

# The Significance of Students: Can Increasing “Student Voice” in Schools Lead to Gains in Youth Development?

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*The notion of “student voice,” or a student role in the decision making and change efforts of schools, has emerged in the new millennium as a potential strategy for improving the success of school reform efforts. Yet few studies have examined this construct either theoretically or empirically. Grounded in a sociocultural perspective, this article provides some of the first empirical data on youth participation in student voice efforts by identifying how student voice opportunities appear to contribute to “youth development” outcomes in young people. The article finds that student voice activities can create meaningful experiences for youth that help to meet fundamental developmental needs—especially for students who otherwise do not find meaning in their school experiences. Specifically, this research finds a marked consistency in the growth of agency, belonging and competence—three assets that are central to youth development. While these outcomes were consistent across the students in this study, the data demonstrate how the structure of student voice efforts and nature of adult/student relations fundamentally influence the forms of youth development outcomes that emerge.*

While many high schools have struggled with how to improve student outcomes, few high schools have decided to go straight to the source and ask the students. In the past few years, the term “student voice” increasingly has been discussed in the school reform literature as a potential avenue for improving both student outcomes and school restructuring (including Carbonaro & Gamoran, 2002; Fielding, 2002; Mitra, 2003a; Rudduck & Flutter, 2000). The term has gained increasing credence as a construct that describes the many ways in which youth might have the opportunity to actively participate in school decisions that will shape their lives and the lives of their peers (Fielding, 2001; Goodwillie, 1993; Levin, 2000). When placed into practice, “student voice” can consist on the most basic level of youth sharing their opinions of problems and potential solutions. It could also entail young people collaborating with adults to actually address the problems in their schools.

The concept of student voice is not new to education. In the sixties and seventies, student power movements asserted the right of students to participate in decision making in classrooms and schoolwide (such as Cusick, 1972, deCharms, 1976). Yet a focus on the role of students in school decision making and culture largely vanished after the mid seventies (Levin, 2000). During the past few decades, efforts to improve schools have taken center stage across the nation, but youth rarely become involved in school reform in the United States,<sup>1</sup> despite the fact that many reforms are intended to create more equitable and engaging educational programs for students (Muncey & McQuillan, 1991; Olsen, Jaramillo, McCall-Perez, & White, 1999).

During this time when student voice remained mostly silent in schools, many adolescents experienced increasing alienation as a result of large school and class sizes, segregation by age and ability that can prevent students from learning from more experienced peers, and a view of students as clients that is often perpetuated throughout school decision making and thereby increases the distance between teachers and students (Costello, Toles, Spielberg, & Wynn, 2000; Nieto, 1994; Pittman & Wright, 1991; Soohoo, 1993). Students report that adults in their schools rarely listen to their views, nor do they involve students in important decisions affecting their own activities or work (Noddings, 1992; Poplin & Weeres, 1992). This alienation results in large numbers of high-school students who describe their school experiences in terms of anonymity and powerlessness (Heath & McLaughlin, 1993, Nightingale & Wolverson, 1993; Pope, 2001; Sizer, 1984). These systemic problems can contribute to youth disengaging from school and lead to increasing numbers of students who cut classes, have lower self-concepts, achieve less academically, and drop out of school (Fullan, 2001; Rudduck, Day, & Wallace, 1997).

“Student voice” has reemerged on the educational landscape in the United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom in the past decade. The focus has not been geared to rights and empowerment as it had in the past, but instead it has focused on the notion that student outcomes will improve and school reform will be more successful if students actively participate in shaping it. In its present form, student voice activities range from schools gathering information from students through focus groups and surveys to students working alongside teachers to develop and implement strategies for school improvement.

The existing research suggests that this new form of student voice has served as a catalyst for change in schools, including helping to improve teaching, curriculum, and teacher-student relationships and leading to changes in student assessment and teacher training (Fielding, 2001; Mitra, 2003; Oldfather, 1995; Rudduck & Flutter, 2000). Partnering with students to identify school problems and possible solutions reminds teachers and administrators that students possess unique knowledge and perspectives

about their schools that adults cannot fully replicate (Kushman, 1997; Levin, 2000; Mitra, 2001; Rudduck, Day, & Wallace, 1997; Thorkildsen, 1994). Through open conversations about injustices in schools, student voice can raise equity issues that tend to get swept under the rug by administrators and other adults in the school who would rather avoid controversy. By involving students—and particularly students failing subjects or rarely attending school—school personnel cannot easily shift the blame of failure onto the students. Instead they must assess the problems within the school's structure and culture (Fine, 1991; Mitra, 2003; Wehlage, Rutter, Smith, Lesko, & Fernandez, 1989).

Research also suggests that participation in student voice efforts can benefit the young people who participate in many ways. Hardly any studies exist that examine student experiences and outcomes when they participate in schoolwide decision making and change efforts. One of the few studies that looked at student experiences in schoolwide change efforts took place in Canada. The Manitoba School Improvement program found a correlation between an increase in student voice in the school culture and an increase in school attachment. Students who had been sullen and unreachable became some of the most passionate participants in the school reform process once they became involved (Earl & Lee, 2000; Lee & Zimmerman, 2001).

Most research instead has looked at efforts to increase student voice and agency at the classroom level. These studies have found that students improved academically when teachers construct their classrooms in ways that value student voice—especially when students are given the power to work with their teachers to improve curriculum and instruction (Oldfather, 1995; Rudduck & Flutter, 2000). Research conducted in a middle-school English classroom in the United States also found that increasing student voice in schools helped to reengage alienated students by providing them with a stronger sense of ownership in their schools. Students highly valued having their voices heard and “honored.” Student voice opportunities helped young people to gain a stronger sense of their own abilities, and built student awareness that they can make changes in their schools, not only for themselves but also for others (Oldfather, 1995). Increasing student voice in classrooms also improved students' understanding of how they learn. Other research similarly found that by articulating how they learn best, students also can help teachers do a better job of meeting student needs (Johnston & Nicholls, 1995).

With just a limited number of studies that discuss the effects of student voice on the school (e.g., Fielding, 2001, Mitra, 2003; Soohoo, 1993) and a small set of studies that look at increasing student agency within the classroom (e.g., Arnot & Reay, 2001; Oldfather, 1995; Rudduck & Flutter, 2000), the subject of student voice still requires much more empirical research and conceptual framing. This article provides some of the first

empirical data on youth experiences in student voice efforts. Drawing from a broader study of student voice that examined the process and outcomes of two student groups working to make changes in their low-income, comprehensive high school, this article helps to fill two gaps in the literature. First, it offers much needed rich empirical data on how student voice activities influence the youth participating in these activities. Second, it provides a theoretical contribution to the field by detailing the usefulness of a “youth development” framework as a conceptual lens for analyzing student voice activities.

### CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK: YOUTH DEVELOPMENT IN A SOCIOCULTURAL CONTEXT

This article focuses on school change efforts in which youth and adults working together on shared activities. The study has its roots in sociocultural (Rogoff, 1990) and situative (Greeno & MMAP, 1998; Lave, 1988; Lave & Wenger, 1991) perspectives, which premise that we learn and become who we are through interaction with others. The article is premised on the concept that learning is inherently a social activity that occurs between people rather than just as an individual process. As groups continue to chase an ever-transient notion of collective identity, persons within the group simultaneously work to connect their own identities and understandings with the group. Experienced members assist novice colleagues so that the less experienced members move beyond their current capabilities to learn new tasks and acquire more sophisticated skills (Vygotsky, 1978).

In the context of this study, learning and meaning making occur through the process of students and teachers developing together an alternative frame for student participation in school reform. Students working with teachers and administrators to co-create the path of reform could help youth to meet their own developmental needs and could strengthen student ownership of the change process (Sarason, 1996). Specifically, student voice activities can increase specific youth development needs, including providing opportunities to influence issues that matter to them (Costello, Toles, Spielberger, & Wynn, 2000; Pittman, Irby & Ferber, 2000); to engage in actively solving problems (Fielding, 2001; Goodwillie, 1993; Takanishi, 1993); to develop closer and more intimate connection with adults and with peers (McLaughlin, 1999; Pittman & Wright, 1991; Takanishi, 1993); to assume more active classroom roles (Costello, Toles, Spielberger, & Wynn, 2000); and to increase their sense of agency and voice (Costello et al., 2000; McLaughlin, 1999; Pittman & Wright, 1991).

This article analyzes how student voice activities at Whitman did in fact enhance youth development outcomes. This research draws upon three concepts to understand youth experiences in student voice—agency,

**Table 1. Definitions of youth development assets**

Youth Development Asset	Conceptual Definition
Agency	Acting or exerting influence and power in a given situation
Belonging	Developing meaningful relationships with other students and adults and having a role at the school
Competence	Developing new abilities and being appreciated for one's talents

belonging, and competence. Referred to informally by some youth development researchers and advocates as the “ABC’s” of youth development (Carver, 1997), the choice of using the concepts “agency, belonging and competence” to reflect youth development outcomes derives from research in both psychology and youth development fields. It is based on the assets that youth need to succeed in school and in their lives overall. Table 1 provides a summary of these three components of youth development, including a brief definition of each term and the specific ways that youth embodied these assets as the engaged in their student voice activities.

Research in developmental psychology finds agency, belonging and competence to be necessary factors for adolescents to remain motivated in school and to achieve academic success (Eccles, Midgley, Wigfield, Buchanan, et al., 1993; Goodenow, 1993; Roeser, Midgley, & Urdan, 1996; Stinson, 1993). The youth development field does not possess a consistent set of assets that youth need to acquire to be prepared for the future and to navigate their current situations. However, descriptions of youth assets in other research focusing on youth development consist of similar types of capacities, including “autonomy, belonging, and competence” (Schapps, Watson, & Lewis, 1997); “self-worth, belonging and competence” (Kernalleguen, 1980); “knowledge, belonging and competence” (Villarruel & Lerner 1994); “navigation, connection and productivity” (Connell, Gambone & Smith, 2000); and “confidence and compassion; connection and caring; competence and character” (National Research Council, 2002; Roth & Brooks-Gunn 2000).

## METHODS

### SAMPLE

With little research available on the resurgence of student voice efforts occurring for the first time since the early seventies, the intent in this study was to find a best-case scenario of student voice efforts. This research provided an in-depth explanation of a school that did contain strong

student voice efforts. The research sample is based on representativeness of the concept of student voice (Strauss & Corbin, 1990), rather than representativeness of school sites. The goal was to maximize the opportunities to observe student involvement by choosing cases that most actively demonstrated commitment to working with students on their reform work rather than to find schools with a range of student involvement in reform efforts.<sup>2</sup>

The study examines the emergence of student voice at Whitman High School<sup>3</sup>, a school serving families who rarely have a voice in schools in the United States. Located in a bedroom community in northern California, Whitman High School serves a community comprised of first generation immigrants from Latin America and Asia as well as working-class African-Americans and European-Americans. Half of Whitman High School's students are English language learners, and half qualify for the free or reduced priced lunch program.

With the school graduating just over half (57%) of the 1,750 students that start in ninth grade and with one-third of its teachers electing to leave each year, Whitman High School staff felt compelled to make changes. In 1998, Whitman received a major grant to launch a three-year reform effort from the Bay Area School Reform Collaborative (BASRC), a \$112 million education initiative in the San Francisco Bay area that was supported by the Annenberg Challenge and the Hewlett Foundation. As a part of deciding where to focus their reform efforts, the school's reform leadership team made the unusual decision of asking students what they felt needed to be improved.

During the time that this research was conducted, Whitman could easily be considered the trailblazer on student involvement in the San Francisco Bay Area.<sup>4</sup> Many other high schools in the area were talking about wanting to involve students in their reform work, particularly through interviewing focus groups of students. After conducting a small sample of interviews and observations with other schools and after talking with school reform consultants in the area, it was clear however that although these other schools indicated an interest in increasing student voice, it was not occurring at these schools at the time. The student voice effort happening at Whitman was unusual and deserved to be the sole focus of this study.

Two groups at Whitman engaged in student voice activities—Pupil-School Collaborative (PSC) and Student Forum. The groups worked in relative isolation from one another but shared similar goals of improving the educational process through involving students more directly in reform efforts happening at the school. While this parallel work of the two groups perhaps was not in the best interests of making an impact on the school, it did allow for an embedded case study design that allowed for between-group comparisons.

The group PSC began when the leader of Whitman's reform efforts hired retired community-college teacher and community activist, Hector Sanchez, to help improve education for Latino students. Hector recruited group members informally through talking to students in the hallway and spreading the news about PSC through word of mouth. His strategy for creating the group was important since PSC members had little affiliation to Whitman. They often cut classes, rarely participated in activities, and found greater importance in their family responsibilities and after school jobs than their schoolwork. Eight students consistently participated in PSC and another five occasionally attended meetings and events.

The resounding connection among the PSC members was that they were all first generation Latino immigrants who understood what it was like not to speak English and to not understand the subtleties of the U.S. education system. The group wanted to help fellow Whitman students who were experiencing the same struggles of learning the language and culture of the school as they had previously. After engaging in several support activities, including offering advice to incoming eighth graders and encouraging the greater involvement of Latino parents, PSC eventually decided to focus its efforts on what it considered to be the greatest needs for newcomer Latinos—tutoring and translation assistance. The group developed a program that consisted of students who could both tutor their peers and translate Spanish into English. The tutors waited in the career center for teachers to phone them for assistance. They would then go to the classrooms and work alongside the student in class or they would pull students out of class for additional help. Between two and four tutors were available during each class period.

The group Student Forum began at the same time as PSC. Fourth year English teacher Amy Jackson selected students to participate in focus groups on how improve the academic success of ninth graders. Amy assembled a cross-section of the student population based on race, gender, academic performance and “clique.” Eventually a group of thirty students (with twelve consistently participating) constituted the group Student Forum. The young people in the group consisted of a fairly equal mix of African American, Latino, Asian, and White students and represented a wide range of school experiences, from youth on the verge of dropping out to the president of the school's student council.

Unlike PSC's focus on helping students one at a time through mentoring and tutoring, Student Forum focused its efforts at the organizational level by seeking student participation in efforts to reform the school and to institute new school programs and policies. The group sought to inject student voice into school decision making and to seek ways to make the school a better place for all students. The group eventually narrowed its focus to one schoolwide issue—building communication and partnership schoolwide between students and teachers.

## DATA COLLECTION

This study relied on qualitative data collection that continued for more than 2 years. It consisted of interviews, observations of meetings and conversations, and written documents from both groups. Table 2 summarizes the data collection for this study, including data gathered from the students and the adult advisor of Student Forum and Parent School Collaborative (PSC) as well as interviews with the head of the school's reform efforts, guidance counselor Sean Martin, and with teachers and students who were not directly involved in the student voice efforts. As the table indicates, the data collection was distributed throughout the timeframe of the study. All students and adults who participated regularly with the two groups were interviewed at least twice<sup>5</sup> and if possible three times (spring and fall of 1999, spring of 2000, and fall of 2000). Interviews were not conducted if the person was no longer at the school or no longer an active participant of student voice activities. Because this article traces the development of youth, I did not use student data for this article if I was not able to conduct at least two interviews with this person. I also conducted interviews with teachers and students in the school who were not directly involved with the groups and almost all of the students who attended the groups intermittently. All told, I conducted over 70 semi-structured interviews<sup>6</sup> with student group members and their adult advisors and a handful of interviews with school administration, teachers, and students not involved in the group.<sup>7</sup>

To understand group process and to observe student experiences in student voice activities, I also conducted over 50 observations of both formal meetings and informal conversations. Before and after formal meetings, I also interacted informally with adults and students in the groups in classrooms, offices, and hallways. I was present at the school on average two days a week for half of the school day throughout the 1999–2000 school year. In the fall of 2000, I visited two to three times a month.<sup>8</sup>

My purpose at Whitman was not as a participant observer, but rather as an outside observer. During meetings, I transcribed the conversations verbatim using a laptop computer and some fast typing skills. I also made note of unspoken emotions, gestures, and underlying currents happening during the meetings. I shared these transcripts with adults and students in the group (with my commentary removed) to learn if I missed anything in the transcription. I also offered these notes as a way of “giving back” to them for their generous sharing of their time. The two groups appreciated having a record of their meetings for their own purposes.



**Table 2. Summary of number of data collection**

	Spring and Fall 1999	Spring 2000	Fall 2000	Total
Observations	Student Forum: 4 PSC: 6 School events: 5	Student Forum: 11 PSC: 10 School events: 2	Student Forum: 10 PSC: 1 School events: 1	<b>50</b>
Interviews	Student Forum: 8 PSC: 2 Sean Martin: 5 Other: 3	Student Forum: 12 PSC: 19 Sean Martin: 7 Other: 5	Student Forum: 5 PSC: 1 Sean Martin: 5 Other: 1	<b>73</b>

Written documentation available from the groups, including internal documents and those meant for an external audience, supplemented interview and observational data. The documents indicated what was valued by the school community and beyond the walls of the school, including to what extent the student contribution is viewed as a priority. Since student voice began at Whitman the spring prior to this research, documents provided key information about what happened prior to the commencement of data collection. They also provided a way of viewing how the groups formally expressed their vision and plans to the broader school community.

DATA ANALYSIS AND CONCEPTUALIZING THE FRAMEWORK

The evidence on youth experience in these two groups was derived from a grounded theory analysis using grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1990), which is a qualitative methodology that provides a process for developing theory that is derived from data that is systematically gathered.<sup>9</sup> Grounded theory is especially useful since it focuses on moving beyond description to developing theory by making connections, defining relationships, and looking for patterns of action between concepts derived from the data. Moving from raw data to conclusions involved a process of “data reduction” that involved breaking data down, conceptualizing it, and putting it back together in thematic categories that best fit the text (Miles & Huberman, 1994).<sup>10</sup>

To manage my data, I used QSR Nud\*ist software, a qualitative data analyses program. The program assists with data storage and retrieval such that it allowed me to search for patterns in the data and to locate discrepancies and missing pieces. My coding process included writing the codes on the transcripts, cleansing the documents for errors and formatting them for Nud\*ist, importing files into the Nud\*ist program, and entering in the codes. As a reliability check, I shared excerpts of transcripts (with all identifying information removed) with three collea-

gues whom I met with regularly to discuss data collection and analysis issues. I asked them to look for themes in the raw data and compared my analysis with their fresh look at the interview data. These opportunities allowed for an increase in the reliability of my coding as I compared it to their analysis. It also helped me to notice new themes and ideas that I had not identified previously.

Through analysis of the thematic categories, I developed an explanatory framework, or the central phenomenon around which to relate other categories (Miles & Huberman 1994, Strauss & Corbin 1990). When identifying patterns in the data, I observed that youth who participated in efforts to increase student voice showed evidence of marked increases in the very personal and social assets that youth development researchers assert are necessary for students to succeed in society. In particular, I noticed a strong increase in agency, belonging, and competence across the youth participating in student voice efforts at Whitman. This parsimonious set of attributes concisely described the ways in which the participating students had changed and the aspects that young people valued the most from their work in the two groups.

Little discrepant evidence contradicted these three categories. Student-self-reports correlated with observational data, the opinions of Amy, Hector, and other adults working with the two groups, and even with survey data conducted for a broader evaluation of Whitman's reform efforts. The interview and observation data indicate how the participating youth (24 in all) discussed the changes they observed in themselves, including developing new skills and a more positive outlook on their school and their lives overall. What was striking about these self-reports was the consistency in the ways that young people described how they were changing. This is particularly intriguing since students were never prodded for specific individual changes beyond the question, "Do you feel that you have changed as a result of being in this group?" Also noteworthy, the lack of communication between the two groups did not decrease the consistency in the changes experienced by students in both groups.

Survey data supported the qualitative data. As a part of this broader study, a random sample of ninth and eleventh graders at Whitman responded to the survey. I administered the same survey to students in Student Forum and PSC as a way to compare youth within the groups to the broader high school population. Two-tailed *t*-tests identified the differences in perception of the groups and of the broader samples. Within this survey, Student Forum members had a significantly lower sense of social deference ( $p = .03$ ) than the average Whitman student, meaning that Student Forum members felt more comfortable speaking up when they disagreed with a predominating opinion in conversation. Survey data also affirmed that all Whitman students, including Student Forum, believed that student-teacher

relations were in desperate need of repair ( $p = .62$  for Student-Teacher Respect, indicating that Student Forum shared the same sentiments as the broader student population on this issue). Survey data additionally indicated that youth in both groups had a significantly greater sense of social responsibility ( $p = .037$ ) than the average Whitman student. Students from both groups strongly affirmed the statements: “It is important to help others in my neighborhood, all students should be listened to; and when someone is having a problem, [I] want to help.”

To help ensure validity of my analysis, and particularly in the final year, I shared the youth development findings with Whitman adults and youth by describing the concepts of agency belonging, and competence and asking both adults and youth if they felt that these terms captured the changes that they saw in the youth participating in both groups. Sean, Amy, and current Student Forum members gave feedback on the Student Forum case. Sean and previous PSC members gave feedback on the PSC case (Hector had left the school and I could not contact him after he left). The students in particular agreed strongly with the framework as a reflective depiction of their experiences. Adults did not engage in the findings as excitedly as the students, but they also did not find any discrepancies with my conclusions. It became clear to me that an academic analysis of their work was my “enterprise,” not theirs. And they seemed to be quite content with that. I was less satisfied and yet accepted this decision as their choice. Sean Martin was the one exception, and several times he and I discussed the details of my findings, the rationale behind them, and the consequences of the work of the two groups.

## EVIDENCE OF YOUTH OUTCOMES

The remainder of this article focuses on a detailed examination of the development of agency, belonging and competence in the participating students, including a suggested conceptual definition of each asset and the specific ways that student voice activities manifest these assets in the participating youth. The findings also consider how the groups’ contrasting strategies for change influenced the way that participating youth acquired an increase in agency, belonging, and competence. Correlating with PSC’s focus on improving Latino outcomes by providing tutoring and mentoring one person at a time, the PSC students’ growth occurred in the context of an improved ability to interact on an individual basis with adults and their peers. In contrast, Student Forum’s attempted system-wide efforts to change teacher-student relations aligned the group members’ improved ability to interact with organizations and authority. Table 3 summarizes the findings of the study that will be described in the remainder of the article.

**Table 3. Summary of youth outcomes**

Youth Development Asset	Ways That Student Voice Increases This Asset
Agency	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* Increasing ability to articulate opinions to others</li> <li>* Constructing new identities as change makers</li> <li>* Developing a greater sense of leadership</li> </ul>
Belonging	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* Developing a relationship with a caring adult</li> <li>* Improving interactions with teachers</li> <li>* Increasing attachment to the school</li> </ul>
Competence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* Critiquing their environment</li> <li>* Developing problem solving and facilitation skills</li> <li>* Getting along with others</li> <li>* Speaking publicly</li> </ul>

### AGENCY

Agency in a youth development context indicates the ability to exert influence and power in a given situation. It connotes a sense of confidence, a sense of self-worth, and the belief that one can do something, whether contributing to society writ large or to a specific situation (Heath & McLaughlin, 1993). The data in this section indicate that students in both groups demonstrated a growth of agency in three ways: (1) they articulated their opinions and felt that their views were heard; (2) they constructed new roles as change makers in the school who could “make a difference”; and (3) they developed leadership, including an increasing sense of responsibility to help others in need.

### BEING HEARD AND SPEAKING UP

In activities with a focus on student voice, a sense of agency particularly focuses on the notion that youth ideas are to be heard and respected (Costello, Toles, Spielberger, & Wynn, 2000). Student Forum member Sala Jones, one of the student leaders of the group, explained, “Me being a student, I can really do something. I’m just not an ordinary guy. I have a voice . . . . My opinion counts and people need to really respect my opinion, to value it.” The students developed a greater sense of self worth when they felt that people were listening to their perspectives.

Participation in the focus groups and the subsequent analysis contributed greatly to the development of agency in Student Forum youth. During the focus groups, students talked about why so many students failed at Whitman. In subsequent meetings, the students worked in small groups with adults to analyze the focus group data to find common themes. In these analysis sessions, teachers often misinterpreted student opinions and the youth

involved in the analysis set them straight. In one focus-group transcript, the adults interpreted a student's comments as meaning that she did not see the value of coming to school. The students in the group explained to the adults that this interpretation was incorrect—the student was missing school due to family problems but still wanted to succeed in school. Yet when she did attend class, her teacher seemed very angry with her for being absent so often. Ashamed of the possibility of letting down her teacher and also mentally tired from the problems at home, this student did not want to engage in a confrontational situation, so she stopped coming to class entirely.

After the focus groups, Student Forum decided to work on what they and their peers viewed as one of the most pressing problems at Whitman—the lack of respect between students and teachers. Survey data affirm that all Whitman students, including Student Forum, believed that student-teacher relations were in desperate need of repair ( $p = .62$  for Student-Teacher Respect, indicating that Student Forum shared the same sentiments as the broader student population on this issue). Thus, Student Forum focused its work on building partnerships between students and teachers. Their strategy for accomplishing this involved students participating in “teacher-driven” activities such as the focus groups. The group also developed “student-driven” activities to help teachers to gain a better understanding of student perspectives.<sup>11</sup>

In their first attempt at a student-focused activity, pairs of students took teachers on tours of their neighborhood. In the words of one student tour guide, “They [teachers] learned where we lived, worked, the different territories, where we stay away from, where people get killed and hurt for being in the wrong areas.” As a second student-focused activity, the group wanted to create a schoolwide conversation about Whitman's reputation as a “ghetto school.” Student Forum member Joey Sampson explained, “So it's like where does the label ghetto school come from? We wanted to deal with that directly.”

Student Forum youth also increased their sense of being heard as they noticed that teachers and other adults in authority positions respected their opinions and listened to what they believed during the student-driven activities. Student Forum member Joey Sampson explained, “We're not just people anymore. We're not just students. We aren't just names anymore. We're actually important and teachers have to listen to us now as they didn't before. They do now.” Student Forum members observed an increasing willingness to collaborate with students and a deeper growth in teacher understanding and receptiveness of student perspectives. Student Forum members and teachers also observed that the student-focused activities helped to reduce tension between teachers and students, to increase informality, and to help teacher and students to identify one another as persons rather than as stereotypes.

In contrast, however, to Student Forum members' emphasis on others hearing them, PSC members spoke of an internal sense of feeling more confident to speak up and to speak out. PSC students' growing development of agency grew from within as they felt more self-assured and brave enough to express their beliefs. Mary Mejía expressed this sentiment when she described a growing confidence in articulating her views. She proudly commented, "I learned to speak with no fear. I used to be shy." The group's advisor, Hector, described this development as allowing the students not only to share what they believed but also to feel that they had the right to have their own opinions. When asked what he thought was the most important change in group members, he asserted, "They're free-thinkers now."

Like Student Forum, PSC began its efforts by learning more about student perspectives. They surveyed their Latino peers to identify the main concerns that they had and presented their data to teachers and parents. The experience helped to build confidence in the PSC youth's ability to speak to adults. Student member Esperanza Hernandez explained, "I think that it [being in PSC] gives me the guts to say what I really feel—what I think of what's going on. And it wasn't that I didn't like to. It wasn't just part of me because I had never before, not on a regular basis. And [now] I can say what I want to say to anyone. It could be teachers or principals. It just gives me more courage."

#### DEVELOPING NEW IDENTITIES AS CHANGE MAKERS AND SOURCES OF SUPPORT

Most often schools reinforce preconceived expectations of youth and sort them into categories (Giroux, 1983). Based on these labels, students develop a sense of self. For example, students slotted as "burnouts" in Eckert's (1989) famous study develop an identity based on marginalization and a lack of agency. Student Forum and PSC provided opportunities for youth to develop positive forms of identification that are normally unavailable to youth in a school setting. Specifically, youth in both groups developed new identities as change makers.

Student Forum members actively helped to construct their groups and worked to influence their schools. After the focus groups, Student Forum members participated in many other teacher-driven reform activities that helped to strengthen their sense of agency as they became change makers. One way they engaged in reform conversations was providing a student perspective at professional development trainings. Student Forum members assumed the role in such meetings of interpreting to the staff how students might receive new pedagogical strategies and materials through participation in teacher professional development sessions, such as a training on developing standards-based curricular units. Youth shared

with teachers how they would receive the new lessons being developed and suggested some ideas for how to make the lessons more applicable to students' needs and interests. Student Forum members also shared personal experiences about situations in which they had experienced significant learning and those in which they did not learn at all and they suggested ways that teaching and curriculum could be changed to improve student learning.

In addition to sharing student experiences with teachers, Student Forum members also worked to transfer teacher-developed ideas and jargon into language that their student peers would understand. Student Forum Member Troy Newman explained his role at the meetings was "breaking down vocabulary. Some students may not understand, you know. So we were trying to put it [the rubrics and the departmental standards] in a way where all students understand. I guess you could say [I was a] a translator."

Troy also provided feedback on the type of classrooms and teacher styles that worked best for him. He recalled, "One teacher asked me how do I feel about teachers and who are we comfortable with. And I told him that a teacher who is laid back and . . . gives you freedom . . . . And learning about something as you're going through something."

Students also served as an accountability mechanism during teacher meetings. Teachers noticed a difference in the tenor of meetings when students were present. Reform-resistant faculty members were less likely to engage in unprofessional behaviors such as completing crossword puzzles during staff meetings or openly showing hostility to colleagues.

Rosalinda Gutierrez, another member of Student Forum, transformed her role in school from forced compliance in which she attended school out of obligation to that of change maker. Rosalinda participated actively in the group, including presenting Student Forum's efforts at local teachers' conferences and working intently to explain student perspectives to teachers during staff development sessions. Observations also supported Rosalinda's key role as peacemaker in the group by smoothing ruffled feathers and building trust among group members. She explained that through participation in Student Forum, she believed that she could make an impact in improving the school:

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

Sean Martin, a reform leader at Whitman and advocate for the Student Forum, observed this transformation in Rosalinda as well, explaining, “I’ve seen some people step forward and actually be able to have their voices heard. Rosalinda comes to mind.”

An increase in agency among group members also leads to efficacy. The group members articulated an ability to define new roles for themselves as they pushed the school to redefine itself. Student Forum member Donald Goodwin commented:

Before [Student Forum], I was just another face in the crowd of students here at Whitman . . . It kind of makes me feel more powerful now being in this group . . . I think a lot of students don’t even know that when they first come in [to high school] that they can actually do something . . . that they could actually make a change. And since they don’t know that and something goes bad and they just say, “I’m just going to drop out of school because I don’t like it.” We need to let them know that they can make a change if they put their minds to it.

Donald’s growing sense of self contributed to the development of an identity as a leader in the school.

Rather than focusing on changing the school culture, PSC focused on making changes for individual students by providing sources of support and assistance for their Latino peers. PSC initially worked on many efforts at once, including encouraging greater involvement of Latino parents and hosting conversations with teachers in the school on meeting the needs of Latino students. The group also developed a mentoring program to help eighth grade Latino students assimilate into high school. PSC members traveled to the feeder middle school to explain what it was like to be a Whitman student. They also provided translation and advice while counselors scheduled the middle-school students for next year’s classes. The middle school students expressed great appreciation to PSC for answering their questions and for translating the course catalog into Spanish for them. Eventually the group narrowed their focus to one activity—developing a translation and tutoring program for ESL students.

By engaging in these activities and providing assistance to their Latino peers, PSC members spoke of noticing an increasing sense of agency in themselves. Rosa Campos became much less shy and developed confidence in her ability to assist others and to improve her own life as well. She commented, “I feel good about myself. I help myself and other students by giving my opinion of how school is and how hard it was for me when I first came here [from Mexico].”

The experiences of PSC gave the students involved courage and a greater belief in themselves. Isabel Calderón expressed pride in her developing



ability to help her peers. She stated, “I think it’s good for us. The group makes us do something for others. And for ourselves too . . . I think that I really have helped others. I have some ideas or something.” Mary used language similar to Isabel’s to describe her emotions about her involvement in PSC. She said, “I’m helping Latinos. I feel like I know something. I can give my advice and help them . . . I talk, give ideas, be creative [sic], give support to other people. I feel proud and good about what I’m doing.”

#### GROWING LEADERSHIP

Youth need to practice and to assume leadership roles to prepare for adult responsibilities (Connell, Gambone, & Smith, 1998). Leadership developed in PSC and Student Forum members as they learned how to take responsibility for their group and how to guide others. Student Forum members increased their ability to communicate the vision of the groups and to help run the organization. Adults who worked with Student Forum members particularly noticed a growing confidence and leadership in the students involved. Adult advisor Amy Jackson commented, “Well, [I’ve seen] just a huge leadership blossoming in a lot of them. And an appreciation of each other, [and] working together in different kind of groups.” Whitman reform leader Sean Martin also noticed a heightened awareness and agency, even among the Student Forum Members who were newcomers at the beginning of the year. He remarked, “I think that what really strikes me is the young kids who came in as freshmen, sat in the back for two or three meetings, and basically didn’t know why the hell they were there. They have become leaders, and I think that they have a pretty good grasp of what this is about.”

Developing leadership included empowering persons during group activities and outside meetings as well. Reform leader Sean Martin explained, “The recognition that [veteran] students have of silent people also comes to mind. I see Donald and other students outside of class having conversations with Lata Kumar, for example, who is very quiet. There is a real sense of respect. I’ll see them walk up and put their arms around her and talk with her outside of our meetings. That’s real productive.”

PSC members’ leadership did not focus on group facilitation or empowering others. Instead, PSC members spoke of a responsibility to help fellow Latino students. The resounding connection among the PSC members was that they were all first generation Latino immigrants who understood what it was like not to speak English and to not understand the subtleties of the U.S. education system. The PSC group contrasted themselves to second-generation students whom they felt did not share a similar compassion for fellow Latinos. PSC member Esperanza Hernandez explained, “You have to speak up for those that people don’t listen to. Like

some of the students don't speak up because they don't speak the language right. I see all those problems, and maybe the teachers don't see them. And if I know about it, I know I have to do something about it for those people because they think they don't have the power."

PSC members unanimously articulated an obligation to improve the situation for other Latinos in the school (and even have an obligation to do so). Mark Alberto, president of PSC, explained, "When I first came here, I wish that there would be a program like this to help me whenever I needed something, whenever I didn't understand. So now if it can help for these students, it will make it easier for them. And then they will come to school more." PSC members knew what it was like to struggle in a new school and a new country because they had been there before.

In both groups, the youth who participated most in each of the groups displayed the greatest growth in leadership, including guiding the vision and day-to-day tasks of the groups. These student leaders learned how to encourage the work of others to ensure that the group completed its tasks and they helped to maintain the vision of the group by reminding their fellow members of the group's purpose and by keeping spirits high. They noticed that their roles in the groups helped them to feel more comfortable giving assistance to others. Twelfth-grade student Sala Jones credited Student Forum with teaching him leadership skills. He commented:

When a person in school asks me a question, no one knows the amount of joy that I get from being able to give him a straight answer to the problem. When I can talk to someone in a younger grade, and really educate them on what's happening in the school and what you need to do on life, there's no better gratification than to just feel confident that you helped somebody. Student Forum has helped me do that.

Not only did they feel more comfortable helping others, but the student leaders noticed that others also identified these students as leaders and began to seek them out for assistance. Mark Alberto, voted to serve as "president" of PSC, noticed:

Some of them [my fellow students] come to us now and ask us questions about what they need to graduate. They come to me and say, "Do I need to take this class? How many credits do I need to take?" . . . If I don't know the answer, then I say, "Let me find out about it and I'll let you know." They feel more comfortable knowing that they can talk to me as a friend and that I know the answer than going to someone else. They don't know if that person will understand.

After Mark became a leader in the PSC, he became a resource for his fellow students, who felt comfortable asking him questions since they felt that he understood them and would be willing to help them out.

## BELONGING

The concept of belonging in a youth development frame consists of developing relationships consisting of supportive, positive interaction with adults and peers and of opportunities to learn from one another (Costello, Toles, Spielberg, & Wynn, 2000; Heath & McLaughlin, 1993; Pittman & Wright, 1991). Since youth tend to spend most of their time with peers and relatively little time in formal or informal socialization or interactions with adults, opportunities to develop meaningful relationships with adults have become an increasingly important need for adolescents (Csikszentmihalyi & Larson, 1984). When students believe that they are valued for their perspectives and respected, they begin to develop a sense of ownership and attachment to the organization in which they are involved (Atweh & Burton, 1995). Scholars have found that an adolescent's belonging to her school is positively related to academic success and motivation (Goodenow, 1993; Roeser, Midgley, & Urdan, 1996; Ryan & Powelson, 1991).

The data in this section demonstrate that both groups provided opportunities to foster new sources of belonging for youth at Whitman. Specifically, youth developed (1) greater connections to caring adults; (2) greater connections to teachers in general; and (3) greater connections to the school. When comparing PSC and Student Forum members' shifts in belonging, the goals and focus of the group once again influenced the type of growth evident in the youth involved. PSC members focused more on personal connections, including developing strong ties with their advisor, Hector. Student Forum members instead talked about knowing and appreciating the school as a whole, including feeling more comfortable with teachers and gaining pride and respect for the school as an entity.

## RELATIONSHIP WITH A CARING ADULT

Building connections with adults encourages healthy adolescent development (Kushman, 1997; Moore, 1997). Students in both the groups realized the importance of connections with adults as well. Student Forum member Sala Jones explained the great importance of having adults who care in high school:

I think that relationships between teacher and student throughout their high-school career are the most important thing . . . Once you

have that relationship, you can go to that teacher and you can say, "That's my friend." And they will listen to your problems, whether it has to deal with school or family or girlfriend or whatever, any problem that you have. You can go to them and talk to them. And they'll give you feedback and they'll be there for you. Just to have people there for you to support you, you will be successful in anything you do.

The connection to a caring adult proved to be the strongest developmental influence for PSC students.

The PSC members developed strong connections to Hector Sanchez, their advisor. A retired teacher in his seventies, Hector had 50 years of experience teaching at all levels of the school system. He had worked hard throughout his life to support Latinos and to help them learn how to support themselves. Isabel Calderón stated, "Mr. Sanchez really cares for education and cares for us. But I know some other teachers who don't really. They do their job . . . but I don't think they really care." Hector worked with PSC 2.5 days a week to serve as a self-entitled advocate for Latino students. He spent his time meeting with PSC members, whom he called his "associates," both in formal meetings and informally by pulling persons or groups of persons out of class or asking them to see him during their free periods.

Building trust is crucial for youth to develop relationships with adults (Eckert, 1989). The PSC students trusted Hector because he was honest with them. Mary Mejía described Hector as "sometimes . . . grumpy, but he says it true. He talks direct, to the point." Ritz Ruíz commented similarly, "He lets us know straight out what he's thinking. I actually like that, because not many teachers could do that. They could do it, but they don't like to." Hector's willingness to speak directly to young people, including telling them bad news as well as good, created a rapport of respect.

Once this trust was established, Hector worked hard to develop a mentoring relationship with all of the students who joined the group. He served as a resource and support mechanism for PSC students who otherwise did not have many sources of information. He counseled students on choosing courses, applying to college and acquiring financial aid. Isabel Calderón explained, "I found out those things I didn't know before, like the computer classes at school. I thought they were boring and I'm not going to be able to understand them. But [Mr. Sanchez was] telling us we should take those classes because they will help us a lot for our future. Things that I didn't know, now I know."

Hector offered advice and support that the group members crucially needed and did not find from adults in the rest of the school. He also offered strategies to young people on how to improve their grades. Frances

Ruíz explained, “I have P.E. in the morning and I didn’t want to go through all my classes after I ran. [Mr. Sanchez] said that it was better because at the end I had my mind clear, and then I had history. If they changed to history in the morning [I was] not going to be paying attention because [I was] going to be sleepy . . . It’s helped me. I have a good grade in my history class.” Students greatly appreciated Hector’s willingness to provide advice and information.

Hector also provided advice on personal issues, such as how to communicate with their parents. Hector helped Mary Mejía convince her father that she needed to reduce her hours at her job so that she could keep her grades up. Mary described:

I don’t know what to do with my dad, because he wants me to work. And I know if I work, my grades are going to go down. [Mr. Sanchez and I], we sit down, we talk. Then we work out: “You’re going to tell your dad this. Okay?” I’m like, “Okay, that sounds good.” This is why I like him. He gives advice. He don’t just say “Yeah, oh, whatever. Talk to your dad.” No, he gives us advice. Most of them [in PSC], they come to Mr. Sanchez for help, college, family, or problems. I know Mr. Sanchez is supportive of me, helps me, tells me, “I know you can do it.” He gives me motivation.

Mary considered Hector’s encouragement to be invaluable, and she even credited his support and belief in her as the reason she passed her minimum competency exam, something that she had failed once before.

Not all students appreciated Hector’s constant guidance, however. Anita Lozano felt that Hector was too involved at times. She explained, “He was too persistent. I felt sometimes like he was stalking me or something. Like he knew my grades and everything. And that made me uncomfortable. There’s just times when I didn’t want to be bothered.” This sentiment was rare however. Most students valued consultations with Hector. In a school where the student to counselor ratio was approximately 400 to 1, Hector provided advice that was otherwise unavailable to students.

While PSC members spoke constantly about developing close relationships with Hector, Student Forum members rarely talked about specific assistance from their adult advisors. Rosalinda Gutierrez was the only Student Forum member who consistently spoke of relying on Amy as a resource. Reflecting on what has helped her grow into an adult during her years at Whitman, she said, “You get information, you get knowledge, and you get to be involved with adults from other careers that you might be interested in. They actually treat you as someone.” Beyond support and information, positive interactions with adults also helped to reinforce and strengthen Rosalinda’s growing agency.

Observational data indicated that Rosalinda was not the only student who relied on Amy and other adults involved in Student Forum. Most students involved did gain advice and information on course selection, plans for the future, and dealing with situations at home. For example, adult advisor Amy Jackson provided a sympathetic ear for frustrations and occasionally offered advice on communication with parents. In one instance, Joey Sampson told his mother that he was struggling in trigonometry, and she suggested that he drop the class even though he needed to graduate. Joey and Amy discussed his concern and worked out a way for him to explain to his mother the importance of succeeding in high school and going on to college.

#### IMPROVING INTERACTIONS WITH TEACHERS

When speaking of building connections, Student Forum members often spoke of improved relations with teachers throughout the school. As the group evolved to the goal of “building teacher-student partnerships,” Student Forum members noticed a greater give and take between teachers and students so that they mutually understood each other and could take action to change the school. Joey Sampson explained, “I think the teachers look at us differently now. Like I kind of like get a little bit more respect, or I know a lot more of them now that I’m involved with this stuff. Because they’re like ‘Oh, you’re in Student Forum.’ Because you’re not just another punk kid anymore. You’re actually trying to do something.”

Even newcomers to the group noticed a change in how teacher-student relationships, as demonstrated in a conversation between two Student Forum members. Both felt comfortable speaking to teachers in the hallway and approaching them if they had a concern in class:

*Lana:* They (teachers) recognize you and they see that you’re doing something. So it kind of makes you feel like better because they’re supporting us and our ideas. So it’s not just kind of like, “Oh, they don’t care.” We actually find out they do care. And that means a lot.

*Marcus:* And actually I found out they feel kind of bad when students don’t say hi to them when they walk past them. I always say hi to my teachers.

*Lana:* They opened up a lot by telling us what they go through, like what they’ve seen and everything, too. So that’s helped us learn.

The students began to understand the perspective of teachers more, and the teachers began to understand the experiences of students.

Of all of the Student Forum activities, both teachers and students alike expressed that the student-driven activity of taking teachers on a tour of their neighborhood provided the most meaningful opportunity for teachers and students to learn about each other. Students felt that they truly did come to know their teachers better, and teachers expressed similar sentiments. During a pizza lunch that included the student tour guides and some of the teachers on the tour, one of the student tour guides reflected, "I was in the car with the principal, and we took him right down the street. We got fifty yards away and he got lost. Now he knows where I live. I see him down the hall and he says hi to me. He'll go out of his way. I've seen a lot more of the teachers try to make an effort to say 'hi' and include students in their conversations." The students at the lunch talked about engaging in informal conversations in settings outside of the classroom with teachers that allowed a sharing of fears and dreams and an opportunity to build connections. They believed that teachers came to better understand them.

PSC did not develop a strong connection with teachers like Student Forum did. Rather than building partnerships with teachers, the group's strategies for change actually increased alienation between PSC youth and the teachers. Despite teachers voicing support for translation and tutoring assistance for their students, very few teachers took advantage of the tutoring and translation service. The tutors expressed surprise at the lack of opportunities to provide their services in the school, given the large population of ESL students in the school. To increase participation, Hector and the tutors decided to inform parents en masse about the program. They even went further to personally contact parents of struggling Latino students to see if they would request tutoring services on their child's behalf. Teachers did not appreciate the tutors communicating to parents without involving teachers in the process.

Also, the tutors' decided to spread the word about the program to teachers as well. Yet their method of doing so further increased animosity rather than improving teacher receptivity, since tutors sent notices to teachers about which of their students were failing and explaining the translation and tutoring opportunities that they could provide both during class and during other times. Some teachers responded angrily to these notices, commenting that they were too pushy. Others did not respond at all.

#### GAINING RESPECT AND ATTACHMENT TO THE SCHOOL

Members in both groups displayed a final form of belonging that increased their connection to the school itself. This connection is critical to adolescent outcomes because of the links between the literature on school belonging and academic success. Research indicates that students who are more

behaviorally engaged in school have greater academic success, regardless of their at-risk status (Damico & Roth, 1991; Fine, 1993; Johnson, 1991). While this study cannot prove a difference in academic success of students in the groups, the data on belonging do indicate the first step in students becoming more attached to school. Rosalinda Gutierrez from Student Forum understood the importance of connecting with school and hoped that Student Forum could begin at the middle school as well. She observed: “The earlier you get involved, the more students are likely to be interested and more into school in general. Because that is true . . . the earlier you start, the more [you become] involved in other groups, and the better you do in the school.” Rosalinda wished opportunities like Student Forum would be available in middle school as well in order to increase belonging during those crucial years.

The increasing attachment to the school included a growing pride in Whitman. Student Forum member Jill Bersola in particular was afraid to come to Whitman as a freshman because of the negative things she had heard about the school’s “ghetto” reputation. Her participation in the group changed her outlook on the school, which she explained on many occasions:

When I first came to Whitman, I was like, “Oh no, I have to go to a ghetto school.” [laughter]. Then when I got into Student Forum I realized that Whitman isn’t bad. I learned to love this school rather than just hating it . . . . Now, I care more about Whitman . . . . I feel I’m more outspoken to defend Whitman . . . . This year, I’m more protective of it.

Many other members of the group expressed a similar feeling of pride during interviews and observations. The experiences of these students suggest that becoming a critical democratic participant yields a discourse of emotional pride and protection for public institutions.

In addition to having a higher opinion of the school overall, some Student Forum members became more involved in other activities in the school after joining the group. For example Joey Sampson joined the baseball team and became director of the school play. He commented:

Before I was involved in this (Student Forum) I didn’t want anything to do with school. I came to school, did my work and went home and didn’t have anything to do with it. I think I cut most of my math class, so I wasn’t even at school when I was supposed to be. I started getting involved in my sophomore year when Ms. Jackson chose me to be in Student Forum . . . . So I came and it was fun and I worked with people. I just started wanting to be around school more, started wanting to be involved in more activities and stuff . . . . I noticed that I’ve got a lot more pride in the school too.



For Joey, Student Forum provided a hook into the school's culture and guided him to other opportunities for interaction.

Unlike Student Forum members, PSC youth did not tend to branch out to join other activities. Instead, they emphasized how unusual even joining PSC was for them, let alone something else in the school. For example, Mary Mejía exclaimed, "I was like, no, no, no . . . . Being in a program? No, programs are not for me, clubs are not for me . . . . But now I'm with Mr. Sanchez. It is good." In great part due to the support of Hector Sanchez, PSC was one of her first formal affiliations in the school beyond her required courses.

PSC also provided an incentive to improve academically. Rita Ruíz found that participating in PSC gave her a reason to keep her grades up and come to school. She explained, "I used to have a bad attitude against everyone. I'm talking about a bad attitude! And then I got involved in PSC and now everyone makes you laugh. And you actually have a reason to be in school. If you don't do good in school, you can't help others." Her younger sister, Frances, also a PSC member, echoed feeling a new motivation to attend school. She expressed greater determination to improve her grades so that she would have time to become more involved in PSC in the future.

Hector and other adults working with PSC also noticed that the group members talked and acted in ways that indicated they had a greater connection to the school since joining the group. Hector from PSC commented, "The biggest thing I can say that's come out of it (the development of PSC) is the personal growth [of the students]. The feeling of being more a part of the scene, being part of a system, and still not forgetting their identity. I say never forget that, but why not acquire a second one? That, to me, has been very, very heartwarming." Rita Ruíz even became so attached to the group and the school that she offered to return to the school to volunteer with the group after she graduated from Whitman.

## COMPETENCE

Competence in a youth development context consists of the need for youth to develop new skills and abilities, to actively solve problems, and to be appreciated for one's talents (Goodwillie, 1993; Takanishi, 1993; Villarruel & Lerner 1994). By assuming responsibilities in Student Forum and PSC and enacting decisions that have consequences for themselves and others, the data in this section demonstrate that participating students developed a broad set of competencies that helped them prepare for adulthood. The data in this section describe how youth experienced marked growth in four specific competencies: (1) critiquing the environment; (2) problem solving

and facilitation skills to keep an organization focused and moving forward; (3) cooperating and negotiating with others; and (4) speaking publicly.

#### CRITIQUING THE ENVIRONMENT

Student Forum youth in particular developed an ability to critique their environment, including identifying injustices in their school and making problematic the standard procedures and rules in the school. Sala Jones, one of group's veterans, asserted:

If I was a student that was not exposed to this type of thing (Student Forum) . . . the knowledge of what goes on within the school may be a little depressing. But at least I know it. When I was a freshman . . . I really didn't understand exactly why some of the things went on the way they did. And now I understand. But with it comes a lot of sadness, because it's always sad if your school is sad. At least this is the best way though—I mean, knowing.

Sala's comments emphasized that he had not understood why problems existed before, but came to realize that awareness of inequities was important even if they were difficult to accept and he did not know how to solve them. Adult advisor Amy Jackson also observed Student Forum members "getting more of a critical edge and looking at things from a different angle . . . . And getting a sense of social justice that I think some of them had definitely already had the seeds of. But giving it a forum for it to develop and for them to practice using that voice and those skills and that lens through which to look at their surroundings."

One activity that particularly enhanced the development of critique was the creation of a schoolwide conversation about Whitman's reputation as a "ghetto school." Student Forum member Joey Sampson explained, "Where does the label ghetto school come from? We wanted to deal with that directly." Student Forum hosted a Ghetto Forum to create opportunities to openly discuss perceptions of the school and to encourage students to discuss how the school's negative image influenced their own identities. The group hoped that by raising consciousness about the different interpretations of individual identities and their communities, they could build a collective direction in which the school should move to improve the realities of student experience.

Student Forum facilitated a similar conversation with all of Whitman's teachers to learn about how they perceived the consequences of the term "ghetto" as a descriptor for Whitman. The teachers voiced markedly different interpretations of the "ghetto" label, including suggesting that students capitalized on the term to excuse themselves from aspiring to

higher goals. One Student Forum member demonstrated his growing ability to analyze the perspectives of others when he reflected, “The teachers use ‘ghetto’ to lower our expectations. They think we use it as an excuse.”

Student Forum members also spoke of the injustices they were beginning to notice in their classrooms at group meetings. For example, Joey Sampson talked about hearing students who made homophobic remarks in his English class and trying to “set them straight” by explaining why “discrimination against any group was a terrible thing.” Despite these advances, the adult advisors of Student Forum hoped to see even further growth in critical thinking. Whitman reform leader Sean Martin noted that although Joey was growing more aware of injustice in some contexts, he still had much more to learn. He explained, “Joey sits in an English class where what goes on is just bogus. It’s a lousy form of education, and he’s accepting it. That concerns me. [We] want to have all these kids go into classrooms and be advocates for a strong education. [We want students to] really critique their education. And we have quite a ways to go with that.” Sean’s disappointment in Joey’s lack of outrage demonstrated his hope of increasing the ability of critical thinking skills in all the members of Student Forum. He and Amy encouraged students to become aware of problems, to raise them, and to go beyond identification of concerns to think about how action could be taken to address them.

Qualitative data demonstrated that PSC members did not have a similar increase in their ability to critique their environment. Perhaps this is because critique was not an explicit focus of the group’s work. Rather than deconstructing Whitman’s culture, the group instead attempted to help Latino students survive the current system.

#### DEVELOPING PROBLEM-SOLVING AND FACILITATION SKILLS

Beyond developing skills to identify what was wrong, students also learned skills to try to address the problems that they identified. The student leader of PSC in particular demonstrated an awareness of a development of problem solving skills in the youth involved. Esperanza suggested that if other schools wanted to start a group similar to PSC, they would need to “have a clear decision what they want to do. Start a little group for ideas, like finding out what is the biggest problem in the school. We found out here that we have Latinos with low grades and everything, and we’re trying to get ideas, find out what we can do. Depends what problem they have.”

PSC students also developed problem-solving skills through participation in the tutoring and translation program. Because of the lack of teacher interest in the tutoring and translation program, the tutors offered assistance to guidance counselors and office personnel who would

occasionally utilize the tutoring and translation program. Office personnel used the students' translation abilities to help interpret for families both on the phone and in person, and in written materials being sent home to parents by the office or by teachers.

Perhaps the most powerful example of the development of problem solving skills occurred when student tutor Mary Mejía provided information and assistance to a terrified parent. A mother called the school speaking frantically in Spanish and wanted to speak to a counselor. Since no one could understand her, the office asked Mary to translate the call. She described the experience by explaining, "You wanted to do something to help this mother. You could hear her voice almost crying. The mom was telling me, 'I need help because my little daughter is going out with this guy and she's cutting classes.'" Mary explained to the mother that a counselor would contact the police and other county services and hopefully help to find the daughter. Mary's ability to translate the call helped to connect a frightened mother with community resources that she desperately needed.

Student Forum members learned facilitation skills in addition to their increase in problem solving. Student Forum Member Sala Jones asserted, "I've learned a lot about how to run things. Like how to organize things and how to make sure everything's done and tied up all these loose ends that always pop up with something. There's always something else that needs to be done." These facilitation and problem-solving skills that have been identified in previous research are important capacities that youth need to develop (Eckert, 1989; Knight, 1982).

Rather than only pointing out problems, Whitman students needed to learn how to turn frustrations into action. One of the greatest needs of adolescence is to learn how to influence issues that matter by actively solving problems and engaging authority (Goodwillie, 1993; Pittman, Irby, & Ferber, 2000; Takanishi, 1993). The students most involved in the groups tended to develop an understanding of how to move beyond an awareness of issues to act on their concerns. PSC member Lana Marcos explained:

I hear a lot of students complain a lot about things. But it's like, stop and realize that you have power. If you really have a passion to have things change in order for you to feel welcome, to feel comfortable here in this environment, and to feel that school is worth your time these four years, then do something about it. Come together and do something. I would like for them to feel that they do have the power and they can get things done. They must come together, organize themselves, motivate, and say, "Okay, this is the problem. Now how do we get to a solution?" Instead of this end place where you just whine and whine and you don't really do anything about it.

Lana hoped to help students to move beyond identifying problems to actually taking action to solve them.

#### GETTING ALONG WITH OTHERS

All of the participants in the groups emphasized learning social skills, and particularly they learned how to get along with others. The qualitative data provide overwhelmingly strong evidence of the development of this ability in both PSC and Student Forum youth. PSC members talked about this skill as learning how to cooperate and to communicate with their peers. Esperanza explained:

Part of starting a group is getting to know each other. Because that's how you get to communicate with people—and really listen to what other people has to say. Everybody has to cooperate and do most of the things together . . . . You don't have to like some of the people in the group, but you have to work with them . . . . When you have communications, you break a lot of barriers. You get to know each other better, not only by your name, but . . . [by] the differences you want to make.

Other members of PSC spoke of developing cooperation in similar terms, such as “learning to communicate with different people” and “how to work with other students.”

One key component of working together was learning to respect the opinions of others. Mark from PSC discovered that this still was important to learn. He explained, “I seem to take everything more seriously. Because most of the time I used to . . . take it as a joke . . . when other people say things . . . I don't think it might be important, but for them it is.”

Student Forum members emphasized the need to overcome personal biases to become better colleagues. Jaycee Garcia and Rosalinda Gutierrez learned not to make assumptions about others. Jaycee explained, “I used to misjudge people . . . I don't see other people the same way I used to . . . . Because when I got in the group there was a lot of people I didn't know . . . and I [would think] ‘I don't like this girl because she's stuck up or whatever.’ Once you meet the person, it's totally different . . . I think that made me think about that everybody should be treated equal.”

Sala Jones learned how to value the opinions of others more and started to listen more and speak less. He commented, “I learned how to bite my tongue, I learned how to hear out people a little bit more. I learned how to facilitate. I mean, these things I take for granted now, that I learned how to do. And I get so accustomed to doing it but it's taught me probably a whole

lot more than I recognize right now.” Like Sala, Joey Sampson found that he needed to listen more and control his emotions when he spoke. He commented, “I used to get in arguments with a lot of people before, because I have a hard time controlling my anger. I’ll start an argument sometimes just to get in a verbal fight with somebody . . . . Now I tend to talk things out more before I get mad at somebody . . . It’s just a lot easier for me to have an actual conversation now than an argument.”

By learning how to cooperate and communicate with others, Student Forum was able to establish a norm of caring and respecting for one another. Rosalinda explained that in Student Forum, “You know everybody. And everybody says what they want to say. Nobody says, ‘Oh, your idea is wrong.’ We all listen to each other. We are a family.” As a result of behaviors such as not prejudging others, listening more, and controlling one’s temper, meetings became times to exchange opinions, to develop meaningful relationships with peers, and to learn from one another.

#### SPEAKING PUBLICLY

In addition to learning to get along with others, nearly all students in both groups enthusiastically described their growth in confidence when speaking publicly. The only students who did not mention this area of growth had already developed this skill before entering the group. The youth in both Student Forum and PSC spoke of feeling uncomfortable or afraid to speak initially, but the groups helped them overcome their fears. For example, Mark Alberto in PSC commented: “You’d never see me speaking in public. That was not me.” Through the practice of making many presentations in PSC and Student Forum students learned to become comfortable sharing their views publicly and not to consider such speaking a difficult task. Rosa Campos from PSC commented, “So now I’m just . . . Whenever there’s a speech to give in class, it’s a piece of cake for me.” Rosalinda from PSC similarly explained, “I used to be really, really shy, I mean, just shy standing up there. I turned red. I started trembling. It was just bad. And now it’s no big deal.” Over time Rosalinda began to assume responsibility for large portions of the group’s many presentations to adults in the school and in the region.

Speaking to adults was a particular fear for group members at first, but after a while they felt comfortable speaking to them as well. Isabel Calderón explained:

I didn’t know how to talk to people, like I do right now. [Then] I came to the meetings with parents and then I talked to them. I explained what they could do to talk to the teachers and to know about how their kids are doing in school. Before I [went] to this, I wouldn’t do that. I think it’s good because we’ve learned a lot.

One successful opportunity to speak with adults appeared to provide the groundwork for an increased confidence for future interactions for Isabel and many of her peers. Even those comfortable with public speaking had some reservations speaking to adults. Joey Sampson, not a shy person in the least, also admitted having initial reservations speaking to adults, “I feel more comfortable speaking in front of large groups of adults. I’ve always been like a talkative person, but I was uncomfortable speaking in front of large groups of adults, especially educators. But now I don’t care [who’s in the room].”

## DISCUSSION

Efforts to increase student voice can create meaningful experiences that help to meet the developmental needs of youth—and particularly for those students who otherwise would not find meaning in their school experiences. Participating in these groups helped (1) to instill agency in students, or belief that they could transform themselves and the institutions that affect them, (2) to acquire the skills and competencies to work toward these changes, and (3) to establish meaningful relationships with adults and the peers that create greater connections to each other.

Several aspects of these data on the youth in this study are notable. The first is the consistency of the three categories across the groups. Second is the evidence that changes were greater for the youth with a stronger involvement in their respective group. In other words, the youth most involved in the groups demonstrated stronger agency, a tighter-knit description of belonging to the group, and a more profound growth in competencies than youth who participated in the groups less often.

While these data point toward the potential of student voice efforts, the consistent findings of agency, belonging, and competence in these students also help to validate the existence of a core set of youth developmental needs. In a time when practitioners face growing pressure to emphasize standardized testing, the youth development frame provides an additional way to identify important skills and assets that youth need to learn to prepare themselves for the future and to navigate through current situations in their lives. Young people in this research consistently expressed enthusiasm, and even gratefulness, for the opportunities that they had to develop agency, belonging and competence.

The data further indicate that how we structure student voice efforts greatly influences the ways in which youth development occurs. PSC attempted to improve the outcomes of Latino students within the system rather than challenging the system itself. Fitting with this group focus and the tendency of PSC’s advisor to work with students individually, the youth in PSC demonstrated internal agency, or efficacy, through an increase in

pride and confidence, a more one-on-one form of building connections with adults, and a new set of skills focused on increasing communication with others. Student Forum instead focused their work on broader school change, including seeking to alter teacher-student relations. The agency described by the youth in the group focused more on adopting new roles as change makers. Their belonging related to having a stronger connection to the school and the faculty. Their new competencies centered on learning how to critique their environment, to identify ways to address the problems they observed, and to communicate with others to effectively implement the change efforts that they designed.

A key component of the structure of student voice activities is the relationship between the youth and adults who are working together on these endeavors. My colleagues and I have discussed previously the dilemma of adult advisors learning how to balance support for youth with the need to create space for young people to take on meaningful roles and responsibilities (Kirshner, 2003; Mitra, 2003b; O'Donoghue & Stroebel, 2003). When adults did not strike a balance between support and letting go, the groups easily fell back into traditional teacher-student roles. This article illuminates how the nature of adult-student relations influences the type of student developmental outcomes that emerge. Hector's attention to individual relationships helped to foster greater belonging between PSC members and individual adults; Amy's more collaborative form of leadership contributed to Student Forum members developing a more communal form of belonging to the group, to teachers overall, and to the school as a whole.

Overall, the student voice opportunities in this study provided occasions to strengthen the developmental assets of young people. The two groups had less success in changing the fabric of schooling so that schools could better prepare young people to develop agency, belonging, and competence. Future research pertaining to youth development and student voice might examine the connections between achieving individual changes through meeting developmental needs in students and the potential for organizational changes in school culture. Perhaps when attempting change strategies that are as counter-normative as student voice efforts, part of the pathway toward creating institutional change must first be to transform the persons involved.

#### APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW PROTOCOL FOR WHITMAN STUDENTS INVOLVED IN STUDENT FORM (PSC)

##### *Group goals and activities*

How are things going in the group? What are you working on?

– [ask about specific group activities happening at this time]

What are the goals of the group?



- Is it what you expected it would be?
- What do you like best about it? What could be improved?
- Do you think it's made any changes in the school?
- What do your friends think of the group? Your family? The principal?

#### *Individual involvement in the group*

- When did you get involved in the group? Why did you get involved?
- Why have you stayed involved? What makes it meaningful to you?
  - Are you involved in any other organizations in the school?
- Do you feel you have changed as a result of being in the group?

#### *Group process*

- What is the role of adults in the group? The youth?
- Ask what group he or she plays?
- What types of students does the group involve?
- Anyone in the group not involved anymore? Why did they leave?
- Anyone leave the group? If so, why?
- Do people get along well? What happens when there is a disagreement?
- What would happen to the group if the adult advisor was not here next year? What would need to be done to make sure the group lasted?
- How is a decision made in the group?

#### *Changes*

- What would you tell other schools who wanted to start their own student voice group?
- Other teachers/adult advisors?
- So overall what would you say the role of students should be in being a part of the changes at Whitman?

#### *Notes*

1 In fact, Michael Fullan (2001) stated that, when writing his third edition of *The New Meaning of Educational Change*, he had considerably more new research about reform to include in his updated chapters on the roles of teachers, administrators, districts and parents because of the ways the reform picture has evolved over the past twenty years. Yet he had hardly any changes to make in his chapter on the role of students in educational change, because, quite simply, not much has happened. Similarly, Ernest Boyer of the Carnegie Foundation said in the early 1990s, "Throughout the entire scheme of the [educational] reform movement, students are rarely mentioned" (quoted in Johnson, 1991).

2 Merton (1987) calls such a research design a "strategic case" that provides the opportunity for an in-depth examination of an elusive issue. Robert Yin (1994) characterizes a "revelatory" case in a similar fashion as an instance in which a case can provide insight into complex conditions and relationships by demonstrating significant aspects of a phenomenon in its naturalistic state (as opposed to a hypothesized state).

3 All names have been changed in this article.

4 Through participating in the evaluation of the Bay Area School Reform Collaborative (McLaughlin, Talbert, et al., 2000), I had the opportunity to observe and learn first hand about

the 87 leadership schools who received funding from BASRC. While many schools gave lip service to the notion of involving students in their reform work, Whitman was the only school that truly engaged students beyond conducting a survey of their opinions or holding a few focus groups. I learned about Whitman's work at a conference in which BASRC members presented their reform work. Whitman chose to share the student voice activities happening at their schools as a central focus of their change activities. The excitement that the students inspired in the conference participants was electric. Hands waved in the air as more and more of the audience of teachers and administrators from other BASRC schools wanted to ask questions of the students and to participate in the conversation. It was clear that the other schools in BASRC also recognized the unique nature of the student voice activities happening at Whitman.

5 I continued to interview the actors in this study on a regular basis until I was "saturated" with the data. Saturation meant that I had developed a sufficient understanding of their broader contexts to situate their responses within their frame of reference in the group.

6 My interviews were semistructured. When conducting interviews, my intent was not to follow a predetermined protocol. I would prepare approximately eight main issues that I wanted to cover with the interviewee. Appendix A offers a complete protocol used with students.

7 For all of the interviews, reliability was increased by systematically seeking multiple perspectives in my research. I tried to understand what was unspoken and to interpret what was. Gathering multiple perspectives inside and outside the school, including many students, teachers, consultants, and others provided a clearer picture of events and perceptions of outcomes, thus improving validity. Additionally, accuracy was increased by recording all interviews on audiocassette to preserve the words of the interviewees. When I received them from the transcriber, I would "cleanse" them for accuracy by listening to the tape and correcting any errors on the document.

8 PSC met weekly on Wednesdays after school. Student Forum did not have a regular schedule of meetings, but they tended to meet once or twice a month as a large group. For each large group meeting there was at least one smaller planning meeting. I estimate that I was able to attend approximately 90 percent of the Student Forum meetings and 80 percent of the PSC meetings. When I missed a critical event, I collected written documents and interviewed as many students and adults as I could find to tell me what happened and what they felt about what happened. In addition to having other responsibilities that kept me away from Whitman, occasionally meetings would occur, being present for all of the "important" events also proved difficult because student voice at Whitman did not have a formal "place." Unlike much school research, I did not have a particular classroom to visit or an office to go to where I could observe the topic of my study on a regular basis. When I would drop by, the question of where to go to observe informal interactions of the group proved difficult. Outside of formal meetings, important conversations happened in the hallways during passing periods or when a group advisor would spontaneously pull students out of class to touch base. I would position myself in the book room where PSC's tutors would sit and then find out later that students were meeting in a classroom on the other side of campus.

9 Theory in this case is defined as "plausible relations among concepts and sets of concepts" (Strauss and Corbin, 1994, p. 278).

10 Strauss and Corbin (1990) describe the data reduction process as having three steps: open coding, axial coding, and selective coding. For open coding: Starting with Student Forum data, I broke down the data into discrete parts, looking for similarities and differences between events and individual interpretations. To synthesize this initial pass of analysis, I wrote a rough draft of the case chronologically, taking note of these larger themes throughout the text. I identified themes in the text and created the first draft of my coding tree and begin to process documents. After developing the coding tree, I coded all 214 documents and wrote the PSC

case. For axial coding, I put the data back together to define the relational nature of these categories by identifying their properties and dimensions (Becker, 1998). This was a helpful process since coding required re-reading every piece of data I had collected. I wrote the second case in a more analytic fashion from the start than I did the Student Forum Case perhaps because I had gone through the process of “binning” data beforehand. After writing the case, I summarized the data with an analytical memo. I summarized these themes in a memo to what I felt Student Forum “was a case of” (Ragin & Becker, 1992)—that is, the main contributions of the case to theory and to understanding student voice at Whitman. Selective coding involved identifying the central theme around which the other categories fit. This led to the identification of youth development as the organizing framework for this study.

11 This symbiotic balance of teacher and student fits well with the Vygotskian construct of novice and expert. Rather than being unidirectional, the work of Student Forum explicitly states that learning is bidirectional. When students are learning about teachers, the teachers are the experts. When teachers are learning about students, the students are the experts. Yowell and Smylie (1999) discuss a similar concept by arguing that all learning is in fact bidirectional. In student voice activities, the symbiotic relationship is much more explicit, and thus empowering, for students.

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