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**STUDENT VOICE: A QUALITATIVE CASE STUDY OF TEACHERS'
CONCEPTIONS IN A NEW JERSEY URBAN HIGH SCHOOL**

by
Matin Remi Adegboyega

A Dissertation

Submitted to the
Department of Educational Leadership
College of Education
In partial fulfillment of the requirement
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Doctor of Education
at
Rowan University
August 27, 2015

Dissertation Chair: Ane Johnson, Ph.D

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Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to those who opposed all forms of oppression and social injustice. Their views on equality and equity are attestations that every human being is endowed and relevant in life.

Acknowledgments

The route through this dissertation has been the most rewarding of my life because my thoughts have been influenced by many individuals and have made me more committed to the course of social justice in schools, most especially those schools located in urban areas. My appreciation goes to the faculty of the Educational Leadership for strengthening my beliefs in social justice. My deepest gratitude goes to Dr. Ane Johnson for being critical of my work and for demanding excellence throughout the process of the study. She has set the expectation high and provided the support every step of the way. Thanks for your guidance and the advisee monthly meetings. I would also like to thank Dr. Janeann Bean-Folkes for her insights and passion for urban education. Her suggestions have guided me to be thoughtful throughout the process. To Dr. Yvonne Rodriguez, I am very grateful for believing in the study at the poster presentation and for your scholastic comments throughout the study. I am grateful for cutting your summer vacation short to attend my presentations.

I want to thank everyone who gave me the needed support to complete the doctorate program. Truly, great things have happened to me during the course of this program and I remain grateful to my family and friends home and abroad. To other students in my NJPSA Cohort, I say thank you all.

Most importantly, I am grateful to the Al-Mighty who has given me the grace to complete this program in good health and sound mind.

Abstract

Matin Remi Adegboyega
STUDENT VOICE: A QUANLITATIVE CASE STUDY OF TEACHERS'
CONCEPTIONS IN A NEW JERSEY URBAN HIGH SCHOOL
2014-2015
Ane Johnson, Ph.D
Doctor of Education

“Student voice” is a metaphor for active student engagement and participation in issues that matter to their learning and schooling experiences (Student Achievement Division, 2013). The exclusion of student voice in urban education raises the question about what opportunity exists for students to express their opinions on matters that affect them in schools. Urban education has a culture that is ripped apart by chronic absenteeism, low graduation rates, high dropout rates, school violence, and poor academic performance (Steinberg & McCray, 2012; Rodriguez, 2008). If reforms are truly to address these challenges, in what facets of schooling and learning do teachers and administrators seek student voice? Therefore, the interplay of critical theory and learning theory within the framework of constructivism were used as lenses in this qualitative case study to understand teachers’ conceptions of student voice in an urban high school in New Jersey. Sixteen certificated teachers participated in this study and findings revealed that teachers allowed student voice to enhance their classroom practices, promote teacher-student relationship, and they felt that it should be incorporated into the school culture. However, observations from classrooms visits and document analysis did not corroborate these findings in entirety. This study also demonstrated that teachers and students should be in partnership to address the challenges in urban high schools.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

High dropout rates continue to be a silent epidemic afflicting our nation's schools. As the federal, state, and local policies and practices change to meet the dropout challenge, the nation's progress continues to lag behind and the individual, social, and economic implications continue to mount. This challenge comes amidst a troubling crisis in the nation's schools: every year, nearly one-third of all public high schools, and almost one-half of minorities fail to graduate with their cohort (Smyth, 2006). The fact that over three million students drop out of school every year and more than 1.2 million students fail to graduate with a diploma four years after they have entered high school makes this epidemic a national concern (Steinberg & McCray, 2012). The implication is huge in terms of negative consequences for the dropouts themselves, the national economy, and the civil fabric of the larger society (Bridgeland, Balfanz, Moore, & Friant, 2010; Smyth, 2006). Civil rights advocates and other pressure groups describe schools as instruments that perpetuate social injustice because students described their school experiences in terms of anonymity and powerless (Cole, 1980; Mitra, 2004). Given the well-documented negative implication of early school leaving at both individual and societal levels, educators and the larger community increasingly recognize the need to understand and respond to the complex interplay of factors that continue to marginalize students in the decision-making process in schools (Brenner-Camp, 2011; Rudduck & Flutter, 2000). By drawing on the lack of collaborative partnership with students in schools, alienation of their voices impacts the students' ability to stay and succeed in school (Mitra, 2003). Moreover, debates of who should be involved in school reform discussions have

marginalized one voice in particular: the students' (Kirby & Morgan, 2010; Rudduck & Flutter, 2000).

Historically, education is viewed as an instrument of democracy used to increase the influence of students in schools by ensuring that their views are included when adults make key educational decisions (Dewey, 2004; Martin, 2009). America's founders believed that education is the instrument of emancipation that guarantees liberty for all Americans. Jefferson emphasized the need to improve the minds of the people to a certain degree; otherwise, the government breaks down gradually when trusted to those that govern the people alone. In other words, the voices of electorates are usually heard and acted upon by the government through their elected officials (Loflin, 2008). In essence, schools do have the obligation to prepare students ready to participate actively in every aspect of the democratic process in life. Therefore, all stakeholders in schools continued to aspire to see democratic education as an inclusive provision that allows active participation by everyone involved in schools. In democratic schools, students are involved in the decision-making process on matters that affect their educational experiences, including learning (Mitra, 2003; Cook-Sather, 2007; Fielding, 2004a). From this standpoint, education and democracy become inseparable with the unified purpose of producing an educated citizenry (Dewey, 2004; Fielding, 2012; Morrison, 2008). This process of democratic involvement of all stakeholders allows power to be shared, rather than appropriated in advance by a minority of people within the school system.

Today, education often excludes democracy and student voice because it allows only a select group of individuals to make decisions about what to learn, how to learn it, when to learn, how to assess learning, and what the learning environment should look

like without involving those central to learning: the students (Fletcher, 2005). Democracy in schools is demanding and difficult because it shifts the ultimate authority and power of decision-making process from the few to many (Cobertt & Wilson, 1995; Ruddock, 2003; Yonezawa & Jones, 2009). Haller and Strike (1986) describe “democracy as a process for making collective decisions in which the wants of an individual are fairly considered, and each individual has a fair influence on the choice” (p. 230). Students are not to be treated as consumers of product, rather as the co-makers of the product (Cook-Sather, 2007).

Advocates of democracy in schools have, in the past, lobbied for a much greater role for teachers in school decision-making under the heading of teacher empowerment (Rice & Schneider, 1992). In the 60s and 70s, there was a shift that called for community involvement in school administration (Fullan, 1991; Lieberman & Miller, 1990).

Democracy in schools advocates one kind of practice for adults in school systems, and a very different practice for students. The anti-democracy found in schools has resulted in chronic absenteeism, high dropout rate, low graduation rate, anger, disruptive behavior, poor academic achievement, and an increasing rate of violence in schools (Dianda, 2008; Giroux, 2003; Smyth, 2006; Steinberg & McCray, 2012). These point to the fact that focusing on democracy as a matter of who is involved in which decision is insufficient in education (Benjamin, 1994). Therefore, democracy in schools should at least, in part, give the least powerful, the students, and a voice on matters that affect their educational experiences (Cobertt & Wilson, 1995; Cook-Sather, 2007; Rice & Schneider, 1992; Czeniawski, Garlick, Hudson; & Peter, 2009; Fletcher, 2005; Mitra, 2004; Ruddock, 2003; Yonezawa & Jones, 2009).

John Dewey (2004), Paulo Freire (1970), Maxine Green (1989), Henry Giroux (1989, 1998, 2003), Paul McLaren (1994), and David Purpel (1989) argued that schools should emphasize their commitments to a democratic system where every stakeholder is given equal opportunity to participate in a democratic freedom-based education. These theorists emphasize that with autonomy and choice, everyone in education experiences an emancipatory form of education; different from that offered by the conventional, hierarchical, more coercive education system present in most public schools (Dewey, 2004, Fielding, 2012; Greene, 1998; Giroux, 2003; Morrison, 2008; Purpel, 1989). The idea of democratic schools was to shape student voice around collaborative culture where teachers take the initiative without undermining their autonomy and authority (Wisby, 2011). Dunleavy (2007) suggested that one way to overcome the challenges faced by students is to encourage teachers to engage in extensive conversations with students and include their opinions into school structure. Therefore, understanding teachers' conceptions of student voice will foster hearing what students have to say about their learning experiences and integrating their points of view into their schooling as a valuable way of inclusive education practices forward (Gordon, 2010).

The Promise of Democratic Education in Schools

When students are given the freedom to decide what, when, and how they want to learn, they develop an increasing independence, a stronger interest in schooling, and a better quality of education in schools (Morrison, 2008). Gatto (1992) reaffirmed that democratic education places trust in students to make decisions on matters that affect their educational experiences, and, in the process, see the value of learning above and beyond passing assessments (Morrison, 2007b; 2008; Labaree, 1997). Proponents of

democratic education further argue that when students are given freedom and choice in the learning process, they become better citizens because they have learned how to negotiate with others to improve their learning experiences (Dewey, 2004; Gatto, 1992; Morrison, 2007a). As Shor (1996) contends, a democratic classroom encourages students to converse with others and cultivates the desire and imagination to make change necessary for school improvement. In as much as democratic education is antithetical to traditional school practices, voice and choice do not fit practically into the school system that is typical of bureaucracy and hierarchical structure that marginalizes students (Morrison, 2008; Giroux, 1989). Therefore, high schools with young adults are duty bound to equip students with the skills to participate in democracy; after all, education and democracy are connected in American shared thoughts and practices (Dewey, 2004; Fielding, 2012; Morrison, 2008).

If the primary role of schools is to educate students, why should educators continue to make decisions for students without involving them in the process that affects their future endeavors? The continuous neglect of student voice is an act of social injustice and anti-democratic principles (Jessop, 2012; Johnson, 1991). Students who are steadily excluded from every conversation and decision-making process in schools should be given the opportunity to have their voices heard on all matters that affect their educational experiences (Cook-Sather, 2007; Fielding, 2004a; Fletcher, 2004a; Loflin, 2008; Lundy, 2007; Mitra, 2003; Morrison, 2008; Reitzug, 2003).

Voice and Democracy

Voice is an expression of opinions and views on what matters most to an individual or a group of people; it is more than spoken words (Mitra, 2003). Voice is a

tool used in a democratic society because individuals within that setting use it to express their feelings on a larger problem facing the society (Fletcher, 2004a). The conceptualization of voice makes it possible to view voice, based on power relation of who is speaking, who is listening, and who is acting on the spoken words, especially when language is the tool through which voice is expressed (Ruiz, 1997; Batchelor, 2006). Therefore, when students are given freedom and choice in the learning process, they become better citizens because they have learned how to negotiate with adults in the school system to improve their learning experiences. Giroux (1989) describes voice as desirable in a democratic society as well as in schools because schools and society are true reflections of one another. The relevance of voice and democracy in schools raises the question about the prevailing status of student voice in schools, most especially in public schools (Batchelor, 2006). Fielding (2012) states “listening to the voices of young people ... is not merely espoused, but actively advocated in the context of formal education” (p.48). The voices of students should feature in every aspect of schooling; by listening to students’ opinions, teachers will not only be better informed, but also more effective as they facilitate their students’ education (Lee & Spires, 2009). Therefore, to overcome the challenges of inequality in high schools is to engage in conversations with students and include their views and opinions into the present-day school structure (Batchelor, 2006). Listening and acting on student voice to improve their educational experiences can be a valuable way of moving inclusive educational practices forward to benefit all stakeholders.

Exploring the Meaning of Student Voice

Student voice is how students express their opinions about what is happening within their schools and classrooms. Student voice is inclusive of the opportunities given to students to express their opinions and be involved in all aspects of decisions regarding their learning experiences in schools (Fletcher, 2005; Martin, 2009). Student voice is also a representation of students' opinions in classrooms to influence conversations around forming a partnership with teachers and school administrators (Mitra & Gross, 2009). Student voice is crucial in schools and classrooms because it symbolizes students' points of view when schools make key decisions (Mitra, 2004; Fletcher, 2004a). The concept of student voice has been explained as having three constituent elements: a voice for knowing or an epistemological voice, a practical voice or a voice for doing, and an ontological voice, or a voice for being and becoming (Batchelor, 2006). However, a voice for being and becoming is less valued and more vulnerable in schools. It is the vulnerability of student voice that makes it easy for teachers to marginalize students in their classrooms. Therefore, it becomes a common feature for schools to ignore student voice from the whole decision of school reforms and makes students more disenfranchised in classrooms and schools (Batchelor, 2006; Kozol, 1991).

Student voice is a necessary factor for change to occur if schools are to stop treating students as consumers of knowledge where teachers produce the knowledge and students are required to remain voiceless in their classrooms (Cook-Sather, 2007; Giroux, 1989; Fullan, 2007). Democracy as a process for making collective decisions in which the wants of students are fairly considered becomes a mockery of time, not only in classrooms, but also in schools. Therefore, democratic schools are characterized by

engaging student voice in the decision-making process that affects their educational experiences in terms of what and how they learn in classrooms (Haller & Strike, 1986).

In the early 1980s, researchers such as Freire, Giroux, McLaren, Cook-Sather, and Giroux acknowledged the relevance of student voice to transforming schools (Morrison, 2008). However, adults, such as teachers and administrators, did not actively build student voice into the function of the school because of an inherent belief that students are not capable of participating in a democratic setting (Kozol, 2005). As a result, students continue to be disenfranchised, as teachers see students as consumers of knowledge and believe that classrooms and schools should be designed for them and not with them (Sand, Guzman, Stephens, & Boggs, 2007). Yet the concept of student voice may be important to transforming education and education policy despite external pressures from politicians and the general public, including the parents (Seitz, 2007). According to Cook-Sather (2007), teachers who listen to student voice and act upon it create opportunities to improve academic achievement for all students. In order to make schools relevant to students' lives, teachers need to listen and integrate student voice in all matters that affect their educational experiences (Mitra, 2001; Rudduck, Chaplain, & Wallace, 1996; Corbett & Wilson, 1995; Wallach, Ramsey, Lowry, & Copland, 2004).

Students as a disenfranchised group in schools results from their voices being marginalized, which continues to result in poor attendance rate, high incidence of classroom disruptive behavior, low graduation rate, and poor academic performance in urban high schools (Giroux, 2003; Fletcher, 2005; Levin, 1992; Morrison, 2007b; Sheir, 2001). The exclusion of student voice raises the question about what opportunity exists for students to express their opinions regarding what affects them in schools. If policies

are truly meant to improve attendance, graduation rate, and academic performance, in what facets of schooling and learning do school administrations and teachers seek student voice? The cultural mismatch and the accompanied misunderstanding serve as opportunity for teachers and school administration to make decisions regardless of student voice; consequently, students become more disengaged from matters that affect their learning (Joseph, 2006; Mitra, 2001; Lundy, 2007; Wilson & Corbett, 2001).

Urban High Schools and Student Voice

Urban high school reform is one of the most significant challenges facing education today. Urban high schools are characterized by overcrowded classrooms, inadequate funding, poor quality instruction, disruptive behavior, violence, low graduation rates, or high dropout rates (Rodriguez, 2008). Across the nation, urban high schools have not been as successful in the area of student academic achievement as their counterparts in suburban towns. Therefore, students often graduate from urban high schools unprepared to lead fulfilling lives in their communities (Bridgeland, Balfanz, Moore, & Friant, 2010). In an effort to improve on the inadequacies and fragmented practices, school reforms evolved as corrective measures such as Alternative School Program, Character Education, and Remediation Program (Bridgeland, Balfanz, Moore, & Friant, 2010). The teachers' belief that classrooms ought to be designed for students, and not with students, furthers the argument that disengaging student voice from matters that affect their educational experiences is not democratic (Cook-Sather, 2007; Fielding, 2004; Storz, 2008). Therefore, teachers continue to make decisions in the classrooms while disregarding students' voices or opinions (Fletcher, 2005; Giroux, 2003; Mitra, 2001). The neglect of student voice on issues by teachers and administrators results in

disruptive behavior, anger, disgruntlement, chronic absenteeism, high dropout, low graduation rate, poor academic achievement, and increasing rate of violence in urban high schools (Dianda, 2008; Giroux, 2003; Rudduck & Flutter, 2000; Smyth, 2006; Steinberg & McCray, 2012). The consequences of these issues that arise from making students voiceless, as a result of teachers' conceptions, have implications on the individual, society, and the economy (Joseph, 2006; Kozol, 2005; Morrison, 2008; Pearson, 2008).

Urban High Schools in New Jersey

Urban high schools in New Jersey, for example, have a culture that is characterized by chronic absenteeism, disruptive behavior, violence and vandalism, and poor performance on state tests, low graduation rate, and poor academic performance; and various reforms have not been able to ameliorate these problems (Steinberg & McCray, 2012). According to the Education Law Center (ELC) in New Jersey, in early April 2013, the New Jersey Department of Education (NJDOE) released a list of schools in the new classifications - priority schools, focus schools, and reward schools. Not only were the majority of urban high schools labeled as priority schools, none of those schools designated as reward schools was located in the urban areas of the state. Advocates and residents of urban communities have raised concern about what needed to be done to improve student academic achievement because their taxes continued to increase without a corresponding improvement in their schools.

A priority school is defined as a school with the lowest school-wide proficiency rates in the state. In other words, a priority school has an overall three-year proficiency rate of 31.6% or lower. On the other hand, a focus school is defined with a 2011

graduation rate lower than 75% and an overall proficiency rate for the lowest-performing subgroups of 29.2% and below (ELC, 2012; NJDOE, 2012). An ELC analysis of the list shows that 183 high schools are classified as focus schools based on low graduation rate and/or large gaps in state standardized tests or the High School Proficiency Assessment (HSPA). Seventy-two percent of students in these schools are Black and Hispanic, 63% receive free or reduced meals, and 10% are English Language Learners (ELL). Similarly, 75% of the priority schools had low test scores. Ninety-seven percent of the students attending these schools are Black and Latino, 81% received free or reduced meals, and 7% are ELL. The consequence for these priority schools is closure if they fail to meet the annual targets for three consecutive years (ELC, 2012; NJDOE, 2012). The fact that only 66% of American teenagers (and just half of all Black, Latino, and Native American teens) graduate with a diploma four years after they enter high school is a concern (Smyth, 2006). According to Education Law Center (2012), what is often forgotten is the fact that behind a test score is a human being, which raises the question as to why teachers refuse to listen to the voices of those with the least power in the school system: students? These staggering statistics paint a bleak future for this large population of poor minority students in urban high schools. Therefore, the consequences of doing nothing or doing little to involve student voice in urban high schools will result in negative impacts in terms of policy and economic implications. Howard (2002) suggests that the academic difficulty many urban high school students experience “manifests itself in a plethora of behavior and social maladjustments” (p.426). He further explains that urban high school students are more likely to be classified as students with learning disabilities than their counterparts in suburban high schools. Schools are established to serve the interest of

students but their feelings and opinions are ignored constantly on matters that affect them.

Student Voice in Transforming Urban Education

Although there has long been a negative trend regarding the inclusion of student voice, some schools are now finding that student voice can be an effective tool for school improvement. Consequently, involving student voice in schools increases students' commitment to learning and school reform goals (Giroux, 2003; Mitra, 2004; Mitra & Gross, 2009). This, in turn, has made schools more responsive to the diverse needs of students (Education Alliance, 2004; Cook-Sather, 2002; Howard, 2002; Fletcher, 2005; Lee & Zimmerman, 2001.; Levin, 1999). By eliciting student voice, these schools ensure that students are actively involved in shaping their own learning experiences (Fletcher, 2003; Fielding & Rudduck, 2002; Lee, 1999). Therefore, involving student voice in urban high schools will engage students in learning, improve the teacher-student partnership in the process of schooling, and promote equity and excellence for all stakeholders (Education Alliance, 2004; Fielding, 2004b; Fletcher, 2005). However, failure to engage students in urban high schools in New Jersey in meaningful dialogue about their learning will have long-term negative consequences for persistence and achievement (Beresford, 2000; Dianda, 2008; Education Alliance, 2004; Ericson & Ellett, 2002; Gregg, 1994; Mitra, 2004; Rudduck & Flutter, 2004; Sarason, 1990; Wilder, 2000).

Giving voice in classrooms and schools provides students with opportunities to express themselves freely on matters that affect their educational experiences. Whether those opportunities involve sharing opinions, discussions, writings, creating arts, performing theater, or even publishing in the school newsletter, the point is that students

are given public outlets for their perspectives (Toshlis & Nakkula, 2008). When placing student voice into practice, it is viewed as students sharing their points of view on problems and possible solutions to advance a course that is beneficial to them either as an individual or as a group (Mitra, 2004). Student voice is honored when students participate actively in classroom discussions and give comments that are not just heard, but acted upon. In essence, student voice is honored when teachers construct their classrooms in ways that value student voice – especially when students are given the power to be in partnership with their teachers on what and how they need to learn (Mitra, 2004; Oldfather, 1995; Rudduck & Flutter, 2000).

Honoring student voice in schools includes getting students' perceptions in the larger policy and practice, shaping conversations from which students are generally excluded, and making students no longer the oppressed in schools (Cook-Sather, 2002; Freire, 2007). Student voice is characterized by creating needs-fulfilling classrooms, using strategies such as cooperative and inquiry-based learning approaches to engage students, offering choices in terms of what and how to learn, and increasing value for effort and participation (Schneider, 1996). Lessons are developed using students' everyday experiences as sources of knowledge to promote student voice in classrooms. In these classrooms, teachers no longer monopolize classroom discussions and knowledge is no longer treated as residing entirely with the teacher. When students have a voice in classrooms, they share in decision-making and teachers become co-learners and facilitators as well as a source of knowledge (Kordalewski, 1999). When student voice is heard and acted upon in schools, classroom teaching becomes engaging, students invest

in their learning, trust and support become evident, policies are more effective, students learn better, and democracy strengthen (Sussman, 2013).

Problem Statement

High dropout rates continue to be a silent epidemic that afflicts the nation's high schools, where nearly one-third of all public high school students and almost one-half of minorities fail to graduate with their cohort (Smyth, 2006). Students who dropped out of high school fared substantially worse than their peers on a wide variety of long-term economic outcomes. On average, a dropout earns less money, is more likely to be in jail, is less healthy, and is unhappier than a high school graduate. But despite this growing gap, dropout rates have remained mostly unchanged over the past three decades (Messacar & Oreopoulos, 2012; Pascopella, 2003; Swanson, 2010). Swanson (2008) explains that with a national dropout rate of 30%, the overall urban dropout rate of 40% is significantly higher than the overall rates for other locale types: 29% in towns, 27% in rural areas, and 25% in suburban areas. He further states that the dropout rate is also significantly higher in school districts serving the largest 50 urban areas across the nation, from which 48% of students drop out of school. The effects of this dropout crisis fall disproportionately on the nation's most vulnerable adolescents and communities. A majority of dropouts are members of historically disadvantaged minorities and other educationally underserved groups. They are more likely to attend schools in urban areas; and they come from disproportionately from communities challenged by severe poverty and economic hardship (Pascopella, 2003; Schmidt, 2003; Swanson, 2010).

According to Steinberg and McCray (2012), over three million students drop out of school per year. They explain that this number translates to about seven thousand

students dropping out of school every day. In other words, more than 1.2 million students fail to graduate high school annually (Smyth, 2006). These high dropout rates have negative consequences for dropouts themselves, the national economy, and the civic fabric of the communities where they live (Bridgeland, Dilulio Jr., & Morison, 2006).

Various constituencies share different and often conflicting views of the causes of dropping out in high schools. However, urban students continue to drop out of high schools and the graduation rate remains below 60%. As reforms continue to fail, urban high schools continue to fail the students, and the crisis of high dropout rates in high schools has become a reality in urban cities. This crisis has translated into an unprecedented level of crime and violence among young adults in urban areas. Therefore, urban high schools have become a true reflection of the culture in which they are located, and civil rights advocates have started to describe urban schools as instruments that perpetuate social injustice because students are longer safe in schools and the society becomes threatens by the increasing rate of insecurity (Cole, 1980; Smyth, 2006; Bridgeland, Dilulio Jr., & Morison, 2006).

As a result of the anger and frustration that develops in students for having been ignored on matters that affect their learning, they become disruptive in classrooms, cut classes, become disengaged in schools, and continue to drop out of high schools in large numbers (Giroux 2003; Rudduck & Flutter, 2004; Swanson; 2008). As teachers continue to suppress student voice on matters that affect learning, students are deprived of the opportunity to be heard and listened to on matters that can improve their educational experiences (Giroux, 2003; Mitra, 2004a).

The concept of voice may be explained either in terms of youth identity that draws upon the notion of the often silenced voices of the marginalized group in school, or subordinated as a means of exposing oppressive power relation between students and teachers. However, this conceptualization of voice suggests that classroom practices allow the construction of message that teachers hear in their classrooms (Arnot, 2007). This concept further raises the issue of which voice teachers should hear, listen to, and act upon. In other words, vulnerability is not only about the vulnerability of presenting students as marginalized, but also about their voices at risk of being lost (Arnot, 2007; Bachelor, 2006; Schneider, 1996).

Therefore, studying the teachers' conceptions of student voice in an urban high school in New Jersey will initiate dialogues among teachers and students, challenge the classroom dynamics, strengthen students' empowerment and responsibility, and uncover student voice that is at risk of being lost to address the dropout challenge in urban high schools in New Jersey. These resulting effects will raise awareness and discussions among teachers and policy makers to rethink their practices for a possible change in behavior.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative study was to investigate teachers' conceptions of student voice in a New Jersey urban high school. In this study, I examined how teachers involve students' voice in their classroom practices, and how student voice shapes the teacher-student relationship in an urban high school. The setting for this qualitative case study was an urban high school in Essex County, New Jersey. I collected data through informal semi-structured interviews of selected teachers, observed teachers' classroom

practices, and examined documents that included displayed students' work. This research allowed me to understand, in depth, the role teachers' conceptions play on how they involve students' voice in an urban high school's reforms through a close examination and the use of multiple sources of information.

Research Questions

I explored four research questions concerning teachers' perceptions of student voice in a New Jersey urban high school. These research questions were as follows:

1. What are teachers' conceptions of student voice in an urban high school in New Jersey?
2. How do urban high school teachers use classroom practices to involve student voice?
3. How does student voice shape the teacher-student relationship in an urban high school in New Jersey?
4. How can the findings inform a framework for incorporating student voice into urban high school education in New Jersey?

Theoretical Context of the Study

The study is bound by the belief that when student voice is involved in schools, students are less likely to become disaffected and more likely to remain in school or further their education (Czerniawski et al., 2009).

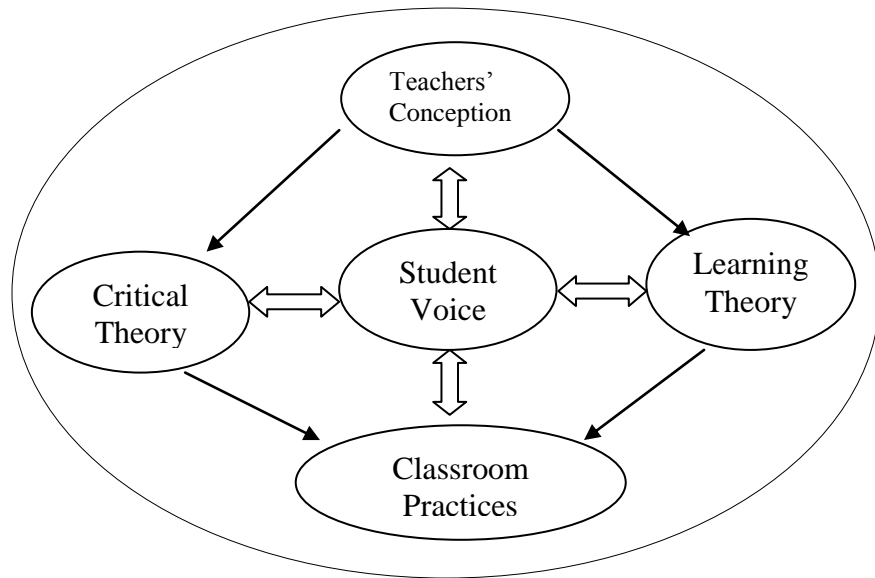


Figure 1. Integrating the Missing Link –Student Voice as a Critical Component of School Experience

As presented in Figure 1, the philosophical worldviews of constructivism, critical theory, and learning theory will be used as lenses in this study to understand why teachers’ conceptions of student voice are necessary to reform urban high schools. Ravitch and Riggan (2012) explain that the theoretical context can be best illustrated as a way of thinking of all elements of the research process. In other words, critical theory and learning theory will be explored in the study within the framework of the constructivist worldview. The constructivist paradigm is rooted in the premise that people learn through interactions with others rather than from an individual social behavior. Therefore, in the context of this investigation, learning and making meaning of what is learned occur through the process of teacher and student interactions. This then results in a teacher-student relationship that honors student voice and solicits it on all school matters

(Applefield, Huber, & Moallem, 2001; Bruner, 1996; Fielding, 2001; Mitra, 2004, Oldfather, 1995).

Learning theory asserts that teachers design learning activities that foster a dialogical teacher-student relationship. Learning occurs when new information and ideas interact with the existing knowledge to build new understanding. What it means to understand in the constructivist tradition is to construct new information, and link what was previously known to what was most recently learned. This frames students and teachers as co-constructors of knowledge (Toshalis & Nakkula, 2008). According to Vygotsky (1978), learning happens first socially before it becomes internalized in a classroom setting that permits peer interaction among students. The theory rests on the premise that when teachers facilitate students' voice in classroom, they can observe how students make meaning of knowledge (Fletcher, 2009). Elevating classroom practices demands that teachers allow student voice to become a regular opportunity to improve students' learning experiences (Cook-Sather, 2002; Duncan & Morel, 2008; Levin, 1999; Morrison, 2008; Toshalis & Nakkula, 2008).

Critical theory is rooted in Karl Marx's views and theorists like Dewey (2004), Freire (1970), Giroux (1989; 2003), McLaren (1994), Pupel (1994), and Green (1989) explain the theory as having an emancipatory orientation that criticizes educational organizations as perpetuating social injustice. Teachers who listen to student voice and act upon it create opportunities to improve academic achievement for all students, related to the critique inherent in critical theory. Both teachers and students are co-participants in the learning process as student voice becomes an integral component of the classroom's agenda for improvement. The exclusion of student voice raises the question about what

opportunity exists for students to express their opinions on matters that affect them in schools (Cook-Sather, 2007; Fielding, 2001; Giroux, 1989). If policies are truly meant to improve attendance, graduation rate, and academic performance, in what facets of schooling and learning do school administrations and teachers seek student voice? Critical theorists further argue that students continue to be marginalized because teachers see them as consumers of knowledge and passive recipients of education. In the process, students become marginalized; remain anonymous and powerless on matters that affect them in schools (Breuing, 2011; Cook-Sather, 2007; Delgado, 2002; Foster, 1986; Jessop, 2012; Leonardo, 2004; Mitra, 2004; Morrison, 2008; Quiroz, 2001). Therefore, critical theory calls for a dialogical relationship between the teacher and students before a meaningful educational environment that fosters learning is created. Sand, Guzman, Stephens, and Boggs (2007) emphasize that listening to “student voice is equity and excellence in action” (p. 342). In essence, critical theory asserts that teachers become in tune with the reality of activities within their classrooms by working together with the students to create a social agenda for democratization on all matters that affect student learning (Cook-Sather, 2007; Giroux, 1989; Jessop, 2012). Critical theory begins by inquiring into what is preventing the realization of engaging student voice as an empowerment ideal for students. In doing so, critical theory questions and challenges the obviousness of the world around students in schools and communities; and unveils what teachers perceive as student voice in schools. Therefore, the use of critical theory in this study is aimed to achieve emancipation and transformation of students from being ignored to being consulted on matters that affect their educational experiences. Theory and practice will form a single process that provides analysis and critique of teachers’

conceptions, leading to a social change in schools (Jessop, 2012). The use of the critical theory in this study presents the opportunity to understand fully teachers' conceptions of student voice, and be able to contribute toward the progressive transformation of the prevailing status quo of ignoring student voice on matters that affect educational experiences of students (Nowlan, 2001). By incorporating a critical inquiry as a stance for this study, teachers would be able to reflect on their conceptions of student voice and take action to promote social justice by being attentive to and acting on the viewpoints of students in urban schools (Lalas & Valle, 2007).

This study has its roots within the theoretical context that deemphasizes the classroom as a place where the students are being regarded as depositories and the teacher as the depositor of knowledge (Freire, 2007). In other words, the traditional banking concept of educator becomes obsolete and gives way to a meaningful dialogical relationship that allows student voice to flourish in classrooms and schools (Giroux, 2003). Therefore, the interplay of critical theory and learning theory within the context of constructivism occurs in a classroom environment that fosters dialogue as a means of involving student voice. Students and teachers are co-constructors of knowledge; students are not just information receivers and teachers are not just transmitters of information (Toshalis & Nakkula, 2008). As teachers' conceptions of student voice change, their beliefs and actions also change to encourage discussions and interaction in the classroom (Vocht, 2011). When students in urban high schools participate in decision-making in the structures and practices that shape their classroom, then their learning experiences are enriched. Their learning becomes dialogic and they encounter an interaction that goes

beyond a passive process controlled by adults (Wallach, Ramsey, Lowry, & Copland, 2006).

Significance of the Study

The issue of teachers' conceptions of student voice is important, since almost every effort to reform education has been centered on adults' notions of how education should be conceptualized and practiced. Ironically, the perceptions of those for whom reforms are designed – the students – are not often heard (Wallach, Ramsey, Lowry, & Copland, 2004). There has been a minimal research examining teachers' conceptions of student voice. Nonetheless, the persistent failure of urban education merits an investigation into how teachers and administrators treat student voice to ensure relevance, relationship, and rigor in urban education (Cook-Sather, 2002; Mitra & Gross, 2009). Therefore, this research is significant for future research, policy, and practice in urban education.

Research

From a research standpoint, the results from this study will place student voice at the center of the discussion of urban high school education to present findings that will require teachers and school administrators to rethink the school policy on student voice. While many researchers have explored student voice from the perceptions of students, and claim that involving student voice is necessary to transform urban education, many have argued that research has excluded teachers' conceptions of student voice, more importantly in urban high schools (Howard, 2002; Fielding & Rudduck, 2002; Fielding, 2004a; Mitra, 2004). As explained by Rudduck et al. (1996), schools where the adults seek to improve learning for all students listen and act on student voice, and serve as an

avenue to unravel the power relationship. This study will be used to explore student voice from the teachers' conception in an urban high school. This study may inspire a future qualitative research study on conceptions of student voice from students' perceptions. In particular, this inquiry may shed light on the need for a more detailed study on the perceptions of residents in a youth developmental program in New Jersey.

Policy

From a policy perspective, this study will be an appeal for intervention from teachers, administrators, and policymakers alike to provide a voice to a large majority of disenfranchised urban high school students who have not experienced school success. Educators, in the past, have exercised their rights through their voices; parents have demanded site-based leadership councils and succeeded (Rice & Schneider, 1992). A logical next step will be for schools to give chances to students to express to their teachers what their learning needs are (Elkind, 1997). The likelihood of policy depends on how relevant the outcome of the study is to everyday challenges that face urban high schools in New Jersey. School administrators may use the findings to further examine school policies, while teachers use the findings to reflect on their classroom practices and build on a student-teacher relationship to improve the learning experiences for all students. Policies that may likely be informed by the findings of this study include the inclusive education policy, curriculum development policy, remediation policy, graduation policy, and dropout policy.

Practice

From the practical point of view, incorporating student voice into classroom practices will present a wide range of opportunities and offers new hope for revisiting

existing school policies and practices, educational research, and teacher practices (Mansfield, Welton, & Halx, 2012). The absence of a definitive solution to reform education, especially in urban education, demands a look at the lack of student voice in such a way that students become active participants in all school improvement efforts (Fullan, 2007). According to Seitz (2007), if school improvement efforts are to be successful, student voice, which is currently non-existence in the classroom practices, has to emerge and be heard in all reform efforts. Johnson (1991) argues that “with ownership comes motivation and with motivation, the self-imposed responsibility to achieve” (p.5). Therefore, acknowledging the importance of student voice in classrooms implies that teachers acknowledge the role of students’ voice in the learning process. As such, teachers may change their teaching practices to engage student voice as a means of enhancing learning for all students regardless of their initial knowledge capital. In the final analysis, findings from this research may make teachers rethink their perceptions of student voice in such a way that gives students a voice that is more than asking them for periodic comments or feedback (Kordalewski, 1999).

As Soo-Hoo (1993) states, “We listen to outsider experts to inform us, and consequently we overlook the treasure in our own backyard: our students” (p.390). Rather than describing student voice as the voice of hope, it will be seen as an instrument of hope to engage students and transform schools for the benefit of all (Pearson, 2008). Listening to student voice and acting on it has the potential to empower both the teachers and students in urban high schools to make meaning of and address the inequity that exists in classrooms and schools (Cooper, 1993; Fletcher, 2003.; Storz, 2008). Indeed, when teachers listen to student voice, opportunities are presented for students to embrace

challenges and become more involved in the learning process (Guskey & Anderman, 2008). The school administration and teachers in urban high schools may use the findings of this investigation to develop and implement programs and services that seek to enhance students' participation in every facet of school reform. Similarly, findings will describe teachers' involvement of student voice and may become the transformative process by which teachers awaken to their students' voices as an approach to active participation in the classroom.

Finally, in this study, I hope to demonstrate the possible benefits of student voice in terms of balancing the power between teachers and students as a crucial factor in the growing of student voice inside and outside the school environment (Torres, 1997).

Delimitations of the Study

As with all research projects, this study had some initial delimitations. The scope of this study is delimited because it explores teachers' conceptions of student voice in one urban high school in New Jersey, as opposed to many high schools in the state. While qualitative research allows for a rich, deep understanding of an issue or event, the methodology requires that the issue or event being studied be bound in time and activity (Creswell, 2003; Yin 2009). Thus, the study is context-dependent and may not be applied directly to another case. However, reasoning by analogy allows for the application of "lessons learned" in other circumstances believed to be sufficiently similar (Rossman & Rallis, 2003, p. 105). The particular methodologies used to collect data also presented some limitations. Interviewing participants allows for individual expression of beliefs and attitudes, but analysis and conversion of the participants' words by the researcher can also lead to incomplete findings and implications. Member checking may help to

alleviate discrepancies. This process requires that participants be asked to confirm categories and themes that have emerged from the data and the researcher's interpretations (Yin, 2009; Rossman & Rallis, 2003; Toma, 2005). Negative case analysis, or the description of instances of disagreement with the researcher's interpretation, lent to the overall confirmability and credibility of the study (Stake, 1995; Toma, 2005; Yin, 2009). Nevertheless, the potential for incomplete findings existed.

Outsider-insider issues also emerged as an obstacle to the research. As a central office administrator conducting a study in a high school, I might have been seen as an outsider. The time duration of the study, transparency of research purpose, sensitivity to teachers' plights, local politics, and a clear ethical belief guiding my research, and a focus on dissemination of findings have ameliorated these challenges to some degrees.

Also, using a qualitative case study may not adequately answer the research questions because of the limited number of participants in the study. The number of participants and one high school may raise an issue for transferability of findings. Credibility may be an issue, especially when participants decide not to answer research questions truthfully. Perhaps, interviewing students and later comparing findings to see whether they are congruent to the findings from teachers' interviews may add richness to the study (Creswell, 2013; Key, 1997). Nonetheless, these limitations do not in any way undermine the purpose and significance of the study.

Overview of the Dissertation

In the first chapter, I introduce the topic of the study and present the problem statement, purpose of the research, research questions, significance of the study, and the delimitations. In the second chapter, I provide a review of the literature within the context

of student voice that demonstrates why it is necessary to study teachers' conceptions of student voice in an urban high school in New Jersey. This chapter will also contain a description of the school, its neighborhood, and the process within which the study will be conducted. In the third chapter, I establish the methodology for the study, which includes a discussion of participant selection, instrumentation, a description of the methods of data collection, data analysis, data trustworthiness, and finally, a discussion of the researcher's role and ethical considerations of the study.

In the fourth chapter, I provide an overview of the findings within the structure of the study, explore the possibility of writing a journal manuscript, as well as introduce the need for further study.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

Ironically, as public discussions are taking place within and outside the educational systems about the need for schools to prepare students for the 21st century skills, we have heard repeatedly the concerns from parents, community leaders, business organizations, and student advocates that the nation's public schools are facing a high school completion crisis. Although these discussions are necessary so that students can compete reasonably in the changing global economy, the inability of educational policy makers in the United States to parse the public rhetoric from the reality has made reforms in schools difficult to push public education agenda past political propaganda (Brenner-Camp, 2011; James, 2009; Swanson, 2004). The inability of schools to meet the diverse needs of students makes it more compelling for policy makers to address the disconnect that exists in schools. Therefore, to succeed in reforming schools, students and their voice must be involved in the classrooms and in school administration (Levin, 1999).

Educators often blamed the society and students themselves for failures, and have continued to ignore the fact that the school structure has been designed to exclude students' voice on every reform initiative in schools. As students questioned why they should remain in schools that have disenfranchised and ignored their voices on matters that affect their educational experiences; the deliberate act of making students' voice irrelevant continues to contribute to student disconnects and increasing dropout rates in schools (Matthews, 2013; Smyth, 2006). Over a decade ago, a major catalyst in the student voice movement came in 1989 United Nations Convention on the Right of the

Child which marked a landmark in the developments of rights of children (Lundry, 2007).

For schools to involve student voice and prepare them to become active participants in a democratic society, the paradigm has to change to make education democratic where the voice of every shareholder in a school is listened to and acted upon (Dewey, 1916; Kozol, 2005; Lundy, 2007; Matthews, 2013; Mitra, 2003). Here I review the extant literature to support an investigation of teachers' conceptions of student voice in a New Jersey urban high school. The hope is that once student voice has become embedded in schools way of thinking, a moment is reached when adults in schools are committed to building a climate of openness, trust and respect, in which student voice is seen as a constructive process rather than the usual top-down whiplash. Educators must trust the judgment of students to earn the trust from students so that mutual respect is created in classrooms and schools (Cook-Sather, 2007; Flutter, 2006; Howard, 2002; Jebbett & Rouse, 2009; Mitra, 2003; Ruddock, 2003). Therefore, this chapter will outline literature review to cover democracy in education, student voice and democracy in schools, student voice as a component of teaching and learning, student voice as an instrument of change, and student voice as an element of empowerment. This chapter will also cover student voice as a means of becoming a lifelong learner, student voice and the constructivist paradigm, teacher-student relationship and student voice, and the crisis in urban education.

Democracy and Education

Education and democracy are inextricably linked in American social thought and practice, and has made democracy, in all its contemporary forms, play a pivotal role in

shaping conception of public education (Gutmann, 1987). The purpose of democracy is to register the desires of individuals as they are, not to contribute to what they might be or might wish to be. Therefore, democracy in education involves participative processes at the action level. It allows students to be closely and extensively involved in making decisions that directly impact their educational experiences (Benjamin, 1994). Does this imply giving students the opportunity to voice their opinions, or does this mean an opinion that carries influence on a decision? There exists extensive literature on democracy and education in public schools across the country. However, public schools are viewed as places where students receive knowledge and skills and not as environments that socialize them (Ehman, 1980). The John Dewey Project on Progressive Education grounds its work in Dewey's assumption that the aims of education should be oriented towards preparing young adolescents to be active participants in all aspects of democratic life. Hence, it is "the object and reward of learning is continued capacity for growth" (Dewey, 1916, p.1). In other words, for young adolescents to experience democracy, they must be allowed to expand their capacities for growth by allowing them to express freely their views and opinions on all matters that affect their schooling and life experiences. Education can take place where there is "Adequate provision for reconstruction of social habits and institutions by means of wide stimulation arising from equitably distributed interests" Dewey, 1916, p.2).

The disposition needed to actively participate is predicated on involving student voice on all matters that are circumstantial to their schooling experiences (Koliba, 2000). In short, democratic education aims to develop real democracy through active participation by all those involved in classrooms and educational institutions. In

democratic education, students are given the opportunity to make decisions about their learning because power is shared rather than appropriated in advance by a minority of adults: the teachers (Fielding, 2012). The literature regarding issues of democracy and education in schools has led to debates about student voice among educators, policy makers, politicians, and business alike and the impact this may have in democratization of schools (Gutmann, 1987). The review of literature therefore points to the need to give students the participatory roles in classrooms as a tenet of democracy in schools (Fielding, 2012; Giroux, 1989). Through conversations about individual and group wishes, needs and prospective actions, it is possible to discover common interest and to freely express these desires to others (Cook-Sather, 2007; Fletcher, 2005; Friend & Caruthers, 2012).

Student Voice and Democracy in Schools

Student voice is an activity through which students express their feelings and points of view on issues of concern to them in schools. Student voice is more than spoken words; it is a reflection of what is going on in the minds of young adults (Johnson, 1991). Student voice can also be explained as the “individual and collective perspectives and actions of adolescents within the context of learning and education” (Fletcher, 2006, p.1). Schools are basically authoritarian, since one person, or small group of people make decisions about what to learn, when to learn, how to learn, how to assess learning, and the nature of the learning environment (Gutmann, 1987). On the contrary, democratic schools that are run according to democratic principles allow teachers and students to participate equally in the decision-making process (Giroux, 1988). Therefore, engaging students in activities allows them to freely express their thoughts either in classrooms or in schools

“strengthens their developmental and social skills, hence preparing them for the real world” (Joseph, 2006, p. 34).

Public schools in America are suffering a crisis of public disenchantment because students’ advocates continue to demand the involvement of student voice in the decision-making process in schools. In reviewing the research literature on student voice and education, it has been reported that bringing student voice front and center can nudge educators and policy makers toward making education more meaningful to those it claims to serve, the students. To keep adolescents “engaged in their education is to include them in decision-making” and make their voice relevant to their school experiences (Steinberg and McCray, 2012, p.1). Similarly, secondary students desire to be active participants in their learning process because they need to feel that they are not only a part of the school community, but also competent individuals whose opinions and views matter (Cook-Sather, 2002). The prevalence of disruptive behavior in classrooms has been associated with the continued neglect of student voice on matters that affect their schooling experiences (Giroux, 2003).

Students who are involved in their education in classrooms, co-create educational goals with their teachers, and collaborate with their teachers to reach these goals are more likely to achieve academically (Cauley, & Chafin, 2003; Fielding, 2012). In essence, involving students in school leadership provides opportunities for them to contribute beyond their classrooms and schools because they “explore their interests, refine their talents, gain a better understanding of themselves, and collaborate with their peers” (Neigel, 2006, p. 4). Such involvements give students a voice and a sense of belonging, which helps to build healthy relationships and connections with students, teachers,

administrators, and the greater community (Fletcher, 2005; Mitra, 2003). Contrary to schools involving student voice, adults generally ignore inputs from students, and “most schools, most times, nearly everywhere are not democratic places” (Winchester, 2003, p. 2). Schools continue to deprive students the freedom to make a choice on what to learn, how to learn, and when to learn by imposing structures that mandate the curriculum and their daily schedules. Typical of schools, most reform efforts continue to ignore deliberately the voice of what is most central to learning – the student. With what researchers have said about the benefits of involving student voice in schools, why does the passive tradition continue in schools?

Despite the benefits of involving students’ voice in the learning process, teachers continue to resist democratization in classrooms by stripping students of activeness and carefully training them not to talk in and out of school premises (Rautianen & Rähä, 2012). In urban public schools, teachers trained students to be passive learners while they remain the custodians of knowledge. Teachers remain the sole transmitters of knowledge and educate students not to see things differently in classrooms. On the other hand, democratically operated schools exchange traditional teacher authority for informal control driven by close teacher-student relationships and mutual leadership responsibility (Mitra, 2004; Fletcher, 2005; Fielding, 2012). Besides, how can an educator demand of his students the ability to cooperate or to get along with people if he himself as an adult “is incapable of functioning as an active member of his own community or in cooperation with other teachers?” (Rautianen, 2008, p. 88). The deliberate behavior of adults in schools to keep ignoring the benefits associated with involving student voice reaffirms

the need to understand teachers' conceptions of student voice and share findings with the purpose of making school and classroom experiences relevant to the lives of students.

Student Voice as a Component of Teaching and Learning

Student voice is an important component of teaching and learning process in schools, and “a starting point for enabling those who have been silenced or marginalized ... to reclaim the authorship of their lives” (Giroux, 1989, p.63). Therefore, student voice influences the relationship between teachers and students, academic achievement, positive feelings, and classroom engagement (Hollins and Spencers, 1990). The social nature of teaching and learning as the interactions that occur between teachers and students and among students in the classrooms enables students to understand one another better and promotes originality of students' ideas (Hew and Cheung, 2012). Educators who listen to student voice and act upon it have created opportunities to improve academic achievement of all students. When classroom environment is conducive to learning and students are given opportunities to express their opinions freely, the resulting effects are “not only more engaging for students, but also transformative for students personally and politically” (Cook-Sather, 2007, p. 345). Therefore, student voice is a way to appreciate the dynamics in the lives of young adults and to recognize the emerging results from engaging students in school matters (Harriot-White, 2009).

Additional perspective is the fact that urban students are explicitly aware of the educational inequalities that exist in their schools which negatively impact their learning. These urban students claim that no one really cares about the quality of education, and teachers do not seek their opinions on curricular issues (Storz, 2008, p. 247). Instead of

teaching in a vacuum, teachers can breathe life into instruction by elevating the involvement of student voice (Toshalis and Nakkula, 2008). The question is: Where is the place for teachers' conceptions of student voice in the discussion? It continues to be missing in the discourse of transforming teaching and learning in schools.

Student Voice as an Instrument of Change

Student voice is defined as students being equal partners in school decision-making (Mitra, 2003; Milton, 2007). A growing body of literature has recorded student voice as an instrument of change that casts a unique and distinctive light on the role of student voice on school environment. Student voice is indicative of the centrality of teacher-student interactions in effective learning in schools (Beresford, 2000). In England, student voice is not involved in issues that affect their learning (Ruddock, Chaplain, & Wallace, 1996). Attention has been drawn to the absence of student voice from the discussion of education and educational reform in United States (Kozol, 2005). In Canada, there is a conspicuous absence of student voice from discussions regarding change processes in education and has resulted in asking, "What would happen if schools treat students as people whose opinion mattered" (Fullan, 1991, p. 170)? It is not an overstatement to describe the role of students as stakeholders as critical in the educational change process. Though students are thought of as beneficiaries of the change process, they are rarely thought of as participants in the change process in the organizational life of the school (Brenner-Camp, 2011; Fullan & Stiegelbauer, 1991).

It becomes a common occurrence that school reform initiatives have neglected the issue of making students take responsibility and ownership for improvement prospects in their schools. When put into practice, student voice could take a lead in the reform efforts

in schools through collaboration with teachers and administrators to address the challenges facing their schools (Mitra and Frick, 2010). Surprisingly, many educators believe that schools are to be designed for students and not to be designed either by or with them “because they are not capable of making informed decisions” (Joseph, 2006, p. 34). Therefore, the absence of student voice and participation of students in systemic change in schools undermines the suitability of student voice as an instrument of change (Brenner-Camp, 2011).

Although the research has been limited on teachers’ conceptions of student voice, the available literature has shed insights into how students perceive their voices (Fielding & Rudduck, 2002; Fletcher, 2005; Mitra, 2001; Mitra, 2003). Many researchers posited that those who spend the most time in classrooms are often given the least opportunity to express their views and opinions. Studies have stated that students have lessons to teach their teachers if they begin to listen to them (Hollins & Spencer, 1990; Howard, 2002; Lee, 1999). To this end, keeping students’ voices and experiences at the center of every school reform initiative can enhance the legitimacy of proposed reform plans, their implementation and effectiveness, and their sustainability.

Student Voice as an Element of Empowerment

Vulnerable student voice remains a matter of concern for student advocates because of the existing gap between how students value their voice and how adults in schools perceive student voice. The concept of voice may be “anatomized into three constituent elements: a voice of knowing, a voice of doing, and a voice of being and becoming” (Batchelor, 2006, p.787). The voice of being and becoming is fundamental to the voice of knowing and the voice of doing. Therefore, what is more important is the

vulnerability in the student voice in schools (Batchelor, 2006). However, the concept of student voice is a critical factor among theorists. Critical theory studies of youth populations draw upon the notion of the often-silenced voices of the marginalized or subordinated as a means of exposing oppressive power relation (Arnot & Reay, 2007). Education is about “constructing knowledge through meaningful experiences and contacts with others; thus schools and classrooms should be characterized by student voice and choice.” (Morrison, 2008, p.103). Critical theory looks at the social injustice of voices that are silenced or made voiceless to voices that need to be heard and incorporated, not only in classrooms but also in the school community (Fletcher, 2005; Fielding, 2004b; Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008; Delgado, 2002).

Critical theory began with its origin in the Frankfurt School has focused on the imposition of capitalism to achieving emancipation of the voiceless groups through human action (Jessop, 2012). The goal of education is to instill passion and to stimulate individual into believing that his or her voice counts. Education is also an avenue to help individuals overcome the oppressive views of being neglected in matters that affect their well-beings (Friere, 2007; Matthews, 2013). Within the context of critical theory, a goal of schooling should strive to empower students to develop a voice in order to be successful beyond school and classrooms environments. Young adults who do not enjoy a sense of belonging in schools continue to be excluded and disenfranchised in learning environments that perpetuate inequity and inequality in schools (Shield, 2004).

In the quest to develop schools that promote student voice, it becomes relevant to question the teachers’ conceptions of student voice in urban high schools where chronic absenteeism, high dropout rate, poor performance, low graduation rate, and increasing

violence are the common features. Critical theory supports the use of dialogue between students and teachers as well as providing students with the opportunity to think and express their opinions without fear (Bain, 2010; Dewey, 2004; Freire, 2007; Green, 1989; Giroux, 2003; McLaren, 1994; Morrison, 2008; Pupel, 1994).

Student voice opportunities helped young adults to gain a stronger sense of their abilities, and built student awareness that they can make changes in their classrooms and schools, not only for themselves but also for others. Therefore, students valued “having their voices heard and honored” (Mitra, 2004, p. 652). The pyramid as shown in Figure 2 was used to explain the three levels of involving student voice in schools (Mitra, 2006).

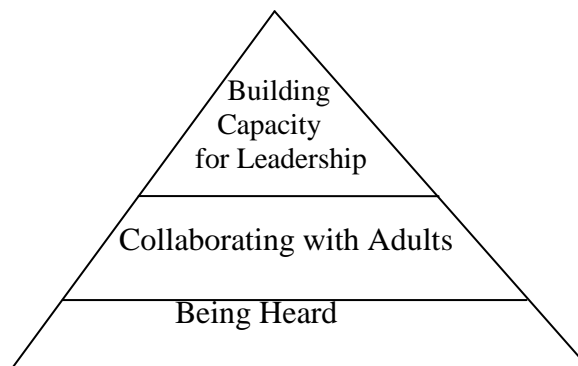


Figure 2. Pyramid of Student Voice. Adapted from “Increasing Student Voice and Moving Toward Youth Leadership,” by D. Mitra, 2006, *The Prevention Researcher*, 13(1), p.7.

At the foundation level is “being heard,” when teachers and administrators in schools listen to students’ opinions and points of view on matters that affect their schooling experiences. At the center of the pyramid is “collaborating with adults,” which

involves students working collaboratively with other stakeholders to initiate and influence a change that benefits all stakeholders. At the top of the pyramid is “building capacity for leadership,” which should be the ultimate goal of involving student voice in all decision-making processes in schools. However, “building capacity for leadership” remains the toughest to achieve in schools because it involves shared responsibility and shared power with students in all school matters (Harriott-White, 2009). The “building capacity for leadership” component of the pyramid is rare in schools; however, it holds the most promise with “an explicit focus on enabling youth to” to have a voice in school administration (Mitra, 2006, p.8). Ultimately motivate them to participate in the rhetoric of school.

Dialogue, as conceptualized through the lens of critical theory, emphasizes that teachers and students work and learn together in partnership with a shared agenda for social inclusion and empowerment for all (Shier, 2001; Soo Hoo, 1993). As long as students’ opinions are not solicited or continue to be ignored amid reform planning and implementation in schools, the direction taken by teachers and administrators will continue to be misguided and fruitless (Lee, 1999).

The centrality of voice seeks to promote a pedagogy that “takes the problems and needs of the students themselves as its starting point” (McLaren, 1994, p. 223). The banking system in education is an approach where students were perceived to lack knowledge and must instead have it imparted upon them by educators who owned it. It becomes critical that the “being” of education was to eliminate the apparent contradiction between teachers and students “so that both are simultaneously teachers and students” (Freire, 1992, p. 2). Therefore, to overcome the depository form of knowledge, education

must involve “practical problem-solving that incorporated the consciousness and worldview of the students” (Jagersma & Parsons, 2011, p. 116). This is consistent with the purpose of this study, using teachers’ conceptions and experience to inform teaching and learning as they reflect on their classroom practices as an “attempt to insure that the students’ voices are heard and not merely spoken” (Storz, 2008, p. 249). It is also consistent with how findings from this study will be useful to teachers and educational leaders as they think about their work in urban schools. Critical theory is a strong framework for this study because it seeks to empower the student voice from being suppressed to being heard on all matters that affect their educational experiences (Jagersma and Parsons, 2011; Fletcher, 2005; Foster, 1986; Giroux, 2003, 1988; Mansfield, Welton, & Halx, 2012; Mertens, 2005; Mitra & Gross, 2009; Oldfather, 1995).

Student Voice as a Means of Becoming a Lifelong Learner

Seeking student voice by investigating teachers’ conceptions is also supported by the learning theory, and it is grounded in human communication, where learning is understood as a process of using a prior interpretation to construe a new or revise meaning of one’s experiences in order to guide future action (Taylor, 2008). Learning theory emphasized the importance of student voice in the construction of knowledge because individuals make meaning of their learning when interactions occurred through dialogues and discussions in a social environment. In fact, the relationship between the teacher and the student is necessary to maintain a positive learning environment that is socially beneficial to all and dialogue is a way of being and knowing (Good & Brophy, 2000; Freire, 1992; Greene, 1998; Matthews, 2013; Taylor, 2008; Vygotsky, 1926).

Researchers have identified a strong student-teacher relationship as an important factor necessary to enhance classroom practices and improve student success in schools. It is also explained that language played a vital role in the learning process and tied expressing opinions to understanding the world (Cushman, 2000; Matthews, 2013; Vygotsky, 1926; Yonezawa & Jones, 2003).

When students are provided with opportunities to actively participate in school decision-making rather than act passively within the bureaucratic structure, they take ownership of and responsibility for their own learning and develop a sense of social intelligence that will serve them in life. In essence, construction of learning is situated in the learning theory because student voice is a product of mental constructs before using language to express views and opinions (Brenner-Camp, 2011; Dewey, 2004; Freire, 2007; Mosher, Kenny & Garrod, 1994; Vygotsky, 1926). More importantly, how students view their classrooms provide “insights into important components of the teaching and learning process, an important starting point for enabling those who have been silenced or marginalized by schools... to reclaim the authorship of their lives” (Giroux, 1988, p. 63).

Situated learning becomes relevant to the learning theory because it recognizes students’ thoughts and actions as adopted from and applied to the environment. It is explained as an act of perceiving and activity, how it was conceived, and how it was done which tied learning to language. Therefore, in situated learning, conceptualization becomes the outcome of activity and perception, while student voice fosters learning through legitimate expressions of views in classrooms (Dewey, 2004; Hausfather, 1998; Matthews, 2013; Seitz, 2007; Vygotsky, 1926). Students at any high school have the capability to articulate what they want to see concerning their educational experiences;

“they just need someone willing to listen and act on their behalf as advocates for their academic and social endeavors” (Steinberg & McCray, 2012, p. 11).

Student voice in the decision-making process can promote student interest, create purposeful interactions between students, teachers, and school leadership, improve academic achievement, and encourage self-confidence (Mitra, 2004; Cook-Sather, 2007). Constructivist learning involves active student engagement and proposes that students can move in a linear fashion from no involvement to becoming directive learners (Giroux, 2003; Mansfield, Welton, & Halx, 2012). Therefore, in democratic schools, student voice and choice are allowed in what students study, and how and when they study the jointly decided curriculum. As schools restructure to meet student needs, student voice has been demanded by education advocates that the curriculum development, teaching, and learning should represent a participatory process instead of, “viewing the curriculum as a body of [information] to be passed on...in a passive [manner]” (Schlechty, 1990, p. 23).

In the process of allowing student voice, the student decision-making process is enhanced, and students become empowered as lifelong learners (Cook-Sather, 2002; Dewey, 2004; Fletcher, 2009; Giroux, 1989; Lee, 1999; Morrison, 2008.) Students are capable of “articulating what they need and want concerning their education; they just need someone willing to listen and act” (Steinberg and McCray, 2012, p.11). There is a growing body of research on the notion that students have a clear understanding of their own learning and learning environments. However, the issue is the adults’ willingness to listen and incorporate students’ perspectives for their academic and social endeavors (Steinberg and McCray, 2012).

Student Voice and the Constructivist Paradigm

Within the context of the constructivism paradigm, the interpretive framework explains teachers' conceptions of student voice. This philosophical worldview of constructivist learning is rooted in the premise that teachers construct new experiences from the existing conceptions, and use the new construct to define their conceptions of student voice (Applefield, Huber, & Moallem, 2001; Bruner, 1996; Creswell, 2014; Maxwell, 2005; Rodriguez, 2008). The realities of social constructs in schools place the teachers in a position that grants them a greater power over students, and consequently places them at an advantage to ignore the student voice continuously (Delgado, 2002; Basseches, 2005; Greene, 1998; Mertens, 2005; Wegerif, 2005).

The literature contextualizes student voice as a concept of engaging students as active participants in all matters that affect their educational experiences where both the teachers and students are co-constructors of knowledge (Toshalis & Nakkula, 2008). In essence, voice is not about communicating one's opinion; it is more than spoken words but valued to create a desired impact, and that language is merely the tool with which voice is expressed. For voice to be empowering, teachers must listen to it and act on it in such a way that it becomes an integral part of the school culture (Fielding, 2001; Johnson, 1991; Mitra, 2004; Quiroz, 2001).

When the student voice is routinely ignored during the process of school reform, efforts of teachers and administrators can be ill advised (Lee, 1999). However, emphasis has been on students' perception of their voices and not teachers' conceptions of student voice (Corbett & Wilson, 1995; Jones & Yonezawa, 2007; Lee, 1999). Knowing well that student voice does not exist within a vacuum, it becomes necessary to study the teachers'

conception of student voice because it affects students' learning and sets an agenda for school improvement. Listening to student voice has the potential to empower both teachers and students to make sense of and address the inequality that exists in urban classrooms and schools (Cook-Sather, 2007; DeFur & Korinek, 2010; Giroux, 1988; Storz, 2008).

The aforementioned scholarship suggests that teachers that involve student voice help to encourage democracy in learning, and liberate students from being voiceless to being heard and acted upon by adults in schools (Fielding, 2001; Giroux, 2003; Mitra, 2004; Rudduck & Flutter, 2004). Student voice provide the opportunity for young adults to get involved in the process of school improvement because they can articulate clearly what is occurring in their classrooms and why their voices "should impact not only the efforts of teachers, but should be considered more directly in the process of school change" (Storz, 2008, p. 249).

Teacher-Student Relationship and Student Voice

Teachers' inadequate understanding of their students poses difficulties in developing teaching practices that meet the needs of all students in their classrooms. The lack of involving student voice inhibits compelling classroom practices that address students' interests and experiences. It has helped teachers to continue the traditional teacher-centered instruction where frequent silence and/or teachers' voices are the loudest and most often heard (Christidou, 2011; Kohn, 1996). It suffices to say that teachers' understanding of their students presents the classroom as a network of student-teacher creations that involve interactions between teachers and students. In other words, the creations and re-creations of interactions engage the students and teacher in a dialectical

relationship that involves student voice as a tool that can be used to influence the teacher-student relationship (Evans & Larson, 2008).

Teachers easily and understandably ignore the conceptual and moral challenges of student voice because they lack a clear understanding of their students, which raises equity and equality issues in schools (Jessop, 2012). Teachers' understanding of their students facilitates their abilities to use the student voice as a conceptual framework and skill-sets for enhancing their self-awareness, attitudes, and conceptions regarding their students' school experiences (Lalas & Valle, 2007). Therefore, changing the relationship that exists between teachers and students in classrooms requires that students are no longer consumers of knowledge as schools move from behaviorist to constructivist approach to learning (Hausfather, 1998).

When researchers asked students what they desired from their teachers, students indicated a need to have a relationship with their teachers (Certo et al., 2003; Steinberg & McCray, 2012). Students desire caring teachers who listen to them and understand their lives outside of school. Students further expressed their appreciation for teachers that know each student's name (DeFur & Korinek, 2010). Students have stated that relationships between teachers and students affected their academic achievement and teachers' responsiveness to students' personal lives generated positive feelings that resulted in increased efforts in schools (Hollins & Spencers, 1990; Howard, 2002). Students affirm their understanding that "the quality of their relationships and interactions with teachers affect every aspect of their schooling" (Storz, 2008, p. 263).

Student-teacher relationships should be rooted in dialogic interactions in such a way that involve sharing of ideas between teachers and students as a method used to

validate student voices in classrooms (Freire, 2007). In other words, for teachers to provide a forum for students to move towards that critical consciousness, teachers must establish a classroom environment that promotes a relationship of dialogue with the students (Corbett & Wilson, 1995; Matthews, 2013). The teacher-student relationship is enhanced when students feel their welcoming classroom and school relationships are ones of exchange; exchange in terms of when students feel respected, their voices are solicited, and are provided with positive interactions, which in turn allows them to work to their full potential and take responsibility for their education (Cook-Sather, 2007; Flutter, 2006; Steinberg & McCray, 2012). Student voice in high schools has been described as the glue that binds students' persistence in schools with their academic achievement. It has also been seen as the foundation of a long-lasting student-teacher relationship (Dianda, 2008; Cook-Sather, 2002; Fletcher, 2009; Messacar & Oreopoulos, 2012).

The tokenistic engagement seen in classrooms is more of a superficial approach to encourage student-teacher relationship through classroom discussions. It is often one-sided and teacher directed without placing importance to student voice (Vocht, 2011). While there does not seem to be much research on teachers' conceptions of student voice, researches that have been conducted suggest that students can articulate their educational experiences to improve their learning as well as offering solutions to solve urban education crisis (Giroux 1988; Mitra, 2001; Storz, 2008).

The Crisis in Urban Education

The high school dropout problem in United States has continued to be described as a national crisis because nearly one-third of all high school students decide to leave the

public school system before graduating (Swanson, 2004), and the problem is severe particularly among students of color and students with disabilities (Greene & Winters, 2005). Nearly half of all Black, Hispanic or Latino, and Native American students in public high schools fail to graduate with their cohort. Moreover, dropouts are often from families with comparatively low earnings and education; in 2008, students from low-income households dropped out four times the rate of their peers from high-income families (Messacar & Oreopoulos, 2012). It is well known that remaining in school at least through high school graduation is vital to staying out of low-wage occupations. In addition, Jordan and Kostandini (2012) remark that:

Students who do not finish high school are more likely to be unemployed, to end up in prison, to need public assistance, and to die at a younger age. Yet many continue to leave school before graduation. Dropping out of high school thus has social costs reflected in lost tax revenue and increased expenditures for health care, corrections, food and cash assistance, subsidized housing, and public assistance making dropout prevention a priority for policy. (p. 1)

As students become disruptive in classrooms, skip classes willingly, and drop out of schools, they take pride in being part of a gang or doing drugs, and engage in criminal behavior. These have a negative impact on the economy, on the individuals, their immediate communities, and the larger society (Messacar & Oreopoulos, 2012). By the time students decide willingly to drop out of schools, there typically has been a long history of truancy, failing grades, skipping classes, observed disruptive behavioral problems, and suspension. However, students often “report leaving schools because they are not motivated or inspired to work hard or because classes are not interested enough”

(Messacar & Oreopoulos, 2012; p. 8). In order to motivate and inspire students to persist in schools, adults in schools, and most especially teachers, must first understand their students by listening and acting on their voice before they can make classrooms interesting and engaging (Brenner-Camp, 2011; Jones & Jones, 1981). The literature supports the importance of student voice and students' perception in schools; however, there is limited literature on understanding teachers' conceptions of student voice especially in urban schools (Mitra, 2004; Mitra & Gross, 2009; Smyth, 2006). Therefore, this study was embarked upon to understand teachers' conceptions of student voice and present findings that would not only improve the teacher-student relationship, but also use in schools to inform policies that would inspire students to persist in schools and be successful in life.

Conclusion

In summary, high school education is in crisis and, in particular, high schools located in urban cities in United States, Canada, and Britain (Fullan, 1991; Kozol, 2005; Ruddock, Chaplain, & Wallace, 1996). Sands, Guzman, Stephens, & Boggs (2007) note that despite intense endeavors to promote educational change to affect student achievement, one voice, "perhaps the most critical voice that could inform the debate of how to increase student achievement, is surely lacking: that of students themselves" (p. 324).

The prevailing poor academic achievement and high dropout rates in urban high schools continue to signal a disconnect that exists between teachers and students. Teachers focus on improvement of academic achievement without asking students to share their opinions on what needs to be done differently (Fielding, 2004a; Milton, 2007;

Rodriguez, 2008; Steinberg & McCray, 2012). As initiatives continue to fail in urban schools, students become alienated because their opinions are ignored, and they feel anonymous and powerless (Giroux, 1988; Mitra & Gross, 2009). In the process, students become “disengaged from schooling, cut classes, and drop out of school” (Mitra, 2004, p. 652). The failure to incorporate student voice in classrooms raises the question of how long teachers will continue to cope with classroom disruption as a legitimate avenue for students to express their opinions (Giroux, 1989; 2003). Classroom disruption as widely accepted by populist writing to be a legitimate avenue students use to challenge the authority of teachers in the classrooms (Slee, 1994). The neglect of student voice in education has galvanized student advocacy groups to demand more rights for students in schools as supported by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (Giroux, 2003; Kozol, 2005; Lundy, 2007).

Advocates of democracy in schools, in the past, have required a much greater role for teachers in school decision-making under the heading of teacher empowerment, and there has been a shift to encourage community involvement in school administration (Davies, 1991; Fullan, 1991; Lieberman & Miller, 1990; Rice & Schneider, 1992). Remarkable resurgence in recent years has witnessed the implementation of school-based management or site-based management across the globe. However, neither practice has resulted in significant improvement in schools (Lieberman & Miller, 1990; Rice & Schneider, 1992). Particularly interesting has been the absence of attention in the reform literature of changing the role of students, who continue to be substantially excluded from the discussion about democratizing schools and empowering teachers (Benjamin, 1994; Murray, 1992). Efforts at using students as catalysts of educational change were

unsuccessful; instead, they became a disfranchised group (Fullan, 1991; Levin, 1992; Malen & Ogawa, 1988; White, 1992).

The irony is that the school reform movement advocates one kind of practice for adults in the school system, and a very different practice for its clientele – the students. The clamor for democracy in schools remains to give in part the least powerful a voice in matters that affect their educational experiences (Cobertt & Wilson, 1995; Cook-Sather, 2007; Czeniawski, Garlick, Hudson, & Peter, 2009; Fletcher, 2005; Mitra, 2004; Ruddock, 2003; Yonezawa & Jones, 2009). The unambiguous success of democracy in schools has resulted in chronic absenteeism, high dropout rate, low graduation rate, anger, disruptive behavior, poor academic achievement, and increasing rate of violence in urban high schools (Dianda, 2008; Giroux 1988; 2003). These resulting effects point to the fact that focusing on democracy as a matter of who is involved in which decision is insufficient in education (Benjamin, 1994; Giroux, 2003; Smyth, 2006; Steinberg & McCray, 2012). The consequences of making students voiceless as a result of teachers' conceptions have implications on classroom practices, student-teacher relationship, school policies, society, and the economy at large (Joseph, 2006; Kozol, 2005; Morrison, 2008; Pearson, 2008).

Proponents of democratic education argue that when students are given freedom and choice in the learning process, they become better citizens because they have learned how to negotiate with others to improve their learning experiences. Therefore, schools are duty bound to equip students with the skills to participate in democracy; after all, education and democracy are connected in American shared thoughts and practices (Dewey, 2004; Gatto, 1992; Fielding, 2012; Morrison, 2008). As teachers steadily

exclude students from every conversation and decision-making process, they continue to drop out of schools (Pascopella, 2003). Researchers point out that when students are given the opportunity to express their opinions and thoughts, their academic achievements increase and curtail the ever-increasing dropout rates in urban high schools (Cook-Sather, 2007; Jessop, 2012; Johnson, 1991 Fielding, 2004a; Fletcher, 2004b; Loflin, 2008; Lundy, 2007; Mitra, 2003; Morrison, 2008; Reitzug, 2003).

The theoretical context for this study deemphasizes the classrooms as places where students are being regarded as depositories and the teacher as the depositor of knowledge (Freire, 2007). In other words, the traditional banking concept of educator is no longer relevant in urban high school and gives way to a meaningful dialogical relationship that allows student voice to flourish in classrooms and schools (Giroux, 1988; 2003). Critical theory seeks to liberate students from being voiceless to voices that are relevant to decisions that affect their educational experiences. Learning theory within the constructivist paradigm ensures learning to be truly student centered where teachers elevate student voice as a contributing factor to teaching and learning in schools (Jessop, 2012; Toshalis & Nakkula, 2008). As teachers' conceptions of student voice change, their beliefs and actions also change to encourage discussions and interaction in the classroom (Vocht, 2011). When students in urban high schools participate in the decision-making process, their learning becomes dialogic and they encounter an interaction that goes beyond a passive process controlled by adults (Wallach, Ramsey, Lowry, & Copland, 2006).

A large number of studies have emphasized the need to involve student voice in schools, yet researchers have seen little evidence of actual involvement of students in

matters that affect their schooling experiences (Fielding, 2012; Fullan, 2007; Levin, 1999; Mitra, 2001). Study after study raises the need for further work to make schools inclusive of student voice for equity and equality purposes, but keep silent on the need to understand the role of teachers' conceptions of student voice. The goal of this study, unlike other research, focuses on teachers' conceptions of student voice in an urban high school in New Jersey and aims that the findings be used to change teachers' classroom practices in such a way to make students persist in school.

Chapter 3

Methodology

This chapter provides a description and the rationale and assumptions for using a qualitative case study as a design for the study. This chapter includes discussions on the purpose statement and research questions, participant selection, data collection, instrumentation, data analysis, and rigor. Other details will include the role of researcher in the study and ethical considerations.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this heuristic qualitative case study was to investigate teachers' conceptions of student voice in an urban high school in New Jersey. In this study, I examined how teachers use classroom practices to involve students' voice, and how student voice shapes the teacher-student relationship in an urban high school. The setting for this qualitative case study is an urban public high school that serves grades nine through twelve, located in the central part of New Jersey.

I collected data through semi-structured interviews of participants, observed participants' classroom practices, and examined documents that included students' displayed work. This research allowed me to understand, in depth, the role teachers' conceptions play in how they involve students' voice in an urban high school's reforms through a close examination and the use of multiple sources of information.

Research Questions

I explored four research questions concerning teachers' conceptions of student voice in a New Jersey urban high school. These research questions were as follows:

1. What are teachers' conceptions of student voice in an urban high school in New

Jersey?

2. How do urban high school teachers use classroom practices to involve student voice?
3. How does student voice shape the teacher-student relationship in an urban high school in New Jersey?
4. How can the findings of this study inform a framework for incorporating student voice into urban high school education in New Jersey?

Rationale for and Assumptions of a Qualitative Methodology

Qualitative research is holistic, inductive, and empathetic and it is generally conducted in a natural setting that contends with issues that are of social and human concern (Creswell, 2005). Merriam (1988) describes a qualitative inquiry as one that is characterized by an understanding of the phenomenon of interest from the participants' perspectives, the researcher is the primary instrument for data collection, and uses an inductive research strategy. Qualitative study involves fieldwork in the setting within which the phenomenon of interest occurs and interaction with participants with in-depth knowledge of the phenomenon and its related factors and considerations. In essence, a qualitative inquiry requires that the researcher is in close proximity to the human participants (Creswell, 2005; Morgan, 1998; Whitt, 1991). When using a qualitative approach, the researcher explores a phenomenon over a period of time through detailed data collection that involves multiple sources of information (Creswell, 2013). The use of a qualitative research method in this study is predicated on the fact that it proposes an interpretive view of the phenomenon in its natural setting while attempting to make sense of the meanings participants bring to them (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005).

Qualitative methods ensure that the researcher appreciates the value-laden nature of the study by being aware of and influenced by his or her values and cultural context but takes adequate precautions to mitigate the effect of these values on the research (Whitt, 1991). This is true for this study because qualitative research allows the researcher to observe, describe, and interpret settings as they are, and still maintains the “empathic neutrality” so that the investigation is conducted in a non-judgmental fashion (Patton, 1990, p. 55).

The heuristic nature of this qualitative design taught me to honor the richness and complexity of meanings participants brought into the investigation, and made modifications to my personal experiences as information unfolds (Djuraskovic & Arthur, 2010). In other words, as the researcher conducts the study, data is collected and analyzed simultaneously so that necessary adjustment is done to the research process as the need arises (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

Strategy of Inquiry

The main qualitative strategy of research used by this inquiry is case study because it offers a broad approach and is well used in understanding a particular phenomenon within a social unit. Although the scope of a case study is bounded in context and the findings can rarely be generalized, it, however, provides rich and significant insights into events and experience (Brown, 2008; Douglass & Moustakas, 1985; Miles & Huberman, 1994). A case study is described as an empirical inquiry that explores contemporary phenomenon within real-life context, using multiple sources of evidence (Noor, 2008; Stake, 1995). The evidence used in a case study “is typically qualitative in nature and focuses on developing an in-depth, rather than broad,

generalizable understanding” (Noor, 2008, p. 1602). In essence, it “is not in the hope of proving anything, but rather in hope of learning something” about the phenomenon of study (Eysench, 1976, p. 9).

The in-depth focus on the particular phenomenon within the bounded system provided a holistic view of teachers’ conceptions of student voice in this context, an urban high school in New Jersey. Data collection was limited to this urban high school and was bounded by a particular area of interest, that of teachers’ conceptions of student voice. The study was also bounded by time, as data were collected between September 2014 and February 2015. The exploratory nature of this case study is particularistic because it focuses on a particular phenomenon, descriptive because it produces a rich and thick description of the phenomenon under study, and relies on inductive reasoning by using multiple data sources (Merriam, 1998).

In using case study as a strategy for this qualitative research, all information was gathered to produce a quality analysis, as well as to present evidence with the possibility of exploring alternative interpretation (Yin, 2003). The flexibility in a qualitative study allows changes to be made to the overall design of the inquiry when useful information is revealed during the data collection stage. In other words, the study design is iterative, that is, data collections are adjusted according to what is learned (Yin, 2003). Therefore, qualitative case study is supported by the heuristic inquiry of Moustakas (1990), informed by the rigor of Yin (2009), and enriched by the creative interpretation described by Stake (2008). The use of a case study for this qualitative inquiry was a sufficient method to gain an in-depth understanding of teachers’ conceptions of student voice, and

it is a method that holds well when compared to other methods in social science research methodology (Hoepfl, 1997; Merriam, 1998).

The choice of case study was the preferred strategy because the investigator has little control over events and the “focus is on a contemporary phenomenon within some real-life context” (Yin, 1984, p.1; Brown, 2008). The use of case study also required that “the researcher digs into meanings, working to relate them to context” of this study (Stake, 2005, p. 450). Hence, it is not the purpose of this heuristic qualitative case to present findings that represent all urban high schools but to inform a framework for incorporating student voice into urban high school education in New Jersey.

In this single-case design, student voice was conceptualized within four subunits of space, voice, audience, and influence (Lundry, 2007; Yin, 2003). Figure 3 illustrates the framework for exploring student voice.

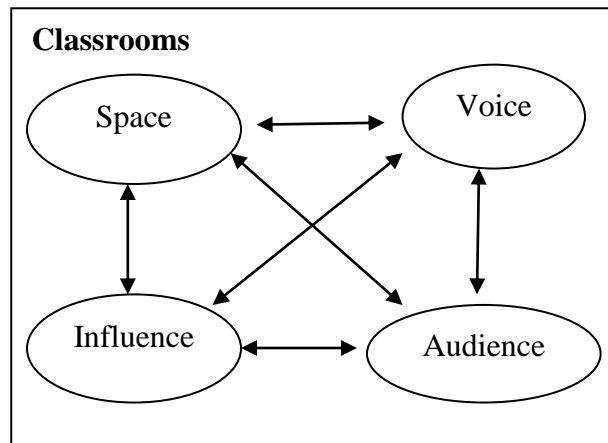


Figure 3. Framework for the Role of Student Voice in Classrooms. Adapted from “Integrating Student Voice: Assessment for Empowerment,” by J. Bain, 2010, *Practitioner Research in Higher Education*, 4(1), p. 19.

This framework for student voice is perhaps the most relevant to this study because voice is necessary but “tokenistic voice is not sufficient, voice is not enough” if it occurs in isolation of space, audience and influence” (Bain, 2010; Lundy, 2005, p. 3). This conceptualization was adapted for this case study to enhance data collection through interviews, observations, and document examination. These elements provide the direction and a framework for developing an emergent design that is typical of a qualitative research because the researcher focuses on this emerging process as well as the outcome of the study that allows the elements to be “interconnected” (Patton, 1990, p. 40) and “mutually reinforcing” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 39). The analysis of data was systematic and occurred simultaneously with data collection (Creswell, 2014; Dey, 1999; Maxwell, 2005; Patton, 2002).

The heuristic nature of the inquiry allowed a “self- reflection through dialogues with participants, and creative depictions of experience to generate a comprehensive knowledge” about the phenomenon of interest – the teachers’ conception of student voice (Douglass & Moustakas, 1985, p. 40). In other words, the researcher came to understand the essence of the phenomenon through shared reflection and inquiry (Kleining & Witt, 2000). Heuristic processes emphasized connectedness and relationship, involved personal significance that imbued the search to know, focused on issue of intense personal interest, and concluded with a creative synthesis that included the researcher’s intuition and tacit understandings (Kleining & Witt, 2000; Moustakas, 1990; Patton, 2002). Therefore, using a heuristic qualitative case study for this research inquiry would generate an experience-based knowledge to learn and discover teachers’ conceptions of student voice

in an urban high school where little is yet known (Djuraskovic & Arthur, 2010; Patton, 2002; Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

Qualitative method for this study will also provide opportunity to gain new perspectives on student voice by providing more in-depth information that may be difficult to convey quantitatively (Hoepfl, 1997; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Such a case study would allow innovative practices and form a database for future comparison and theory building (Merriam, 1998). I chose this particular strategy of inquiry because the case was teachers' conceptions of student voice, but the case could not be considered without the context – the school – and, more specifically, an urban high school in New Jersey (Baxter and Jack, 2008; Miles & Huberman, 1994). The case study has been regarded as a design, a methodology, a particular data collection procedure, and as research strategy that employs qualitative method to guide every aspect of this inquiry to ensure trustworthiness and credibility of the data and method of research (Brown, 2008; Eysenck, 1976). This is true for this study because qualitative research reports are descriptive, incorporating expressive language and the “presence of voice in the text,” and use inductive data analysis (Eisner, 1991, p. 36; Hoepfl, 1997; Flyvbjerg, 2006, Meyer, 2001).

This study also embedded the four characteristics of heuristic inquiry by allowing the researcher to change his preconceptions about the phenomenon when necessary, the research topic to change during the exploratory process, the ability to view the topic from many directions, and analyze data for common patterns (Burkart, 2003; Kleining & Witt, 2000; Moustakas, 1990).

Context of the Study

This urban high school has a student population of one thousand three hundred twenty. Ninety-one percent of students are Black, 9% are Hispanic, 0.3% are Asian, and 0.1% are Pacific Islander. Fifty-three percent of the students are male, and 47% are female. Seventy-four percent of students speak English Language; 16.2% speak Haitian-Creole; 6.0% speak Spanish; 3.2% speak Creole, Pidgin, and French; 0.3% speak French; 0.1% speak Chinese; 0.2% speak another language at home. Thirteen percent of the students are students with disabilities, and 15% are Limited English Proficient (LEP). The graduation rate is 60.8%, compared to the state's target of 75%, and there is a dropout rate of 2.8% compared to the state's average of 2% (New Jersey School Performance Report, 2013). The high school is located in a township economically designated by the State of New Jersey as District Factor Group (DFG) A, which is the lowest socio-economic status, and about 50.9% of the students receive free or reduced lunch (FRL). The school's academic performance, college and career readiness, graduation and post-secondary readiness significantly lag in comparison to schools across the state and to its peers (New Jersey School Performance Report, 2013).

Participant Selection

For the purpose of this case study, teachers will be defined as those adults in the schools with teaching certifications, have teaching assignments, and assigned classrooms. The definition excluded support staff and administrators, even if they have teaching certifications. The inquiry was conducted in the high school within the school district in which I work because I was not considered an outside researcher who has no understanding the culture of the school; this is referred to as the emic perspective, or

insider view, in qualitative research (Rossman & Rallis, 2013). The choice of the high school was an expeditious way to obtain the data needed; more importantly was the need to ensure that the participants did not feel any coercion to participate (Creswell, 2009).

Prior to recruiting participants for this study, I had conversations with the Superintendent of Schools, who approved the study, and the school principal, who allowed me to explain the study to teachers at two consecutive faculty meetings. Since teachers were the primary population of interest for this study, my initial contact was made at the first faculty meeting, and followed by a discussion about participation at the second faculty meeting. Important to the interview process are participants, or rather, teachers that volunteered to participate and met the following criteria: (a) possessed teaching certification, (b) were tenured, (c) had an assigned classroom, (d) had a minimum class size of twenty students, and; (e) had a teaching assignment in any of the courses that include Applied Technology, English Language Arts, Mathematics, Social Studies, Performance and Virtual Arts, Physical Education and Health, and Science. Teaching assignment in core subject areas allowed teachers to see students every other day; they get to know them, and thus building a relationship. In the process, students feel free to communicate their ideas, express their views on both controversial and contemporary issues, and allow discussions, debates, and dialogues. Teachers are able to engage students with their teaching practices and volunteered to participate in this study because of the need to graduate students four years after they have enrolled in the high school. The teacher participants were from the total population of one hundred sixty-seven teachers. The participants were tenured, and therefore were able to freely express their conceptions of student voice as they performed their primary responsibility of

teaching. An assigned classroom was required in terms of availability of space to display students' work, and a minimum class size of twenty students for a diversity of opinions. This sampling method is referred to as criterion sampling (Patton, 2002).

To gain an in-depth understanding of the research problem, a criterion sampling strategy was used to select teachers so that useful information was provided to answer the research questions. Purposeful sampling ensured that selected participants met the criteria earlier discussed. It is a strategy that allowed selection that was not based on the diversity within the teaching staff and ensured credibility of sample and consistency of data (Creswell, 2013; Patton, 2002). This sampling strategy, with the use of the criteria, facilitated the selection of teachers across the spectrum that cut across race, sex, group or groups of students that teachers teach, and years of teaching experience in an urban high school because it was based on representativeness of the concept of student voice rather than representativeness of school site (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). However, if it is discovered that the recruitment strategy is not working as anticipated, because of its emergent process, it is permissible in qualitative research to change the recruitment strategy, as long as the proper approval is obtained (Nkwi, Nyamongo, & Ryan, 2001). The use of a criterion sampling method to select participants for this study enhanced legitimization because it incorporated audit trail and minimized the sample bias (Patton, 2002). Selection of participants was based on the recommendation that sample size should reasonably be adequate in terms of providing coverage of the phenomenon, student voice, given the purpose of the study, which was teachers' perception of student voice. However, the sample size was expected to change as fieldwork unfolded. At the same time, sampling would be terminated when no new information was forthcoming

from new sampled units (Sandelowski, 1995). In other words, sample selection would be allowed up to the point of redundancy, when information became repetitive as the researcher kept hearing the same responses on a particular experience from participants (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Patton, 1990). An appropriate sample size for a qualitative study is one that adequately answers the research questions and often becomes obvious as the study progresses as new themes or explanations stop emerging (Marshall, 1996). Therefore, the sample size used in this study was not about numbers, but was determined on the basis of saturation, which was the point in data collection when new data no longer bring additional insights to the research questions (Hoepfl, 1997; Onwuegbuzie & Collins, 2007; Patton & Cochran, 2002). Once selected, participants signed letters of consent (Appendix A) to participate in the study, and data collection and analysis began. Preceding the commencement of data collection, I sought the approval of the Institutional Review Board at Rowan University (Appendix B, IRB approval letter). Once the approval to conduct the study was granted, I started to collect data from the selected participants.

Data Collection

The primary purpose of data collection in a research study is to gather information to answer the research questions that were asked in the study. Data collection in qualitative research provides evidence for the experience the study is investigating. The evidence is in the form of accounts people have given of the experience and serves as the ground on which findings are based (Polkinghorne, 2005). A hallmark of a qualitative case study is the use of multiple data sources and a strategy that also enhances data credibility (Patton, 1990; Yin, 2003). Purposeful sampling was used for this qualitative

case study as a design strategy to gather data from information-rich participants about their conceptions of student voice in this urban high school. Therefore, multiple data collection methods were used in this qualitative case study: informal semi-structured interview, participant observation, and document examination. As the researcher for this study, I was the human instrument for data collection and, as such, took into consideration the total context by interviewing the participants as well as recording non-verbal responses (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Merriam, 1998).

Interview

Interviews are paramount to case study research, and the use of open ended questions require the researcher to ask participants questions and get them to react verbally by expressing their perspectives on and experiences with the phenomenon of the study (Patton, 1990; Yin, 2003). The use of semi-structure interviews for this study entailed fixed open-ended questions that were based on the phenomenon of the study and were asked of all participants in a particular order (Rossman & Rallis, 2013). This provided opportunities for both the researcher and participants to discuss the topic in more detail and used probes to clarify and elaborate responses to questions (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Patton, 1990). Hence, at the foundation of “an in-depth interviewing is an interest in understanding the lived experience of other people and the meaning they make of that experience” (Siedman, 2006, p. 9). Therefore, for me to gain an in-depth understanding of teachers’ conceptions of student voice, then interviewing provided a necessary avenue of inquiry for the study (Siedman, 2006).

For this research, one-on-one interview sessions took place between the researcher and teachers at the urban high school. The interviews were arranged to take

place between September, 2014 and February, 2015 and were conducted before school and after school to prevent interruption of teachers' primary assignments. The on-site interview lasted approximately 60 minutes and it took place at each participant's classroom or a location convenient to the participant. All interviews were audiotaped with the express permission of the participant. A digital voice recorder was used to ensure the quality and clarity of recorded conversation. Informed consent was secured from all participants before the beginning of the interview. Participants were also given paper copy of the interview protocol to provide written responses and return upon completion as a way to avoid misrepresentation. The recorded interviews were transcribed and participants were given opportunities to evaluate the summary of interviews via emails and hard copies, to ensure that I captured all the major points without error. Participants were allowed to make changes and/or provide supplementary comments to the summary as they felt necessary before they return it to me. The interview questions for the semi-structured interview process were formulated into a protocol matrix (Appendix C) and described in the instrumentation section of this chapter.

Participant and Classroom Direct Observation

Face-to-face interviews allowed the observation not only of verbal but nonverbal data. Both participant and interviewer had access to facial expressions, gestures, and other paraverbal communications that enriched the meaning of the spoken words (Knox & Burkard, 2009).

To build a relationship with every participant and to become informed about the meaning each participant made of the lived experience, a minimum of two visitations

were made to each participant's classroom purely for observation purposes. Every visitation was performed during the same teaching period with the same group of students and at same time of the school day for two consecutive days. Each teaching period is a block of two periods lasting 84 minutes. Two visitations were adequate for describing the setting, for meeting the study needs, and for helping to answer research questions (Patton, 2002). Ongoing narrative field notes were scribed from the time the researcher entered the classroom for the lesson until the end of the period, including participants' gestures and expressed body language (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 1998).

On the second visitation of observation, focus was on the participants and how they used classroom practices to involve student voice. Continual alert to researcher bias and subjectivity towards each visitation was not allowed to interfere with observation during the two classroom visitations because the researcher could not safely assume that all periods are the same (Boyer & Bishop, 2004; Lincoln & Guba, 2000; Glesne, 1999). Therefore, the use of observation for this study provided additional source of data, helped to compare interview responses with classroom practices and did not require direct interaction with participants. In other words, observation produced rigor when combined with other methods of data collection (Adler & Adler, 1994).

Document Examination

The examination of documents may also provide confirmatory evidence of information obtained from interviews and observations (Patton, 1990). Documents in this study referred to the school mission statement, lesson plans, anchor charts, classroom rules, and newsletters. Others included student-teacher conference sheets and the student handbook. These artifacts or material culture were examined to support observations,

added to interview probes, and supplied additional data that were helpful in clarifying what teachers had described in their interviews (Creswell, 2013; Rossman & Rallis, 2003). This material culture enabled me to gather information on how teachers used classroom practices to involve student voice. I was critical of the content of these documents because they were not written intentionally for this study, but for different purposes and audiences. However, they shed light on lived experience and truth could be extrapolated from them (Yin, 2003). These artifacts were copied and scanned into a qualitative research data analyses program for further analysis.

Reflective Journal

A reflective journal in this inquiry was a kind of diary, which I kept on a daily basis, and contained a variety of information about self and the method of investigation (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 1998). These entries were deliberate notes taken by the researcher throughout this study to augment other sources of data collection. The purpose of memos in this study was to document the behavior of participants and reactions to the phenomenon under investigation. It involved “thinking and thus writing and thus thinking even more” about the entries; memos are “sites of conversation with ourselves about our data” (Saldana, 2009, p.32).

Instrumentation

Interview Protocol

A protocol for interviewing teachers was developed as a means of holding useful conversation and to gain the trust of participants. Interviewing as a conversation between the researcher and the participants was used in this study because it allowed the participants to talk about their conceptions within the context of the inquiry while the

researcher listened attentively (Creswell, 2013; Seidman, 2006; Rubin & Rubin, 2005). At the root of interviewing is an interest in understanding the classroom experience of teachers and the meaning they make of that experience (Seidman, 2006). The use of an informal open-ended interview as an instrument for this qualitative case study required the researcher to ask participants about beliefs and opinions on phenomenon of study (Lincoln & Guba, 2000; Yin, 2003).

In this study, I used open-ended questions and follow-up questions in a friendly conversation to access the participants' lived experiences and sought their opinions on the phenomenon being investigated (Seidman, 2006). The open-ended interview involved a set of pre-determined questions that were asked in a particular order of all participants (Rossman & Rallis, 2003), and allowed the researcher to clarify participants' responses with probes. For example, participants were asked about their conceptions of student voice and how they used classroom practices to involve student voice. Responses to these questions and subsequent use of probes led to an in-depth interviewing as an approach to clear up misconceptions and misunderstanding (Maxwell, 2005; Seidman, 2006). Interview was an appropriate instrument for this study because it presented the researcher the opportunity to gain an in-depth understanding of the meaning teachers make of their experience about the phenomenon under investigation (Fontana & Frey, 2005; Rubin & Rubin, 2005; Maxwell, 2005; Seidman, 2006; Yin, 2009). In addition, the use of interview for this study allowed "participants to select details of their experience from their stream of consciousness" (Seidman, 2006, p. 7).

I sought informed consent from all participants to interview and use a digital voice recorder to audiotape all conversations to ensure clarity, accuracy, and quality. This

was done to minimize omissions, misunderstanding, and misconceptions of responses from all participants. In addition, interview questions were virtually displayed on a handout for every participant, along with a pencil to encourage participants write down thoughts that they did not feel comfortable to share orally or other thoughts or comments during or after the interview. The digital voice recording device made responses available for transcription and archival purposes. Also, the researcher made a summary of interview available to every participant to ensure that all relevant information was captured during the interview. The complete interview protocol can be found in Appendix C. The table showing the relationship between the interview protocol questions and the research questions guiding this study is shown on the next page.

Table 1

Research Questions and Interview Protocol Matrix

Research Questions	Interview Questions
1. What are teachers' conceptions of student voice in an urban high school in New Jersey?	A. How will you define "student voice"? B. What is your belief about involving student voice in school?
2. How do urban high school teachers use classroom practices to involve student voice?	A. How do your classroom practices engage student voice during instructional delivery? B. How do outside forces impact your choice of instructional activities that engage student voice? C. How do inside forces impact your choice of instructional activities that engage student voice? D. How do you experience student voice in the classroom?
3. How does student voice shape the teacher-student relationship in an urban high school in New Jersey?	A. How will you describe what the teacher-student relationship looks like in your classroom? B. How will you describe what the teacher-student relationship looks like in your school? C. How is the relationship developed between you and the students? D. How does the student voice shape your actions and behaviors?
4. How can the findings inform a framework for incorporating student voice into urban high school education in New Jersey?	A. How will you describe the implications of involving student voice in your school? B. How can schools engage student voice in day-to-day running of schools? C. What is your opinion on listening and acting on student voice in urban schools?

Observation Protocol

For me as the researcher to understand the complexities of many situations in the classrooms, the use of an observation protocol provided an avenue to collect additional

data for this study. As a passive observer, the data collected was descriptive because I needed to understand what happened and how it happened in the classrooms. The use of this observation protocol was useful for me to overcome discrepancies between what participants said and what they actually did during instruction. In fact, it also provided opportunity for the participants to uncover behavior of which they were not aware (Adler & Adler, 1994; Patton & Cochran, 2002).

Table 2

Research Questions and Observation Protocol Matrix

Research Questions	Observation Questions
1. What are teachers' conceptions of student voice in an urban high school in New Jersey?	A. How do the teachers demonstrate their beliefs of student voice?
2. How do urban high school teachers use classroom practices to involve student voice?	A. How is questioning technique used to engage students' participation? B. How is the wait time used to engage student thoughts and opinions?
3. How does student voice shape the teacher-student relationship in an urban high school in New Jersey?	A. Who does what tasks, and when? B. How do students relate to teachers and peers? C. How freely do students communicate in the classrooms?
4. How can the findings inform a framework for incorporating student voice into urban high school education in New Jersey?	A. How will the classroom atmosphere be described?

Document Examination Protocol

Documents examined in this research included lesson plans, evaluation instruments, school mission statement, anchor charts, classroom rules, and newsletters.

Others included student-teacher conference sheets, and the student handbook. The websites of the school and district were also examined. These documents were referred to as material culture and their choices were predetermined because they represent thoughtful information for this research (Hodder, 2002; Rossman & Rallis, 2003). Access to these documents was requested from individual participant at the time of interview because they “are potentially rich in portraying the values and beliefs in a setting or social domain” (Rossman & Rallis, 2003, p. 198). A protocol matrix was used to link material culture with the research questions and a Document Analysis Worksheet was used to summarize the data (Appendix D).

Table 3

Research Questions and Documentation Protocol Matrix

Research Questions	Material Culture
1. What are teachers’ conceptions of student voice in an urban high school in New Jersey?	A. Classroom rules B. Students’ work C. Anchor charts
2. How do urban high school teachers use classroom practices to involve student voice?	A. Students’ work B. Lesson plans C. Anchor charts
3. How does student voice shape the teacher-student relationship in an urban high school in New Jersey?	A. Student-teacher conference sheets B. Student handbook C. Newsletters
4. How can the findings inform a framework for incorporating student voice into urban high school education in New Jersey?	A. Student handbook B. School and district websites C. School mission statement

Reflective Journal Protocol

A reflective journal protocol for this study was established as a guide to keep variety of information that raised the need for further understanding of the phenomenon under study. The protocol was used daily as a way to develop learning and independent thinking about the study. Journal writing was used to provide a data set of the researcher's reflection on the research act because the researcher was the research instrument in the study (Janesick, 1999). There was no time limitation set for using the journal during the interview process because information was freely written during interview as the need arose. However, a time limitation of ten minutes was set to write thoughts and feelings at the end of every classroom visitation (Hayes, 2006).

Table 4

Research Questions and Reflective Journal Protocol Matrix

Research Questions	Protocol Questions
1. What are urban high school teachers' conceptions of student voice in New Jersey?	A. What did I find difficult to understand? Why? B. What did I find difficult to accept? Why?
2. How do urban high school teachers use classroom practices to involve student voice?	A. What did I learn? B. How did I learn from it?
3. How does student voice shape the teacher-student relationship in an urban high school in New Jersey?	A. How what I have learned relates to my experience? B. Why was it important to the study?
4. How can the findings inform a framework for incorporating student voice into urban high school education in New Jersey?	A. What conclusion was drawn? B. Why was it important to the study?

Data Analysis

Consistent with the qualitative research approach to data collection, data analysis was ongoing in nature. Purposeful sampling was most useful to this study because it allowed data review and analysis to be done in conjunction with data collection (Patton, 2002). Holistic analysis and, where applicable, an embedded analysis was used to understand the true conceptions of teachers about student voice (Yin, 2009; Stake, 2005, Creswell, 2013). The data analysis followed grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Lammers & Marsh, 2013), which emphasizes a flexible approach that grounds emerging theory in “the data themselves” (Charmaz, 2006, p.2). I followed the basic grounded theory guidelines of coding, memo writing, sampling, and comparative methods as I simultaneously collected data, analyzed, and interpreted data at every stage of the investigation (Lammers & Marsh, 2013). In the context of this qualitative study, the product of data analysis is not only to provide an in-depth understanding, but also to inform a framework for incorporating student voice into urban high school education in New Jersey because it is based on the “ever-developing” experiences of participants (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p.32). Therefore, grounded theory becomes relevant to this study, at this stage, when theories that are currently documented about student voice in literature fail to adequately explain the phenomenon observed (Ellis & Levy, 2009).

The systematic design that emphasized the use of data analysis steps of open, axial, and selective coding of participants’ words or phrases expressed during the interviews were used to analyze transcribed data. This approach was appropriate for this study because it is a qualitative procedure that explains teachers’ conceptions of student voice “at a broad, conceptual level” (Creswell, 2005, p. 5).

Interviews and Journal Notes

Individual interviews were transcribed verbatim in their entirety and coded by themes. Iterative rounds of data reduction began with open coding directly from the interviews. Similar codes were grouped into categories and similar categories were grouped into themes (Creswell, 2013). This interpretation technique was consistent with the three-step analysis process of open coding, axial coding, and selective coding of participants' words or short phrases (Dey, 1999; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). The initial line-by-line coding was guided by sensitizing concepts and stayed "close to the data" (Charmaz, 2006, p. 49) by using action words and phrases, applying *in vivo* codes of participants' words, working spontaneously, and staying opened as I compared data to data along the way. *In vivo* coding was appropriate for this study because the emerging codes were used to develop categories. Vital to this process was the construction of a codebook that contains an inventory of codes and their descriptions (Creswell, 2013; Yin, 2009).

To ensure the accuracy of procedures, transcribed information was uploaded into qualitative data management software that sorted and coded data with the underlying aim of finding commonalities and analyzing relationships. Axial coding helped me to make sense of how codes relate to each other as *categories* and *subcategories* by using a code map (Anfara, Brown, & Mangione, 2002). Axial coding regrouped data by categorizing codes into patterns and the emerging patterns were used to reveal *central phenomena*, or themes (Creswell, 2013; Stake, 2005; Yin, 2009). Throughout initial, focused, and axial coding, codes and categories emerged from the data (Glaser, 1978), limiting the tendency to superimpose preconceived ideas of the researcher. The selective coding involved

composing an account that integrated the themes from the axial code map. At this point, conditional *propositions* were stated to answer the research questions (Ryan & Bernard, 2003; Yin, 2009).

Observations

This analysis technique involved the use of a pre-determined protocol to record observations. Observation is a form of data collection and was used for the purpose of description of settings, activities, participants, and the meaning of what is observed from the perspective of the participants. It provided an additional data source because I used it to see things that participants themselves were either aware or not aware of, or that they were unwilling to discuss (Hoepfl, 1997; Patton, 1990). This was relevant to the study because they constituted the subjective experience explicitly expressed by the participants during the interview (Seidman, 2006; Yin, 2009). Detailed field notes informed, verified, and, at times, called into question the emergent themes. These extensive observation notes were also used to describe the teachers' conceptions of student voice (Boyer & Bishop, 2004).

Document Analysis

Descriptive coding as an analysis technique was used to summarize, in a short phrase, meanings made from examining documents such as classroom rules, anchor charts, newsletters, and others as related to the study. This technique was relevant to the study because it promoted reflexivity on data as well as the entire research process (Seidman, 2006; Yin, 2009).

In addition to using qualitative software to capture as much information from the recorded transcripts, collected data from multiple sources (interview, observation,

documents, and other artifacts) were assembled to make meaning of teachers' experiences; answers to research questions could be cross-referenced for consistency. From what teachers said and did, clues emerged from the multiple data sources as to whether teachers were just giving "cosmetic answers." From this process, irrelevant data were filtered out to get corroborating evidence as credible answers to the research questions. To further ensure validity, member-checking was frequently used to determine accuracy of recorded interviews. A reliability check was done with different qualitative software used to determine the intercoder agreement rate (Creswell, 2013; Golafshani, 2003; Key, 1997; Melrose, 2001; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Patton, 1990).

Heuristics are a way of engaging in a research aimed at discovery; a way of self-inquiry and dialogue with others to understand the undying meaning of important human experience (Moustakas, 1990). Therefore, the outcome of this analysis was heuristic because my experience at the high school led me to extend my understanding and knowledge to reach for strikingly new insights about teachers' conceptions of student voice in the school. In the course of the research, the participants learned new things about themselves, discovered, and understood their conceptions of student voice (Khin & Fatt, 2010). In other words, the heuristic outcome of the study enhanced the researcher's and participants' learning about the phenomenon of study (Klening & Witt, 2000; Moustakas, 1990). This study allowed presenting findings in form of creative synthesis of excerpts to inform school and district policies that could result into developing structures such as forming a professional learning community on the practice and development of student voice in classrooms and schools (Djuraskovic & Authur, 2010; Casterlines, 2009).

Data Quality and Rigor

Trustworthiness is synonymous to credibility in a qualitative research design (Creswell, 2013). Therefore, establishing trustworthiness of this qualitative case study was paramount to the researcher and it started by choosing an appropriate design that ensured systematic data collection, allowed rigorous data analysis, and supported ethical consideration (Toma, 2006). These elements were necessary to ensure that research findings are credible, dependable, confirmable, and transferable (Creswell, 2013; Lather, 1986; Lincoln & Guba, 2000; Rossman & Rallis, 2003; Toma, 2006).

The process for credibility for this study began with an extensive literature review to search for existing findings, which enabled me to design a coherent structure for the study. The logical structure included the choice of appropriate strategy of inquiry, selecting participants without researcher bias, data collection methods, and data analysis. Credibility for this study was also attained because participants did not consider me to be an external researcher; instead, they saw me as one of them, trying to improve the status quo. Reflexivity as a concept of qualitative research added credibility to the study because the researcher's personal views about the phenomenon were articulated by means of journal writing (Dowling, 2006). The four strategies used in this study to ensure rigor and trustworthiness included triangulation, member-checking, peer debriefing, and audit trial. Multiple data collection sources provided intersecting lines that corroborated and validated evidence collected during the study (Gall, Borg, & Gall, 1996; Golafshani, 2003).

Triangulation

Triangulation is an approach for increasing validity of findings through deliberately seeking evidence from a wide range of sources and comparing findings from those different sources (Patton & Cochran, 2002). Therefore, triangulation involves the cross-checking of data from different dimensions and was used to augment trustworthiness for this study (Toma, 2006; Yin 2003). Multiple data sources and types were used to ensure triangulation: semi-structured interviews, observations, and documents (Esterberg, 2002; Creswell, 2013). Triangulation involves corroborating evidence from different sources to shed light on a theme or perspective.

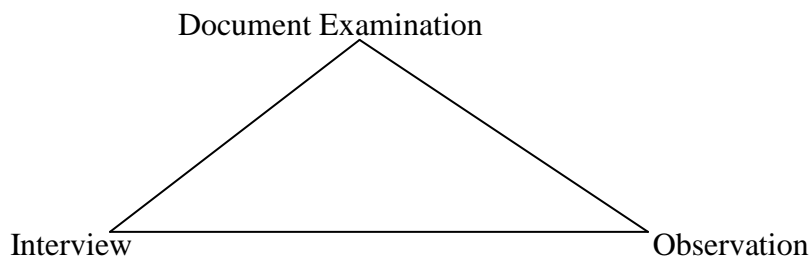


Figure 4. Triangulation of Sources

Triangulation is used in this research to bring together different sources of information to converge or conform to one interpretation. With the convergence of information from different sources documents, interviews, and observation, I can make a powerful argument that the interpretation was more credible (Patton, 2002). The interviews were based on the interview protocol and consisted of open-ended questions.

Observations were analyzed and documents examined to determine corroboration on the content of the interviews (Tamim & Grant, 2013). To ensure consistency and validity of information, observations were done for each of the participants during the same period, two times in two consecutive days. Triangulation is more than just the data collection technique; it also encompasses multiple respondents (Creswell & Miller, 2000; Johnson, 1997; Lincoln & Guba, 2000; Maxwell, 1992; Rubin & Rubin, 2005; Toma, 2006).

Member-checking

Member-checking as a validation strategy involved feeding transcripts and findings back to the participants because it was important for them to assess how far they considered transcripts and findings reflect the issues from their perspective (Patton & Cochran, 2002). Therefore, confirmability was ensured because participants were allowed to check transcripts and notes for correctness recorded information that they communicated to me during the interview process. The essence of confirmability was to enhance internal validity as a trustworthiness construct in data analysis (Anfara, Brown, & Mangione, 2002; Toma, 2006). The transcripts from the recorded interviews were sent to participants as email attachments to review and to make necessary changes (Tamim & Grant, 2013). The intention was to ensure correctness of key points, which I summarized at the end of each interview and gave to participants to review. This was to ensure data transparency and participants' dependability of findings (Toma, 2006). Transparency also gave participants the opportunity to fully understand the purpose of the study and to ensure that what was communicated to me was an accurate account of their expressed experience (Creswell, 2013; Lincoln & Guba, 2000; Saldana, 2009; Yin, 2009; Waters-Adams, 2006).

Peer Debriefing and Expert Review

Trustworthiness in method often implies dependability in qualitative strategy of inquiry because of implied transparency from a clear chain of evidence (Toma, 2006). Therefore, dependability was enhanced by colleagues and experienced researchers' reviews of interview protocol, codes, categories, and themes, as well as using the concept maps to construct teachers' conceptions (Creswell, 2013). Several peer-debriefing sessions were held for consistency in the interview protocol by making sure that no question was ambiguous and asked what it was intended to ask the participants. Different qualitative software was also used to determine the intercoder agreement rate as a way to achieve rigor (Johnson, 1997).

Audit Trail

Trustworthiness is documented in this study by keeping a database that contained all information on every stage of the inquiry. I kept a journal of information on various decisions made during the research, including but not limited to the coding process and the creation of categories and themes. Furthermore, after each interview, the researcher documented his reflection on teachers' personalities and their reactions during the interview. These reflections helped in the construction of teachers' conceptions of student voice (Tamim & Grant, 2013; Toma, 2006).

Negative Case Analysis and Referential Adequacy

To maintain trustworthiness constantly while conducting this qualitative case study, I analyzed data while they were being collected and, shortly after every interview, then made inferences or conclusions, collected more data, analyzed it, and made further inferences (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 1998). Negative case analysis in terms of describing

instances of disagreement with the researcher's interpretation and referential adequacy were conducted during the data analysis process to eliminate researcher's bias. These were imperious of credibility and confirmability of qualitative research because they were undertaken during data analysis for this study (Toma, 2006).

Thick description, in the form of verbatim quotes from research participants, also assisted in underscoring the dependability and trustworthiness of the findings. Hence, transferability was possible because it was the intent of the research to use findings from this study to inform a framework for incorporating student voice into urban high school education in New Jersey (Toma, 2006).

Role of the Researcher

I have many years of teaching experience in urban school settings that ranges from teaching at elementary schools, middle schools, and high schools. I am also familiar with urban education, and live in the community where the study site is located. The fact that I work in the school district facilitated the Superintendent's approval to conduct this research study. Participants were more or less colleagues and I regarded them as co-collaborators because they expressed the frustrations during many faculty and departmental meetings why various reforms have not resulted in improved graduation rate and dropout rates in the school. I recognized that the study was been conducted at a time when teachers in New Jersey have been bombarded with many reforms, such as new Evaluation tool, new Tenure Law, Merit Pay, Common Core State Standards (CCSS), and the Partnership for Assessment of College and Career Readiness (PARCC). Therefore, I recognized the level of anxiety in the teaching profession in New Jersey, explained in detail the purpose of the study, and what it meant to the urban education

setting at faculty meetings before the commencement of the study. I also acknowledged that the timing of the study created opportunities for teachers to express their frustrations while I listened patiently to their voices. I made it clear that the study was not evaluative of their practices in any form or way so that teachers could distinguish my role as an administrator in the district from that of a researcher. For the purpose of the study and to avoid getting my role confused, I decided not to wear a tie every time I was in teachers' classrooms to collect data for this study.

The qualitative research was exclusively designed to investigate teachers' conceptions of student voice without engaging students. Therefore, no student was involved in the study and data collection was limited exclusively to teachers. I used a semi-structured interview to ask questions from the participants, listened actively to their responses, and adapted to unforeseen circumstances that arose during the study (Creswell, 2013; Patton, 2002). Having worked in this high school and in this school district for twelve years, I had a grasp of the phenomenon of study. I ensured that my values did not interfere with the analysis of data by enumerating them before the onset of the research and exclusively designed protocols that eliminated them from the study. I developed converging lines of inquiry by the process of triangulation to cross-reference data for trustworthiness (Brown, 2008; Yin, 2003).

As the researcher, I was interested in multiple interpretations and not just one conception of reality, checked for patterns when analyzing qualitative data rather than one right answer, and used the emerged knowledge to develop a theory rather than confirming a theory (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). I believe in social justice and oppose all forms of exploitation; I clearly explained the benefits and possible risks of this research.

Every participant involved in the study signed a letter of consent and received a copy of it. Furthermore, since my study entailed human subjects, I completed the training required for the Institutional Review Board process to ascertain my total commitment to safety as well as protecting the rights of participants throughout the period of the study. I then obtained the Rowan University Institutional Review Board approval. I ensured that, at no time, the welfare and rights of participants were compromised. The qualitative research was not about morals and no reference was made to it either verbally or explicitly throughout the study. The study was neither evaluative nor prescriptive of teaching methods; however, I expected the findings to positively inform the framework that promotes student voice in school decision-making processes in urban high school education. Confidentiality was maintained and I remained ethical, authentic, and credible throughout the course of this qualitative case study (Creswell, 2013; Melrose, 2001).

Ethical Considerations

Every teacher who participated in this study freely consented to participate, without being coerced or unfairly pressured. Participants were well informed about what participation entailed, and were reassured that withdrawing or declining would not affect them in any way or form (Patton & Cochran, 2002). Researchers and participants are not considered equal in a research study. In this study, I was the interviewer and participants were the interviewees (Seidman, 2006). Conducting research requires that the researcher maintain the highest standards of ethical practice, both with respect to human participants as well as with the execution of professional conduct and judgment throughout the period of inquiry (American Educational Research Association, 2006). Therefore, I adhered to these standards and reported findings accurately and without falsification or fabrication

of data. Research of all kinds has an element of intrusiveness because the researcher more often than not leads the conversation by asking questions and expecting responses in terms of participants' lived experience (Creswell 2013; Maxwell, 2005). I respected participants' time and space and I made sure that interview schedules were mutually agreed upon.

There may be times when participants become defensive and researchers are to remain calm by keeping quiet and later changing the discussion. I believed that it was not the responsibility of the researcher to doubt the responses from participants, but rather to use probes to solicit additional information for clarification purposes (Creswell, 2013). Confidentiality of every participant in the study was guaranteed by not using participants' names (Creswell, 2014). It was therefore, essential to protect the identity of every participant at all times and data was not left lying around in notebooks or un-protected computer files (Patton & Cochran, 2002). I respected the right of every participant and conducted the study in the context of equity because I believed that issues of well-being were to be handled with utmost respect and dedication. Therefore, I sought the approval from the Rowan University Institutional Review Board. Approval was obtained before collecting data for the study because the study involved human subjects as participants.

For ethical purposes, I gave the research protocol for vetting on potential issues before using it. Participants were also given the opportunity to review and make necessary changes in information collected from them. This was necessary because they were considered as co-collaborators in this study (Creswell, 2013; Patton & Cochran, 2002; Yin, 2009).

I reported the research findings according to the highest standard of ethical practice, both with respect to participants and with respect to the execution of professional conduct in research. Participants reviewed the findings before reporting to agree on accuracy and to ensure that they were not reflective of my personal views. As a matter of ethical principle, I was committed to protecting participants' rights, requests, and wishes before reporting the data (American Educational Research Association, 2006; Creswell 2013; Golafshani, 2003; Seidman, 2006).

Conclusion

In summary, I designed this study by using a qualitative case study research because the purpose of the study is to understand the teachers' conceptions of student voice and how they use classroom practices to involve student voice. I used the methodology described in this chapter to gather data relevant to the research questions for this study. The fact that I used the worldview of social constructivism meaning necessitated reflexivity to occur throughout the study. As the researcher, I was interested in how meanings are produced and reproduced within social and phenomenon contexts. Therefore, I was able to maintain reflexivity by demonstrating a methodological and theoretical openness and honest awareness of interactions between the researcher and participants. In essence, keeping record of thoughts, feeling, and activities associated with the study were used to maintain reflexivity (Lambert, Jomeen, & McSherry, 2010; McGhee, Marland, & Arkinson, 2007).

Chapter 4

Findings

The purpose of this chapter is to provide an overview of the findings produced from the data analysis. The focus will be on what teachers in an urban high school conceived as student voice and how their beliefs have been used to shape their classroom practices. A description of code maps, constructed from emergent themes discovered in the data, will also be provided. Lastly, this chapter will act as a bridge to the next two chapters that take the form of manuscripts. Descriptions, including the rationale for the topics chosen, and the intended audience of the articles, will complete this transitional chapter.

Discussion of Findings

Interview transcripts served as the primary data set for this qualitative case study. Discussions with participants took the form of semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions using an interview protocol that allowed a flexible emergent technique of follow-up and probing questions when it was necessary to either clarify or obtain additional information from the participants (Seidman, 2006). Before presenting the study to the participants, I had discussions with the president of the teachers' union. This was done to minimize opposition and increase participation in the study. A large number of teachers volunteered to participate in this study, but I ended data collection when saturation was reached. Sixteen participants were interviewed individually before and after school hours. Each interview lasted between forty-two and sixty minutes. The interviewees were asked to talk about their conceptions of student voice and how each

participant used it in a classroom setting. Interviews were tape-recorded and then transcribed.

Data was also collected by means of observation and participant observation. My role in the school district is that of a central office administrator; therefore, for participants to see me as a researcher, I dressed without a tie and wore a green-colored shirt to participants' classrooms for observations. By minimizing the perception of my administrative position, I sought to build informal relationships with participants in their classroom setting, and, as such, better understood the ways student voice was perceived by them. The discussions we had centered on teachers' conceptions of student voice within its real-life context. This allowed me to understand this contemporary phenomenon, especially when the boundaries and the context are interwoven (Yin, 2009). Material culture such as the school mission and vision statements, classroom rules, lesson plans, and anchor charts were used to develop converging lines of inquiry, which facilitated triangulation and offered findings that were much more accurate and convincing (Yin, 2009).

Through the lens of critical theory and learning theory, findings emerged from the data analysis that demonstrated how teachers' rhetoric is used to produce resounding accounts of the dialogical relationships in the classrooms necessary to enhancing learning within an urban high school context. A summation of these findings follows. The short descriptions provided give an overall account of that which was uncovered during data collection. The final two chapters of this dissertation will more thoroughly detail the research findings.

Opinion Tolerance

Teachers in this urban high school had a clear conception of student voice and had incorporated it into instructional practices. Participants were able to define student voice, which they described as allowing students to express their opinions and views in the classrooms as well as giving them the opportunity to exercise their rights within the school. Participants showed emotion as they talked about their conceptions of student voice. They communicated that student voice is a valuable tool in the classrooms but it could be challenging if it is not properly structured. However, evidence from the material culture varied; the school vision did not reflect student voice but the school mission statement embraced student input. Displayed student work, anchor charts, and the student handbook did not corroborate this finding that teachers embrace student voice in their classrooms. Feedback on student work was minimal and classroom rules did not solicit student input. When teachers were asked why the divergence, they explained that most students do rely on teachers for guidance and, as young adolescents, they look up to their teachers as role models. Therefore, students obey their teachers because they are the adults in the classrooms and tend to follow directive without questioning the underlying rationale. Nonetheless, the teachers strongly felt that student voice in their classrooms promotes teaching and learning when it is planned and guided.

Information collected from interviews, and then from observation and material culture, indicated that teachers planned instructional activities to engage student voice in their classrooms. Instead of students remaining passive in classrooms, participants cited examples that included argumentative writing, collaboration, pair-share, and cooperative

learning when asked to explain how student voice has been used in their lesson planning and their practices.

The participants' conceptions of student voice provided clues to the theme, though they claimed to embrace student voice in their classrooms, data from material culture did not support that claim. The reasoning behind this theme is the common words and phrases found on the school's website, noted in the mission statement, and cited in the student handbook. These institutional scripts served as the texts that guide behavior and action, lend legitimacy to student council, come with state and federal regulatory systems of involving every stakeholder, and long-standing socially approved practices (Rowan & Miskel, 1999). In essence, these documents were in place to drive student aspirations and not necessarily designed to involve student voice in the school.

Voice Integration

The participants explained that they continued to negotiate student voice through the state adopted Common Core State Standards (CCSS). Participants engaged student in instructional strategies that included discussions, debates, and group work to allow student voice in their classrooms. These instructional strategies facilitated student voice because they were able to express their opinions freely in the classrooms. The emerging theme was that teachers use instructional strategies to integrate student voice in their classrooms. They allow students to talk without disrespecting others, share ideas, and talk about issues that affect their learning.

Material culture, posters on the classroom walls, promoted minimal use of student's voice as well. They contained phrases that included "nothing is wrong with trying," "it is wise to ask a question," and "we are here to learn, share ideas, and talk

about things together.” There was an overlap in the participants’ responses to the question that asked them how student voice influences their classroom practices. Most participants expressed the new evaluation tool; the Danielson Model compelled them to involve student voice. However, the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) standardized assessment was seen as an obstacle to using instructional practices to involve student voice. When participants were asked why, the explanations offered ranged from “who knows what the test will contain?” to “we have a lot of materials to cover before test.” Non-choice behavior was a common theme evolving around instructional practices that allows for student voice, and PARCC. Anxiety compelled teachers to relegate student voice and focused on prepping students for the standardized assessments. Therefore, rules were set for students and the participants required compliance as an attempt to ensure a suitable learning and as a way to protect their jobs.

Information collected from interviews, observations, and material culture revealed themes that revolved around instructional strategies and activities, improving learning, intrusions, policies, and unified purpose. Participants cited many examples of instructional practices and forces that either mitigated or enhanced involving student voice as an established classroom norm. Many references in the data indicated the stress educators felt from external and internal expectations placed upon them and the need to meet those expectations. These internal and external forces include school policies, district policies, and mandates from state and federal agencies; including the intrusions from the Regional Achievement Center (RAC), which ironically was established to support the district.

Greater Relationship

Participants believed that listening to student voice before, during, or after instruction enhances teacher-student relationship. It created an atmosphere of trust for students to express their concerns to the teacher and for the teacher to provide necessary assistance. Mutual respect between teachers and students was evident, and based on what participants described as trust; they were able to integrate student voice. Formal and informal interactions were observed as participants promoted the student-teacher relationship by, for example, giving high fives to students during instructional periods.

Participants expressed their feelings that listening to student voice is a matter of trust and gave them satisfaction “despite the baggage students bring to school every day.” Participants expressed that students trust a teacher that listens to their voices and, consequently, reduces the incidences of classroom disruptive behavior. Fewer disciplinary write-ups were submitted by such teachers. Participants were passionate about showing their students that they care about their education and their well-being. In essence, participants said “students believe a teacher that listens to them and does care about their education.” However, when asked why this teacher-student relationship has not led to improve student performance on the High School Proficiency Assessment (HSPA), participants responded that “there are other factors and positive teacher-student relationship alone will not lead to high student performance on the test.” In essence, regardless of the student-teacher interactions in the classrooms, students still need to invest their time and efforts on their academics after the school hours. They need to study at home, complete assignments, and stop cutting classes. Participants showed a strong

conviction that student voice fosters good teacher-student relationship in their classrooms and within the school as a whole.

Participants referenced their role and responsibilities in the school as enacting a successful partnership with their students to engage them in decision-making and improvement-related practices in their classrooms. Participants believed that listening to student voice encouraged students' aspirations in the classrooms because they are aware that their voice is being heard and therefore, get involved in their education. At the time of conducting this study, mentoring, School Leadership Council (SLC), Positive Behavior Intervention and Support (PBIS), and Character Building programs were in the school. Therefore, programs that promote teacher-student relationship have been put in place that validated the relationship that the participants claimed to uphold.

School Policy

Participants believed that student voice should be allowed to flourish in classrooms and school because they considered it the link that brings all stakeholders together to improve the school image. There was a difference in the way participants felt about how to incorporate student voice into the culture of the school. Some participants believed that student voice should be part of the school fabric because there is the tendency for students to respect adults in school when student voice is embraced in school. Other participants believed that incorporating student voice into the school culture required a collective responsibility from the administrators supporting it, teachers believing in it, and student appreciating that their voices matter in the school. A couple of participants felt that the prevailing disconnect in the school resulted from the "inability of teachers to understand students' predicaments made it difficult for them to treat students

the way they will want others to treat their children.” Yet, participants shared the belief that as adults in the classrooms, they make the rules for students to follow because when rules are made with students, it often resulted in classroom management issues.

Associated Challenges

The participants felt that allowing student voice comes with some challenges because the school is located in an area that is “ripped apart by constant violence and gang activities; students come to school with these challenges.” It was widely expressed by the participants that as a result of frequent street violence, “students see school as a safe place, and they do not really care about getting an education.” Most participants believed that “as much as you want to give students every opportunity to voice their opinions in the classroom, there is always the tendency for abuse because students often take it as a weakness on the part of teachers.”

It was suggested that this challenge is a result of students who come to the district’s high school come from middle schools where teachers promote student voice in the classroom. The general opinion of participants is that students from these schools, who were accustomed to being listened to, had conflict upon entering some high school classes where teachers allow less student voice. Participants felt that these students tend to think that “teachers must listen to them and it is acceptable to express their opinions by being disruptive and dis-respective in the classrooms.” Therefore, these students see disruptive behavior as an acceptable approach to express their opinions and views in the classrooms.

Participants claimed that cultural capital can pose a problem to student voice in classrooms and school. When asked how, the explanation was that students who came

from a culture where the belief is that the teachers are always right found it difficult to express their opinions, even when teachers are ready and willing to listen and act on student voice. Participants cautioned that allowing student voice in the classroom is rewarding, but the teachers must be careful because “students often take it as a weakness on the part of teachers.” They felt that if student voice is not controlled, the teacher can lose control because of the unruly behavior in the classroom. When the classroom control is lost, the learning environment becomes chaotic, and using dialogue to involve student voice is impacted negatively.

Code Maps

The abovementioned findings are displayed in code maps (Table 5), that follow, adapted from Anfara, Brown, and Mangione (2002). These maps display, for the reader, the emergent conceptions and how they develop into themes, data application, and finally, an interpretation of the data as a whole.

Table 5

Code Map for Research Data

Research Questions	Codes
What are the teachers' conceptions of student voice in an urban high school in New Jersey?	Voice and conception
How do urban high school teachers use classroom practices to involve student voice?	Practices and involve
How does student voice shape the teacher-student relationship in an urban high school in New Jersey?	Relationship and shape
How can the findings inform a framework for incorporating student voice into urban high school education in New Jersey?	Inform and incorporate

Third Iteration: Interpretation

Participants valued listening and acting on students' voice to improve their choice of instructional practices so that they can reach every student in their classrooms. However, it is often difficult to implement on a consistent basis because students see and live with violence and gang activities which in most cases transcend into school. In addition, teachers' willingness to involve student voice as a source of empowerment and as an avenue to bring forth leadership qualities in students is inhibited by pressures arising from conflicting policies from district and government agencies. The behavior and actions of the participants in this study are a result of many factors, which include job protection. As participants carried out their contractual responsibilities, they become cautious about making the school culture inclusive of student voice.

Second Iteration: Themes/Data Application

- | | |
|--------------------------|----------------------|
| 1. Opinion tolerance | 2. Voice integration |
| 3. Greater relationship | 4. School policy |
| 5. Associated challenges | |

First Iteration: Initial Codes/Surface Content Analysis

- | | |
|---|--------------------------------|
| 1A. Opportunity to express opinions and views | 3C. Classroom management |
| 1B. Voice is valuable | 3D. Disruptive behavior |
| 1C. Allow & Tolerate student voice | 4A. Evaluation tool |
| 2A. Conflicting policies & mandates | 4B. Violence & Gang activities |
| 2B. Too many assessments | 4C. Respect & Care |
| 2C. Formal and Informal interactions | 4D. Shared leadership |
| 2D. Instructional practices | 5A. Collective responsibility |
| 2E. Intrusion & Job security | 5B. Discipline & Control |
| 5C. Empowering students | 5D. Relationship & Trust |

Conclusion

The remaining two chapters of this dissertation will be in article format for publication. Each scholastic article will explore a paramount finding in this study in more depth. The two topics featured in the next chapters relate to the teachers' conceptions of student voice in an urban high school in New Jersey. These topics were chosen to discuss conceptions of student voice and how the findings can be used as a framework for incorporating student voice into urban high school education in New Jersey.

Findings from this study that included allowing student voice in classrooms, using instructional strategies to facilitate student voice, and listening to student voice enhances the teacher-student relationship were used to develop the first manuscript, entitled "Integrating student voice: An opportunity for inclusive urban high school education." This article was created to meet the specifications for publication of *The High School Journal*. This is a journal that focused on scholarly articles of general significance to the field of secondary education. The second manuscript will be based on the remaining two findings, which are student voice in classrooms comes with some challenges and student voice should be incorporated into the culture of the school. The manuscript will be titled "A framework for student voice: A learning Mechanism to build a culture of inclusion in urban high schools." This article was developed to meet the criteria of *Urban Education*, a journal focused on issues of importance to urban education. My dissertation chair, Dr. Ane Turner Johnson, and I are listed as co-authors on each manuscript. Reference lists accompany both manuscripts. A complete reference list that includes citations from chapters one through four and the manuscripts concludes this dissertation.

Chapter 5

Integrating Student Voice: An Opportunity for Inclusive Urban High School Education

Abstract

This qualitative case study was designed to explore teachers' conceptions of student voice in an urban high school and how teachers use classroom practices to involve student voice. This study took place in an urban high school and revealed four key themes that explained teachers' conception of student voice: soliciting ownership, voice integration, urban context, and dissonance. The viewpoints offered by the teachers in this study provided valuable insight into a disenfranchised non-inclusive school environment in the current era of standardization and accountability. This study also offered insight into the need to correct the deliberate neglect of student voice and consequently make urban high schools inclusive.

Current discourse on the declining nature of urban education had led to various reform policies to address chronic absenteeism, high dropout rate, low graduation rate, violence, disruptive behavior, poor academic achievement, and inadequate college readiness (Dianda, 2008; Giroux, 2003; Smyth, 2006; Steinberg & McCray, 2012). Meanwhile, the accountability component of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) has not resulted in any evidence of improvement in urban high school education. Yet, students in urban high schools constitute a proportional amount of all students in K – 12 public schools, and still remain a disenfranchised and underachieving segment of the nation’s school system (Howard 2003), despite attempts to address this through various policy mechanisms.

Within the traditional paradigm of education, high schools are seen as the proverbial “equalizer” that opens up opportunities for young adults to flourish in an egalitarian society (Dianda, 2008; Howard, 2003; Messacar & Oreopoulos, 2012). High school education is expected to prepare these adolescents for a democratic society as productive parts of the nation’s economy. However, the statistics demonstrate that urban schools are not meeting this need because of high dropout and low graduation rates. There is an incongruence that exists between the mission statement of urban schools and the school environment that is typical of less involvement of students in their schooling. This promotes the stereotype of poor performance and low esteem associated with students in urban schools since classroom practices have failed to meet the diverse students’ needs (Hudley, 2013). This failure results from low teacher expectation, inadequate preparation for the future challenges, and increase in punitive actions. As a

result, urban high schools have become sites of resistance, alienation, silence, and are ultimately non-inclusive of inputs from the students (Howard, 2003).

The purpose of this paper is to address how teachers' conceptions of student voice and classroom practices could be used to create an opportunity to make urban education inclusive of student voice. We will contextualize the issue by conducting the study in an urban high school and how teachers used their practices in shaping the everyday democracy in classrooms. Through teachers' actions on student voice, a culture of inclusion can be created to make participatory democracy prevails in urban education. We offer findings from a qualitative study that sought to establish the fact that integrating student voice should not be disguised to mean the traditional school activities that promote student council but that which enhances learning and being together as a school community to address the evils that inhibit progress in urban education. Finally, we assert that teachers talked about listening to student voice, yet they were not able to define clearly how classroom practices are used to involve it. Instead, teachers were able to articulate how government initiatives compelled them to integrate student voice in classrooms. Precisely, integrating student voice was never intentional and it remains a long uphill teachers struggle with in urban education. The structure in urban schools setting is such that perpetuates social injustice in urban education.

Education and Urban School Reform

Poor academic achievement among students in urban schools has been a discussion over the past decade. However, current reform discourses have exposed the challenges facing urban education, and with sixty-four percent of the students receiving free or reduced price lunches is an indication that their families are at or near the federal

poverty level (Hudley, 2013; Storz, 2008). The notion that education is designed to produce citizens that contribute to the nation's Gross Domestic Product has remained an illusion for the majority of the urban students because of high dropout rates. Urban high schools being insufficient and inadequate make students in these schools less competitive in the present day economy than their counterparts in affluent schools (Fletcher, 2009; Hudley, 2013).

The discourse on urban school reform continued to present sub-standard conditions in the quality of education students received because classes in urban schools are more likely to be taught by underqualified teachers, substitute teachers, and teachers teaching outside their content areas (Hudley, 2013; Milner, 2013). Combined with inadequate funding, outdated instructional materials, fewer opportunities to learn, and deteriorating facilities make education in urban schools sub-standard compared to their counterparts in low poverty schools (Hudley, 2013). More than often, school buildings are defined by dirty bathrooms which undermine students' self-esteem and their ability to concentrate in schools (Hudley, 2013). Poor on-task behavior remains the core indicator of low motivation and disengagement in urban education (Hudley, 2013). These conditions often render urban schools sites of developmental risk rather than being a supportive environment that is designed to enhance productive educational outcomes. The resulting effect is diminished student engagement, disruptive behavior, poor academic performance, chronic absenteeism, high dropout rates, and low graduation rates (Dianda, 2008; Giroux, 2003; Hudley, 2013, Lewis et. al, 1998; Smyth, 2006).

The urban school reform discourse has resulted in incremental improvement, but still leaves urban schools less motivating to students compared to their counterparts in

much affluent schools (Smyth, 2006). This raises the question of how can urban education better serve the student population that live in high-poverty areas?

Student Voice and Urban High Schools

Urban high schools located in cities in the United States, Canada, and Britain are in crisis (Kozol, 2005; Ruddock, Chaplain, & Wallace, 1996). Despite intense endeavors to promote educational change, the demons of chronic absenteeism, high dropout rate, violence, and low graduation rates remain typical of urban high schools. These issues in urban high schools signal a disconnect between teachers and students and have made high school reform initiatives deficient of students' needs (Sands, Guzman, Stephens, & Boggs, 2007). Therefore, students become detached from matters that affect their education (Giroux, 1989; Mitra & Gross, 2009). As adults in schools continue to neglect student voice, students become "disengaged from schooling, cut classes, and drop out of school" in large numbers (Mitra, 2004, p. 652). The failure to integrate student voice in urban high schools raises the question of how long teachers and administrators will continue to cope with non-inclusive schools where students' opinions never matter (Giroux, 2003).

Voice is more than spoken words, it is an expression of opinions and views on what matters most to an individual or a group of people. Voice is a tool used in a democratic society to express feelings on various issues in the society (Fletcher, 2005; Mitra, 2003). The conceptualization of voice makes it possible to view voice, based on power relation of who is speaking, who is listening, and who is acting on the spoken words, especially when language is the tool through which voice is expressed (Batchelor, 2006). Therefore, student voice is a systemic representation of students' opinions in

classrooms and schools to influence conversations around forming a partnership with teachers and school administrators (Giroux, 1989; Mitra & Gross, 2009). The concept of voice has been explained in terms of epistemological voice – the voice of knowing, the practical voice - the voice for doing, and an ontological voice - a voice for being and becoming (Batchelor, 2006). However, it is the ontological voice that is less valued and more vulnerable in schools. It is the vulnerability of student voice that inhibits dialogical education in schools and makes it easy to marginalize students in schools. The dialogical education premised voice on participatory democracy where both teachers and students are co-constructors of knowledge. In other words, both the teachers and students learn from one another as partners without the teachers exercising authority and control over the students; and students do not have to perpetuate disruptive behavior as a form of expressing their feelings (Friere, 2007; Giroux, 1989).

Furthermore, Article 12(1) of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child mandates that children be able to have input on matters that affect them in schools. Student input should be weighted in accordance with the age and maturity of the child (Kozol, 2005; Lundy, 2007). Therefore, integrating student voice will serve this mandate as well as make schools inclusive of all stakeholders. A remarkable resurgence in recent years has witnessed the implementation of school-based management or site-based management across the globe, but neither practice has resulted in significant improvement in schools (Cook-Sather, 2002; Yonezawa & Jones, 2009). Additionally, there is an absence of attention in the reform literature regarding changing the role of students, who continue to be substantially excluded from the discussion (Mensfield et al., 2012).

Teaching in Urban Schools

The issue of teacher quality is considered central to keep students persist in schools and has a significant impact on student achievement with a key indicator of teacher experience being related to student performance. Urban schools are typical of inexperienced teachers, teachers teaching outside their content knowledge, and higher teacher turnover (Goldhaber, 2007; Gordon, Kane, & Staiger, 2006; Rivkin, Hanushek, & Kain, 2005; Lee, 2004). The low teacher retention rate makes it harder for urban schools to build an experienced teaching core, thus creating a problem of retaining experienced teachers to teach students with diverse needs (Goldhaber, 2008). This problem is compounded by the fact that many urban school districts do lay off teachers to make up for budget deficits in a given year while they are simultaneously recruiting teachers to remedy their chronic shortages (Haberman, 2000; Harper, 2015; Reid, 2000).

The profile of teachers who succeed and stay in urban school districts indicates those have attended urban schools themselves, have completed a bachelor's degree in college but not necessarily in education, and do have another part-time or full-time job (Haberman, 2000; Olson, 2000). Teachers in urban schools were not adequately prepared to cope with the diverse culture of students and they often escalate rather than deescalating student behavior problems leading to more student suspensions and expulsions (Haberman, 2000; Harper, 2015). Therefore, classroom management is a concern for teachers in urban schools and the absence of essential skill to prevent disruptive behavior has negative outcomes for teachers. The consequences of which include high stress, burnout, and teachers' ineffectiveness (Anhorn, 2008).

The concept of conceptions is predicated on the cultural challenges teachers in urban schools struggle with and consequently affects the types of classroom practices and policies typical of this educational setting. Teachers in urban schools bring a set of beliefs that serve as a breeding ground for the dysfunctional perceptions of students' intellectual abilities—particularly those students who are culturally and linguistically diverse in this learning environment. As a result, teachers' conception fits into the structural challenges and consequently impedes their ability to effectively educate the most vulnerable students in urban schools (Noguera, 2003).

The irony in urban high school reform movement is that it advocates one kind of practice for adults in school systems, and a very different practice for its clientele – the students (Cook-Sather, 2002). However, the clamor to make these schools inclusive should at least, in part, give the least powerful (the students) a voice on matters that affect their educational experiences (Cobertt & Wilson, 1995; Czeniawski, Garlick, Hudson, & Peter, 2009; Fletcher, 2005; Mitra, 2003; Ruddock, 2003). The consequences of not integrating student voice in urban high schools have implications on teachers' beliefs, classroom practices, and student-teacher relationships (Joseph, 2006; Kozol, 2005; Morrison, 2008; Pearson, 2008). Therefore, including student voice in educational matters in schools carries both philosophical and practical questions. Philosophically, in a democratic society, what is the rightful place of student voice in school? Pragmatically, does involving student voice improve student engagement in classrooms? Does student voice in classroom practices improve learning and as a result academic achievement (Jagersma & Parsons, 2011)? These questions prompt a deeper understanding of teachers'

conceptions of student voice, and the potential for increased learning in urban high school when student voice is solicited, listened to, and acted upon.

Methods

This study began with a broad question about teachers' conceptions of student voice in an urban high school. After much consideration, it was decided that the best way to gain an in-depth understanding was through a qualitative case study (Merriam, 1998). This case study was informed by the rigor of Yin (2009) and enriched by the creative interpretation described by Stake (2008). A case study approach was preferred because the "focus [was] on a contemporary phenomenon within some real-life context" (Yin, 1984, p.1); and required that we dig "into meanings, working to relate them to context" (Stake, 2005, p. 450). Hence, it is not the purpose of this qualitative case study to present findings that represent all urban high schools, but to inform a framework for incorporating student voice into urban high school education in New Jersey. The study was guided by the following research questions:

1. What are teachers' conceptions of student voice in an urban high school in New Jersey?
2. How do urban high school teachers use classroom practices to involve student voice?
3. How does student voice shape the teacher-student relationship in an urban high school in New Jersey?
4. How can the findings inform a framework for incorporating student voice into urban high school education in New Jersey?

Context

This study took place in an urban high school in New Jersey. It is located in a township that was designated as having the lowest socio-economic status by the State of New Jersey; about 50.9% of the students receive free or reduced lunch (FRL) (New Jersey Department of Education, 2013). The school's academic performance, college and career readiness, graduation and post-secondary readiness significantly lagged in comparison to schools across the state and to its peers (New Jersey Department of Education, 2013).

Ninety-one percent of the students enrolled at this school were Black, 9% Hispanic, 0.3% Asian, and 0.1% were Pacific Islander. Thirteen percent of the students were classified as having disabilities and 15% were classified as Limited English proficient (LEP). The graduation rate in 2013 was 60.8%, compared to the state's average of 83%, and there is a dropout rate of 2.8% compared to the state's average of 1.4% (New Jersey Department of Education, 2013; Stetser & Stillwell, 2014). This school is typical of an urban high school where many students come to school not prepared to learn and many are negatively affected by poverty, drugs, alcohol, poor health, and gang-related violence. To a greater extent, this high school is a reflection of its immediate environment as well as the myriad of urban ills (Lipman, 2015)

Participants

Purposeful sampling ensured that participant selection was based on representativeness of the concept of student voice rather than representativeness of school site (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). The use of this strategy allowed selection that was not based on the diversity within the teaching staff but rather ensured credibility of sample

and consistency of data (Creswell, 2013; Patton, 2002). Though the sample size was expected to change as fieldwork unfolded, sample selection was allowed up to the point of saturation, when participant' responses became repetitive (Lincoln & Guba, 2000; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Patton, 1990). Over 25 certificated teachers volunteered to participate in the study but only 16 of them were interviewed. Nine of the 16 participants were male, three African-American, four Haitian, and two Iranian. The seven other participants were female, two African-American, two Haitian, one Hispanic, one Indian, and one Caucasian. All the 16 teachers who participated in the study were tenured, had assigned classrooms, and taught core subjects to students in grades nine through 12. Ten of the 16 participants had been teaching at the site of study for a period of 12 to 15 years, three had seven to 11 years, and three had four to six years of teaching experience. Most importantly, all 16 participants had teaching schedules that allowed them to meet with the same group of students every other day. Pseudonyms were used to ensure confidentiality of the participants in the study.

Data Collection

Multiple data collection methods were used in this qualitative case study: informal semi-structured interview, participant observation, and document examination. We, as the researchers, served as the instruments of data collection and took into consideration the total context by interviewing the participants as well as recording non-verbal responses (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Merriam, 1998). Sixteen certificated teachers were interviewed,, including follow-up interviews, equaling 22 interviews in total. In-depth interviews were conducted and triangulated with observations and document

analysis to gain an understanding on the teachers' conceptions of student voice and how teachers have used classroom practices to integrate student voice.

In addition to interviews, we also collected data from documents from the school and district websites and downloaded, vision statement, mission statement, and student code of conduct. During classroom visits, we examined teachers' feedback on displayed students' work, classroom rules, reviewed student-teacher conference form, disciplinary write-ups, and posted lesson plan. We also collected other documents that we believed would aid our understanding of teachers' conceptions of student voice. These artifacts or material culture were examined to support observations, added to interview probes, and supplied additional data that were helpful in clarifying what teachers had described in their interviews (Rossman & Rallis, 2003). However, we were critical of the content of these documents because they were not written intentionally for this study, but for different purposes and audiences (Hodder, 2005). Supplemental data collection procedures used in the study included reflective journals kept by the researchers and the contents were used to augment the primary data collection procedures (Janesick, 1999).

Data Analysis

The semi-structured interviews were recorded and then transcribed yielding multiples of pages of single-spaced text. We read and coded the transcripts. The transcribed information was uploaded into qualitative data management software that sorted and coded data with an underlying aim of finding commonalities and analyzing relationships (Anfara, Brown, & Mangione, 2002). Axial coding regrouped data by categorizing codes into patterns and the emerging patterns were used to reveal themes

(Creswell, 2013; Stake, 2005; Yin, 2009). The categories that emerged from the clustering the coded data were collapsed into these themes and are presented thusly.

Positionality

We acknowledge that our positions as administrators and academics influenced the nature of this study. One of us was a central office administrator in the district where this study took place; therefore we realized that we would be faced with possible road-blocks to teachers' participation in the study. More importantly, we recognized that the study was to be conducted at a time when teachers are being bombarded with many reforms that range from a new evaluation tool and the controversial Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Career (PARCC) standardized test which ties students' performances to teachers' evaluation. The stake was high for teachers because of the associated implications on job security. To minimize participation issues from the teachers, we had unofficial approval of the president of the teachers' association before starting the study in the school. Recognizing the level of anxiety in the teaching profession, and the need to ensure accurate data collection, we conducted interviews before and after school hours and classroom observations were conducted wearing clothing that indicated a change in role, from administrator to researcher. The idea was to position ourselves as researchers and not as administrators, and by doing so, participants did not see the data collected as evaluative in any form.

Findings

Teachers in this urban high school had a clear conception of student voice and had incorporated it into instructional practices. Teachers communicated that student voice is an important tool necessary to make school inclusive but it could be challenging if it is

not properly structured. Evidence from the material culture varied, but teachers explicitly believed that most students rely on them for guidance which is not related to the use of student voice. The teachers expressed the new evaluation system and high-stakes standardized testing as the mechanisms that forced them to use classroom practices that elicited student voices. However, anxiety compelled teachers to relegate student voice for fear of losing control of the classroom and loss of job protection due to poor evaluations. Nevertheless, teachers believed that integrating student voice before, during, or after instruction enhanced teacher-student relationship and created an atmosphere of trust where students and teachers interact freely with one another. Below we present these findings as themes, consistent with our qualitative design, and use data elicited from our participants to illustrate the nature of these themes as well as open our interpretations up to public scrutiny (Anfara, Brown, & Mangione, 2002).

Soliciting Ownership

Student voice is an important component of the teaching and learning process in schools, and participants acknowledged the value of student perspectives on curriculum and instruction because it provided an opportunity to observe the teaching and learning process. The perspectives included attitudes on partnering with students to identify problems and possible solutions, students expressing their feelings at curricular planning meetings, planning and co-creating learning units and instructional activities with students, and involving students in school matters that affect their present and future educational experiences. For example, participant Hammy said that “some students who have dealt with issues of both segregation and racism or just overcoming oppression changed the classroom discussions” as students prepared for the District’s Dr. Martin

Luther King's essay prompt. Participant Hammy had to change the lesson plan for the week to reflect issues of racism and oppression in urban municipalities. This was an occasion when the teacher used students' opinions to plan and modify instructional activities around racism and oppression for the week. In essence, concrete activities were defined and created by the students as a result of expressing their opinions on contemporary issue (Koliba, 2000; Morrison, 2008). In the process, participants made adjustments in the way they conduct classroom business and offered the students to take responsibility for their education. It is "a starting point for enabling those who have been silenced or marginalized ... to reclaim the authorship of their lives" (Giroux, 1989, p.63).

It was commonly stated by participants that involving student voice on school matters was very important because it made students take responsibility and ownership for improvement in their schools. As stated by our participant Angel:

Student voice is important and should be taken into consideration in our practices because by giving them a chance to express their opinions and views; we are helping them to take responsibility for their education and make them proud of their school. Allowing students to express freely their opinion is truly a way of involving student voice in my classroom. This is true because when parents, teachers and students are involved, the school stands the chance of seeing improvement. Allowing student voice in classrooms and schools is a way to see things from their eyes so that adults can make necessary adjustments to reduce conflicts and in the end [is] beneficial to all.

Our participant ROA reaffirmed that:

I am tolerant to my students' views and opinions. I believe that listening to student voice is an eye opener for many teachers because it helps us as teachers to tolerate opinions that may not be the same with ours and we can use these opinions to modify our classroom practices so that instructions and lessons are meaningful and relevant to their experiences. I see student voice as valuable to schooling because it makes the students to trust teachers and the teachers more caring.

When students are given the opportunity to express their opinions and views, they exercise the freedom to decide what, when, and how they want to learn. They also develop an increasing independence, a stronger interest, and a better quality of democratic education in schools (Morrison, 2008). When students have the freedom and choice in the learning process, they become better citizens because they have learned how to negotiate with other to improve their learning experiences (Dewey, 2004; Fielding 2004).

However, participants believed that involving student voice should not be left uncontrolled because of possible abuse. Our participant Carla expressed that:

Um, let's see. I pay attention to my students by listening to what they have to say whether in the hallway or in my classroom. I talk to them for a moment and listen to what they feel is important. I then try to use those ideas in my classroom. However, you can never take these students for granted. One moment they are nice, the next moment they are nasty. Hence, I make sure that my classroom is well structured to accommodate student voice when it is necessary and do away with it whenever I envisage a potential problem. As a teacher, I run the show and be very cautious of when to allow student voice and when not to. These students can put you in trouble real quick if you are not on top of game in your classroom.

Students are not adults and they need teachers to guide them to become responsible young adults in the society. Hence, integrating student voice should not negate the importance of showing respects to adults and does not equate students to teachers.

Voice Integration

Participants felt convinced that they used classroom practices to integrate student voice because they desired to create a learning environment that promoted the essence of democracy. Participants believed that they took democracy and citizenry seriously and created a dialogical learning environment.

According to Snoopy,

I stay away from being an actor on the stage to a facilitator of learning. I allow students to express their opinions through collaboration and discussions to enrich learning in my classroom. I have allowed their voice to change the course of the lesson. In the process, they bring their voice to bear in my classroom. That's why I arranged my classroom like this so that they can hear and listen to one another. However, I am very conscious not to allow student voice to get out of hand in my classroom. As a teacher of History, I believe in student voice and integrate it daily in my classrooms, I am happy someone is talking about it in the district but too many things will make it difficult to implement it fully.

The teacher's role in shaping the everyday involvement of student voice was important because through their actions they have created a culture of inclusion where teachers and students had participatory role to improve the quality of learning experience in urban classrooms and schools. This changed the dynamics of students from been passive to active learners. Our participant Plato expressed that:

I use Socratic Method of teaching because it is important to integrate student voice to avoid regimentation of ideas. I use the lesson to cultivate student voice, stimulate and motivate discussion. I build lessons around dialogue, students' experiences and background, and reflection to expose them to the difference in cultural linkage. The voice of reasoning dictates that I use classroom practices to involve student voice. I understand all these perfectly but many teachers, including administrators do not understand all these. Though we see things in opposite direction especially when I tend to sound like their parents, yet I still integrate and respect their voice in my classroom and should be the same thing in the school.

Teachers built a learning community that valued tolerance and respect diversity as a tool that promoted a foundation that offered the opportunity to disagree and see thing differently but not in adversary way. The resulting effect was a school community that strived hard to make improvement in the academic achievement of students.

Participants revealed that there is a great deal of potential for students to learn and persist in schools when classroom practices are used to integrate student voice. Tapping

these potentials will eventually reduce dropout rates and increase graduation rates in this urban high school. M&M expressed that:

Right, right, I have students who are not “A” students, they are not “B” students, and they are not even “C” students but they don’t cut my class because they know that I do listen to them and use their feelings to motivate them so that they are ready to learn. Involving student voice in my classroom is a good way to gauge students’ feelings and use it to modify instruction accordingly. Most students believe that I am the best teacher because I listen to their opinions and use it to make them believe that graduation is possible and career is possible only when they attend school regularly. I have not taken a sick day this year and student attendance in my class has been about 99% for the past three months.

Once students know that teachers give them the opportunity to express their feelings “which in most cases are personal rather than academics, they believe that they have the influence and voice” in the classroom (Joselowsky, 2005, p.23). As a result of this, teachers become more open to student voice and include students in designing instructional programs, both individually and in groups (Joselowsky, 2005; Rudduck, 2003). The moment teachers include students in co-creating learning opportunities in the classrooms, schooling become relevant to their interest, attend school regularly, and put more personal effort to succeed in schools.

The Urban Context

When participants were asked what they desired from their students, they indicated a need to build trust and a caring relationship with their students. Participants went further to state that a caring relationship with their students promotes academic achievement because of the resulting positive feelings that made students to increase their efforts in schools. Integrating student voice in high schools was described as the glue that will increase students’ persistence in schools and consequently increases graduation rates because of the existing teacher-student relationship. Participants in this study valued a

good relationship with their students and they believe that teachers who engage student voice do have an impact on students' actions and behavior. Participants expressed that they do care about their students' education because it gives them satisfaction "despite the baggage students bring to school every day." Moe expressed that:

Students trust a teacher that listens to their voices and, consequently, reduces the incidences of classroom disruptive behavior. Fewer disciplinary write-ups were submitted by such teachers. I care about the feelings and well-being of my students, therefore, I build a relationship that last even after they graduated from college. However, integrating student voice in classrooms can be a problem when you let it gets out of hand and you don't want to appear weak, and there is no support from the administrators. Remember that teachers need their job too.

According to Sweet Heart:

I speak to my students with a tone that is not high, yet they can all hear, I speak to them with respect and they trust me. Every day, I look forward to a greater relationship that lasts for a very long time. I do care about my students and they listen to me. Note problem can arise especially when students abuse it for whatever reason and this can create a serious issue if you don't get necessary support from assistant principals. That been said, most teachers really don't understand what these students are going through in their private life. More so, many teachers allude to the dynamics of urban life which is very complex. I grew up in the projects and I understand the urban life. Believe it or not, you have to live it to understand it.

In essence, urban education is not about leaving the problems on the doorstep of urban schools and blame students for poor performance, poor graduation rates, and high dropout rates but embracing it by acknowledging their voice to build an inclusive culture in urban schools. The fact that most teachers in urban schools do not understand the plight of living in poverty and constant fear is an indication that more has to be done to improve the structure that isolates student voice in urban education. When trust, care and relationship prevail in urban education, then the existing pervasive disengagement among

teachers and students will disintegrate to promote partnership, ownership, and makes inclusion of student voice attainable.

Integrating student voice adds another dimension to the urban education discourse because the resultant positive student-teacher relationship in the school can act as a catalyst for improvement in school climate, classroom environment, and teachers' attitudes toward urban students. Urban high school is a reflection of its immediate environment, and if the school is going to change the street mentality which students bring to school daily, the teacher-student relationship has to be based on caring attitude and trust. However, participants reiterated that living in urban area is not easy; it is more complex than what most teachers think and that "you have to live it to understand it."

As much as teachers valued and were willing to integrate student voice and make their classroom inclusive, they were "constrained by not having supportive school administrators necessary to curb the excesses that can result" from making an urban high school inclusive of student voice. Teachers did not want to be seen as weak by students and school administrators; therefore, they put more emphasis on "not losing classroom management to protect their jobs" rather than integrating student voice.

Dissonance

Participants showed their appreciations for student voice; however, examining documents that included school mission statement, lesson plans, displayed student work, student handbook, disciplinary reports, and notice of concern form revealed that these documents were not primarily designed to integrate student voice in the school. Though participants claimed to believe in student voice as an approach to restructure the school, most instruction practices observed were teacher-centered and element of fear was

evident in classrooms. Feedbacks on displayed students' work were either "excellent," or "good job," or "keep it up" with nothing meaningful that reflected their claim of integrating student voice. The dissonance was glaring in the lesson plans we examined because none of the instructional practices and strategies listed in the document made mention of student voice as a tool used to deliver instruction in classrooms.

As much as the participants talked about involving student voice in their daily practices, none of the documents examined, such as student handbook, educational contract, uniform grading policy, vision and mission statements, and student code of conduct has a line that was indicative of integrating student voice in the school. In the document titled *Students' Rights and Responsibilities*, the student council association is charged to "foster better attitudes, develop leadership, promote harmonious relationship, and to act as a forum for student concerns" but made no mention of soliciting student voice in the entire document. According to participants, the mission statement, the school vision, and student handbook were not inclusive of student voice because "these documents were motivational things to guide students" through the four-year high school education and not necessarily to make the school inclusive of student voice.

Discussion and Implications

Though schools were established to serve primarily the students and teachers developed practices to deliver instruction in classrooms with the students as the central focus, student voice is largely excluded from educational matters in urban high schools (Fletcher, 2005; Howard, 2003; Mitra & Frick, 2010). The findings in this study revealed that participants believed using student voice in the classroom increased learning, reduced dropout rates, and increased graduation rates when integrated to make urban high

schools inclusive. However, teachers were challenged in their use of voice by the accountability regime, fear regarding their employment, and a context that demanded teachers assert authority in the classroom to maintain control over student behavior.

While literature talked about the need to integrate student voice in the classrooms, little has been said about how to manage difficult behavior associated with it which continued to make classroom management one of the greatest concerns among urban teachers (Milner & Tenore, 2010). Therefore, the absence of a simple strategy to prevent behavior problems made urban teachers turned to the use of authority to control classrooms from becoming a center of chaos. This became necessary more than before in this era of accountability when student performance is tied to teacher's evaluation. Learning suffered when urban teachers spent instructional time addressing behavior problems and this could be a signal "between a bright beginning to an exciting career or reason for an early exit" (Hovland, 2008, p. 4).

The educational inequality that exists in urban education in terms of deteriorating structure and facilities, poor quality of instruction, chronic absenteeism, high dropout rates, and low graduation rates, the findings in this study demonstrated that critical implications could be gleaned from integrating student voices through a social justice lens. Though participants believed in greater relationship with their students, what was apparent was that participants were not well equipped to understand the dynamics of urban life which often resulted into a missed opportunity for the said "greater teacher-student relationship." Therefore, findings from this study were consistent with other literature because it was evident that most teachers in urban high schools still have difficulty creating a classroom environment that fosters shared responsibility between the

teachers and the urban high school students (Jagersma & Parson, 2011; Lallas & Valle, 2007; Mitra & Gross, 2009; Niegel, 2006)

Moreover, participants took student voice to mean “raising up their hands to answer questions asked by the teacher.” However, they felt that it was not enough for students to simply “keep quiet while the instruction was being delivered,” but be active scholars who participated in discussions that permeated the whole classroom as opposed to the one-on-one talk between a student and the teacher. The new evaluation tool has a domain on student engagement and was taken to mean “the number of students and how many times they raised up their hands to respond to the teacher’s questions during evaluation.” On the contrary, integrating student voice allows diverse opinions that keep every student active, either through reasoning, thinking, or sharing of ideas. The fact that students were allowed to talk, debate, and share views were done to meet the elements in domain two of the evaluation tool and not necessarily designed to integrate student voice. In other words, it was about job protection rather than a deliberate attempt from the participants to use classroom practices to involve student voice. Needless to mention that the controversial Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Career (PARCC) standardized tests in English Language Arts/Literacy and Mathematics had put tremendous pressure on participants to “focus on covering the curriculum and not integrating student voice” to improve learning.

As teachers focused primarily on job protection, student voice became relegated in classroom practices, and students started to be disruptive, cut classes, loose interest in learning, and doubt their ability to succeed. In 2007, over three million students dropped out of schools. This number translated to approximately seven thousand students

dropping out of school every day with 1.2 million students per year failing to graduate from high school (Steinberg & McCray, 2012). These culminated into a graduation rate of 53 percent for urban high schools compared to the state graduation rate of 83 percent, and 75 percent nationwide. Overall, urban high school graduation rates are 18 percent points lower in urban school compared to those in the suburbs (Stetser & Stillwell, 2014; Swanson, 2004). Therefore, as students become disengaged in learning and less motivated to persist in schooling, absenteeism and apathetic dispositions become a common trend, they dropped out of school and earned about \$260,000 less during their lifetime than those with a high school diploma (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2009; Harper, 2015; Steinberg & McCray, 2012).

From the practical point of view, integrating student voice into classroom practices can lead to an inclusive classroom, which by extension can make the school inclusive of the voices of all stakeholders. Teachers are prompted to use the findings to reflect on their distinct classroom practices and build on a student-teacher relationship to improve the learning experiences for all students. Therefore, acknowledging the importance of student voice, teachers and school administrators may change their practices to integrate it as a means of improving academic achievement for all students beyond asking them for periodic comments or feedback (Kordalewski, 1999).

The findings from this study place student voice at the center of the discussion of urban high school education and encourage teachers and school administrators to rethink the school policy and practice as it relates to the use of student voice. While many researchers have explored student voice from the perspective of students, many have argued that research has excluded teachers' conceptions of student voice, specifically in

urban schools (Fielding & Rudduck, 2002; Fielding, 2004; Mitra, 2004). This study is one, specific to New Jersey. More research in other context is necessary to gain a more comprehensive literature base of the topic. Due to the relatively small number of sixteen participants in this study, the findings should be interpreted with caution. More importantly, whether the findings from this study would hold true for teachers' conceptions of student voice in other urban high schools remains unclear. However, conducting the study in more than one urban high school may likely confirm the veracity of the findings from this study.

Conclusion

In this study, we have investigated the teachers' conceptions of student voice from the perspective of an urban high school. We have also explored how teachers used classroom practices to involve student voice as well as how it has been used for an enhanced teacher-student relationship. Tolerating students' opinions and views on matters that affect their educational experiences throughout the four-year high education may be trendy; however, integrating their voice should be a part of the growing discourse on urban education. The trouble is that those adults in urban high schools who are listening to students are not really doing much to integrate student voice to improve classroom practices. In the final analysis, making urban high school inclusive requires more than asking students for opinions and views, but acting on them to improve learning and academic achievement. In addition, adults in urban high schools should be cautioned in assuming that power relations can be affected negatively by integrating student voice, but rather promotes students' leadership skills for a democratic society (Jagersma & Parson, 2011; Lalas & Valle, 2007; Mitra, 2010).

Chapter 6

A Framework for Student Voice: A Learning Mechanism to Build a Culture of Inclusion in Urban High Schools

Abstract

The qualitative study was designed to explore how teachers' conceptions of student voice are used to shape the teacher-student relationship. The study revealed three key themes that explained teachers' conception of student voice: reciprocal relationships, collective responsibility, and "liberty for license". Being a teacher in an urban high school is tough; yet being a student seems to be tougher because urban education is a reflection of its community – often ripped apart by violence, gang activities, and drugs. Therefore, listening to student voice in urban high schools as an approach to create an inclusive learning environment remains a challenge educators struggle with on a daily basis. Traditional schooling places emphasis on the teachers as the custodians of knowledge, students remain disenfranchised because they have limited voice in matters that affect their educational experiences. Findings indicated that listening to student voice enhanced the reciprocal relationships, required a collective responsibility through school policy, but also suffered from struggles in the classroom. The findings informed a framework for incorporating student voice into urban high school education.

A Portrait of Urban Education

There are many reasons for pessimism as for optimism about the future of millions of students attending schools located in the inner cities. Dropout rates in urban schools exceed 50% and many of whose students graduated lacked adequate reading and writing skills and continued to function minimally in the ever changing economy (Crosby, 1999; Cuban, 2001; Raffel, et. al., 1992). Regardless of students' desires to be successful, negative stereotypes about race and class often lead to negative views about students attending urban schools (Ahram, et. al., 2015; Harry & Klingner, 2006). Various instructional initiatives to turn around urban schools have become fragmented or indeed contradictory because urban schools continue to ignore diverse students' needs (Dianda, 2008; Mitra, 2004). Moreover, urban schools with high concentrations of low-income Black and Latino students are more likely to have inexperienced teachers or teachers teaching outside of their certifications (Steele, 2010). The lack of commitment to identify student needs and monitor student progress makes it difficult for urban schools to design a coherent pathway for improvement (Ahram, et. al., 2015; Goldhaber, 2007; Lee, 2004). Needless to say that these structural challenges either produce or perpetuate low expectations of students because teachers in these schools may feel overwhelmed by what they consider to be the high needs of their students, and thus lower their own expectations for student performance (Griffith, 2000; Steele, 2010).

The dearth of culturally responsive classroom practices leads to lack of student trust in the school setting. Therefore, urban students often interpret the school environment as unwelcoming and thus unworthy of a meaningful personal effort, making improvement in achievement unlikely (Ahram, et. al., 2015; Cushman, 2005). To this

effect, urban students may even respond to what they perceive as inhospitable school environments with behaviors that are oppositional to the prevailing norms and values of the school system (Delpit, 2006; Giroux, 2003). Perhaps turning to students for their opinions and views on matters that affect their schooling experiences may serve as an opportunity to improve student outcomes and address the problems in urban high schools.

Urban High School Education: Past, Present, and Future

The advent of formal education was predicated on a system that premised reforms on adults' notions of how schools should look and operate without consulting those stakeholders schools were designed to serve – the students. The efficacy of this notion becomes increasingly problematic in today's urban high schools across the nation (Cook-Sather, 2002). This challenge comes amidst a troubling crisis in the nation's schools where nearly one-third of all public high schools, and almost one-half of minorities fail to graduate with their cohort (Smyth, 2006; Steinberg & McCray, 2012). However, within the last decade, educational research has asked why a plethora of reforms have not resulted in decreasing dropout rates and increasing graduation rates – repositioning the narrative on urban secondary education and suggesting that failed educational structures have negative consequences for the dropouts themselves, the national economy, and the civil fabric of the larger society (Bridgeland, Balfanz, Moore, & Friant, 2010; Smyth, 2006).

Civil rights advocates and other pressure groups have described urban high schools as instruments that perpetuate social injustice; students within these contexts describe their school experiences in terms of anonymity and powerlessness (Cole, 1980; Mitra, 2004). Given the well-documented long-term implications of dropping out of high

school at both individual and societal levels, educators and the larger community increasingly recognize the need to understand and respond to the complex interplay of factors that marginalize young adolescents in the decision-making process in schools (Brenner-Camp, 2011; Rudduck & Flutter, 2000). Today, urban high school education continues to exclude democracy and student voice because the structure allows only a selected group of individuals to make decisions about what to learn, how to learn it, when to learn, how to assess learning, and what the learning environment should look like without involving those central to learning: the students (Fletcher, 2005). A new way of thinking is needed, one premised on the need for urban high schools to realize that every stakeholder has unique perspectives on teaching, learning, and what it means to experience success in school. Therefore, giving the disenfranchised urban high school students a voice in their education may provide them the opportunity to redefine their roles on matters that affect their schooling experiences (Cook-Sather, 2006). The purpose of this paper is to highlight that listening to student voice can be a learning mechanism necessary to build a culture of inclusion in urban high schools where young adults view their schools as caring and relevant. This will transform teachers' misconceptions about students' motivations, and brighten students' expectations for achievements.

The Concept of Voice

Voice has been explained as having three constituent elements: a voice for knowing (an epistemological voice), a voice for doing (a practical voice), and a voice for being and becoming (an ontological voice) (Batchelor, 2006). Voice is an expression of opinions and views on what matters most to an individual or a group of people; it is more than spoken words (Mitra, 2003). Therefore, student voice is about how students come to

play a role in their education as a direct result of teachers becoming more attentive to what students say about their experience of learning and school life. Student voice can be an important component of school change, the improvement of teaching and learning, and consequently, an increase in student achievement (Harper, 2015; Mitra, 2003). Kozol wrote that in United States, “the voice of children...have been missing from the whole discussion” of education (1991, p.5), and Weiss and Fine invited “the voices of children and adolescents who have been expelled from the center of their schools and the centers of our culture [to] speak” (1993, p.2). In Canada, Fullan asked, “What would happen if we treated the students as someone whose opinion mattered?” (1991, p.170), and Levin (2000) argued that the most promising reform strategies involved treating students as capable persons in determining how best they can learn. Therefore, listening to student voice in urban high schools can signal the process of democratization where young adults collaborate with teachers to address the problems of urban education (Cook-Sather, 2006; Giroux, 1989; Neigel, 2006).

The conceptualization of voice is based on control relative to who is speaking, who is listening, and who is acting on the spoken words (Batchelor, 2006). Therefore, listening to student voice in urban high schools gives students the choice in the learning process, and offers teachers the opportunity to learn from the students, making it possible for dialogic learning to promote an inclusive culture. Using voice as a learning mechanism to build an inclusive culture in urban high schools often runs into the risk of denial when it is taken to mean a challenge to the constituted school authority (Cook-Sather, 2006). Nevertheless, student voice may transform words into actions that provide students the right to make their voice matter in schools (Cook-Sather, 2006).

Students represent hidden voices that have been silenced all along and, if listened to, can bring irreplaceable views on what their schools should look like. Adolescence is symbolic with students in high school because their minds and bodies begin to transform into those of adults (Acosta & Mir, 2012; Harper, 2015). As they develop into adulthood, they strive for independence and become more self-conscious about their bodies and their emotions. At this stage of their lives, they become more aware of themselves, their thoughts and feelings, and their relationships with others (Howard, 2003; Steinberg & McCray, 2012). It is incumbent on adults in high schools to pay attention to what students are saying, how they are saying it, and what they expect to happen as a result of what they are saying, especially at this stage in the students' development.

Listening to student voice is a way to determine the best approach to support students' diverse learning needs and subsequently assist schools to develop an inclusive culture that is beneficial to all stakeholders in school systems. There is limited research conducted on how listening to student voice can create an inclusive culture in schools (Cook-Sather, 2002). Therefore, this research was constructed to explore this phenomenon and to answer the following questions:

1. What are teachers' conceptions of student voice in an urban high school in New Jersey?
2. How does student voice shape the teacher-student relationship in an urban high school in New Jersey?
3. How can the findings inform a framework for incorporating student voice into urban high school education in New Jersey?

Methods

This study began with a broad purpose to elicit teachers' conceptions of student voice in an urban high school. The conceptual framework for this study involved the interplay of critical theory and learning theory within the context of constructivism that occurs in a classroom environment where students and teachers are co-constructors of knowledge; students are not just information receivers and teachers are not just transmitters of information (Freire, 2007; Giroux, 2003; Toshalis & Nakkula, 2008). Using a qualitative case study (Merriam, 2009; Stake, 2008), we employed interview, observation, and document analysis to understand how student voice shapes the teacher-student relationships and explore how the findings could be used to inform a framework that incorporates student voice in urban high schools. Individual interviews, ranging from forty-two to sixty minutes with 16 teachers were held before and after school Monday to Friday. An interview protocol was used to guide the conversations with the participants. This approach not only helped us build informal relationships with participants, but also helped with an understanding of the way student voice was conceived by participants. Interviews, including follow-ups were tape-recorded and then transcribed. We also used protocol matrices for observation, documentation analysis, and reflective journal as additional sources of data for this study (Janesick, 1999; Rossman & Rallis, 2003).

Research Site

The urban high school where this study took place is located in an inner city in New Jersey and its academic performance and college and career readiness significantly lagged in comparison to similar schools in the state. In the 2013-2014 school year, this high school had a graduation rate of 62% compared to the statewide target of 78% and a

dropout rate of 4.8% compared to the statewide target of 2% (NJDOE, 2014). Presented in Table 6 are other selective features of this high school.

Table 6

Features of the Urban High School

Features	Percent
Black	88.5
Hispanic	10.8
Asian	0.5
Pacific Islander	0.1
Two or more races	0.1
Students with disabilities	14.0
Limited English proficient (LEP)	18.2
Percentage of students that receive free or reduce lunch	66.1
Student suspension rate	28.8
Percentage of students enrolled in 2-year institution	64.7
Percentage of students enrolled in 4-year institution	35.3
Percentage of students participating in SAT or ACT	57.0

Source: 2013-14 NJ School Performance Report

As mentioned earlier, students in this urban high school live in the community that is negatively affected by poverty, drugs, alcohol, poor health, and gang-related violence. To a greater extent, this high school lags behind schools that educate students with similar demographics in preparing students for success after graduation (NJDOE, 2014).

Participant Selection

The use of purposeful sampling for this study ensured that participant selection was based on representativeness of the concept of student voice rather than representativeness of school site to guarantee credibility of sample and consistency of data (Creswell, 2013; Patton, 2002; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). We had an informal meeting with the leader of the teachers' association to prevent any roadblock from its members participating in the study. We then attended a faculty meeting to explain the study to the teachers and we returned for a second faculty meeting to answer possible questions and cleared any misconception regarding the purpose of the study. Many teachers volunteered to participate in the study; however, participant selection was stopped when participants' responses became repetitive (Lincoln & Guba, 2000; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Patton, 1990). Sixteen teachers in total participated in the study at this high school. Pseudonyms were used to ensure confidentiality of the participants in the study (Guba & Lincoln, 1994).

Data Analysis

The semi-structured interviews with participants were recorded and then transcribed by the researchers yielding many pages of single-spaced text. As suggested by Creswell (2013), we individually read and coded the transcripts, and collaborated on concept meanings when discrepancies occurred in interpretation. Stability of the coding scheme was ensured by discussing the differences in the coding to reach similar thoughts. Emerging categories from clustering the codes included formal and informal interactions, respect, caring, and trusting, behavioral issues, empowerment and leadership, and authority and control. These five categories were collapsed during data reduction into

three themes (Merriam, 2009): reciprocal relationships, collective responsibility, and “liberty for license”. Data collected from classrooms visits, documents, and other artifacts were assembled for the purpose of triangulation. From this process, irrelevant data were filtered out to get corroborating evidence as credible findings (Yin, 2009).

Researchers’ Positionality

To ensure that teachers did not get confused about our role as researchers and as central office administration and academics, we conducted interviews before and after school hours and classroom visits were conducted dressing casually. By doing so, participants did not see the data collected as evaluative in any form, especially at a time when teachers are being bombarded with many reforms that included a new evaluation tool and the tenure law. The stake was high for teachers because of the associated implications for job security as a result of poor performance; therefore, we reaffirmed and guaranteed confidentiality to ensure accurate data collection.

Findings

Teachers in this urban high school had specific beliefs on student voice and the interviews provided an outlet for them to share these conceptions. Participants considered student voice to be what students had to say about their classroom practices and their school. However, teachers’ willingness to listen to student voice is often derailed because “everything is test-driven, and the need to cover the curriculum.” Participants expressed that it “is tough to allow and listen to student voice and still “provide them the education that will make them better adults in life,” perhaps, having meaningful conversations with students “ will lessen the burden we place on this controversial test” which will make school experiences worthwhile. Consequently, to establish purposeful learning in an

urban high school and build long-lasting relationships, participants believed that students need to see “teachers as caring, and willing to develop relationships that are built on a culture of mutual respect and trust.”

Participants also shared that students are not adults and should not be made to think that they are because “kids will be kids” and they will abuse the privilege of having their opinions listened to if classrooms are not well structured to absolve the resulting misbehaviors. However, participants reiterated that if the support is there from the school administration in terms of policies, allowing student voice, listening to it, and acting on it in classrooms can enhance student-teacher relationship and subsequently empower students for a better future in life (Cook-Sather, 2006; Neigel, 2006).

Our examination of documents that included the school mission statement, lesson plans, displayed student work, the student handbook, disciplinary reports, and notice of concern forms revealed that documents in most cases exist because of the state requirements and are not primarily designed to integrate student voice in the school (Hodder, 2005). The mission statement, the school vision, and the student handbook were not inclusive of student voice because these were more of motivational documents.

Reciprocal Relationships

Most importantly, participants believed that student voice is a valuable component of the learning process in urban school because for a relationship to occur between the teacher and the students, it has to be based on trust, care, and respect. A classroom environment that fosters cordiality often results into a “long-lasting relationship after graduating from high school; when students trust their teachers and believe that teachers care and respect their feelings.” Therefore, student voice is about

“student ability to express themselves honestly and openly” in the classrooms, and when this occurs, it influences the formal and informal relationships between teachers and students. Participants believed that listening to student voice “helps students to understand themselves, as well as how to interact and socially relate to other people.” In essence, listening to student voice promotes positive feelings, reduces disruptive behavior, and improves student engagement in classrooms (Hollins and Spencers, 1990; Nuguera, 2003).

Participant Barfy reaffirmed that:

I tolerate my students’ opinions because having a voice is part of the socialization process. I believe that listening to them is instrumental to the type of relationship I have with them. As a result, my students believed that I care about them and they trust me as well. The relationship we have is cordial and based on mutual respect for one another. I have a relationship that goes beyond high school. I continued to attend college graduations of my past students and that is a testimony to what I am saying. Listening to student voice helps to build a long-lasting relationship with students and guess what; it has helped to promote learning and has led to continuous improvement in my classroom practices.

A mutual teacher-student relationship creates a situation where students believe that they are valued and that teachers are listening to their opinions to build an inclusive culture that is beneficial to everyone in the school. Teachers learning from students and students learning from their teachers create a classroom environment in which both learn from one another instead of the teachers being the actor on the stage. When put into the perspective of the participants, student voice could take a lead in building inclusive urban high schools where students and teachers collaborate to address the challenges facing their schools (Mitra & Frick, 2010). This being said, participants still believed that “schools are to be designed for students and not to be designed either by or with them because they

are not capable of making informed decisions” (Joseph, 2006, p. 34). This is evidenced by this statement made by participant Zippy:

I listen to student voice to build a relationship that is based on mutual respect and trust with my students. Students are important and I pay attention to what they have to say. I always listen to them and they value this very much. I create an environment where we learn from one another, I teach them and they teach me too. However, I remind them constantly that I am the teacher in the classroom and I make the rules and I expect them to abide by it. I don't allow students to run my classroom to prevent chaos. Though I listen to their views, I see them as adolescents and not as adults; it is my responsibility to prevent possible abuse because I need my job.

Therefore, not listening to student voice undermines its suitability as a tool necessary to create a greater student-teacher relationship and a learning environment that is based on mutual respect and trust. Listening to student voice will prevent the situation where students and teachers dwell in a culture that is detrimental to the democratic principles (Dewey, 2004; Freire, 2007; Hollins & Spencer, 1990; Lee, 1999). As listening to student voice becomes the norm in the schools, it enhances reciprocal relationship between teachers and students and forms a cornerstone upon which a culture of inclusion is legitimized in every urban high school reform process.

Collective Responsibility

For teachers to tap the inherent potentials of empowering students, school policy must be in place to set purposeful learning outcomes and guide students' behaviors inside and outside the classrooms. In essence, when teachers “do not have to waste instructional time on cautioning students to behave, a learning environment that promotes improvement in academic achievement becomes achievable” for students in urban high schools (Hovland, 2008, p. 4). Therefore, school policy becomes the tool that teachers can

use to reaffirm positive outcomes in favor of listening to student voice to create a culture of inclusion in classrooms and schools in urban areas (Jagersma & Parson, 2011).

Participants explained that as much as we hear about accountability and high school reforms, “no one ever mentioned how to get students involved in the process” either in terms of voice or action. Participants asked the researchers to name “when last there was a national discourse on student voice and any state or federal legislation that resulted from it.”

According to our participant BK Jay:

While larger policy frames exist across contexts from the Regan administration to Bill Clinton’s *Goals 2000* and to *No Child Left Behind (NCLB)* legislation from the Bush administration, no document ever considered student voice as important. Until legislation is enacted on student voice to support teachers, paying attention to student voice in high schools will continue to pose a serious challenge to teachers. Anyway, who cares about teachers? It is all about evaluation and trying to get rid of teachers.

We examined the student code of conduct document and it revealed what student can do and cannot do without any mention of student voice. Student voice was not sought in any way and adults wondered why students don’t care about schooling as they either coming late to school or not come at all. The attendance policy document made no mention of student voice and has no indication that students were consulted when the document was crafted. However, the attendance policy document listed consequences of absenteeism and cutting classes on credit status. The classroom rules posted in all classrooms we visited were punitive and there was no indication that these rules were developed in consultation with students. Neither the vision statement, nor the mission statement offered how listening to student voice can be used as a tool to advance this laudable

statement that “students will reach their full academic potential ... through instructional strategies and authentic assessments.” Though, it was not stated but we left with a feeling that it was left to individual teacher to decide either to listen or not listen to student voice in the classroom. Participants claimed that “when teachers listen to student voice, there is no school policy to encourage them to do more or back them up in case a problem arises.” A participant further explained that “once a school policy is in place, it becomes easier for teachers to relinquish the power” and classroom control will no longer be an issue in the school. Hence, having a school policy in place will promote collective responsibility to integrate student voice across disciplines in all classrooms, and may make teachers feel that the school administration embraces voice in the day-to-day running of the school.

“Liberty for License”

Yet when attempts were made by participants to listen to and act on student voice, “students tend to [assume] adulthood and exhibit all forms of classroom misbehaviors.”

Our participant Zooka explained:

Students do speak from many conflicting positions and you can imagine what will result when teachers listen to student voice. Students like to take liberty for license and they are ready to stress you out at every opportunity they have. We have a lot of problems in the school as it is and listening to student voice can make the situation worse. I have listened to students’ opinion in my classroom before and I don’t think I will do it again. It got out of hand and I almost lost my job because students became very disrespectful and chaotic. You think these are the kinds of students I should continue to listening to their voice? Listening to student voice is a good thing to happen in every classroom but think about the associated problems in this school.

As much as participants believed in student voice as a way to improve situation, they expressed the sentiment that knowing that “something is good and worthwhile, its

implementation may not be that simple” across the school. Participants were willing to listen to student voice and learn from it to build a culture of inclusion; however, they were “constrained by not having supportive school administrators to curb the excesses that can result.” Participants expressed, “when you give students an inch, they will demand a yard, the potential for abuse is there.” This feeling was confirmed during our classroom visits as teachers spent their instructional time addressing students’ behavior issues and refocusing students’ attention on minor tasks. It became apparent to us that participants were very conscious of their classroom management. And yet, this control perpetuated a cycle of denial of voice and misbehavior – teachers tried to control the classroom and students acted out.

A Framework for Student Voice

Participants shared their appreciation for student voice; however, examining documents that included the school mission statement, lesson plans, displayed student work, the student handbook, disciplinary reports, and the notice of concern form revealed that documents in most cases exist to comply with the state requirements and are not primarily designed to integrate student voice in the school. The mission statement, the school vision, and the student handbook were not inclusive of student voice because these documents are in place to, ostensibly, motivate and guide students through the four-year high school education.

Although participants claimed to have a relationship with their students as a result of listening to their opinions, they did not allow student voice to dictate what goes on in their classrooms. The findings in this study revealed that participants saw student voice as valuable in the school but instead of making it the central focus in their

practices, they continued to ignore it because of the potential behavioral issues and lack of administrative support. The position of this article is that urban high schools are full of possibilities only when teachers and administrators develop an attitude that solicits students' opinions, listens to students' view, and then acts on them. When listening to student voice becomes the norm, it can serve as a mechanism to build a learning environment where everyone's opinion counts in the school (Fullan, 2007; Giroux, 2003; Hudley, 2013).

As indicated in the literature, when teachers listen to student voice in classrooms, it makes students' morale high. Such moral promotes reciprocal relationships and fosters dialogical learning in classrooms and schools (Freire, 2007; Giroux, 1989). Hence, co-creating an inclusive learning culture in urban high school requires teachers to build their classrooms around student voice to enhance collective responsibility and a caring learning environment (Fraser & Gestwicki, 2012; Student Achievement Division, 2013). For students to be an integral part of the school culture, they must experience active dialogue with teachers and participate at all levels of classroom and school management. The framework below illustrates that when teachers in urban high school listen to student voice and use it in the day-to-day running of classrooms, students see themselves relevant and they take responsibility for their learning. Listening to student voice empowers students to be confident that they are capable and competent to develop a shared leadership in classrooms and schools.

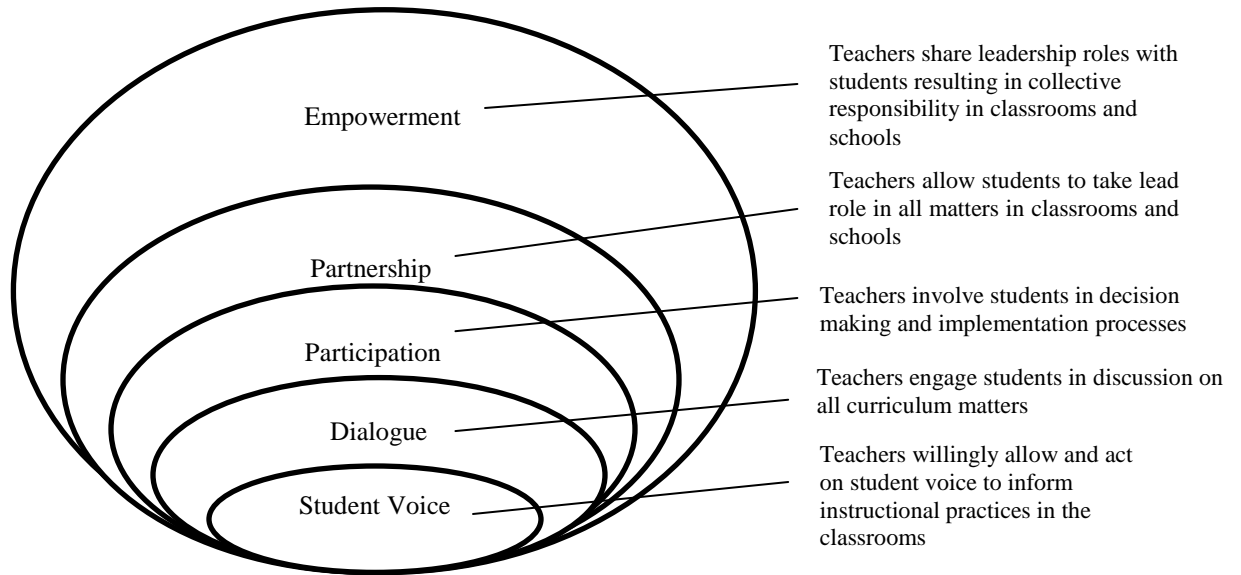


Figure 5. A framework for Making Urban High School Inclusive of Student Voice. Adapted and Modified from Student Voice: Transforming Relationship, Capacity Building Series (2013), Ontario Student Achievement Division.

A caring and dialogical classroom environment creates the space for students to express freely their voice in a way that supports their learning and promotes democratic values. When students are given the opportunity to operate in partnership with their teachers, they take a lead role in matters that affect their educational experience because their thinking becomes visible and fosters active participation in classrooms (Fraser & Gestwicki, 2012; Student Achievement Division, 2013). As listening to student voice becomes the custom in the school, students feel they matter and have something valuable to offer teachers (Fielding, 2007). Participants explained that listening to student voice will broaden the role of students in classrooms from being passive receptacles of learning to active contributors of knowledge and in the process “requires them to relinquish

classroom control.” This empowers students to take responsibility for their learning and explore new ideas as co-leaders of learning to promote self-regulation in classrooms and school. The resulting shared leadership presents an atmosphere where teachers listen, capture and receptive to student voice, and make students take responsibility for their behaviors and learning in classrooms (Student Achievement Division, 2013).

The feeling of being capable to learn will reduce incidence of disruptive behavior and violence, minimize cutting classes, increase interest in schooling, and make students persist to do well in schools. Therefore, the centrality of creating an inclusive culture in urban high school requires that teachers are willing to listen and act on student voice, engage student voice in discussing curriculum matters, and solicit student involvement in the decision-making process. As these become the standards for teachers in urban high schools, students will take lead role, concretize the reciprocal relationships, participate and partner with their teachers to improve teaching and learning. These practices may result into a cultural shift toward making student voice relevant in schools (Cook-Sather, 2003; Dianda, 2008; Howard, 2003). In doing so, these young adults in urban high schools “become indispensable rather than auxiliary in the work” where they are rendered voiceless (Toshalis & Nakkula, 2008, p.26).

From the social justice perspective, the findings in this study demonstrated that critical implications could be garnered by making listening to student voice a collective responsibility to ensure that it becomes part of the school culture. Although participants believed that they had a good relationship with their students, we observed that

participants allowed opportunity to use students' responses to ignite meaningful discussions to slip away. This raised questions about the claim of a "continued relationship with students after graduation." Therefore, it became glaring that participants were more concerned with classroom management and as such had difficulty in relinquishing the control mindset of allowing student voice to create a culture that fosters shared leadership in classrooms (Jagersma & Parson, 2011; Lallas & Valle, 2007; Mitra & Gross, 2009).

Implications

The findings from this study will spark discussion around what is meant by student voice in urban high schools because the literature is still not definitive about what is meant by student voice. This study strived to bring into perspective teachers' conceptions of student voice, how it shapes the teacher-student relationship, and how findings can be used to inform a framework for urban high schools. While many researchers have explored student voice from the perspective of students, many have argued that research has excluded teachers' conceptions of student voice, specifically in urban high schools (Howard, 2002; Fielding & Rudduck, 2002; Fielding, 2004; Mitra, 2004). This study is one that is specific to New Jersey and more research in other contexts is necessary to gain a more inclusive literature base of the topic. The fact that sixteen teachers participated in this study requires that the findings be interpreted with caution. More importantly, whether the findings from this study would hold true for teachers' conceptions of student voice in other urban high schools remains unclear.

However, conducting the study in more than one urban high school and using other research methods may likely confirm the truth of the findings from this study.

This study should act as an appeal to teachers, school administrators, and policy makers to confront the power dynamics inside and outside of classrooms that make democratic dialogue impossible in urban high schools. When teachers hold on to power in their classrooms, the environment becomes hostile to student voice, and students responded by been oppositional in schools. Therefore, changing the power dynamics within and beyond classrooms will create the needed collective responsibility where listening to student voice becomes the mechanism for the inclusive culture where every stakeholder supports one another. This gives students the political potential of speaking out on their own behalf even after graduating from the high school.

When teachers and school administrators in urban high schools listen to student voice and embrace it as a learning mechanism to build a culture of inclusion, students will then believe that what they say matters and indeed results in positive actions. Hence, allowing and listening to student voice in classrooms can become the initiating force in an inquiry process that makes teachers and students partners in learning (Cook-Sather, 2006; Fielding, 2004).

Conclusion

In this study, we have investigated how teachers used student voice to shape the teacher-student relationship from the perspective of an urban high school, as well as how the findings could be used to inform a framework for urban high schools. The study did

not shy away from stating that students and teachers in urban high schools have a host of challenges to overcome. Although there is agreement among researchers about the grim realities of urban education and the likely problems to be faced in the future, no consensus on solving the problems of urban education exists (Raffel, et. al., 1992). While we believed that some rays of hope for making student voice a learning mechanism to build a culture of inclusion in urban high schools are visible, they do not converge. For this reason, it is crucial that teachers use the framework to develop practical approaches on how best to complement student voice with best practices so that schooling can become meaningful for the young adolescents in urban high schools. When this is accomplished, listening to student voice will enable teachers in partnership with students to generate strategies to address the challenges in urban high schools.

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Appendix A

Letter of Intent

The purpose of this inquiry is to explore teachers' conceptions of student voice in a New Jersey urban high school. For this study, student voice is defined as the influence of students on the provision of their own education by ensuring that their opinions are included when schools make key decisions.

For this study, Mr. Matin Adegboyega, the researcher, will be interviewing you using pre-determined open-ended questions. I will return to your classroom as a passive observer and to review displayed students' work. I will neither talk nor interact with the students.

Title of the Study: Student Voice: A Qualitative Case Study of Teachers' Conceptions in New Jersey Urban High School.

Benefits: The information gathered from this inquiry is intended to ultimately advance student voice in all matters that affect their educational experiences in the classrooms and schools. Hopefully, this will empower students as partners in all matters that affect their educational experiences. There may be no direct benefit for participating in this research.

Risks: There are minimal risks involved with this study (no physical or psychological risk), all the data gathered will be confidential, and you are free to withdraw from participation at any time without penalty.

Confidentiality: Your name and other identifying information – such as the subject you teach, the grade level you teach, length of service, and classroom number will not be included in any written document or discussion. Data to be collected are responses to interview questions, classroom observation, and documents that are for public view –student handbook, websites, and display work. Participants' responses and data from observation will be accessible solely to the researcher. All published documents will use alias to protect you as the participant.

Time Commitment: It is anticipated that the interview will last for about 1 hour.

Any questions concerning this study should be directed to the investigator, Mr. Matin Adegboyega, at (201) 709-3398 or adegbo57@students.rowan.edu. Dr. Ane Johnson, the researcher's faculty sponsor at Rowan University, can also be contacted at johnsona@rowan.edu with questions.

For general questions concerning your rights as a research subject, please contact the Chief Research Compliance Officer at: Rowan University Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects Office of Research 201 Mullica Hill Road Glassboro, NJ 08028-1701 Tel: (856) 256-5150

By signing below, you confirm that you understand the purpose and nature of this study and are participating voluntarily. You also grant permission for the data collected during the interview to be used for this inquiry and are cognizant that the findings of this research may be published.

Research Participant Name (Please print)

Date

In order to accurately record the data collected, I agree to audiotape the responses to interview questions only.

Signature of Research participant

Date

Researcher

Date

Appendix B

Institutional Review Board Approval Letter



September 29, 2014

Ane Turner Johnson
Educational Leadership
James Hall

Dear Ane Turner Johnson:

In accordance with the University's IRB policies and 45 CFR 46, the Federal Policy for the Protection of Human Subjects, I am pleased to inform you that the Rowan University Institutional Review Board (IRB) has approved your project, category 7, through its expedited review process.

IRB application number: 2015-018

Project Title: Student Voice: A Qualitative Case Study of Teachers' Conceptions in a New Jersey Urban High School

In accordance with federal law, this approval is effective for **one calendar year** from the date of this letter. If your research project extends beyond that date or if you need to make significant modifications to your study, you must notify the IRB immediately. Please reference the above-cited IRB application number in any future communications with our office regarding this research.

Please retain research data and documentation for a period of five years after completion of the research. In accordance with federal regulations, 2 CFR 215, federally sponsored research must be retained at a minimum of three years after the final report is submitted to the federal agency.

If, during your research, you encounter any unanticipated problems involving risks to subjects, you must report this immediately to Dr. Harriet Hartman (hartman@rowan.edu or call 856-256-4500, ext. 3787) or contact Dr. Sreekant Murthy, Chief Research Compliance Officer (murthy@rowan.edu or call 856-256-5853).

If you have any administrative questions, please contact Karen Heiser (heiser@rowan.edu or 856-256-5150).

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Harriet Hartman".

Harriet Hartman, Ph.D.
Chair, Rowan University IRB

c: Matin Adegboyega

Office of Research
James Hall
201 Mullica Hill Road
Glassboro, NJ 08028-1701

856-256-5150
856-256-4425 fax

Appendix C

Interview Protocol

Hello! Thank you for consenting to participate in this research on teachers' conceptions of student voice. Once again the purpose of this study is to get a deeper understanding of how teachers in an urban high school conceive student voice and how they use classroom practices to involve it. I will define student voice as an activity through which students express their feelings and opinions. Our interview will consist of a series of questions that will help me collect the data I need for the study. I will also be taping our interview for the purpose of accuracy of data, and I will be taking some notes. Do you have any question for me before we start the interview? Great! Let's start then. First I will collect some demographic information to help me describe the sample in the study.

The grade level you teach	
Number of years you have been teaching at this grade level	
Number of years you have been teaching in total	
Subject-matter you teach	
Class size you teach	
Age	
Gender	

1. What is the teachers' conception of student voice?
 - a. How do teachers define student voice?
 - b. What does student voice mean to you?
 - c. What is your belief about involving student voice in school?
 - d. Can you give me an example of what your concept of student voice is?

2. How do urban high school teachers use classroom practices to involve student voice?
 - a. How do your classroom practices engage student voice during instructional delivery?
 - b. When you plan an activity, what are the components that you include in your lesson plan?
 - c. How do outside forces impact your choice of instructional activities that engage student voice? Can you give me an example?
 - d. How do inside forces impact your choice of instructional activities that engage student voice? Can you give me an example?
 - e. How do you experience student voice in your classroom? Can you give me an example?
 - f. How does student voice impact your choice of classroom practice? Can you give me an example?

- g. How do classroom conditions influence student voice? Can you give me an example?
3. How does student voice shape the teacher-student relationship in your school?
- a. How do inside forces impact your choice of instructional activities that engage student voice?
 - b. How will you describe what the teacher-student relationship looks like in your school?
 - c. How does the student voice shape your actions and behavior? Can you give me an example?
4. How can the findings inform a framework for incorporating student voice into urban high school education in New Jersey?
- a. How will you describe the implications of involving student voice in your school?
 - b. How can schools engage student voice in day-to-day running of schools?
 - c. What is your opinion on listening and acting on student voice in urban schools?

Appendix D

Document Analysis Worksheet

IDENTIFICATION OF DOCUMENT

What type of document is it? Describe it the document.

UNIQUE PHYSICAL CHARACTERISTICS

Look for things like whether or not it was handwritten or typed and does it have an interesting heading? Does it have drawings? If so what are they and why do you think they are there? Is there anything different about the document? If so, what? If a symbol is used, is it easy to interpret or memorable or dramatic?

DATE(S) OF DOCUMENT AND CREATOR OF DOCUMENT

If either of these is unknown, simply state “not known”.

PURPOSEOF DOCUMENT

Explain why you think this document was produced. Are the messages on the document visual or verbal, or both? What words or phrases help you understand how the author was feeling at the time the document was produced?

OTHER FEATURES OF THE DOCUMENT

Summarize the document’s main points

Describe any other features you find interesting about the document. What about the language, color, and the tone use in the document?

What evidence in the document helps you know why it was produced? Quote from the document.

Does the document allow collaboration among students? Does it give choices to students?

List two things the document tells you about teachers’ and students’ experiences in the classrooms. Quote from the document.

What question do you still have about the document that you would ask the author, if you could?

This worksheet is an adaptation of one designed and developed by the Education Staff, National Archives, Washington, D. C.