the 4Rs allowed youth, with some training from ASPIRE in the shared language that it created, access to conversations with adults that would previously have been impossible by giving them a vocabulary for school reform and change that all teachers understood and appreciated. A principal at an ASPIRE partner school described how, once the students were able to facilitate conversations in faculty meetings using these concepts,

> There was a growing sort of mutual sort of appreciation. Faculty were very, very receptive and kids were very excited feeling like they were being heard and that their thoughts were valued.

The act of creating a shared language such that teaching and learning concepts could be discussed allowed for shared power between youth and adults by democratizing access to conversations about pedagogy and curriculum. In an early

evaluation of the ASPIRE program, many students brought up the utility of the 4Rs for increasing their ability to express concerns that they had previously sublimated or been unable to describe aside from vague unease. As one student stated,

> When I understood the framework more, I realized that there were identifiable things about school that I couldn't articulate but had been conscious of. ASPIRE gave me a language to talk about what I vaguely found wrong.

The shared language of the 4Rs also provided greater connection across the ASPIRE network as participating schools could now more easily share lessons and strategies between them, increasing their stability in the face of unique challenges from their individual schools (Coburn 2003). ASPIRE was able to share previously successful projects done by other ASPIRE schools, as well as to provide clearer support documents for schools to support implementation through a curriculum designed around the 4Rs and a vision of a transformed school, according to a rubric based on the 4Rs.

Another—likely unintended—consequence of this narrowing for students involved with ASPIRE was that for many of the students, the 4Rs came to define the holistic meaning of student voice. For example, one student, when asked to describe what student voice is, explained,

> Student voice is the act of students trying to take control of their education and trying to make it relevant, rigorous and trying to get relationships out of it. Just the 4R's in a nutshell and just trying to make it an experience that benefits both them and the society if that makes sense.

In their end of year reflections after the first year of work with the 4Rs framework, the majority of reflections were about the ways in which the 4Rs had changed how students thought about the power and application of their voices in schools. One student, at the end of the first year of work framed by the Rs wrote as a summative reflection on their school team's work,

> It is very important to get students engaged in class and school, and in order to do that we have to make changes. Everyone has their own learning styles and we have to adjust the classrooms to incorporate each different one. Students can now have a say in what happens at school, not just the teachers and adults.

Another student discussed how he realized, from this work, that "student engagement" is the real problem with schools, because "school often doesn't work for students who are disengaged. The style in which school is taught needs to be revamped in order to help these kids." Student voice, this student identified, was the way forward.

However, both youth and adults recognized that not every student was interested in engaging in projects framed in this way. Many adult advisors characterized the participating students as being primarily the "high-flyers", the "grandmasters of school as a game", "type-A, college-bound students", or, at one school, "white, middle class females." As one ASPIRE advisor at one of the larger high schools involved put it,

> We really, really wanted it to be as representative of our demographic population as possible. We started from there. We tried to find kids who maybe were more disenfranchised. We tried to find kids who maybe didn't come to school all the time, and all those sorts of things. What we discovered is, those were the kids that were gonna struggle to come to school longer to be in a meeting, or to do something school type in the summer. You know, "Hey, we're gonna do a school activity for two days in the summer. Won't that be fun?" Those kids are like, "I don't think so."

Similarly, when asked to describe his group, another teacher at a smaller high school said,

> Not diverse enough, first of all. Yet. That's gonna change as time goes on… It's a very motivated group who was very frustrated – … they didn't feel that there was any place for them to find – and not complain – but express concerns about the education that they were getting. They kept hearing me say that this is a place where you can get involved in the academics, and how that works. So, these are kids initially, these are a group of kids who are natural leaders, most of them. In a small school like this, over half of them were involved in at least two sports and student council and National Honors Society. You wear a lot of hats as a student in a small school.

In this teacher's comment, there is a theme of "soon" which many teachers and the director of ASPIRE expressed when asked about involving a greater variety of students. ASPIRE students themselves offered the most coherent explanation for why this might be. Students from across participating schools described strategies they used to involve "disengaged" students in activities they hosted to elevate student voice, some of the students described it as an issue of trust. Adults went out of their way to recruit students with a variety of relationships to school, but, in the words of one student,

> It's been difficult to get those people who aren't usually involved to step up and say something… I think it might be easier after the survey when they can see that their answers are taken seriously. They might have a reason to actually do this.

Other students, in discussing why more students were not involved in ASPIRE, suggested that without experiencing ASPIRE-informed youth–adult partnership, as they had, it was difficult for students to understand that ASPIRE students had the ear of powerful adults in the school, like the principal. A trade-off, then, of narrowing the framing of the work through the 4Rs was fewer opportunities to build trust with "not involved" or, in ASPIRE parlance, disengaged students, through a variety of means to show that their voices would be taken seriously.

Adaptation 2: Standardizing data collection and foregrounding facilitation skills

An early evaluation of the program noted that students who participated in ASPIRE's first year trainings learned skills for engaging stakeholders at their schools in a

variety of ways, including focus groups, student voice boxes, and forums; in spite of this, after a semester, these groups began to realize that they were having difficulty using these strategies to get non-ASPIRE students at their schools excited about the idea of student voice. As one student at that time noted,

> We were doing all of these activities and stuff with people who were sort of like in the group and interested in changing things, but when we actually had to do it with people who weren't in our group and who weren't that excited about it, it was just like it didn't really help that much.

As participating ASPIRE schools entered into the second semester of this work in the first year, in an attempt to address this issue of engaging the voices of all students, the ASPIRE director advised all of the teams to adopt a survey-based approach to the collection of student voices. A uniform approach across the schools was simpler for an intermediary organization to support and this approach had shown promise in its pilot by one of the four schools in the previous semester. Also, as the ASPIRE director observed at the time, broad-based data gave student leaders greater credibility with adults who might be inclined to dismiss the opinions of individual students.

In order to ensure largely positive experiences with youth voice in these adult-dominated spaces, groups gradually began to move away from qualitative strategies to engage student voices and to focus on the development of a school-wide survey tool. Over time, the survey approach became standard, with all new schools being trained each fall on how to administer surveys to students and teachers. As this approach became standardized, groups began to require additional support as they experimented with how to share the data they had collected. To meet this need, in the Fall of its third year, ASPIRE invited a nationally recognized facilitation trainer to provide a 2-day workshop for youth and adults on the use of facilitation protocols. This training has since become an annual event offered to participating ASPIRE schools. Several of these facilitation protocols have become central to ASPIRE groups' work in their schools. Chalk talks, for example, are the go-to method for sharing important data points from surveys with faculty and students. This protocol requires large pieces of paper, set up in a gallery format in a large room. Next to each major idea from the survey, broad questions are posed such as "What are the root causes contributing to this?" and "What possible solutions are there?" Participants are expected to ponder the prompting piece of data and then write their response to the question on the paper, as well as responses to other's comments. The resulting silent dialogue is meant to allow for the expression of everyone's opinions without the fear of blame, recrimination or judgment.

The introduction of both surveys and protocols as key tools for the ASPIRE change process cemented the shift from groups working to elevate youth voices to a focus on highlighting differences in the ways that youth and adults perceive youth's needs in schools. This shift can be seen in a training which was observed in ASPIRE's fourth year in which the organization's founder explained to participants the rationale behind the design of their survey:

> The goals of the ASPIRE survey are generally pretty clear. Our whole task is around assessing rigor, relevance, relationships and shared responsibility, so

> that's a pretty easy frame for us, we're not out there trying to define that. And, our wish is that we look at teacher perspectives and student perspectives. And that means if our goal is these four things and we want to be able to compare student perspectives with teachers, it doesn't mean every question [on the student survey] has to have a mirror [on the adult survey], but a lot of them should to get the richest data because the best dialogue comes when we see differences and how teachers and students perceive them.

As groups experimented with presenting the data to faculty and students, several critical incidents informed the formation of best practice for administering these surveys and then presenting their results. At one school, an ASPIRE group presented the data to the student body ahead of the faculty, leading to anger and resentment by the faculty that they had not been informed of data that reflected on their practice ahead of the students. At another school, qualitative data was collected along with the quantitative survey responses, including responses from students that expressed anger, resentment, and some of which used offensive language. The youth–adult team struggled with how to use this data effectively, ultimately abandoning it altogether as "too explosive," suggesting that it would push teachers into "their panic zones," a term they had been exposed to through ASPIRE training on organizational change.

As a result, the accepted wisdom in collecting and sharing survey data was to not collect qualitative data, and to facilitate separate events for teachers and students, starting with teachers and then planning a subsequent event for a subsection of students or the whole school as possible. The strategy proved to be effective in stimulating adult reflection on the differences in youth and adult perceptions of teaching and learning. A non-ASPIRE teacher who participated in an ASPIRE run dialogue expressed the same surprise that many teachers showed in their exit cards from these presentations, saying,

> I think what always surprises all of us is the discrepancy between what students think about a particular issue and what teacher's think about a particular issue. You know, where the teachers think their students are so engaged, the students maybe report they're not that engaged. Those are always the kind of wow moments of like, "How are we that different?"

Using quantitative data as the driver of dialogue, rather than student expression seemed to depersonalize youth voice to a degree that it was not perceived to be as threatening. The common ASPIRE practice of presenting the data to the faculty first, and then presenting the data to the students in a separate chalk talk was perceived as important for success, because of the perception that it was important to protect youth facilitators from adult resentment.

Adaptation 3: Re-codifying the core values of voice

By the fifth year of the program, ASPIRE's focus had become bringing the work to scale—not in the sense of numbers alone, but in the sense expressed by Coburn (2003) in terms of sustainability and transfer of ownership. The organization was

supporting twelve schools, two new and ten veteran teams. Overall, 17 schools had participated in the previous 5 years. Five schools had elected to discontinue the program, all within 1–2 years of starting it. Two of these schools had started in ASPIRE's first year, both choosing, after some discussion of niche and purpose, to merge their ASPIRE groups with student council (prior to the introduction of the 4Rs). The other three schools started and disbanded after less than a year for a variety of reasons that included lack of buy-in from the principal, principal turnover and being located too far away from the ASPIRE parent organization to get effective site-based support.

While a clear process had been established for onboarding new schools and training them in the use of ASPIRE's tools, veteran schools were struggling with the churn of losing graduating students. These schools reported an ongoing difficulty in being able to concisely communicate the purpose of ASPIRE to relevant stakeholders, especially non-participating students for recruitment. To tackle this issue, the director began to make the creation of a stronger communications strategy an organizational priority, with the hope that identifying such a strategy would help students and teachers alike to explain the organizing logic and desired outcomes for their work. An outside consultant worked with the ASPIRE leadership team to focus on clearly articulating the mission, vision, core values, and guiding principles of their work. As the ASPIRE director explained,

> [There was] a series of questions that [the leadership team] all wrote out around—What's your problem statement? What are your resources? What are your scope of services? What are your values and beliefs? We drafted those, but then we had a day retreat which was where we did our own definitive mapping. I think one of the most powerful things to bring off of that was our list of value statements. What drives every aspect of our work? What defines what we won't do as well as where we'll invest the most of our time by those values?

This process was largely about making explicit the values serving to define the boundaries that the ASPIRE director and ASPIRE teams had already been in the process of establishing for this work since its inception. Ultimately, these included six named values: (1) share responsibility; (2) start from strength; (3) assume positive intentions; (4) seek out equity and justice; (5) create open dialogue; and (6) employ data to drive change. For the ASPIRE director, defining these signified ASPIRE reaching "a level of maturity. In her words, "We've gone through adolescence where we are early adults, and are now positioned with enough pieces now to be credible in a higher-level domain of the work."

As part of this rethinking of the work, the mission of the organization was redefined as well to focus on,

> …increas[ing] student engagement by developing youth–adult partnerships in learning to ensure that **each and every student** has the skills, self-confidence, and opportunities to assume meaningful roles in shaping their learning and their lives.

The central concepts of a learning focus and a partnership between youth and adults are present in this iteration of the organization's mission statement, as well as a clear focus on the role of the organization in developing the skills in youth and adults to engage more thoughtfully within this partnership.

Discussion

Early ASPIRE schools faced many challenges, including finding adequate time in the school day for the work, sufficiently differentiating from other forms of student leadership, and buffering teacher resistance to the insights of youth on teaching and learning. These pressures have been recognized as early challenges for other youth voice initiatives (Mitra 2008a; Taines 2014), suggesting that the experience of ASPIRE teams is representative of these types of initiatives in schools. In order to buffer these challenges, ASPIRE prototyped and refined specific technologies and frameworks (the 4Rs, survey data and dialogue), combined with training focused on organizational change, effective partnership practices, and site-based support, to attempt to buffer the pressures or resistance they encountered within their schools. The technologies developed by ASPIRE to address these pressures through trial and error, as indicated in their rapid prototyping approach, and the practical effect that these have had on meeting their goal of elevating all youth voices, have important implications for thinking about the compromises necessary for long-term sustainability as well as the process of rapid prototyping in partnership with schools.

Adult acceptance of ASPIRE through bounding student voice

The adaptations to ASPIRE's model were all preceded by tensions that specifically jeopardized the sustainability and acceptance of its work in partner schools. The first of these tensions was over how to prioritize the concerns raised by the collection of students' voices when those concerns created unease or were deemed unimportant by adults. There is an assumption in much empowerment work with students that creating conditions in which youth voices can be shared will result in a school more effectively serving its mission (Fielding 2001). However, the limits resulting from the latent custodial function of schooling extends beyond what is typically perceived to be key to the mission of schools, controlling what students wear and eat, the places they go and how they use their time. It seems understandable, then, that when given opportunities to express their voices, some youth choose to address these areas of adult "rules and control." Without this opportunity, Bragg (2007b) argues that student voice runs the risk of becoming a project of Foucauldian governmentality, asking for the allegiance of students to a version of schooling that is not authentically interested in validating the diversity of their perspectives. It is for this reason, perhaps, that Arnot and Reay (2007) question whether youth voice alone truly has the power to transform power structures.

ASPIRE's response was to create a framework that would sidestep this tension and increase adult perceptions of student voice's legitimacy by narrowing the scope

of the work to issues of teaching and learning—an issue which adults in schools found intrinsically important. Unfortunately, the costs of focusing the work in this way were twofold. First, it narrowed the field to students who could already had trusting relationships with adults such that a focus on the neuroscience of learning and twenty-first century skills as jumping off points for addressing issues around “student engagement” sounded appealing. Without a strong, critical framing of the social and cultural barriers that might prevent “engagement,” there was little reason for disengaged youth to trust that a focus on twenty-first century skills would result in transformed youth–adult relationships on a broad scale. Secondly, projects framed in any other manner or around other types of concerns were excluded from this type of focus, cutting off additional potential sites of engagement for youth who did not feel this trust with school-based adults. The narrowing of the focus in this way also cut off other arenas of experimentation that might have driven the rapid prototyping of the work, including the deepening of the work around civic engagement and issues of community justice that were seen in the first year, such as access to free and reduced price lunch and community nutrition.

A second notable tension in ASPIRE’s rapid prototyping cycle also revolved around adult comfort with youth voice, specifically, the range of youth expression that elevating youth voice might authorize. Offensive and angry expressions alienated adults, leading ASPIRE to explore other ways of collecting youth voice through quantitative means. Although the survey was coupled with student facilitative leadership to offset the quantizing of youth expression, even in this it became important to foreground adults’ understanding of the data and expression by allowing their dialogue about the data to happen ahead of the dialogue with students. Considerations for adult resistance drove many of the choices on the structure and function of ASPIRE’s model and its enactment in schools, leading to those shifts being reflected in restatements of their core mission over time.

The mandating of equity and justice

In its fifth year, the need to be able to concisely communicate the purpose of their work as they grew pushed ASPIRE to more clearly define their core beliefs, arriving at six values, five of which could easily be traced to the specific tensions and resulting adaptations in practice that had been introduced in prior years. These shifts in practice, viewed through an ethic of practicality and layman’s pragmatism, enhanced ASPIRE’s long-term sustainability and buffered criticism, allowing the initiative to continue to evolve and learn from its practice in partner schools. These shifts also transformed the very intentions of the initiative from one seeking to enhance attention to student experiences in schools to one narrowly focused and tightly controlled.

The sixth, and notable exception, was the value of “seeking equity and justice.” There was an assumption expressed by adults and also by ASPIRE leadership that, given time, this initiative would deepen and allow the “disengaged” to have a voice, leading to a transformative shift in school culture and practice. It is possible to hear this in the optimism of the adult advisor who suggests that although the group is not diverse “yet,” that it will come with time. It is possible to understand where this

optimism arose from, as in each ASPIRE school, adults and some students were able to have authentic power-sharing that transcended age, as evidenced by the positive reports of meaningful partnership from most participating students and adults. At the same time, these students and adults acknowledged the realities of these boundaries and the limited interest in the work from many students within the school. These assertions, like the ASPIRE parent organization's attempts to mandate the existence of a focus on equity and justice, failed to recognize how the evolution of the technologies of the work itself had created conditions that limited the sites of opportunity (i.e. shared value commitments) through which these relationships could be realized.

The rapid prototyping approach that ASPIRE embraces fell into the trap of iterative, emergent design that results from foregrounding a focus on "what works" without asking the critical questions, "Works for whom and to what end?" While rapid prototyping as a practice (like other types of continuous improvement) allowed the work to remain adaptive and responsive in the face of organizational change and, in particular, in the face of pressures that could have overwhelmed their efforts, there was no revisiting of the core values guiding the genesis of the initiative as these iterations were made. Instead, the core mission was adapted to meet the sustainability needs of the initiative and as such, allowed itself to be co-opted by dominant school reform discourses. Dewey (1916) argues that pragmatism demands that situated ethical reflection must be a critical part of any type of action-reflection cycle in order to avoid the trap of relativism for which pragmatism as a philosophy has been so roundly critiqued (Fesmire 2003). It is a point which has been well-covered in the literature on developmental evaluation, which suggests that the role of the developmental evaluator is to help the leadership of an initiative to reflect back on its core values while it refines the means by which it will achieve its goals (Patton 2011); however, this case demonstrates the challenges of doing so in real-time in the face of other types of organizational pressure—most critically, those with the organizational power to threaten the sustainability of the initiative itself.

Conclusion

These findings have implications for student-voice driven reform efforts, specifically, but also for rapid prototyping in school contexts, a model of change that is becoming increasingly popular for school reform efforts through research practice partnerships and a policy focus on continuous improvement (see Fishman et al. 2013). All iterative reform efforts that use reflection on past experience, whether it is subjected to the rigor of the scientific method or not, must confront the central question of how their work creates value for a school, what value actually is and means, and who gets to define it. The case of ASPIRE shows the difference between reactive adaptation and reflective change—with one informed by the layman's pragmatism of what works towards initiative survival and the latter informed by careful reference back to the informing philosophy of a reform. This distinction is not made with the idea that adaptations made to buffer threats to sustainability are always harmful; rather, that there must be a careful weighing of

the costs and benefits of achieving sustainability. It can be tempting, in the case of schools, to believe that incremental reform achieved through these compromises over a relatively long period of time (in the life of education reform) will be the progenitor of critical reflection and ultimately, transformation. Certainly, the optimism of ASPIRE's leaders and youth and adult participants suggests that these beliefs may be widespread. This belief may be especially tempting given the very real alternative of having a poorly received change initiative buffered out of existence altogether. Given the lack of endurance of most reform (Giles and Hargreaves 2006), however, and the enduring institutional structures that exist to reinforce the latent sorting function of schooling, rapid prototyping reform efforts cannot rely on an incremental approach to achieving engagement for all youth, particularly when engagement is not considered through a critical frame.

Student leadership or other voice efforts are particularly likely to fall prey to part equals whole logic when authentic leadership is happening for some. Dominant cultural discourses about youth suggest that it is only exceptionally mature youth who are ready for expressing their voice. In these cases, discourse about the counter-normative efforts of the initiative may obscure the "rich get richer" effect of the reform. It becomes challenging to parse these effects when the school leadership is satisfied with the efforts, participating youth report a host of positive outcomes, and teachers feel challenged—but not too challenged—by the work being done. As one of the few longitudinal case-studies of a long-term youth–adult partnership program in the United States, this study suggests that American schools have significant progress left to make in the acceptance of broadly defined student agency in schooling, a key belief necessary for the transition to student-centered classrooms necessary for personalized learning, proficiency-based education and other state-mandated reforms currently being considered or implemented by state departments of education across the country.

As an embedded case study of the work of a single organization, the results of this study are not directly generalizable to other similar efforts, although they suggest avenues for future research. Comparative work with other long-term student voice efforts—most notably other youth–adult partnership efforts—will help to extend and refine our understanding of the central tension in this study between equity and sustainability. It is possible that other lasting programs have found ways to navigate this dichotomy. Furthermore, although there is a moderate evidence base suggesting the pressures to which ASPIRE's program responded in their rapid-prototyping cycle are present for many other student voice efforts, more attention to the early adaptations of student voice and leadership efforts within schools would create a more robust understanding of how specific efforts to change the regard for youth agency in American schools are received or subverted. Given the favorable policy environments for youth voice and agency in other countries such as Finland, Sweden, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom, the United States still has much cultural work to do towards this end if it hopes to institutionalize these norms within the education reform ecosystem.

References

Abbott, A. (1988). Transcending general linear reality. *Sociological Theory, 6*(2), 169–186.

Alinsky, S. (1971). *Rules for radicals*. New York: Vintage Books.

Arnot, M., & Reay, D. (2007). A sociology of pedagogic voice: Power, inequality and pupil consultation. *Discourse: studies in the cultural politics of education, 28*(3), 311–325.

Au, W. (2010). The idiocy of policy: The anti-democratic curriculum of high-stakes testing. *Critical Education, 1*(1), 1–15.

Baroutsis, A., McGregor, G., & Mills, M. (2016). Pedagogic voice: Student voice in teaching and engagement pedagogies. *Pedagogy, Culture and Society, 24*(1), 123–140.

Beaudoin, N. (2005). *Elevating student voice: How to enhance participation, citizenship, and leadership*. Larchmont, NY: Eye on Education.

Beck, L. G. (1992). Meeting the challenge of the future: The place of a caring ethic in educational administration. *American Journal of Education, 100*(4), 454–496.

Biesta, G. (2010). Pragmatism and the philosophical foundations of mixed methods research. In A. Tashakkori & C. Teddlie (Eds.), *Handbook of mixed methods in social and behavioral research* (pp. 95–118). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Biesta, G., & Burbules, N. (2003). *Pragmatism and educational research*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers Inc.

Bourke, R., & Loveridge, J. (2016). Beyond the official language of learning: Teachers engaging with student voice research. *Teaching and Teacher Education, 57,* 59–66.

Bragg, S. (2007a). *Consulting young people: A review of the literature. Creative partnerships*. London: Arts Council England.

Bragg, S. (2007b). "Student voice" and governmentality: The production of enterprising subjects? *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education, 28*(3), 343–358.

Brasof, M. (2015). *Student voice and school governance: Distributing leadership to youth and adults*. New York: Routledge.

Camino, L. (2005). Pitfalls and promising practices of youth–adult partnerships: An evaluator's reflections. *Journal of Community Psychology, 33*(1), 75–85.

Cammarota, J., & Fine, M. (2010). *Revolutionizing education: Youth participatory action research in motion*. New York: Routledge.

Cammarota, J., & Romero, A. (2011). Participatory action research for high school students: Transforming policy, practice, and the personal with social justice education. *Educational Policy, 25*(3), 488–506.

Chávez, V., & Soep, E. (2005). Youth radio and the pedagogy of collegiality. *Harvard Educational Review, 75*(4), 409–434.

Christens, B. D., & Dolan, T. (2011). Interweaving youth development, community development, and social change through youth organizing. *Youth and Society, 43*(2), 528–548.

Christens, B. D., & Kirshner, B. (2011). Taking stock of youth organizing: An interdisciplinary perspective. *New Directions for Child and Adolescent Development, 2011*(134), 27–41.

Clandinin, D. J., & Connelly, F. M. (2000). *Narrative inquiry: Experience and story in qualitative research*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Coburn, C. E. (2003). Rethinking scale: Moving behind numbers to deep and lasting change. *Educational Researcher, 32*(6), 3–12.

Cook-Sather, A. (2002). Authorizing students' perspectives: Toward trust, dialogue, and change in education. *Educational Researcher, 31*(4), 3–14.

Cook-Sather, A. (2010). Through students' eyes: Students offer fresh insights into social justice issues in schools. *Journal of Staff Development, 31*(4), 42–66.

Cottle, M. (2018). *How Parkland students changed the gun debate*. The Atlantic. Retrieved from https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2018/02/parkland-students-power/554399/.

Cushman, K. (2013). Minds on fire: Students, teachers, and neuroscientists compare notes on classroom lessons that ignite motivation and promote mastery. *Educational Leadership, 71*(4), 38–43.

Delgado, R. S., & Stefancic, J. (2001). Critical race theory: An introduction. New York, NY: New York University Press.

Dewey, J. (1916/1985). *Democracy and education*. In J. A. Boydston, & P. Baysinger (Eds.). Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press.

Dewey, J. (1938). *Logic: The theory of inquiry*. New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston.

Dweck, C. (2006). *Mindset: The new psychology of success*. New York: Ballantine Books.

Fesmire, S. (2003). *John Dewey and moral imagination: Pragmatism in ethics*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.

Fielding, M. (2001). Students as radical agents of change. *Journal of Educational Change, 2,* 123–141.

Fine, M., Torre, M., Burns, A., & Payne, Y. A. (2007). Youth research/participatory methods for reform. In A. Cook-Sather & D. Thiessen (Eds.), *International handbook of student experience in elementary and secondary school* (pp. 805–828). Amsterdam: Springer.

Fishman, B. J., Penuel, W. R., Allen, A. R., Cheng, B. H., & Sabelli, N. O. R. A. (2013). Design-based implementation research: An emerging model for transforming the relationship of research and practice. *National Society for the Study of Education, 112*(2), 136–156.

Fox, M., Mediratta, K., Ruglis, J., Stoudt, B., Shah, S., & Fine, M. (2010). Critical youth engagement: Participatory action research and organizing. In L. Sherrod, J. Torney-Purta & C. Flanagan (Eds.), *Handbook of research on civic engagement in youth* (pp. 621–650). Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley and Sons.

Freeland, J. (2014). *From policy to practice: How competency-based education is evolving in New Hampshire*. San Mateo, CA: Clayton Christensen Institute for Disruptive Innovation.

Fullan, M. (2007). *The new meanings of education change*. New York: New York Teachers Press.

Giles, C., & Hargreaves, A. (2006). The sustainability of innovative schools as learning organizations and professional learning communities during standardized reform. *Educational Administration Quarterly, 42*(1), 124–156.

Ginwright, S., Noguera, P., & Cammarota, J. (Eds.). (2006). *Beyond resistance! Youth activism and community change: New democratic possibilities for practice and policy for America's youth*. New York: Routledge.

Groundwater-Smith, S. (2011). Concerning equity: The voice of young people. *Leading and Managing, 17*(2), 52.

Gustafson, K. L., & Branch, R. M. (1997). Revisioning models of instructional development. *Educational Technology Research and Development, 45*(3), 73–89.

Hattie, J. (2009). *Visible learning: A synthesis of over 800 meta-analyses relating to achievement*. New York: Routledge.

Himmelfarb, G. (1994). *On looking into the abyss: Untimely thoughts on culture and society*. New York, NY: Random House.

Keniston, K. (1971). *Youth and dissent: The rise of a new opposition*. New York: Harcourt Brace.

Kennedy-Lewis, B. L. (2015). Second chance or no chance? A case study of one urban alternative middle school. *Journal of Educational Change, 16*(2), 145–169.

Kirshner, B. (2009). "Power in numbers": Youth organizing as a context for exploring civic identity. *Journal of Research on Adolescence, 19*(3), 414–440.

Kirshner, B. (2010). Productive tensions in youth participatory action research. *Yearbook of the National Society for the Study of Education, 109*(1), 238–251.

Kirshner, B., & Geil, K. (2010). "I'm about to really bring it!" Access points between youth activists and adult community leaders. *Children, Youth and Environments, 20*(2), 1–24.

Kirshner, B., Pozzoboni, K., & Jones, H. (2011). Learning how to manage bias: A case study of youth participatory action research. *Applied Developmental Science, 15*(3), 140–155.

Larson, R. W. (2000). Toward a psychology of positive youth development. *American Psychologist, 55*(1), 170.

Larson, R., Walker, K., & Pearce, N. (2005). A comparison of youth-driven and adult-driven youth programs: Balancing inputs from youth and adults. *Journal of Community Psychology, 33*(1), 57–74.

Mager, U., & Nowak, P. (2012). Effects of student participation in decision making at school. A systematic review and synthesis of empirical research. *Educational Research Review, 7*(1), 38–61.

Maxcy, S. (2003). Pragmatic threads in mixed methods research in the social sciences: The search for multiple modes of inquiry and the end of the philosophy of formalism. In A. Tashakorri & C. Teddlie (Eds.), *Handbook of mixed methods in social and behavioral research* (pp. 51–90). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

McFarland, D., & Starmanns, C. (2009). Inside student government: The variable quality of high school student councils. *Teachers College Record, 111*(1), 27–54.

Medina, J. (2008). *Brain rules*. Seattle: Pear Press.

Mitra, D. L. (2008a). Balancing power in communities of practice: An examination of increasing student voice through school-based youth–adult partnerships. *Journal of Educational Change, 9*(3), 221–242.

Mitra, D. L. (2008b). Amplifying student voice. *Educational Leadership, 66*(3), 20–25.
Mitra, D. L. (2009a). The role of intermediary organizations in sustaining student voice initiatives. *Teachers College Record, 111*(7), 1834–1870.
Mitra, D. L. (2009b). Collaborating with students: Building youth–adult partnerships in schools. *American Journal of Education, 115*(3), 407–436.
Mitra, D. S., & Biddle, C. (2012). *Youth and adults transforming schools together: Evaluation year IV*. Unpublished manuscript. Pennsylvania State University.
Mitra, D. L., & Gross, S. J. (2009). Increasing student voice in high school reform: Building partnerships, improving outcomes. *Educational Management Administration and Leadership, 37*(4), 522–543.
Mitra, D. L., & Kirshner, B. (2012). Insiders versus outsiders: Examining variability in student voice initiatives and their consequences for school change. In B. J. McMahon & J. P. Portelli (Eds.), *Student engagement in urban schools: Beyond neoliberal discourses* (pp. 49–72). Charlotte, NC: Information Age Publishing.
Mitra, D. L., Sanders, F. C., & Perkins, D. F. (2010). Providing spark and stability: The role of intermediary organizations in establishing school-based youth–adult partnerships. *Applied Developmental Science, 14*(2), 106–123.
Mitra, D. L., & Serriere, S. C. (2012). Student voice in elementary school reform examining youth development in fifth graders. *American Educational Research Journal, 49*(4), 743–774.
Mitra, D. L., Serriere, S., & Stoicovy, D. (2012). The role of leaders in enabling student voice. *Management in Education, 26*(3), 104–112.
Murphy, J. F. (2016). *Understanding schooling through the eyes of students*. New York: Corwin Press.
Ormrod, J. E. (1999). *Human learning* (3rd ed.). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Merrill.
Park, N., & Peterson, C. (2006). Moral competence and character strengths among adolescents: The development and validation of the values in action inventory of strengths for youth. *Journal of Adolescence, 29*(6), 891–909.
Patton, M. Q. (2011). *Developmental evaluation: Applying complexity concepts to enhance innovation and use*. New York: Guilford Press.
Pelletier, S. (2012). *Leadership for a new era of student activism: Does the "Occupy" movement signal a new era of student activism?* American Association of State Colleges and Universities. Retrieved from http://www.aascu.org/uploadedFiles/AASCU/Content/Root/MediaAndPublications/PublicPurposeMagazines/Issue/12winter_p2_studentactivism.pdf. Accessed 10 May 2013.
Perkins, D. F., & Borden, L. M. (2003). Key elements of community youth development programs. In F. Villaruel, D. F. Perkins, L. Borden, & J. G. Keith (Eds.), *Community youth development: Programs, policies, and practices* (pp. 327–340). Thousand Oaks: Sage.
Pittman, K., Irby, M., & Ferber, T. (2001). Unfinished business: Further reflections on a decade of promoting youth development. In P. Benson, & K. Pittman (Eds.), *Trends in youth development: Vision, realities and changes* (pp. 3–50). Boston, MA: Springer.
Pleasance, S. (2016). Student voice and its role in sustainability. In D. Summers & R. Cutting (Eds.), *Education for sustainable development in further education* (pp. 213–229). London: Palgrave Macmillan.
Powers, C. B., & Allaman, E. (2012). *How participatory action research can promote social change and help youth development*. Kinder Braver World Project. Retrieved from http://cyber.harvard.edu/sites/cyber.harvard.edu/files/KBWParticipatoryActionResearch2012.pdf. Accessed 13 June 2013.
Reeb, R. N., & Folger, S. F. (2012). Community outcomes of service learning. In P. Clayton & R. Bringle (Eds.), *Research on service learning: Conceptual frameworks and assessment: Communities, institutions, and partnerships* (pp. 389–418). Sterling, VA: Stylus.
Rudduck, J. (2007). Student voice, student engagement, and school reform. In A. Cook-Sather & D. Thiessen (Eds.), *International handbook of student experience in elementary and secondary school* (pp. 587–610). Amsterdam: Springer.
Rudduck, J., & McIntyre, D. (2007). *Improving learning through consulting pupils*. New York: Routledge.
Russell, B. (1909). Pragmatism. *Philosophical essays* (pp. 79–111). London: Routledge.
Shah, S., & Mediratta, K. (2008). Negotiating reform: Young people's leadership in the educational arena. *New Directions for Student Leadership, 117,* 43–59.
Silva, E. (2003). Struggling for inclusion: A case study of students as reform partners. In B. Rubin & E. Silva (Eds.), *Critical voices in school reform: Students living through change*. New York: Routledge.
Sinclair, R. (2004). Participation in practice. Making it meaningful, effective and sustainable. *Children and Society, 18,* 106–118.

Smyth, J. (2007). Toward the pedagogically engaged school: Listening to student voice as a positive response to disengagement and 'dropping out'? In D. Thiessen & A. Cook-Sather (Eds.), *International handbook of student experience in elementary and secondary school* (pp. 635–658). Dordrecht: Springer.

Sousa, D. (2006). *How the brain learns* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.

Taines, C. (2014). Educators and youth activists: A negotiation over enhancing students' role in school life. *Journal of Educational Change, 15*(2), 153–178.

Taylor, C., & Robinson, C. (2009). Student voice: Theorising power andparticipation. *Pedagogy, Culture and Society, 17*(2), 161–175.

Tolman, J., Pittman, K., Cervone, B., Cushman, K., Rowley, L., Kinkade, S., & Duque, S. (2001). *Youth acts, community impacts: Stories of youth engagement with real results*. Forum for Youth Investment. Retrieved from http://forumfyi.org/files/Youth%20Acts%20Community%20Impacts.pdf. Accessed 10 July 2018.

Toshalis, E., & Nakkula, M. J. (2012). *Motivation, engagement, and student voice*. Students at the Center. Retrieved from http://www.howyouthlearn.org/pdf/Motivation%20Engagement%20Student%20Voice_0.pdf. Accessed 10 July 2018.

Vygotsky, L. (1978). *Mind and society*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Yin, R. K. (2009). *Case study research: Design and methods*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Yonezawa, S., & Jones, M. (2009). Student voices: Generating reform from the inside out. *Theory into Practice, 48*(3), 205–212.

Zeldin, S., McDaniel, A. K., Topitzes, D., & Calvert, M. (2000). *Youth in decision-making: A study on the impacts of youth and adults and organizations*. Retrieved from http://www.communitybuilders.ro/library/studies/youth-in-decision-making-by-shepherd-zeldin-annette-kusgen-mcdaniel-dimitri-topitzes-matt-calvert/view. Accessed 22 Feb 2013