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Increasing Student Voice in High School Reform

Building Partnerships, Improving Outcomes

Dana L. Mitra and Steven Jay Gross

A B S T R A C T

While we often write about adolescents as full of turmoil and angst, focusing on 'student voice' instead highlights ways in which young people can learn democratic principles by sharing their opinions and working to improve school conditions for themselves and others. This article examines the connection between the types of student voice initiatives desired and the contexts in which student voice is pursued. Drawing upon cases from the USA and Australia, we suggest that turbulence theory can influence the way that student voice is received at a school and its ability to achieve desired goals. Student voice can help to increase the tension and focus on pressing issues when needed; it also can help to calm turbulence occurring within individual adolescents and also in school contexts that need resolution.

K E Y W O R D S *democracy, positive youth development, student voice, school reform, turbulence theory*

Introduction

As the pressure to equate student outcomes with test scores increases, the broader democratic mission of schools to prepare students to be engaged and contributing citizens (Dewey, 1916 [1966]) is fading into the background. Most fall short when it comes to providing students with opportunities to learn how to become citizens prepared to actively engage in their communities and participate in democracy (Kirshner, 2004; Larson, 2000). Perhaps, then, it is no surprise that high school students frequently describe their school experiences as anonymous and powerless (Earls, 2003; Pope, 2001). Alienation results in 25–70% of students being disengaged from high schools (Cothran and Ennis, 2000; Marks, 2000; Newmann et al., 1992; OECD, 2003; Steinberg et al., 1996). Disengaged students attend school less, have lower self-concepts, achieve less academically, and are more likely to drop out of school (Fullan, 2001; Noguera, 2002; Ruddock et al., 1997).

Because of increasing alienation, young people need to learn 'civic habits' that prepare them for social interaction that can involve them in their own

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communities and more broadly in society (Delli Carpini, 2000; Feldman et al., 2006). With the realm of civic education, public schools do a good job of involving young people in community service activities (Flanagan and Faison, 2001; Honig et al., 2001). While they encourage young people participate in community service, schools tend to fall short on preparing youth to develop and lead such activities (Kirshner, 2004; Larson, 2000; Westheimer and Kahne, 2003). Thus schools tend to teach students to be passive participants in a democracy rather than leaders.

The current concept of *student voice* describes the many ways in which youth have opportunities to share in school decisions that will shape their lives and the lives of their peers (Fielding, 2001; Levin, 2000; Mitra, 2008a). Research has been growing on the topic of student voice (and similar concepts of pupil participation, active citizenship, youth leadership and youth empowerment), with many edited books, books, and special issues being published in recent times.[1] While past efforts often focused on student rights and activism, recent endeavors fit the goals espoused in the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child* in 1989. Student voice efforts are categorically different from traditional student roles in school (such as planning school dances and building school spirit through rallies and sporting events).

Types of Student Voice

The pyramid of student voice, described in detail in Mitra (2005a), illustrates youth development opportunities possible as student voice is increased in a school.[2] Figure 1 depicts the pyramid.

The pyramid begins at the bottom with the most common and most basic form of student voice—'being heard.' At this level, school personnel listen to students to learn about their experiences in school. Research seeking student perspective on educational change efforts indicates that giving students a voice in such reform conversations reminds teachers and administrators that students possess unique knowledge and perspectives about their schools that adults cannot fully replicate without this partnership (Kushman, 1997; Levin,

Figure 1 Pyramid of student voice

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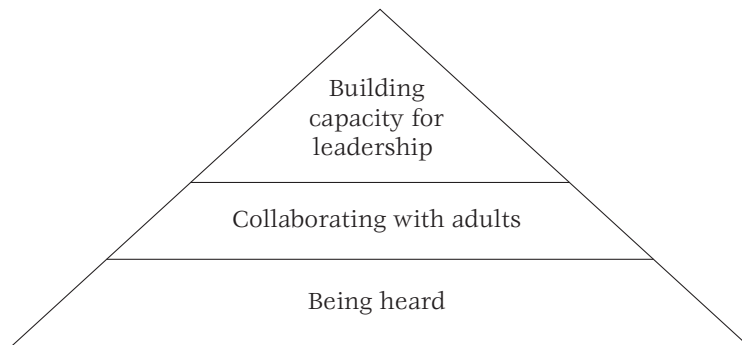
2000; Ruddock et al., 1997; Thorkildsen, 1994), including broaching subjects that adults are reluctant to discuss, such as systemic inequities (Fine, 1991; Mitra, 2008a; Smyth, 2007). Young people have also served as researchers and witnesses documenting school policies that exacerbate achievement gaps and identifying ways in which detrimental school conditions can adversely affect students' psychological, social and academic well-being (Fine et al., 2007).

'Collaborating with adults' is the next level. It describes instances in which students work with adults to make changes in the school, including collecting data on school problems and implementing solutions. In best case scenarios at this level, partnering with students to identify school problems and possible solutions can, as noted, remind teachers and administrators that students possess unique knowledge and perspectives.

It is at this level that most of the recent research on student voice has been conducted. Research in England, the USA, Australia and Canada indicate that student voice efforts focusing on the 'collaborating with adults' level have led to many academic improvements. They have led to improvements in *curriculum and assessment development,* such as by students offering instant feedback during staff development sessions (Fielding, 2001; Ruddock and Flutter, 2000). They also have improved *classroom practice* directly by teachers working with students to co-create curriculum and to engage in dialogues about ways to shape the learning occurring in the classroom (Flutter and Ruddock, 2004; Rubin and Silva, 2003). Youth participation in faculty meetings can even change the tenor of conversations, including reducing unprofessional behaviors such as completing crossword puzzles during staff meetings or openly showing hostility to colleagues (Mitra, 2003). Youth–adult partnerships also can strengthen *teacher–student relations* (Arnot et al., 2004; Bragg, 2007; Shultz and Cook-Sather, 2001), such as by having students take teachers on tours of their neighborhoods (Mitra, 2004). Youth–adult partnerships additionally can *improve teacher training* (Donohue et al., 2003; Youens and Hall, 2006), which includes having teachers in training shadow students for several weeks and work with them on collaborative projects (Cook-Sather, 2006).

The final (and smallest) level at the top of the pyramid, 'Building capacity for leadership', includes an explicit focus on enabling youth to share in the leadership of the student voice initiative. This final level is the least common form of student voice. At this level, students can serve as a source of criticism and protest in schools by questioning issues such as structural and cultural injustices within schools (Fine, 1991; Mitra, 2007b). At this level, research has found that some of the strongest examples improve *positive youth development outcomes*. By providing youth with opportunities to participate in school decision making that will shape their lives and the lives of their peers, increasing student voice in schools offers a way to re-engage students in the school community (Fielding, 2001; Levin, 2000). Participation also can increase youth attachment to schools, which in turn correlates with improved academic outcomes (Mitra, 2004).

Since most of the research on student voice has looked at the middle level of the pyramid, this article illustrates the ways in which student voice at the bottom and top levels of the pyramid can impact democratic ideals in education. The first case discusses an example of youth sharing their opinions of their school experience with researchers. Their opinions are relevant because they indicate priorities for efforts designed to enhance student voice and engagement. The second case documents an example of building capacity for leadership with young people taking the lead to communicate and to share their experiences with the broader community. After considering how the findings from each study inform our understanding of the student voice pyramid, we examine how Turbulence Theory (Gross, 1998, 2004) might explain how and when student voice can be actualized. The article concludes with recommendations for strengthening the potential of student voice efforts to increase democratic participation and to strengthen student engagement.

Case 1: Being Heard—Learning from Students What Matters[3]

Increased demand for accountability and visible results of student achievement has narrowed the vision and purpose of schooling in recent years, not only in terms of pedagogy and content, but also democratic participation. While research on student engagement is growing, the public sphere has indicated a shrinking of opportunities for students—let alone teachers, parents and other citizens—to have a democratic voice in the educational process (Westheimer and Kahne, 2003). Because the accountability movement has been designed and implemented with little student input, one must question its ability to increase engagement of high school students.

Fitting with the most common level of the pyramid, 'being heard', high school students in the USA and Australia participated in a three-stage data gathering protocol that included qualitative and quantitative data collection in 2005. Five high schools in the USA and five in Australia were selected for participation in this study. US students were from public schools and Australian students were from Catholic schools[4] in the state of New South Wales. Selection criteria included diversity in setting, size of school, race, socioeconomic status, graduation rates, geographic region and national origin of students. The number of students from all schools in the study totaled 250. Students participating in this study were selected to represent a cross section of their school's population and ranged in age from 15 to 18. Triangulation of data was achieved in three ways: first by employing three different data collection strategies, through the use of multiple sites in each of the two countries and through comparison/contrasts between the USA and Australia.

Because student disengagement is an international problem (OECD, 2003), data were gathered from the USA and Australian high school students (Gross and Burford, 2006). Significantly, both nations are experiencing similar problems of high school student disengagement and increased mandatory high

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stakes testing. The goal of this research is to give a carefully selected, diverse group of high school students from both countries an opportunity to describe their level of engagement. The research focused on the following questions:

(1) How do selected high school students define their learning priorities and to what extent do they see these priorities attended to in high school classes?

(2) How do selected high school students depict their teenage life today and to what extent do they feel adults in their life share and empathize with that perspective?

(3) How do selected high school students describe peak learning experiences (Shernoff et al., 2003) and how frequently do they experience these in high school?

Data from the second and third research questions are used in this article to demonstrate high school student engagement priorities. Simply put, understanding the perspective of high school students and being sensitive to profound learning experiences are critical elements in fashioning a responsive and engaging educational experience.

Engagement as an Emerging Democratic Citizen with Voice Mattered to Students

In our interviews with high school students in the USA and Australia, we quickly saw that students not only wanted to be heard as individuals, but also as a group. In each setting, students shared a sense of frustration that they were being largely ignored collectively. Not only that, they saw the hypocrisy of the adult world paying little attention to them now but expecting them to take the reins of a democratic society in the near future.

One question that consistently drew a strong reaction asked high school students to describe a quality of teenage life today that was critical for adults to understand but which they felt adults simply did not have a clue about. Perhaps surprisingly there was a strong emphasis on family issues rather than school conditions:

> It seems like when I try to talk to my parents about being stressed out. They're like oh you're a kid you're not supposed to be stressed out you won't understand it until you're my age what stress is. I say I do understand it, I have a job, I work, I have a social life, and I have to juggle it all at the same time. But then they're looking down on me and they say you're a kid, you're young. It's the best time of your life. But it seems a heck of a lot more stressful than theirs is.

Schoolwork does enter into the discussion of teenage life but only at the margins (as one of many pressures that teens in this study are facing). Parents' influence, values, expectations are more at the forefront:

> I agree with No. 11,[5] it's like parents can not really prepare you for life they have to give you that chance and you as a teenager is your time and it's a special period of time when you are supposed to be opening to the world and starting to focus on what ever it is you want to focus on and just look at different things. And your parents should be a letting you do that. Give us a chance to experience and learn because they cannot prepare life for you.

This may give us some insight on the relative influence of school in the lives of these students, at least as they perceive it. Teens in both countries assert their right to space. On the one hand this is a perennial theme. On the other, it represents a perennial dilemma between generations. We may wonder how effectively this conflict can be negotiated.

Clearly, responses from settings in both the US and Australia point to the importance of including families in the discussion of student engagement and the evolution of high school students into full participants in democratic communities. If we envision creating democratic learning communities at school, families are essential partners since they have such a serious influence on students and since, according to the students in this study, they have such divergent ideas about teenage life today. Bringing families into these discussions is an important finding from this case study.

Students were also forthcoming when asked about conditions at school that created greater or diminished feelings of belonging. Students were clearly aware of relationships at school and how different individuals from various social groups were treated. Of particular note is the importance that Australian students and their US counterparts placed upon more egalitarian relationships with authority figures and an appreciation of being treated as an emerging adult population. High school students in this study resented school authorities that dealt with them as if they were children. This mirrors the antipathy these teens felt when they were treated this way by their families:

> I think by going back to what No. 8 said, your teachers and your school community if you do or say one thing bad in your community and somebody doesn't know you day one, they automatically stereotyped you as that kind of person and you have a very hard time getting out of that. Like you were the type of person that got in trouble while in 9th grade or something they are going to keep thinking you're that type of person or if you're like an angel and something happens they're going to think like all I don't believe that someone had to set them up or something and that will get someone else in trouble so they stereotyped each other.

Inequality at school was detected and strongly resented in both countries.[6] As it relates to the issue of fairness, students did hold those in authority responsible for the kind of community that existed. In effect, these were citizens' reflections of their school as a microcosm of the larger society. Students at several sites remarked with some sadness that their opinions were rarely sought after. If we value fairness and equal treatment as crucial elements in a

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democratic society, the concerns of students in this case are worthy of our attention:

> I think there's also a gap between the student body and the school board I think that there's not a whole lot of communication between those two. I also would back up what No. 7 was saying that there are not a lot of students who know the administration on a first name basis but there's a lot more that don't have anything to do with the school, except the fact that they go here and there is a huge disconnect.

Students were also quick to describe powerful learning experiences in and outside of school that they valued. Learning as an emotional experience connected to a larger world and its issues was closely associated with peak experiences. There was a need for students to feel counted and for learning to have meaning. Hands-on, experiential learning was a crucial ingredient for participants for students in both nations:

> I like to build things and do stuff like that and last summer I got to go to Mexico and I learned how to build adobe bricks and we built an entire out-house with 500 bricks. [*Was someone helping you out with this?*] There was a group from Nebraska's going and I got in touch with a missionary group so I was just added into their group. I think a lot of it had to do with people who were there and wanting to be there and they were easy to be around. It was a good time with horse crap and water. Learning how to and the pastor didn't speak any English he was teaching us how do it with no words just by motion he could say yes and no and when you started doing things badly it was no.

While these experiences were deeply remembered and recalled with fondness, they were not frequently experienced by the students in the normal course of their learning. Humanized, personalized, non-officious teaching was valued:

> Last year was the 1st year of physics, I absolutely love that class he was a great teacher. I just wanted to say that. [*What made it so good?*] I've always been interested in math and science. It was a small class with only 9 students so Mr X could work with students individually. But now at this year I've heard is growing so much like there's and 30 people in the class and not a lot of people are enjoying it like I did.

Teachers were appreciated most when they were perceived to be authentic. Interactive, dialogic learning that personalized, supported and challenged students was frequently recalled. Community-building experiences were also recalled by students in both nations.

Flow State Versus the Machine Metaphor

According to Csikszentmihalyi et al. (2003), we experience a flow state when we face a high challenge and when we possess a high level of skill. It is at these times when we are so engaged in our task that we are oblivious to time. This quality of engagement connects the examples above. Countering Csikszentmihalyi's Flow Theory is the machine metaphor described by Morgan (1997) in

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which we robotically follow the commands of an unbending organization. The machine seeks to produce uniform products with no room for individualized pursuits or interests. Student responses resonate with Csikszentmihalyi's Flow Theory and are at odds with hierarchical programs of accountability associated with Morgan's machine metaphor. Again, students who will soon be asked to support, nurture and defend a democratic society find many examples of the machine metaphor in their lives and few examples of being in the flow state where they are asked to undertake valued challenges with the guidance and support of trusted adults. This is a curious contradiction at best.

Indeed, Australian students repeatedly pointed out that their joy of learning seemed destined to wither in the face of Grade 11 and 12 testing and preparation for college entrance examinations organized along the lines of scientific management and the machine metaphor. Authentic learning almost came to a halt in Grade 11, according to numerous Australian students, when the 'rat race' began.[7]

A Matter of Ethics

Beyond the words of the students themselves, the findings highlight the intensity of the high school student responses in both countries. Frustration, anger, fatigue, and angst, mixed with hope, sincerity, and confidence were evident, along with a declared need to be understood. While a developmental lens could serve as an interpretation of this frustration (such as Erikson, 1950), it is important to realize that developmental psychology, like any metaphor, has its inherent limits (Morgan, 1997). Our background, education, and training readily lead us to say that this is exactly what the literature tells us to expect from people this age in advanced economies and that it is nothing new. This response is both professional (to us as educators and scholars) and at the same time off-putting to teens because it maintains adult power relations when the voices of students seems to insist on open dialogue and right to voice. This turns the question into one of ethics–specifically, the ethics of care, critique (Starratt, 1994), the profession (Shapiro and Stefkovich, 2001, 2005), and the community (Furman, 2003; Gross and Shapiro, 2004). The ethic of justice asks us to follow the legal codes and rules handed down from the organizational hierarchy. The ethics of care, critique, the profession, and the community ask us to delve more deeply and see the dilemmas depicted by students in this case from multiple perspectives, thereby avoiding rigid responses and risking further alienation. By employing ethical lenses, we are able to question some of the basic assumptions that seem to trap our construction of high schools (literally and programmatically) into the same molds decade after decade.

Case 2: Building Capacity for Youth Leadership

In addition to efforts to learn about youth perspectives and experiences, student voice initiatives also can extend to young people collaborating with adults to

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address the problems in their schools—and in rare cases with youth assuming leadership roles in change efforts (Mitra, 2005) (see Figure 1). Collaboration among youth and adults has been called 'youth–adult partnership' in the youth development field (Camino, 2000), and is a form of 'student voice' when discussing such school-based partnerships (Mitra, 2005). Youth–adult partnerships are defined as relationships in which both youth and adults have the potential to contribute to decision making processes, to learn from one another, and to promote change (Jones and Perkins, 2004). Collaboration comes with an expectation of youth sharing the responsibility for the vision of the group, the activities planned and the group process that facilitates the enactment of these activities (Jones, 2004). Such efforts provide opportunities not only to prepare students for a democratic society, but they also offer opportunities to transform schools into democratic settings in which young people can gain necessary skills in understanding how to participate in pluralistic communities (Darling-Hammond, 1996; Gutmann, 1987).

To illustrate the work of a youth–adult partnership, we offer a case study of a school that contained a youth–adult partnership between two teachers and a group of high school students (ages 13–19). The case study comes from a three-year examination of 13 student voice initiatives in the San Francisco Bay Area. The purpose of the project was to examine the processes and outcomes of developing student voice initiatives (Mitra, 2007a, 2008b).

Data collection for this research project took place between 2002 and 2005. It consisted of interviews, observations and document analysis. The examination consisted of a snapshot of the group taken at three different times—once within the first few months of receiving their grant funding, a few months after the grant funding ended and one last time three years after their grant funding ended. This final interview also served as an opportunity to identify which groups were still in existence, the nature of their ongoing work (or the reason why the groups had ended) and to share preliminary findings. For each 'snapshot', interviews were conducted with at least three youth and all adults participating in the group (one to three) from each group (with the exception of groups that did not move forward with their partnership and therefore gathering the final round of data with youth was impossible). The interviews lasted approximately 60 minutes each.

In addition to interviews, a small number of in-depth observations were conducted of mandatory meetings held by the funder. These meetings allowed opportunities for observations of all of the 13 groups individually (the groups were in two cohorts, so the meetings hosted six–seven groups at a time). The meetings included small-group discussions and collective brain storming on how to improve the work of all of the groups. In addition to interviews and observations, data collection included gathering relevant group documents of media coverage, internal publications, and pages from group and school websites. As a validity check, the author worked in partnership with a co-researcher to compare and contrast field notes and group impressions of the

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observational sessions with the interview data. The researcher also consulted with interviewees as an additional validity check of hypotheses.

Youth Speaking Up and Fighting Back with Video

Sierra High School (all names have been changed) is a 'last chance' high school for students who were expelled or otherwise unable to succeed in the district's traditional schools. A teacher reflected, 'It's a small school. We only have 200 students.' The school has been partnering with a non-profit organization, Imagine Change, for over 20 years and its founder, a dedicated, licensed family therapist. The non-profit organization worked hard to establish a relationship of trust with the school. The founder explained:

> It's an ingrained program—it's a part of the school. In the beginning that wasn't true. It took five years for some of the really conservative teachers to even say hello to me. But we've always had administration that has been really dedicated. I've been through six principals, but all of them have been committed to . . . plus it's part of their accreditation that they provide some mental health and support services.

The school provides space and some salary for the group. The space is used for a Safe Space room, which provides a comfortable, welcoming environment including couches and food. Students can use the room to take a time out from their studies if they cannot concentrate on their work due to problems at home or the student being under the influence of drugs. The Safe Space offers students a calm place to regroup, with the help of licensed substance abuse counselors and therapists. The program was viewed as enormously successful. The founder explains, 'We have rival gang members at this school and we have never had any conflicts or . . . I mean we have conflicts but nobody has gotten hurt in the 20 years that we've been there.' The non-profit also offered drug and alcohol classes, individual counseling, and tutoring.

While the program started out as traditional social work support, it has evolved to include youth activism and leadership projects run by the group's founder. The shift occurred because the founder decided that sitting and talking about problems 'doesn't work any more because they become more victimized. And they're already criminalized . . . And I just wasn't willing to see them like that any more because I see these kids and young people are the most incredible survivors I've ever met. That they still come out and that they still have some goodness in their hearts after all they've been through . . .'.

The project examined for this study was intended, according to the words of one youth, 'to let everybody know that there's other ways to deal with situations than with violence. Speech is powerful too.' The non-profit founder and adult advisor defined the purpose further as 'to provide an avenue for disadvantaged youth to share their life experiences and to educate other youth on positive paths toward change'. The program seeks to 'dispel stereotypes among [youth] and among us (the adults). Students in the project learn the value of being heard and valued not just as delinquents and hoodlums—that's what our

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curriculum is about—to dispel the negative stereotypes of these teens and change them into the activists. Because delinquents do make good activists!' A youth from the group reflected:

> We're hoping that the public sees that us kids that are from low income neighbor-hoods—that we're not just all about smoking or drinking or all about negative things. We do have positive things going on in our lives. We are trying to graduate. We're trying to be something . . . It doesn't matter where we grew up at and how we dress and how we look . . . We really do have positive things going on in our lives.

The group decided to work on a video depicting youth experiences in their community. One youth member explains the day-to-day work of the project, 'Well I'm supposed to write a piece on how people grow up around violence. And . . . how it's hard for them to make a non-violent decision if that's all they know. And then everybody else, they get footage and in the neighborhoods and the differences in the neighborhoods [between the affluent and the poor.]' Each student at Sierra assumed a particular role on the video project: 'I do most of the interviews . . . Allen writes flows and poems. Edgar [uses the] video cameras and . . . he helps the people that are "camera-ing". Janelle does poems and inter-views too.' All of the youth interviewed at Sierra emphasized the importance of each group member developing a particular expertise that contributed to the creation of their video project. Youth also assume overall leadership for the project. The adult advisor at Sierra explained, 'Some of the [youth] leaders that have stepped forward when they come to the after school program. We tell them, "You are the main leaders. You're here. And that you know the other ones will do their part while they're in school but because you have come after school—that totally sets you apart."' Showing up then becomes a reward for additional respect and responsibility.'

Building Trust within the Group

The advisor's long time commitment to youth shone through in her ability to foster trust and leadership among youth themselves. One youth commented, 'She's like more open with us [than other adults]. She lets us voice our opinion more and it's not just her word and that's it.' Another youth added, 'If she has an idea she runs it by us . . . And then if we don't want to use it, then we don't. Because it's like it's our project, you know?' The advisor's extended experience working with youth also served to bring out the best in even the most challeng-ing of individuals, including a young woman who had great difficulty working with others. The advisor worked with her daily. The youth explained, 'She tries to have me [lead activities] so [that] I can have the skills to do it. But if I find I'm struggling she'll help me out. Like if I'm starting to get a little angry . . . she'll redirect it so that I don't say it wrong and offend people.'

An adult advisor at Sierra High School similarly explained that youth 'need a safe place that they know that they're . . . respected. They need . . . the skills modeled to them.' The group also set aside time for all-day retreats and

weekend meetings to provide times for extended focus on community building and developing specific skills. The group also developed trust drills that, according to one student:

> made sure everyone feels comfortable and they can trust each other. When people would be having a bad day and you could just see it in their face and I'd be like, 'You want to talk about it?' They'd be like, 'No.' Because they didn't trust some of the people in the group. Our adult ally . . . brought in this book and she gave us a bunch of exercises and stuff and we've been doing them . . . One that we do at the beginning every day is that we all hold hands with shoulders touching and every other person leans in—it has to be an even number of people—every other person leans in while the other people lean out and you're holding each other up. If one person doesn't do it right, then you all fall.

One of the adult advisors expressed the difficulty in stepping back and enabling students to take the lead on this challenging project. She explained:

> I want them to do a youth-led program, and they're doing it, but teaching them leadership [is tough] when their skills are so bad. Some days I'm just ready to pull my hair out . . . What we, the adults, are trying to do is to show them all how to funnel their best skills into the work of their project.

This adult advisor discussed the importance of modeling respect when talking about a troubled teen who was becoming a leader in the group. The advisor reflected, 'I want to support her and I want to find out what she's really good at. I'm not going to take any disrespect, and I will show that level of respect back . . . They need the follow through and the consistency.' As indicated in this quotation, youth need adults and peers who can model respectful and professional behavior in order to learn these crucial skills of how to work effectively in group settings.

Two years of work culminated in the group completing a documentary entitled *Take a Look Around*. The video documented three critical issues in their community—the abundance of drugs and alcohol, the high rates of domestic violence, and the lack of grocery and retail stores. A publicity flyer publicizing the movie describes the project as showing 'the power of the media that showed teens in a negative way'. Instead, the group wanted to use media to show the positive actions of youth. The 'video documentary examines economic injustice, substance abuse and violence' in the youth's neighborhoods. A student opens the video by explaining:

> Economic injustice is a serious issue in our community. [Our community] and [a wealthy community] are back to back. [Our community] has abundance of liquor stores, whereas, [the wealthier community] is full of stores with healthy food. In these two cities there is a stark difference in how you feel as you walk down the street . . . How do you all think we as teens feel about seeing this or hearing this? How does it affect youth in both cities to be so close, yet so separated?

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It is such an essential part of youth culture to be authentic and honest (Silva, 2003) that the youth in these cases strongly expressed that their work in the group needed to have importance and value or they would not continue to participate. Youth members of Sierra High School, for example, believed that students would remain committed to their video project because, according to one student, 'It reaches us teens. It reaches issues that we're going through so I think that they want to participate because they want these things resolved.' The documentary was viewed at Sierra High School, at surrounding schools in the district, and during a community event.

Discussion

Our analysis of these cases focuses on the ways in which Turbulence Theory can help to deepen our understanding of the contexts in which student voice initiatives occur and the outcomes of their efforts. In 2004, Gross created a turbulence gauge to apply these levels of disturbance to situations found in schools that were attempting to initiate and sustain innovation in curriculum, instruction, and assessment patterns in the USA and Canada. Turbulence Theory employs four levels of disturbance (modeled after those used in flight instruction) to describe its intensity: light (where little or no disturbance is experienced); moderate (where a constant or buffeting disturbance is experienced but where enough stability exists to continue); severe (where disturbance is so elevated that stability is lost, at least for a brief period of time and where the flight is threatened); and extreme (where disturbance is so significant that structural damage to the craft occurs).

Turbulence Theory can enhance our understanding of the implementation of a student voice effort into a school. It also can help us to understand the types of outcomes that student voice can produce. In the cases presented here, we propose a possible relationship between the type of student voice activity and the way that it can increase or decrease turbulence. Figure 2 demonstrates

Figure 2 Turbulence and student voice relationships
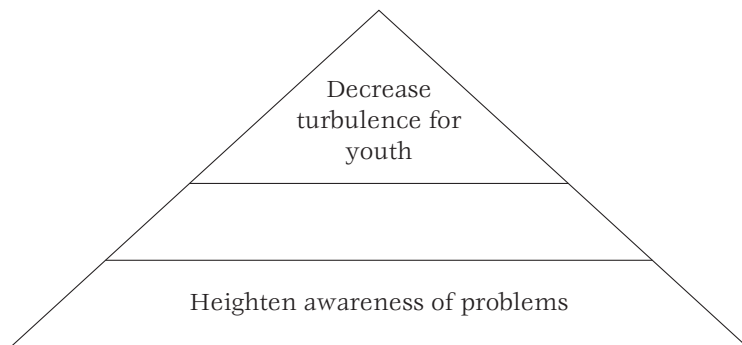
this relationship between turbulence and student voice. We discuss the connection in each case below.

The first case demonstrates the ways in which information from young people can provide new perspectives on pressing issues and give rise to issues that were not previous noted. At the most basic level of the pyramid, student voice efforts can provide opportunities for young people to be 'heard'. Turbulence within a school might increase in situations in which efforts are made to hear student perspectives. Increasing turbulence in a school may be necessary when turbulence is too low—meaning that a school is unwilling to address systemic issues in the name of avoiding conflict (Achinstein, 2002; Gryskiewicz, 1999). Efforts to raise awareness of issues and to heighten sensitivity to problems can lead to improvements in teaching and learning.

Student voice efforts therefore can provide a fresh or new way of seeing problems that had previously been ignored or misunderstood. For example, students interviewed in case one raised the issue of communication gaps between the school board, administration, and students. They also described a system wherein some students were well known to school leadership and often given preferential treatment, while others drifted along unrecognized and unsupported. Thus, gathering student voice information can help to raise the turbulence level when necessary to increase the need for reform.

A key reason that student voice can be so effective in drawing attention to issues in a new light is that students have a different *positionality* (Shapiro and Gross, 2007) in a school organization than the usual actors in school reform models. In the cases illustrated in this article, being a high school student is very different than being an adult interacting with high school students. One's position has a great deal to do with the perceptions one has of a given situation, including the critical issues of power in relationships.

Decreasing Turbulence for Youth

The relationship between turbulence and student voice appears markedly different when considering situations in which student voice efforts are geared toward 'building the capacity toward leadership', such as the second case in this study. At the top of the pyramid, Case 2 suggests that student voice opportunities may also have the opportunity to lower turbulence levels within schools and within the young people themselves.

Student voice efforts toward the top of the pyramid can also reduce turbulence in a school and in the broader community of the school by developing initiatives to increase communication and to develop plans to address problems. In the case described in this research, the students planned on showing their video to classes in their school and in their community. They viewed the video as an entry point in beginning dialogue that can share concerns, reduce conflicts and build plans toward addressing local injustices. In this case, the video could serve to calm some sources of unrest due to a lack of a voice. It might increase turbulence in other arenas as citizens might mobilize for change.

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The initiative can also decrease turbulence for individual youth as well. The second case in which youth took the leadership in the project stretched the notions of being heard to include youth in articulating how and in what structure their voices would be amplified. Research points to ways in which student voice efforts can lead to positive youth development gains of improving youth agency, belonging to a school, and a variety of competencies (Eccles et al., 1993; Mitra, 2004; Roeser et al., 1996). We can define these positive gains as a decrease in the *sturm und drang* that provides a strong source of turbulence for adolescents. We could suppose that these types of student voice activities can lead to a decrease of turbulence within the student.

The Sierra initiative fits with previous research that indicates that such student voice efforts can lead to an increase in youth leadership and empowerment (Larson et al., 2005). These benefits can then be a source of social capital for youth that can yield opportunities for further education, employment and other enrichment opportunities (O'Connor and Camino, 2005), providing legitimate opportunities for youth to take on meaningful roles (Camino, 2000), including opportunities to be change-makers in their schools and communities so that they can experience making a difference—and especially by helping others in need (Mitra, 2003).

An important context for reducing turbulence in this second case was the stability at Sierra. Because of the 20-year partnership between a non-profit and the alternative school, the initiative was grounded in *stability* (Gross, 2007) of relations, which has also been shown to be a key variable in Turbulence Theory research. The student voice work grew out of trust between the school and the non-profit running the student voice effort and it grew out of trust between the youth and the adult advisors. This basic building block provided the foundation on which the risky endeavors of youth leadership could be established and made successful.

Perils of Implementation

While previous literature has highlighted these connections between student voice and positive youth development (Eccles and Gootman, 2002; Mitra, 2004), other literature has emphasized times when student voice ends up doing more harm than good. Despite best intentions, efforts to increase student voice are often clumsy and poorly defined (Bragg, 2007; Fielding, 2004; Holdsworth and Thompson, 2002). While efforts to build capacity for leadership can lead to reduced turbulence, they can have the adverse effect of unnecessarily increasing turbulence for youth when implemented poorly. As with any educational change, the quality of implementation will prove to be as important as the merit of the idea itself. Surface level implementation could create greater alienation among young people by offering insincere gestures rather than authentic partnership. Student voice efforts in poorly implemented situations could increase disengagement, distrust, and alienation rather than helping to resolve these problems (Bragg, 2007; Fielding, 2004; Silva, 2003).

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The question then becomes how to determine when student voice initiatives can be positive and when they can turn into damaging reforms. Asking for student input and participation in school change can be perceived as risky business. Learning how to enable youth to share their opinion and participate in decision making is particularly challenging in school settings because teachers are used to being in control. Even in healthy school climates, the sharing of power with students can be perceived as threatening to teachers. Yet, research suggests that power is not a zero sum game. For adults to empower students, they need to be empowered themselves by their broader institutional environment (Mitra, 2005b; Muncey and McQuillan, 1991). In other words, the increased strength of one constituency can help to build the empowerment of another. Therefore, if teachers feel confident and secure in their environment, they are more willing to be supportive of student voice endeavors. In unstable contexts, teachers will be less willing to take risks and allow student voice efforts to grow. Or they may be so pre-occupied with the other causes of turbulence in the school that they simply don't have the energy to provide the necessary scaffolding and support that we demonstrated was necessary in Case 2 (Mitra, 2007a).

Previous Wrongs Create Cascading Effects

A previous school history of students being treated with disrespect can also make student voice efforts more challenging. Called *cascading* in Turbulence Theory literature (Shapiro and Gross, 2007), the concept describes the impact that one turbulent condition has on subsequent episodes of turbulence. For instance, if there have been several recent examples of adults treating students in an arbitrary fashion, the next such instance is likely to cause a greater disturbance in the minds of students than if there were no recent history of such events. Similarly, a teacher's indifference to a student who just lost a job and was in a minor car accident on the way to school is magnified to the level of outrage. Moderate turbulence may readily cascade into severe turbulence as a result.

Therefore, the initial state of turbulence in a school can affect the ability of a student voice initiative to become established and to yield positive results. In student voice initiatives at the bottom of the pyramid, these initial contexts are less problematic because the focus is on gathering information rather than implementing change. Even in the Australian and US examples of Case 1, however, outside researchers collected the data. This focus of student voice work suggests that even at the most basic form of student voice, sometimes individuals positioned outside of the school system are more willing and likely to encourage students to share their perspectives (Mitra, 2008).

Conclusion

While we often write about adolescents as full of turmoil and angst, student voice instead focuses on ways in which young people can learn democratic principles by sharing their opinions and working to improve school conditions for themselves and others. Student voice initiatives can broaden the scope of who has a voice in schools and can even lead to student participation in developing school reform efforts. This article demonstrates how the types of student voice efforts that can be developed depend both on the contexts of the school and on the types of outcomes desired.

We also suggest that turbulence theory can influence the way that student voice is received at a school and its ability to achieve desired goals. As discussed above, this turbulence need not be seen as only dangerous volatility; it can also be a force for positive change and needed energy to launch an emerging adult into the wider world beyond home and school. We suggest that student voice can help to increase the tension and focus on pressing issues when needed. It can also help to calm turbulence in areas that need a solution. Further research focused on the intersection of turbulence and student voice can add empirical evidence to support the connection presented in this article.

Notes

1. Including a 2006 special issue of *Educational Review*, 58 (2) by Fielding and Ruddock, the 2007 International Handbook of Student Experience in Elementary and Secondary School, and the 2006 special issue of the *International Journal of Leadership Education* 9(4), edited by John Smyth, and the annotated bibliography available at www.soundout.org.
2. Other typologies have been developed to describe student voice activities in schools. The Manitoba School Improvement Program (Lee and Zimmerman, 1999) describes its work on student voice along a three-point continuum from passive (information source) to active (participant) to directive (designer). Michael Fielding's (2001) spectrum of student involvement in school-based research follows a similar trajectory, from least to greatest: student as data source, student as active respondent, student as co-researcher, and student as researcher. Additionally, in the community development literature, Roger Hart's (1992) 'ladder of young people's participation' offers a typology of youth participation that ranges from tokenism and manipulation, or 'non-participation', to projects that are 'young person-initiated' but still require shared decision-making with adults. Missing from these typologies is an interpretation of the extent to which these types of student participation tend to occur. Also missing is an explicit discussion of the relationship between these opportunities and the youth development opportunities available for youth.
3. The authors wish to credit Charles Burford as a co-researcher during the Australian phase of the data collection and for his analysis and writing of trends flowing from that part of the project.
4. It is important to note that Catholic schools in Australia, unlike those in the USA, receive government funding and are subject to government accountability programs.
5. The number 11 refers to another student in the small group interview. Numbers

were used in place of names to preserve student anonymity. Similar references to people by a number will be found later in this section.

6. While the US students saw teachers, principals and even school boards as being responsible for their feelings of connection or the reverse, Australian students focused mainly on the role that teachers played. One reason may be the difference in the two systems: the US sample all came from public high schools and the Australian students were in Catholic schools. This, however, is only speculation and does not account for the fact that administrative structures at the building level were very similar.

7. Unlike the USA, Catholic schools in Australia receive funds from the government and are required to follow the testing practices of public schools.

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