Paper Title Exploring the Implementation of a District-Initiated Student Voice Program in Urban High Schools

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Purpose

The current study uses a qualitative case study design to explore how urban high schools interpret and implement a district-initiated student voice program intended to improve schools' conditions for learning. Through interviews with 22 district high school principals and several focus groups of students, the study uses an implementation science framework (Durlak & DuPree, 2008) to examine between-school variation in how the student-voice initiative was carried out. The research questions are: How do urban high schools interpret and implement a district initiated student-voice mandate? And what contextual factors help to explain variance in implementation?

Perspectives and Theoretical Framework

Urban public schools serve a disproportionate number of low-income, racial/ethnic minority youth, who have been shown to have poorer academic outcomes (e.g., achievement in core content subjects, retention, and graduation) than their peers, on average (Duncan & Murnane, 2011). Students' academic outcomes are generally understood to be a function of their academic behaviors (e.g., attendance, homework completion), which are in turn a function of their social and behavioral competencies, including empathy, cooperation, and motivation (Farrington et al., 2012). Research shows that low-income and racial/ethnic minority students and students in urban schools may exhibit less effective academic behaviors (Finn, 1993; Johnson, Crosnoe, & Elder, 2001). These student competencies and outcomes are further influenced by the social and behavioral norms of the school (Thapa, Cohen, Guffey, & Higgins-D'Alessandro, 2013; Author Citation, 2013), making racial/ethnic minority students perceive the

norms of their schools to be less supportive and safe than their White peers (Author Citation, 2013, 2015).

All high school students included in the present study were eligible for free or reduced-price meals (a proxy for poverty), 66 percent were Black, 15 percent were Hispanic, and 15 percent were White. The district had the third lowest high school graduation rate and second lowest average ACT score of the 601 districts in the state.

Student voice. Student voice refers to students playing a role in identifying needs in their schools, making decisions about improvement strategies to employ, and implementing and evaluating strategies. Student voice initiatives may be understood on a spectrum: on one side of the spectrum are initiatives wherein adults solicit ideas from students regarding school improvement, but students are not integrally involved in planning, and they do not have real decision-making power; on the other side of the spectrum are initiatives wherein students are centrally involved in all phases of school improvement (Author Citation, 2011; Kennedy & Datnow, 2011; Watts & Flanagan, 2007), also referred to as "radical collegiality" between adults and students (Fielding, 2001).

Student Voice Implementation. In schools, student voice may include students in formal management processes; providing training and support for those students; and asking students to organize their own parallel process for discussion of change that could bring many more students into the deliberative process (Levin, 2000). However, student voice goes beyond self-organizing and speaking up, it is also about their voices being truly heard (Mitra, 2004). There are positive effects of student voice on youth development, with an increasing number of youth taking action for school reform and improvement of urban educational settings (Warren, Mira, & Nikundiwe, 2008).

Nevertheless, Durlak (1998) argues that when looking at the negative or positive results of a program [or initiative] we must pay attention to the way in which such program has been implemented, considering implications for the validity of the study, and reflecting on the degree to which the program had been implemented as originally planned. Particularly in the case of administrative staff, multiple responsibilities and time constrains challenge their full involvement and monitoring of appropriate implementation, and "School staff pressured by the superintendent's office to offer new programs often do not implement them very effectively, probably because they do not become committed to the intervention (Berman & McLaughlin, 1976)." For effectively achieving the goals of a program, stakeholders need to continuously review the educational activities and operations designed for such program (McLaughlin, 1976; Durlak & DuPree, 2008). Program implementation is never 100% exact as planned, because it greatly depends on the "fidelity, dosage, quality, participant responsiveness, program uniqueness, monitoring control condition, program reach, and adaptation" of program implementation (Dupree, 2008), as well as on "the receptivity of the institutional setting", which becomes "critical to effective implementation" (McLaughlin, 1976).

Methods and Data Sources

The study used an interpretive qualitative case study of the student voice program with guided/semi-structured face-to-face interviews and focus groups, as an exploratory and descriptive way to answer the research questions. The study was approved by the authors' institutional review board (IRB).

Program. The program of interest was referred to by the district as "student advisory committees" (SACs). As part of a districtwide reform effort, the district required that all high schools create SACs, although there were limited programmatic guidelines. The general dictate

was that schools create teams of approximately 16 students that were representative of the larger school student body in terms of race/ethnicity, gender, academic performance, behavioral record, and grade in school. The SACs were to meet with their school principal on a regular basis to provide input on school improvement decision making, but the parameters of these meetings were left open. The SACs from all high schools convened at the district three time per school year to meet with the district superintendent and share ideas with peers from other schools.

Sample and Measures. The target population was all students and staff in high schools in the district; and the key variable of the study was the participants' perceptions of the implementation of the student voice initiative. The implementation of the program was measured through one-on-one interviews with the principals of 22 of 28 district high schools (6 did not respond to a request for interview) and separate focus group interviews with students who participated in the initiative and nonparticipating students in a subset of high schools that were chosen intentionally to be representative of the range of student voice initiative implementation. Participants were asked to report on the frequency of SAC meetings at school and the depth and manner in which the SAC is involved in school decision-making and action. Principals were asked to share official documents that demonstrate policies or meeting minutes that reflect the degree to which the SAC has been institutionalized at the school. Schools were categorized according to a typology of implementation that emerges from an analysis of these qualitative data.

Data analysis. An iterative analytic procedure using Nvivo 10 software was used to code and interpret qualitative data. First, interview transcripts and documents were coded using an open coding procedure to identify distinct concepts in the data. A constant comparative analysis (Corbin & Strauss, 2008) was concurrently employed to group together coded data

elements to form higher-level themes related to the implementation of the student voice initiative. The use of two coders in qualitative analysis helped protect its integrity and trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The technique of negative case analysis (Corbin & Strauss, 2008) served to identify concepts and incidents that did not fit the resulting thematic framework, helping to safeguard against a drift toward a priori assumptions during this second stage of coding.

Preliminary Results

The results suggest wide variation across the 22 sample schools in how the student voice program was implemented, and they point to school contextual factors that help to explain this variation. We used components of Durlak and DuPre (2008) and Dane and Schneider's (1998) implementation science framework to organize these preliminary results.

Fidelity. Fidelity refers to the extent to which the innovation corresponds to the originally intended program. Fidelity among sample schools was high, but given that the originally intended program was relatively ill-defined, to have fidelity mostly required that schools simply form a SAC, hold meetings between the principal and SAC at least once or twice per semester, and send SAC members to three annual district meetings. All of the schools that we interviewed met this standard.

Dosage. Dosage refers to how much of program has been delivered to participants. From school to school, there was marked variation in the frequency of meetings among SAC members and between SACs and principals. In some schools, a school staff person (e.g., a teacher or counselor) was designated as SAC coordinator and held meetings with the SAC as often as once per week. On the other extreme, one school's SAC met with the principal only twice during the entire school year and otherwise had no contact with one another. The modal school SAC

experience involved meetings approximately once per month between the SAC and the principal. Meetings lasted anywhere from 15 minutes to an hour.

Quality. Quality refers to how well various program components were implemented. In consideration of best practices in student voice programming (e.g., youth participatory action research, youth organizing), very few schools' SAC implementation could be considered high quality. Very few SACs undertook a formal issue identification process, and no SACs used research (e.g., surveying peers) to learn more about school issues to inform recommendations. The schools that were most aligned with best practices in student voice created regular, adult-facilitated spaces for SACs to meet and discuss issues in the school that could be the focus of an action or recommendation. In these schools, SACs focused on one or two issue campaigns per school year (in line with youth organizing) and worked with the school principal and district leadership to enact policy changes.

Program reach. Program reach refers to the representativeness of program participants. In general, schools created SACs that were diverse and representative in terms of grade level, race/ethnicity, and gender. There was a marked selection bias, however, in favor of high achieving students with positive behavioral records. Few schools included students on their SAC who had been suspended from school or who experienced academic failure. This was due in part to the selection procedures that most schools employed for SAC membership. The most common approach involved teacher nominations without strong encouragement for nominators to emphasize representativeness in terms of academic achievement and behavior. Some principals admitted that they were reluctant to include students who may not represent their school well at district convenings.

Adaptation. Adaptation refers to changes made in the original program. Given the ill-defined nature of the program, many schools made adaptations to fit the program with the culture and social regularities of the school. For example, two schools decided against creating new student groups to satisfy the district requirement and instead tapped existing student leadership groups to serve the purposes of the SAC. This often had the effect of limiting program reach, as many existing leadership groups (e.g., student government, National Honor Society) tend to select for high achieving students. Other adaptations included principals tasking SACs with responsibilities typical of a student government or other group—such as planning school dances and other social activities.

C**ontextual factors that explain implementation variance.** Our analyses revealed several contextual factors that determine the extent to which the student voice program was implemented in sample schools.

Principal characteristics – perceived need for innovation, perceived benefits of innovation, skill proficiency (many principals did not know how to do this work and expressed interest in a more manualized approach)

School characteristics

- Shared vision (mission includes student voice, commitment, staff buy-in)
- Organizational norms regarding change: "innovation" schools that were more fluid tended to be more open to SAC—traditional, "comprehensive" school were less so
- School performance and politics: "failing" schools were less willing to take the risk of committing to a nonacademic intervention that could be perceived as a distraction from math and reading
- Having a program champion among school staff

Scientific and Scholarly Significance of the Study

This is the first study of which we are aware that examines the implementation of a student voice initiative in a nonexperimental, controlled setting. It answers the question, how is student voice implemented when urban schools are left to themselves to implement it, with limited technical assistance?

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