

**THE CHALLENGES AND POSSIBILITIES OF INCLUDING STUDENTS IN
MIDDLE SCHOOL LEADERSHIP: BUILDING AND SUSTAINING CHANGE**

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Abstract

Through action research, a new youth-adult leadership group emerged at Forest Hills Elementary (pseudonym). Applying theory to practice, the development of the Student Leadership Group provided a foundation of knowledge, skills, and dispositions necessary for establishing youth-adult leadership practices at Forest Hills. Scaling up reform within was more challenging however; building youth-adult co-leadership into school involves individual, group, and organizational capacities (Mitchell, & Sackney, 2011). I unpack my experience building a Student Leadership Group through the lens of Brasof's (2015) capacity-building behaviors. Outcomes suggest that attention must be paid to shift and spread (Coburn, 2003) in order scale up and sustain student voice within a building.

Research Questions and Theoretical Background

Pre-existing literature provides different models of student voice in elementary and middle schools, with evidence of benefits to student learning and school culture. However, what all these studies have in common is there were structures already in place, or there was structural change, to foster, or at least allow, student voice and democratic leadership (Brasof, 2009, 2011, 2015; Coburn, 2003; Cook-Sather, 2002; Smyth, 2012; McGregor, 2005; McIntyre, Pedder, & Rudduck, 2005; Mitchell & Sackney, 2001; Mitra, 2006, 2007). Yet, educators who know the power of student voice believe that all students should be exposed to it, not just those in schools with supportive administration. This led to the research questions:

- 1) How could the student voice be implemented in the school within pre-existing culture and structures of the school?
- 2) Could student voice work sustain beyond the initial years?

These questions helped me formulate a two-year action research project. Once the research was complete, I began using the data to address the question:

What behaviors help spread student voice throughout the school and help shift the culture of the school to one that is more inclusive of student voice?

I will be addressing this final question in this paper and in so doing, touch on my original two research questions.

Literature that states that regardless of the structures and process, the behaviors and/or how structures and process are implemented are important to building the school's capacity to learn (Mitchell & Sackney, 2011). Brasof (2015) outlines behaviors that encourage and discourage student leadership capacity building in *Student Voice and School Government: Distributing Leadership to Youth and Adults*. In it, Brasof outlines relevant behaviors of key actors—the principal, faculty advisor, key faculty, and student leaders—that encourage and inhibit student voice. This high school level research showed that, “distributing leadership in ways that build students’ experiences to lead is more than just spreading authority and responsibility through structures and procedures” (p. 132). Brasof’s capacity-building framework can be used to develop strategies to spread behaviors that encourage and obtain more advocates for youth-adult leadership. This paper takes a deeper look at a few of Brasof’s behaviors through the lens of practitioner research with middle school students. Finally, I will suggest additions to Brasof’s framework that specifically speak to encouraging student leadership in middle schools, especially ones that do not have pre-existing structures for student voice already in place.

Methodology

Researcher

I have a bachelor's degree in psychology, master's degree in elementary education, and a post-graduate certificate in TESOL, all from Temple University. I am certified in elementary

education, middle years English/language arts, middle years social studies, and ESL. I started this student voice research in my classroom in my sixth year teaching. It was my fifth year teaching seventh grade English/language arts at the school at Forest Hills Elementary (pseudonym). I was also National Junior Honor Society (NJHS) advisor, and a member of the school's School Based Initiatives Team (SBI). I came to education from a social justice perspective and tried to teach social justice within the English curriculum. After five years in this position, I realized I was teaching my students all that was wrong with the world without helping them develop any strategies to address the problems they see. When trying to get my students to write letters to the editor for the local newspapers about topics they cared about, I was dismayed to see students had little passion for what they were writing and even less belief in the ability of their voices to change anything. Searching for answers, I joined an Inquiry to Action Group (ITAG) sponsored by two local progressive teaching organizations that was focusing on creating student voice to further democracy in schools. Through this ITAG and under the mentorship of a university colleague, I developed and implemented the student voice practitioner research described below.

School

Forest Hills Elementary is a small, public, kindergarten through eighth grade school in a northeastern United States city. There are three classes in each grade, approximately 750 students. Forest Hills has a diverse population. The average parental income is slightly higher than the average of families in the city's district as a whole. However, the population would still be considered working class.

Participants

Middle school students participated in the action research. I taught all of the seventh graders in the school. However, in the first year only my homeroom class took part in the action research, which I called the Student Leadership Group (SLG). All 32 students were involved in the project at some point. However, only approximately 15 students were deeply involved. In the second year, the participating students were eighth graders. All eighth graders were invited to participate. Of the approximately 15 regular participants in the second year, approximately 10 of them had participated the first year. Though the makeup of the group shifted slightly over the two years, the ethnic makeup was approximately 30% African-American, 30% Caucasian, 30% immigrants from India, and 10% other ethnicities. This makeup was similar to the population of the entire school. However, the Student Leadership Group had higher than average African-American participants and lower than average participants of other ethnicities.

Case Study One—Uniform Project

I started Student Leadership Group (SLG) in January as a vehicle for student-initiated decision making, providing them a platform to talk about the issues in school they saw as needing a solution or change. After initial discussions to set the tone and frame the work of the group, students proposed and discussed three areas they believed needed policy revisions: bathrooms, uniforms, and snack time. The students chose uniforms. SLG students began their

research phase in late February. They broke up into groups to survey to the entire student body, researched the current school and district uniform policies and the uniform policies at other schools in the district, and interviewed the principal and site-based teacher leader about the uniform policy.

Finally, in late spring, students put together a PowerPoint with their reasoning, research, and proposal. Students proposed switching from a uniform to a dress code, but also included a compromise proposal, adding more options to the existing uniform. The Student Leadership Group (SLG) first made their proposal to the Student Based Initiative (SBI) team in the beginning of June. The SBI team was a group of teachers selected by the principal who met approximately every other week to discuss, and sometimes decide on, school issues and policies predetermined by the principal. After the Student Leadership Group gave their presentation, the SBI team said they wanted the students to meet with the School Advisory Council (called the SAC), a small governing body of parents and teachers required in every school in the district that had some decision making power in the school. The Student Leadership Group would present a proposal for specific uniform additions at the next SAC meeting that SAC members would vote on. The SAC did not meet to hear the students' proposal until the end of October in the next school year, but they did approve the additional uniform options and asked SLG to come up with a plan to inform the school of the uniform additions.

After the administration approved the uniform additions, SLG immediately started writing a memo to be sent home to parents explaining the uniform additions and that the new policy would be presented to each class. However, the uniform presentation roll-out was problematic because of disorganization within the school and Student Leadership Group, and a lack of communication within the group and between staff. I immediately took full responsibility with my principal, co-workers, and the students, presenting this mistake as a learning opportunity for my students. However, the now discouraged students who communicated the incorrect information dropped out of the group.

The SLG planned and delivered an effective second roll-out with assemblies for the whole school that clearly illustrated the new policy. This occurred after a memo went home to parents. The new uniform additions started after winter break. However, it seemed teachers did not take the time to learn what the new uniform rules were, so that any time there was an issue about students not being in correct uniform it was blamed on the fact that teachers misunderstood what was acceptable. The SLG also complained that students did not appreciate all they had gone through to get these additions. Members of the student body continued to advance the idea that they should not have any uniform. After three years, the school administration repealed aspects of the new policy while maintaining other more popular elements.

Case Study Two—Textbook Project

The second year of the Student Leadership Group started similar to the first one, with group discussions about what policies the students wanted to take on to improve the school. However, students were most angry about the district's drastic budget cuts, which had gotten even worse over the summer. I laid out two pathways for recourse to the SLG: we could find alternative means of funding, or fight those with the power of the purse to restore funding. The

students chose finding alternative means of funding to bring back some of what they saw as unacceptable losses.

The SLG divided themselves into smaller working groups and started several projects to raise funds in order to bring, or return, resources they felt their school was lacking due to budget cuts. The project that the students were able to complete was fundraising for more social studies textbooks. At the time, there were not enough textbooks for each student so the SLG decided to raise money using donorschoose.org in order to buy enough copies for the current seventh and eighth grade classes. However, the group had to limit the project to just seventh grade textbooks when their research revealed just how expensive textbooks were. To obtain enough copies of the seventh grade textbook, students had to raise over \$1200 in three months. I helped the students create a Donor's Choose project using my membership page to support fundraising efforts,

Fliers went home asking parents to go on the website and donate, and I urged the students in the SLG to get their parents to share the link on Facebook, but donations were coming in very slowly. When the principal became aware of the Donor's Choose project, she wanted me to cancel it. While I was not keeping the project secret from anyone, I had not thought to get the principal's approval because many teachers had previously raised money for classroom books and supplies through Donor's Choose. However, the principal did not agree with the project for several reasons. The main reason seemed to be that according to the principal, she was going to buy more books for the Social Studies teacher, but the social studies teacher had not given her all the information she needed to order the books. According to the social studies teacher, she had provided all the necessary information to the principal, but the principal had just never ordered the books. The social studies teacher assumed it was because the principal did not have enough money. Yet, I had never bothered to ask the principal about it, assuming she would have no objections. Student groups were also not allowed to raise money without first filling out a fundraiser request form and having it signed by the principal, something I had never been made aware of previously, even though I had overseen student fundraising in my role as National Junior Honor Society advisor. It seemed that the principal felt I was using the students to overstep her authority. I was shocked and hurt by these allegations, but as I realize that the group came in to a situation without getting all of the information, I have come to see why she saw the circumstances in that way. The principal and I were able to work out our disagreements on the issue and the principal allowed the project to continue.

In the end, the SLG convinced parents, staff, my family, and private donors worldwide to donate a third of the money. Then, the Home and School Association donated the rest. The books came at the end of the 2014-15 school year. For the start of the next year each student received a brand new book to take home, for which the social studies teacher reminded students and parents to be eternally grateful to SLG.

SLG ended in spring of its second year for a variety of reasons. The students and I hoped to expand the group to include middle school students of other grades in order keep the group going after the original members graduated in June. However, I kept postponing inviting younger members because the current group of members never seemed organized enough to me to absorb and mentor new leaders. I kept planning on having the students set out a plan for how to invite, attract, train, and retain younger members. However, there always seemed like more pressing issues to confront in our short meetings.

Analysis

I used Brasof's (2015) table, "Behaviors that Encourage and Discourage Student Leadership Capacity Building", to evaluate how all the key stakeholders involved impacted student voice work during this two-year period (p.134-135). From there, I analyzed faculty advisor behaviors and saw three themes emerge that speak to what the faculty advisor needs to do to get the spread and shift necessary in the school to bring about sustainable reform (Coburn, 2003).

Theme One —Facilitating Student Leadership within the Group

Two behaviors that I exhibited as the faculty advisor during Student Leadership Group meetings that worked together to facilitate success were, "Critically questioning students' insights about school problems to help them broaden their thinking and analysis," and, "suggesting action strategies" (Brasof, 2015, p.134-135). In both case studies, my critical questions helped members of the group determine what the most pressing issues were in school that they thought they could do something about. For example, students wrote reflections, and then discussed the questions, "What do you want the Student Leadership Group to accomplish this year? What is a leader? What are your likes and dislikes of the school now?" After students identified several policies they had issues with, I posed these reflection questions for each policy: "What is the purpose of the policy? What are the good parts of the policy the way it is now? What are the problems with the policy? What are your suggestions?" It also helped them develop theories as to why these were problems and what could be done. Also, some of the successes of our initiatives stemmed from me sharing my knowledge and experience of how decision making and action occurred in the school, and suggesting possible ways to move from having a complaint to having a viable proposal and action plan. Without this assistance, students most likely would have felt at a loss for what to do, seen the bureaucracy as insurmountable, and ultimately, given up. Both of these key behaviors on my part made student leadership look very different in the school. In the school administration's previous and later attempts at facilitating student leadership, student leaders were told what school problems to address and given action strategies to implement. While the administration's way of advising student leaders could be seen as less messy, there was less buy-in from the student body and the student leaders themselves.

Theme Two—Facilitating Interactions with Staff

Another behavior that I exhibited that aided in the Student Leadership Group's success in their first project was "facilitating conversations between students and adults during formal meetings," (Brasof, 2015, p.134-135). I was able to be the mediator between the SLG and the members of the two school leadership groups (SBI and SAC) that students had to meet with to get the uniform approved. This was especially important in the first meeting, when staff were interrupting and contradicting the SLG members, causing the students to become visibly frustrated and nervous. My action research also suggests that, for schools that do not have a structure that includes regular formal meetings between administration and/or staff and student leaders, an important addition to faculty advisor behaviors is "facilitating the arrangement and scheduling of formal meetings between students and adults." In the first case study, I used my

position as a member of the SBI team to set up and facilitate the SLG's first and second proposal meetings with school leadership.

I did not arrange any formal meetings between the student leaders and adults after this second meeting, but now see that more formal meetings could have been beneficial. A formal meeting updating the administration on the student leaders' planning in rolling out the uniform additions may have prevented the challenges experienced during the first role-out of the uniform additions. Likewise, a formal meeting where student leaders informed the administration of their plans to create a fundraiser for new textbooks may have prevented the principal's disagreements and attempts to cancel the project.

In thinking about the sustainability of the group, I realize now I should have been "communicating with faculty about students' plans," and most importantly "cultivating relationships with fellow faculty members and students" (Brasof, 2015, p.134-135). During the first case study, I found three staff members who exhibited some of Brasof's helping behaviors of key faculty. These behaviors were, "listening to students' perceptions about school problems," "engaging in honest and open dialogue in which shared understandings about problems could emerge," and "participating in youth-adult leadership discussion during meetings" (Brasof, 2015, p.134-135). All three of these staff members had some kind of leadership role in the school. Facilitating a continued alliance with these three staff members and holding introductory meetings with other staff members could have supplied us with more support and resources when student leaders hit unforeseen roadblocks in their projects, support that seemed necessary at times when student leaders and I became overwhelmed and burnt out.

Theme Three—Facilitating Interactions with other students

Also, when thinking about sustainability within the context of middle school I would add two of Brasof's student leader behaviors to important faculty advisor behaviors. While student leaders need to be "inviting others in the school community to lead" and "communicating issues to the student body" (p.134-135), the faculty advisor needs to be modeling these two behaviors, especially with a new group of middle school students that are learning such norms. Upon reflection, communicating with the wider student body more and recruiting new members could have provided the necessary capacities when current busy student leaders became overwhelmed with other commitments. Then, the group might not have folded.

Discussion

This action research could be seen as successful since in two years, the SLG was effective in planning and completing two projects that seemed to improve the school climate. However, SLG was not sustainable because it was not successful in creating what Coburn (2003) calls shift and spread. We can look back at the behaviors I found I was lacking as a faculty advisor to conjecture how these would have aided in the necessary shift and spread.

Spread

Coburn (2003) insists that “reform principles and norms of social interaction” need to become “embedded in school policy and routines” in order for there to be deep and lasting change (p.7). Looking back at my addition to Brasof’s capacity-building framework—“facilitating the arrangement and scheduling of formal meetings between students and adults”—regular formal meetings could have worked to create spread. If the SLG had met with a faculty leadership group at important junctures in the progress of their projects, as I discussed in the earlier section, student leaders would have met with administration more often. The meetings would provide space and time to discuss school and/or community issues students identified and share plans for ameliorating them. Hopefully, this would have given more legitimacy to the group and set a precedent for these meetings becoming the norm. Meetings between student leaders and faculty/administration where the student leaders set all or part of the agenda would become an embedded routine in the school.

Shift

Corburn (2003) also posits that for reform to be sustainable, a shift in ownership must occur so that “it is no longer an ‘external’ reform, controlled by a reformer, but rather becomes an ‘internal’ reform,” in which the entire school has the authority and capacity to sustain, spread, and deepen reform principles themselves” (p.7). Although I was not an outside entity, I was a lone teacher, acting out a reform agenda based on her principles without consulting other staff. In this way, I could be seen as an isolated, external reformer. To shift ownership, as faculty advisor, I should have engaged in Brasof’s behaviors of “communicating with faculty about students’ plans,” and most importantly “cultivating relationships with fellow faculty members and students” (2015, p.134-135). As discussed in the previous section, I found three staff members with leadership roles who exhibited Brasof’s helpful behaviors. Facilitating a continued alliance with these three staff members and holding introductory meetings with other staff members would have laid the groundwork for a shift in ownership because other staff members would have begun to understand, accept, and hopefully, take on the SLG’s student voice reform agenda.

In the case of student voice, I believe this shift in ownership also has to take place within the student body. “Facilitating students to invite others in the school community to lead” and “communicating issues to the student body,” two behaviors I added from Brasof’s Student Leader section to his Faculty Advisor section, would have aided in this shift in ownership (p.134-135). In citing McLaughlin & Mitra’s research (2001), Coburn explains that once a reform is internally understood, the shift in ownership will occur, making the reform self-generative (2003, p.7). The student body needed to understand what the SLG was, what it did, and why it was important to the school. With this understanding, students would have a greater opportunity to value the group, expect it to exist, and contribute to it, either as a leader or participant of student voice work.

This action research adds to the literature in the areas of key behaviors of student voice and sustainability of student voice. In combining the work of Brasof (2015) and Coburn (2003), this study broaches understudied questions about what sustainability and scale look like in student voice within K-12 schools and what behaviors facilitate that scale and sustainability.

More research needs to be done to explore these issues so that student voice can grow from one-off projects into normative, district-wide practices.

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