

Student Voice and Agency in Primary and Secondary Education

Kayla M. Warford

School of Education, University of Washington, Tacoma

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Dr. Weinstein

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Abstract

This research project seeks to understand more about student voice and agency within education systems, and its impact on student learning. Three themes emerged in the research project [1] Power dynamics between adults and students in schools; [2] Student voice and agency among marginalized students; [3] Practices of student voice and agency. Recommendations of this project include cultural shifts in education to include student voice and agency in schools. Districts and schools can begin to include student voice through practices like student leadership opportunities, student voice surveys, outreach to marginalized student voices, and careful scaffolding to begin shifting power to be shared in schools between staff and students. With these changes students are more likely to see benefits such as increased well-being, increased academic performance, and higher rates of engagement at schools.

Keywords: student voice, student agency, democratic education, student empowerment

Student Agency in Primary and Secondary Education

Students are substantial stakeholders in global education systems. Students are directly impacted by decisions being made at the classroom, building, district, and state levels. A variety of stakeholders are a critical part of education systems, such as teachers, administrators, board members, and community members, but how much power do the students have in these systems? Historically, students have been left out of conversations, from being able to choose their interests in learning, to facilitating changes they would like to see in schools and districts. This project seeks to understand what student voice and agency can look like in schools and districts. According to available literature, it also seeks to understand what works and has been successful. Further, the project seeks to understand student perspectives on their inclusion of voice and agency.

This project defines student voice as the ability for a student to express themselves in a way that is independent of restrictions that would hinder the ability for students to fully engage in conversations around education. Agency is defined as students' ability to influence and make meaningful educational changes. While voice and agency are similar, voice is more specific to students' ability to advocate for their education, whereas agency is the ability to enact changes through choice. Students' perceptions of their voice and agency will also be discussed in this review. Student perceptions may also impact how a student performs in school and are therefore relevant to the conversations around voice and agency in education. While definitions for voice and agency within education can vary, these are the ways they will be addressed in this project.

This review of the literature on student voice and agency in the education system is vital because students meaningfully engaging in educational decision-making could significantly impact outcomes in schools and communities. How students feel about their education is equally as important as student achievement outcomes, given their well-being in the education system. Students spend 180 days of their year in the education system and therefore their voice should matter in the conversations around learning.

As a teacher and an advocate for students who are often overlooked due to their disabilities, I feel it is critical to talk about the importance of student agency and voice within the education system. I believe that students who can make decisions regarding their own education are more likely to succeed due to their willingness to learn. To me, this makes sense, and I can see it within my own classroom when providing students with opportunities to meaningfully use student voice practices that encourage agency. Further, if we want students to come into the world career-ready there should be meaningful opportunities for students to practice critical thinking skills that are fostered through student voice and agency practices. If we are not allowing students the ability to be self-sufficient and meaningfully contribute to school improvement, then we are not likely to see students meaningfully contribute to the communities we live in. These thoughts provoked this literature review of student voice practices and students' sense of agency within school systems.

The purpose of this project is to understand more about student voice and agency, what research says about it, and its impact on students and the educational system overall. The paper will address themes in the literature, such as power dynamics between students and adults in

schools, inclusion of marginalized student voices, and common practices of student agency and voice being used in the education system. I will also provide recommendations to my current school site regarding student voice and agency and how that can be best implemented guided by the relevant literature. Then, I will discuss the findings, the implications of those findings in the literature, and future opportunities for additional research.

The following questions will guide this project:

- How do student voice and agency impact how students learn and how schools operate?
- What does implementation of inclusion of student voice and agency in the education systems look like?
- What have students already said about having a voice in schools?

Literature Review

This project will explore student voice and agencies in school systems. It will explore how voice and agency impact students and how it impacts schools. It will also explore what the implementation of student voice and agency practices looks like. For this project, student voice is defined as the ability to express themselves meaningfully without restrictions that would impact their engagement with conversations about their education. Agency is defined as students' ability to influence and change their educational environments. Together these terms will be used to describe students' ability to engage with the education systems to talk about and make changes related to their own education.

When compiling research relevant to primary and secondary education related to student voice and agency, many themes emerged. The first theme that will be discussed within this

review is power dynamics. Power dynamics is a theme that frequently occurred within the research and is a critical aspect of the inclusion of student voice and agency in schools. Within this theme, students' perceptions of power and voice will also be discussed. Next, positive aspects of teachers and administrators holding power in the education sector are discussed. Contrary to the previous theme, this one explores how teachers having power have shown to be beneficial in schools. Another significant theme that became apparent in the literature was the focus on marginalized groups of students and how they can hold power and voice within education systems. This includes students with disabilities, English language learners, students from minority ethnic and racial backgrounds, and other students who face additional challenges within education. The last theme that developed in the project was practices of student agency, voice, and democracy. This section will discuss current practices in student voice and agencies like student leadership groups, student voice surveys, and community-based project learning. This section also addresses literature that stresses the importance of careful planning of student voice practices in schools.

Power Dynamics

Discussing power dynamics in the education system is important when considering the agency and voice of students. When aiming to have schools that focus on a democratic approach, it is important to consider what power each party has when contributing to the conversation. Students, as children, inevitably have less power and therefore are often overlooked in education. This section will focus on what has been studied regarding the dynamics of power between administrators, teachers, and students. The section will start with roles of power in education and

how educators in power are presented in the research. This will be followed by student perceptions in schools. Then roles of positive power in schools will be addressed. Overall, these three subthemes emerged from the relevant research on power.

Roles of Power in Education

Students will often fall into patterns of relinquishing power to adults around them. One such example of this is a study that sought to understand children's input in studies (Dorner, 2015). While the study is not focused or based on education, it is relevant in its findings and relative to the bigger picture that children often and do fall into patterns of allowing adults around them to lead. In the study, children tended to model the researcher's examples when given free opportunities to be creative and use their own ideas. This is important given the nature of understanding how students might feel about their own agency, which may be influenced by adults and researchers involved in the studies. Dorner makes a point in their findings that it is essential to be critical when analyzing data regarding children. Further, they suggest careful attention must be given conducted research. This is imperative to consider when analyzing the relevant research brought forward in this literature review. Students' perceptions and answers in research could be influenced by power dynamics at play between children and adults in education settings.

Even when educational programming is meant to give students more freedom, staff fell into patterns of children having little to no say in the direction of their learning. Cincera et al. (2020) conducted field observations and focus groups of five outdoor learning programs in the Czech Republic. While the programs expressed that a main goal was to give children more empowerment in their learning, the findings concluded that the children did not have much say

in what was done in the programming. Similarly, in the United Kingdom, Duckett et al. (2010) conducted research that included three schools that had different exam success rates of 27%, 54%, and 80% to better understand and improve the well-being of student. Measures for the inclusion of student voice included a participatory survey that compiled responses from students in the three schools participating. They found that students at times felt bullied by their own teachers and reported their well-being was negatively impacted. The important piece to this literature is that when student voices are expressed in research, they can often go overlooked. It is important that educators and policy makers pay attention to these details. They are important to how we address and include student agencies in education.

Another instance of students falling into historical roles and patterns of power is presented within Robinson and Taylor's (2012) research. They implemented *students as researchers* to understand more about how power shows up in student voice projects in two schools. They called these student research groups SaR (Students as Researchers). Within these groups students determined an aspect of school to create questionnaires on, collect data, and analyze results from their research. They found that existing power roles between teachers and students negatively impacted the two groups. They argued that for projects like theirs to be successful, participants needed to recognize imbalances in power relations and actively attempt to shift that in meaningful ways. They also claimed that, though their study did not provide the desired outcome, it should not discourage others from attempting projects that include students in leadership roles researching. Overall, this research added to the literature with more evidence that without planning, staff and students are likely to fall into historical

roles of power within the education system.

Student Perceptions

Student perceptions and opinions on their ability to express themselves in schools also came up in the research. This subtheme is important to the overall picture of roles of power in education because students' perspectives are not often heard as a result of the power dynamics in schools.

My Voice National Student Report 2013, conducted by the Quaglia Institute of Student Aspirations, had a large compilation of data on student voice (Quaglia Institute, 2013). This study included 200 schools across the United States and considers students' opinions in secondary education. This was one of the larger studies included, totaling 56,877 students in the 2012-2013 academic school year. They surveyed students on different statements about motivation to learn. The report found that only 46% of students felt they had a voice in decision-making within their schools, 52% felt that teachers were willing to learn from students, and only 49% of students surveyed knew goals that their schools were working toward. The findings of this study are significant to student voice and show positive correlation to the use of it. While 58% of students felt they did not have a voice at school, students who did were seven times more likely to be academically motivated and six times as likely to be more engaged in their learning. The Quaglia Institute also had recommendations such as use of surveys, focus groups, and student participation in leadership teams to promote student voice.

Osberg et al. (2006) presented a good example of how a school might implement a small, but meaningful change involving students in leadership like the Quaglia research found. Osberg

et al. explored how shared leadership impacts students. The research followed three schools in case studies that participated in an intervention and reform model called the Stressed-Out Students intervention (SOS). The SOS teams comprised eight participants and included at least one student, administrator, and parent. These teams sought to address pressing issues within their schools and strived to make changes that improve those issues brought by members. In addition to including students on the teams, remaining students within the schools were also surveyed. The findings of this study showed a positive correlation between the implementation of teams and changes being made to the schools. Students and adults involved in these groupings reported positive results in all three schools.

One caution Osberg et al. discussed when implementing SOS leadership groups was to avoid leading students with impressions of having an equal say compared to other stakeholders. They found that two student participants believed they held equal power in the decision-making process; however, when questioned about the process and decisions, these students did not understand the intricacies of the groups they were a part of. The research showed yet another example of students having less power in schools. Despite students not understanding the process or all the intricacies of the leadership groups, most students in this study felt positive about their involvement, reporting a sense of responsibility and power to help produce outcomes.

Another example of group meetings with students appeared in research conducted by Mayes (2013). The collaborative inquiry study based in Australia focused on interviews and committee meetings that included 25 students, a teacher, a student teacher, and researchers. Within the committee meetings, students focused on hidden curriculum, which pertains to the theory that

there are normative and unwritten roles, rules, and values that students are to conform to. Within this hidden curriculum, power between teachers and students comes up and was discussed in the interviews between the researcher and students involved in the groups. Some of the conversations recorded in this article between the researcher and students provided insight into how students feel about classroom power dynamics. One instance was when a student talked about how they felt teachers needed a balance of power. He explained that it feels harmful when teachers are too lenient or too authoritarian. He further described how they felt about the researcher leading their interview, explaining that she was doing good by leading them. This research showed that students often appreciate a balance of power in that teachers can lead students and allow students to make choices and contribute meaningfully. Another relevant aspect of this article was the need for teachers to remain reflective in their practices to evaluate how they use their power in their classrooms. Many students discussed the environments of the classrooms impacted by their teachers; one student even suggested how teachers might consider recording and watching themselves to see how they teach. These student discussions uncovered more impactful aspects of student's roles of power in the classroom.

Positive Power in Teaching

The literature also examined many ways that teachers in roles of power are important to student's ability to access voice and feel agency. Some studies focused on learning tools and ways to increase student agency in classrooms and schools. For example, Kim (2022) focused on science inquiry and exploration where two elementary school classrooms in Canada were observed with an ethnographic approach. Researchers focused on the use of teacher talk and student agency in classrooms. They found that teachers often led students in instruction to

express their voice. One teacher in the study conveyed that the curriculum is important but also found students' inquiry to explore was equally as important. One thing that Kim pointed out is that it was important that the teachers were purposeful in how they held back teacher talk. This left space for students to come to their own inquiries. The teachers in the study would pivot their targets to what the students were exploring. This was a study specific to science inquiry but could potentially be used in other academic areas. The notion that teachers can allow students to guide transitions to new topics in the classroom is both unique and a potentially engaging tool to increase student agency in education.

Mitra (2004) also found positive associations between educators leading and students having more agency. Mitra examined the significance of student voice related to the development of students. Qualitative data was collected over two years, including observations of two high school focus groups. The groups included one that focused on school participation with first-generation Latino students and the other focused on student participation and efforts to make changes to school reform. Both groups consisted of teachers and students. Data from this study showed that students who actively participated in these focus groups showed increased feelings of belonging and agency compared to those who did not participate. Similarly to Kim's research, this study declares that "a key component of the structure of student voice activities is the relationship between the youth and adults who are working together" (p. 682). While schools cannot be completely rid of roles of power, they can be shifted in a positive way which is what this research supports.

Similarly, Soini et al. (2023), who conducted a study in Finland, showed a direct correlation of student feelings of agency to social support from teachers. The purpose was to

examine perceived agency in student learning and the connection that had to teacher and peer relationships. This study, like the previously mentioned literature, also found a direct correlation of students having a higher level of perceived agency when there were higher levels of social support from teachers and peers in the classroom. In this study, the lower grade levels that received more scaffolding support from their teachers showed higher levels of perceived agency. While this is promising, it is worth noting that this could also be related to students of different ages and developmental levels as well. Combined with the previous research, there is compelling evidence that teacher scaffolding and guidance when leading student voice activities are important to improving student agency and perceptions of agency.

Yang (2019)'s research also stressed the importance of teachers in classrooms scaffolding learning and releasing power to students purposefully. This study in Hong Kong focused on the use of reflective assessments and how that impacted agency in students. This study collected qualitative tracing data on ninth-grade students. It compared the use of reflective assessments between two classes. One class was given the opportunity to self-evaluate using reflective assessments and went on to set goals for themselves, and the other class taught by the same teacher did not. The research found a positive correlation between the use of reflective assessments and students' agency and achievement. Further, the study discussed that students went on to develop their agency gradually with the help of teacher guidance. This again supports teacher scaffolding in the classroom to guide students as an essential element to support student agency.

Combined, the literature tells a compelling story about the dynamics of power within schools. It shows that historically students have not been in power and have had little say in

their education. It also shows that we are making strides to try to include students, a major stakeholder in education. It is imperative that we continue to evaluate both the positive and negative aspects of how children's position of power in our world impacts their education and overall agency.

Marginalized Student Groups

Groups of students who have historically been disadvantaged and are considered marginalized is a major theme in the research pertaining to voice and agency of students in education. Demographics that will be addressed in this section include students with disabilities, students of minority ethnicities and races, and economically disadvantaged students. The next section will discuss findings in the research related to student voice and agency where marginalized student groups are concerned. Topics covered include alternate ways of communication with student voice, ways to increase student voice, and how student voice is impacted given the additional challenges these students face daily.

Special education students face unique challenges when considering voice and agency in schools. Students with disabilities might have a harder time expressing their voice. While this is true, there are studies with ways to include disabled student voices who may face additional challenges that general education students do not. One such study examined the impact and integration of arts to increase student agency and voice of students with disabilities in alternate ways (Mason et al., 2008). The study included focus groups across sixteen states. The groups consisted of teachers, art affiliates, and art directors. The study found that teachers and artists tended to link success to enjoyment and participation from students. Additionally, the study found that administrators played a critical role in the implementation of this program at schools.

This study was unique, using arts to encourage voice and choice in students with disabilities. The art used in the study was not specific. It included common art practices such as music, drama, and poetry for example. It is not the typical use of student voice or agency like discussed so far. When considering different populations of students, however, we must think about ways to promote inclusion. Art is one of the ways that this study suggested as an alternative way of expression for students with disabilities. Special education students can come to schools with challenges that impact speech, movement, and cognitive functioning. The arts are one way that this study suggested could help bridge the gap in student voice and choice in schools for special education students. This is one option that educators might consider using to promote student voice of special education students who are impacted by their disabilities.

While Mason et al. focused on art integration to promote student voice with special education, Jimenez & Warren (2023) focused on special education students engaging in self-assessments and found positive results. Students with extensive support needs were studied to understand their self-determination with the use of self-assessments. Jimenez and Warren found a functional relationship between the use of the formative self-assessment intervention and the ability of the students to develop self-determination skills. Self-determination skills can be a part of agency in student learning because they foster choices made by students. This research is important to consider, given that it could increase student agency in special education settings. Helping cultivate agency in special education students may be more difficult because of additional challenges this population experiences. The findings of this study are promising

because they show one way that educators may be able to implement a practice that could foster agency with students with disabilities.

Another marginalized group of students to consider is economically disadvantaged students. One study sought to understand how student voice could be used to promote reading engagement in economically disadvantaged students. Ng (2018) conducted a case study in Australia where a teacher utilized student voice in developing her independent reading times to encourage student from economically disadvantaged backgrounds to engage with reading. There was a positive connection between the engagement of students in her class to the teacher making an active effort to learn and implement what students expressed about silent reading time. Changes students suggested included partner reading, sharing what they read with the class, changing the time of the silent reading block, among others. A critical point to this is that the teacher made an active effort to keep a list of the likes and dislikes of the children to help implement these changes. The teacher in this study reported in the interviews that she saw an increase in participation and engagement. Additionally, it emphasized the need for partnerships between students and teachers in learning environments. Students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds can often find it harder to engage with academics because of additional stressors in their lives. This study shows that integrating these students' voices into classrooms in small ways can be very impactful to their overall engagement in schools.

Students with social behavioral disorders were another group of students to consider. Often students with social behavioral disorders receive special services but can differ because they can communicate in more significant ways than students with communication disabilities

may not. In England, a case study included six boys from ages 13-16 that displayed such disabilities and were interviewed regarding their school experiences (Sellman, 2009). These groups brought up a few reoccurring trends. One trend included that the students felt positive about their current school due to feeling valued. By contrast, the students also mentioned negative aspects of their experience at their current school, such as restraint occurrences and school uniforms. It also explained that students took on a pragmatic approach to the discussions around restraint. Students acknowledge that it was at times necessary for the safety of others. One thing that is important is that these students were able to vocalize their concerns to researchers. The main goal of the research was to get students' perspectives on their experiences, given they are marginalized students due to their behavioral disorders. These students may not have had many opportunities to express concerns prior to this research and therefore, it could be a major reason so many negative aspects were found in interviews. If students are not feeling heard or understood, then how can educators and policymakers make meaningful changes that help facilitate the needs of all children? This is an important question to think about when reviewing the research pertaining to agency and voice.

Racial minorities and English language learners also came up when reviewing the research on student voice and agency. One teacher in the Southeastern United States who teaches English language learners participated in a case study by Metson et al. (2022). The study sought to better understand ways that this teacher engaged students in meaningful discussions and higher-order thinking. Findings of this research included that teachers need to be prepared to allow students to reflect and be vulnerable, strong scaffolding is needed for students learning

English, opportunities are needed for collaboration and agency within discussions, and allowing space for reflection as a teacher is imperative. The strongest argument in their findings was that planning and reflection need to happen with practices like this. Additional studies in this section will also support ample planning to successfully engage learners in student voice and agency practices (Zion, 2020; Holquist & Walls, 2021).

Zion's (2020) research utilized transformative student voice to better understand racial inequities and how that impacts student voice in schools in the United States. Students were not only participants but helped to conduct the research alongside the adult researchers. The students helped develop a survey, collected 500 surveys, and analyzed the data. Lack of trust in the education system was a theme that became apparent in this research. Students made four proposals for policy change from the surveys conducted. The district school board then went on to approve all the proposals brought forward by students in the transformative student voice group. This is an example of a way a school district was able to meaningfully include minority voices and implement policy changes because of student voice and agency. This is one of the more important research articles found in my search for literature pertaining to student voice because of the considerable success of the implementation of transformative student voice. This strategy of student agency and voice inclusion should be researched further and implemented in more areas to gain a deeper understanding of how it may help the K-12 education system improve based on the voices of adults and students.

Even when careful planning is put into the inclusion of marginalized student voices, it can be hard to break down barriers that are present. Holquist & Walls (2021) aimed to see how

student-voice groups focused on policy reform could include equitable representation. The study involved a secondary analysis of previous research conducted by the author. The two case studies included one group that focused on influencing state legislature and another on participants' perceived failures and successes within student voice groups. The studies did not meet the expectations of the researcher's hopes. They found that additional barriers, such as not enough outreach efforts, accessibility issues, and exclusionary practices based on skill sets, were all reasons that certain students were unable to participate. Overall, the findings of this study were mixed because the groups included marginalized racial and ethnic students but did not represent students with disabilities. It is important to acknowledge that barriers exist, and without careful planning, the inclusion of various students can be easily overlooked.

Altogether, this section has covered literature that addresses marginalized students who face additional challenges with voice and agency in schools. They can face additional challenges for several reasons, such as disabilities, food and housing insecurity, English being a second language, or discrimination. Due to these challenges, students may also face challenges in their ability to engage with student voices meaningfully. The research presented shows ways that schools might be able to engage students who face additional challenges within schools. Marginalized student groups present challenges that educators must address when engaging students in student voice and agency within schools.

Practices That Encourage Student Agency and Voice

The next section will address the literature that fits into the theme of practices and strategies for implementing student voice and agency in schools. Practices of student voice and

agency in literature are broad. For this reason, this section has many different subsequent sections to follow. These sections include students in leadership roles, the emotional well-being of students and relationships with staff, service-learning groups, surveys, and Thoughtful planning.

Students in Leadership Roles

One practice that came up repeatedly in the literature is putting students in leadership roles, which helped students use their voices and have a sense of agency within their education. The studies I found utilized different individual strategies and pedagogical practices but had the same overarching theme of students being able to step into leadership roles. Earl & Lee (2000) found within their research that schools within Canada that encouraged students to take on leadership roles showed success in graduation rates, grades, and positive feedback from students in questionnaires. Their research sought to improve the learning experiences of students as well as outcomes with students who were at risk. The research focused on secondary schools and found a positive connection between students' leadership and success. Alternatively, Halliday et al. (2019) focused their study on an approach called positive education pedagogy to understand student well-being. This pedagogical approach emphasizes the strengths of students. The study was a participatory action research project where students led. The findings of this research connect to student voice and agency. The researchers explained that students felt a sense of autonomy and satisfaction overall from being able to contribute and be involved in their school. Additionally, they found that students showed gains in self-efficacy, communication, and

engagement through the participatory action research led by students. These two studies are unique but related regarding students taking on that leadership role in educational settings.

In their compilation of relevant research, Cook-Sather (2020) argues that placing students in positions where they can lead and voice their opinions is linked to students feeling a sense of agency. They used empirical studies to analyze how student voice fosters agency. Cook-Sather's research includes over fifty different studies. They discussed in their findings that it is important that, as previously discussed in the theme of power dynamics, power needs to be shifted toward students, and one way to do that is through offerings of leadership roles. In this article, they made a critical point about student voice practices and how they can vary significantly. Cook-Sather explains that "differences may arise, partly, because adults' interpretations of what 'giving pupils a voice' means, and how to implement that in practice, vary enormously" (p. 34). It is important to consider that while the practices of student voice in research vary, it is worthwhile to spend time researching for the sake of students being heard within schools.

Student leadership practices, like student voice practices, can vary, but Lac & Mansfield (2018) proposed a model called Principal Orientations for Critical Youth Educational Leadership to help guide administrators. The research model gave administrators a guidance tool for offering leadership to students. Core components of this model included building and strengthening the critical perspectives of students and staff, honoring the lived experiences of students and staff, and designing methods that allow students to participate and construct in decision-making (p. 48). These core components were developed over previous studies conducted by the same researcher and showed positive benefits to students gaining the ability to use meaningful voice

and use of leadership skills. This qualitative secondary analysis of the practice is promising for administrators to have a model that specifically lays out components that work in student leadership opportunities.

Emotional Well-Being and Relationships

Some of the literature focused on student well-being. It is no surprise that student voice and student well-being are linked together in research. Many studies have used student voice to gain information on student well-being as students are stakeholders in their education. While only the critical literature about this area will be included in this section, it is important to note that many of the studies discussed could also relate to this area (Mason et al., 2008; Osberg et al., 2006; Jimenez & Warren, 2023; Soini et al., 2023).

Balfe & Travers (2011) and Mameli et al. (2019) also examined student well-being. Both used questionnaires to understand more about students' well-being. Balfe & Traver's research sought to understand what makes students feel included, while Mameli et al. focused on various measures, including psychological fulfillment, agentic engagement, and academic achievement. These studies bring powerful findings that support student well-being connected to student engagement and agency in schools.

Mameli et al. found that students' basic needs being met is a predictor of agency, responsibility, and academic achievement in schools. If a student's basic needs are not being met, then it is unlikely that they will be able to partake in critical conversations in schools or participate meaningfully. Mameli et al. found that students must be in a good emotional state first to access strategies to evoke student agency. In contrast, Balfe & Traver's research findings

indicate areas students reported help them feel included in schools. Students reported that they like having activities at school, having friends, and an overall positive atmosphere at school. Additionally, students reported in the study that subjects such as art, physical education, and group activities made them feel more positive engagement and inclusion. Balfe & Traver's research might help teachers and administrators understand what makes students feel included and positive about their school experiences. Together, the findings of these studies help further shape why the well-being of students is important in the larger conversation surrounding the inclusion of student voice and the ability of students to feel a sense of agency within schools.

Surveys and Service-Learning Groups

Other strategies for engaging students in agency practices and student voice practices include using student voice surveys and implementing service-learning groups. Student voice surveys are a strategy that schools and districts can use to help to gain insight into what students are thinking. On the other hand, service-learning groups are projects that involve students helping a cause, typically in the community.

Earl & Lee (2000) worked on research that followed schools in Canada on a school improvement program. The main goal was to improve at-risk students' learning experiences and outcomes. The findings of this study indicate that only a few schools showed significant positive outcomes. In these schools, one of the strategies mentioned was student voice surveys. The schools that thrived most from the changes of this program were the ones that had an "Inquiry-Mindedness" and utilized data collected to help shape their planning (p. 37). Additionally, they note that the most successful schools shared leadership with students. This mirrors some of the

previous research that points toward including students in leadership within school buildings. Student-created surveys are just one way that a school might implement that. In contrast, Schneider et al. (2021), researched the inclusion of student surveys to improve accountability systems in schools further. Their findings argued that student survey data should be added to accountability systems because it helped show the bigger picture of school quality. Currently, schools collect data on state testing scores, absentee records, and suspension records. As Schneider et al. pointed out, this data does not grasp the entirety of the school and what is happening. They urge that the inclusion of student voices through surveys can only add to that picture for the public. It could be argued that it also adds to what the schools can see and how they might change practices. This study is promising because it shows how policy could be changed to include student voices in the very structure of school accountability.

Similarly, Vaughn et al. (2020) used another survey that could potentially benefit schools in further understanding student agency. The study focused on a survey instrument called StAP (student agency profile), which included measures of intentionality, self-perception, choice-making, persistence, and instructiveness. The researchers used the instrument to understand student agency more and found a positive link between student agency and literacy achievement. They note that this correlation only applied to grades 3-5 and not grades 1-2, which were included in the study. The study shows another way surveys can be used to understand further how agency impacts student learning and achievement. Implemented by teachers or administrators, it could give a larger picture of student voice and agency much like Schneider et al. (2021) suggested as well.

Service-learning groups were another practice that focused on agency and voice in education. Serriere et al. (2011) and Sorkin (2018) have research that had critical findings on using service-learning groups in education. One trend both these studies point toward is that student service-learning groups need to include student leadership. Serriere et al. found three types of emergent groups from their research: teacher-led, shared power, and student-led service-learning groups. Of these three groups, the least successful was the teacher-led grouping. The findings suggested that this group of students did not gain further interest in learning, nor did they have time for reflection like the other two groups, which showed favorable outcomes. This is favorable for the outlook of student agency in classrooms because this research confirms that a teacher-led model where students do not have input is not as powerful. Sorkin's research focused more on students' understanding of leadership within service-learning groups. The three areas that students understood most about leadership within these groups were that the relationship between leadership and followers is built on care, that there are limitations to someone's leadership based on their knowledge and world views, and that leadership requires response and action to be effective (p. 103). This research shows that students can not only engage with leadership in service-learning opportunities but also understand nuances around them. One significant difference between these two studies is that Serriere et al. focused on grades k-5, whereas Sorkin focused on high school. It is unknown if students in the k-5 setting would understand the nuances of leadership, as Sorkin's research points out. Both studies found that students felt positively when engaged in leadership opportunities in service-learning groups that were carefully planned.

Intentional Planning

Serriere et al. (2011) and Sorkin (2018) also both emphasize the need for careful and intentional planning when including student voice and agency practices within schools. Other research studies stressed this as well. Savitz et al. (2021) sought to understand if student debates promoted a sense of agency and empowerment within students. Like Vaughn et al. (2020), this study also found a link between increased literacy skills and practices that encourage agency. Savitz et al. found that critical disciplinary literacy skills needed for the debates followed students to different areas of learning outside of debate-centered learning. That being said, a major focus of their discussion is around the careful planning that went into the debates with students. Some of the mentioned elements that needed careful planning included scaffolding the release of power to students, ensuring student understanding of elements of debates, and allowing space for flexibility.

Intentional planning at a building level is equally important to the classroom level. Bergmark et al. (2014) gave a wonderful example of this in practice. In this case study, a school implemented small group meetings where students and teachers met monthly to discuss community-building and service-learning projects. Instead of positive outcomes, this study found that there was a breakdown in the process where some teachers felt positive, and other teachers felt negative about the meetings. There was a divide within their school, and the findings focused on the importance of administration in schools, ensuring clarity of school visions and values. They suggested, "This case can teach leaders, teachers, and students of the need for articulating core values of schooling, how to handle value conflicts and dilemmas, and how to develop a

shared learning community” (p.43). This case study was a notable example of how careful planning is something that comes up repeatedly in the research. Not all literature relevant to planning is laid out in this section because most practices that utilize student voice and promote agency require careful planning. It is evident through the research that student voice and agency require careful planning to ensure they are successful. Without an understanding from all parties, there can be a breakdown in efficacy, as shown in this case study.

In this section, research was presented that focused on practices and strategies for implementing student voice and agency in schools. Practices of student voice and agency in this section included students in leadership roles, service-learning groups, and the use of surveys. Strategies included addressing the well-being of students, fostering positive relationships between staff and students, and cultivating practices through intentional planning. Through these practices and strategies, educators can better understand practices that can work to increase student voice and agency in schools.

Action Plan

This literature review aims to understand what the research says about the use of student voice and its impact on the agency of students in school. It also examines what the research says regarding the implementation of student voice. What it looks like in implementation within education systems and its implications for schools and students. Questions that guided my research include:

- How do student voice and agency impact how students learn and how schools operate?

- What does the implementation of inclusion of student voice and agency in education systems look like?
- What have students already said about having a voice in schools?

There were three major themes that surfaced within researching student voice and agency. The first theme was power dynamics in school systems and how those roles of power impact the use of student voice and sense of agency among students. Next, themes around the inclusion of marginalized students also surfaced. While research was limited most in this area, it is worth noting in the action plan that these students should not be excluded from a conversation that has historically ignored them. Last, the theme of how schools can and should implement strategies and practices of student voice to foster agency came up. The three of these themes make up research related to student voice and student agency in schools that were found.

The proposed action plan is curated for the use of my current place of employment, an elementary school in the Pacific Northwest (PNW). The PNW School Site described in the action plan below includes a marginalized population of students from pre-school to 5th grade. The site is considered a title school in Washington State, and all students receive free and reduced lunches. Enrollment includes more than half of students from non-white race/ethnicity backgrounds and serves approximately one fourth of students in English language services. Additionally, PNW School Site has disabled students with various needs ranging from resource rooms to self-contained special education classrooms. The proposed changes offered in the sections below relate to this school site.

Power Dynamics

The role of power between students and staff was a theme within the research. The literature shows that both students and staff fall into historical patterns of power in schools (Cincera et al., 2020; Dorner, 2015; Duckett et al., 2010; Halliday et al., 2009; Mayes, 2023; Mitra, 2004; Osberg et al., 2006; is Robinson & Taylor, 2012; Quaglia, 2013). Quaglia Institute found that only 46% of students felt they had a voice in decision making within their schools, and that 52% of students felt that teachers were willing to learn from students (2013). Students within schools are not currently feeling heard when reviewing the literature. They also know that they hold little power compared to adults within schools (Quaglia, 2013; Osberg et al., 2006; Mayes, 2013). While students are not feeling heard in schools, there is research that supports that slight shifts in power can be utilized by teachers to provide students with voice and agency within classrooms. The research supports that teachers use scaffolding to gradually release power to students to ensure that student success (Kim, 2022; Mitra, 2004; Soini et al., 2023; Yang, 2019). These combined make up what the research has said regarding power roles within schools and how educators and administrators can act to acknowledge and shift power from adults to students. Recommendations made in Table 1 below specify what the research has said, what PNW school site is doing related to that research and how they might improve or continue practices already in place that are backed by the research.

Table 1*Power Dynamics*

Research	Practice	Recommendation
Staff and students fall into normative patterns of power that have historically been used in schools, where adults take on the role of the leaders and students take on the role of the follower (Cincera et al., 2020; Dorner, 2015; Duckett et al., 2010; Halliday et al., 2009; Mayes, 2023; Mitra, 2004; Osberg et al., 2006; Robinson & Taylor, 2012; Quaglia, 2013)	PNW School Site utilizes leadership teams (principal and student monthly meetings), student council meetings (monthly meetings with select students and lead teachers), and student ambassador opportunities for students (select students involved in planning whole school activities- i.e., assemblies, food drives, introduce new students to school, etc.). These all involve students and educators in the building. Leadership opportunities are available to students, but it is unclear if students can make meaningful decisions in these positions or simply follow what adult leadership directing is asking of students.	When designing opportunities for students to participate in school changes, careful planning that includes clear expectations of staff and student roles, providing staff with scaffold ideas to position students in power, and minimizing teacher talk to allow students to voice opinions openly is needed.
Students throughout the research convey that they know and understand when they are not in positions of authority or lack agency (Quaglia, 2013; Osberg et al., 2006; Mayes, 2013)	It is unknown if students at PNW school site feel they do or do not have opportunities to practice agency in school.	Administrators need to understand what students are thinking about their school climate and provide students with opportunities to contribute to conversations about school reform that are tangible to students. This can be done through student voice surveys, student interviews, or focus groups to gain student perspectives.

There are clear correlations between scaffolding gradual release of power to students and positive outcomes of students perceived agency. (Kim, 2022; Mitra, 2004; Soini et al., 2023; Yang, 2019)	PNW School Site has bi-monthly training made available to educators to strengthen practices. These trainings have not focused on including student voice and agency or ways to increase that within classrooms this school year. Historically, in previous school years, culturally responsive pedagogy training has been offered that emphasizes student voice in classrooms.	Administrators need to train staff to ensure educators working with students understand strategies to scaffold and gradually release power to students in schools.
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Marginalized Student Groups

Marginalized students having voice and agency in education systems also surfaced as a theme in research. Special education students, economically disadvantaged students, English language learners, and students of color were all included in the project's research. These groups have been historically overlooked and need an emphasis on feeling valued to meaningfully participate in student voice and agency within education (Ng, 2018; Sellman, 2009; Zion, 2020). Another element related to this theme was the careful planning and scaffolding of student voice and agency practices when working with marginalized students (Holquist & Walls, 2021; Metson et al., 2022; Zion, 2020). Many marginalized students require additional planning due to unique barriers, and research shows this. While planning was an important element in marginalized groups, it is discussed in practices that encourage student agency and voice. Special education students, like other marginalized groups, require careful planning and showed increased well-being when included in student voice activities (Mason et al., 2008; Jimenez & Warren, 2023). PNW school site has a marginalized population of students that includes English language learners, economically disadvantaged students, students of color, and special education

students. In Table 2, I provide recommendations to further encourage student voice and feelings of agency among these students.

Table 2

Marginalized Student Groups

Research	Practice	Recommendation
Research indicates that seeking to include students with significant special education needs in student voice practices shows favorable outcomes for student well-being. (Mason et al., 2008; Jimenez & Warren, 2023)	PNW School Site encourages students with disabilities to participate alongside their non-disabled peers in some leadership opportunities. For example, support students are included in monthly student council meetings. There is limited outreach to significant support needs classrooms to include these voices in other opportunities where students might voice opinions on the school.	Administrators and teachers need to continue to encourage special education students to join non-disabled peers and explicitly invite and include them to participate in student voice and leadership opportunities.
When marginalized students feel valued through opportunities, they can meaningfully voice opinions and express concerns to be acted upon by schools (Ng, 2018; Sellman, 2009; Zion, 2020)	PNW school site does not have programs targeted to hold space for students of historically disadvantaged backgrounds. These students can participate in student voice activities, but they are not centered around marginalized populations of students.	Administrators need to offer options like focus groups and student voice surveys for marginalized students' perspectives to be heard and to show students that their voices matter and are valued at their school.

Practices That Encourage Student Agency and Voice

Putting strategies and practices into place to increase student voice and agency in the education setting is a major focus of this research project and emerged as a theme as well. Educators and administrators might use many different strategies and practices to encourage student voice and agency. Including students in leadership roles consistently was linked to

positive findings in the research (Earl & Lee, 2000; Halliday et al., 2019; Osberg et al., 2006; Cook-Sather, 2020; Robinson & Taylor, 2013; Zion, 2020). This included strategies such as service-learning opportunities, group meetings where students and school staff meaningfully participated, and even using students as researchers. There was also an impact on student agency when students felt they had basic needs taken care of, an overall sense of well-being, and positive relationships with adults around them in schools (Mameli et al., 2019; Osberg et al., 2006; Soini, 2023). This project cannot specify if one practice is better than another, but the research has some clear trends in these two areas, as well as the need for careful planning. With ample and thoughtful planning, student voice and agency practices tend to be more successful (Cook-Sather, 2020; Holquist & Walls, 2021; Metson et al., 2022; Robinson & Taylor, 2013; Savitz et al., 2021; Zion, 2020). PNW School Site currently has a fair number of practices that try to include students in student voice activities that encourage agency. In Table 3 I make recommendations based on the research available for practices of student agency and voice.

Table 3*Practices That Encourage Student Agency and Voice*

Research	Practice	Recommendation
Students involved in leadership opportunities show favorable outcomes with academic achievement and a sense of student agency (Earl & Lee, 2000; Halliday et al., 2019; Osberg et al., 2006; Cook-Sather, 2020; Robinson &	PNW school has opportunities during school hours and outside of school, such as participating in leadership teams with select students and administration, having ambassador opportunities, and attending student council member meetings.	Administrators and teachers should continue offering students options to participate in student leadership opportunities. Additionally, administrators need to assess if the options available are equitable to all students by keeping track of what students are attending and noting if demographics are missing from the opportunities

Taylor, 2013; Zion, 2020).		presented. If data shows that marginalized groups are missing these opportunities then the administration needs to use student input to help find ways to make opportunities more accessible.
Emotional well-being and relationships between staff and students impact students' feelings of agency within education (Mameli et al., 2019; Osberg et al., 2006; Soini, 2023).	The PNW school site utilizes a program called Second Step to address social-emotional learning and well-being in the school. Implementation of this varies from class to class in the building. Overall, the site has observable positive relationships between staff and students. This can be seen through interactions in hallways.	Administrators and teachers should continue to foster well-being through social-emotional curriculum and continue to build positive relationships between staff and students. Social, emotional curriculum needs to be up to date and evaluated using school surveys that include staff and students to determine if it is helping with student well-being.
Research indicates that careful planning is needed to implement strategies of student voice with fidelity to ensure favorable outcomes. (Cook-Sather, 2020; Holquist & Walls, 2021; Metson et al., 2022; Robinson & Taylor, 2013; Savitz et al., 2021; Zion, 2020).	It is unclear how many teachers use student voice practices in their classrooms at PNW school site. There is no push from administrators to include student voices beyond what is specified in the criteria for teacher evaluation tools, where teachers call on students to answer questions and reflect on their learning in some way.	Administrators, teachers, and other faculty should carefully plan the use of strategies to include student voice to ensure they are purposeful and meaningful to avoid surface-level student voice. Student voice must be impactful on outcomes. Administrators need to ensure staff knows of strategies and scaffolds to encourage student voice and agency through administrator-directed training.

Summary

The action tables above specify changes PNW School Site might take to ensure students within the school can meaningfully participate and gain a sense of agency. I made many recommendations on ways to shift power imbalances between faculty and students in Table 1. These changes include ensuring students understand the process of these student-led opportunities and how to meaningfully participate, offering larger outreach opportunities to other students not typically involved, and offering training to faculty to ensure the successful implementation of voice that encourages agency in classrooms. In Table 2, I recommend creating a culture where students with disabilities are included in leadership conversations and offering more narrow focus groups for historically disadvantaged students. My last recommendations in Table 3 include PNW School Site continuing to offer a wide selection of leadership opportunities to students both during and outside of school hours, PNW School Site increasing strategies to improve student wellness and relationships, and the school continuing to thoughtfully plan and implement strategies to include student voice and foster agency. These recommendations have been made based on the research currently available on student voice and agencies within the education system.

Discussion

This research project aimed to better understand student voice and agency in school systems. It aimed to see how student voice and agency impact student learning and how schools can implement strategies to encourage this. It also sought to understand how, if at all, inclusion of student voice and agency impacts students in schools both in well-being and academic

achievement. Three key themes that emerged from the research include power dynamics in school between students and staff, inclusion of marginalized students, and practices that encourage agency and voice. From these themes, actionable steps have been suggested to improve student voice and agency at my school site. I will now attempt to answer questions presented in the rationale, analyze current trends in the research, and discuss implications for teachers, students, schools, and future research. I will also address the limitations of this project before concluding with overall takeaways from the project.

Discussion of Findings

In this section I answer my initial questions:

- How do student voice and agency impact how students learn and how schools operate?
- What does implementation of inclusion of student voice and agency in the education systems look like?
- What have students already said about having a voice in schools?

I do this by both examining the research and my school site

Impact of Student Voice on Learning and School Operations

The first research question involved understanding if student voice and agency influence positive changes in education. I wondered if the inclusion of student's voice and agency in schools was supported by research. The research largely supports the use and inclusion of student voice and agency in the education system (Cook-Sather, 2020; Halliday et al., 2019; Jimenez & Warren, 2023; Kim, 2022; Mason et al., 2008; Mitra, 2004; Ng, 2018; Osberg et al.,

2006; Savitz et al., 2021; Vaughn et al., 2020; Zion, 2020). These articles found some positive correlation to student success or well-being.

Positive outcomes of the inclusion of student voice and agency practices include increased literacy skills, increased participation and engagement, and policy changes that support marginalized students. Of the positive leaning research I found, one that stood out among others was Zion's use of transformative student voice to evoke policy changes in school districts (2020). Within the research, students took on leadership roles, created surveys to understand student concerns, and then went on to make four proposals to the school district board based on their analysis of those surveys. Their efforts were successful, and all four proposals passed. This whole project was student-led with the help of educators along the way. The students were able to successfully make a lasting impact on their own education through this student voice practice. This answers a large part of this question by specifying how schools could operate with the use of meaningful student voice practices. The school district in this research went through local policy changes that will impact students for the better based on what they want to see changed. This is a strong source of research that administrators should pay attention to because of its large success.

Additionally, Ng (2018) found increased participation and engagement from students, whereas Savitz et al. (2021) and Vaughn et al. (2020) found increased literacy skills when implementing student voice and agency in schools. Ng's research focused on using student input and voice at a classroom level to change silent reading times. The teacher reported findings that students became more engaged and wanted to participate. This is a study that teachers could

utilize to easily implement a small but meaningful way to increase student voice practice in classrooms. The teacher's methods were simple: she would write down input from students and purposely bring those change requests to the classroom. Vaughn, on the other hand, conducted research regarding a type of survey teachers and administrators can use to understand how much agency a student has in a classroom. The research used this survey and found a positive link between literacy skills and students' feeling that they have agency in the classroom. It is important to note that these findings only applied to grades 3-5 in the study, whereas grades 1-2 did not show the same impact. It is unclear why this was the case, but overall, the link between agency and literacy skills appears promising for educators and students. Similarly, Savitz et al. also found a link to increased literacy development when encouraging student voice and agency in debates within the classroom. These were some of the more prominent studies that showed positive links between student voice and agency in classrooms.

Some articles, however, found mixed results of outcomes when including student voice and agency in schools (Earl & Lee, 2000; Duckett et al., 2010; Holquist & Walls, 2021; Sellman, 2009). Some research focused on outdoor education programs, while others focused on groups of students meeting with administration and student voice surveys. Earle & Lee (2000) found that schools in their study had increased graduation rates when student voice practices were implemented, but that only a few schools were successful. The research followed schools in one area that participated in a district-wide initiative to increase student voice practices. The schools that showed increased graduation rates had a common theme of increased student involvement in leadership roles and had an emphasis on schools acting and actively encouraging this practice.

Most schools in this study, however, did not see this achievement, and therefore, it is hard to know if district-wide initiatives for changes like this work. It does appear that administrative and school staff can create positive, lasting changes, though.

Another study that fell short of its expectations sought to bring policy change to the local education system through student voice groups (Holquist & Walls, 2021). The research found that meaningful change was not made from the use of the student voice groups in this study. It sought to focus on students from marginalized backgrounds being able to participate and make meaningful changes in policy. The big picture of the study was that there was not enough outreach to marginalized students, accessibility issues were prominent, and exclusionary practices happened within the groups of students. This study acts as a cautionary tale in the research. Without careful thought about how to include different populations of students, such as economically disadvantaged students and students with disabilities, they are easily overlooked. Unlike Zion (2020), policy change was not possible in this research. It is unclear if it is due to the methods used within the groups Holquist & Walls used or if it has to do with barriers described, such as exclusionary practices and accessibility issues.

Students within the research often voiced negative attributes of their time in education. For instance, Duckett et al. (2010) researched schools with very high ratings. Despite that, results showed that students were feeling bullied by their teachers and found overall students felt their well-being was negatively impacted by their time in school. This study was alarming because of the large contradiction of what someone might expect from high-achieving schools. This research is important because it shows that, on the surface, schools can appear to be healthy

places for students based on achievement scores alone, but in reality, they can be harming students' well-being. On the other hand, Sellman (2009) also found that students, when given the opportunity to voice their opinions, often brought up negative aspects of school. In their study, they focused on learning more about the perspectives of students with behavioral disorders. The research itself acts as a way for students to practice voice within the focus groups offered. Students voiced a range of complaints in the groups such as having uniforms and general struggles at schools. Students also generally reported in the groups that they felt valued in their school, however. The valuable part of this research is that when students can use their voices in schools; they may not be what is desired. In this study, students were given a voice where they may not have had one previously. The research largely shows ways student voice and agency can positively impact students, but it would be erroneous to say that all the research has clear findings.

PNW school site, much like many of these researchers utilizes strategies to include students in the processes of decision making around the school. Some examples include the use of student leadership teams that meet with administrators, the inclusion of student voice surveys, and student council meetings that get students involved. It is hard to know if there are positive changes because of a lack of comparison since I was not a part of this school community prior to the implementation of these strategies. PNW school site allows students opportunities to contribute to the community around them through these strategies. The school also has an overall positive atmosphere reported by both staff and students that is observable through community conversations and conversations overheard in the building. In my own classroom I try to include

student voice but can find it challenging with students who are impacted by disabilities. In the section on future research, I will expand more on the dire need for more studies on the inclusion of students with disabilities in student voice and agency practices. As an educator, I find the balance between giving students power in the classroom and doing what I think will help them most. Students in my own classroom seem to be happy and are making meaningful progress but given what I have found on student voice and agency in this project, I am more concerned now than ever about its inclusion in my classroom.

Implementation of Student Voice and Agency in Schools

My second research also sought to explore different types of practices being used by educators and school systems to include student voice and encourage student agency. Within the research, I found many different practices that were studied. Some of the more prominent and reoccurring practices included providing students with leadership role opportunities (Cook-Sather, 2020; Earl & Lee, 2000; Halliday et al., 2019; Lac & Mansfield, 2018; Osberg et al., 2006; Quaglia Institute, 2013; Robinson & Taylor, 2013; Serriere et al., 2011; Sorkin, 2018; Yang, 2019; Zion, 2020), intentional planning of scaffolds used (Cook-Sather, 2020; Mayes, 2013; Robinson & Taylor, 2013; Savitz et al., 2021; Sorkin, 2018;), and fostering growth of well-being and relationships in the classroom (Mameli et al., 2018; Osberg et al., 2006; Soini, 2023;). Some other notable practices that came up included student voice surveys (Schneider et al., 2021; Earl & Lee, 2000; Vaughn et al., 2020) and small group meetings between staff and students, and other stakeholders (Earl & Lee, 2000; Osberg et al., 2006; Zion, 2020). It is important to mention that the use of student surveys and meetings, which included students,

varied significantly. The research has trends in including these two very specific aspects of student voice. They seem to be the two strategies used primarily to include student voice and agency in schools today.

The most prominent practice in the current research is the use of leadership opportunities for students in schools. Just over one-third of the research articles included in this project place emphasis on student leadership opportunities, and even more mention of it. Individual practices of student leadership opportunities differ, but a few elements seem to be consistent across the research. Shared leadership was a practice that reoccurred in the research. For example, Earle & Lee (2000) and Osberg et al. (2006) both had instances of shared leadership come up in their research. As previously discussed, Earle and Lee found schools that implemented this strategy to be successful in increasing graduation rates, and Osberg et al. used groups of students and staff to address student well-being in schools. The findings of Osberg et al.'s research included a positive association with the implementation of shared leadership groups. Changes were able to happen in the schools that participated in the studies and staff and students positively from the experience. These are encouraging findings regarding one way leadership opportunities could positively impact students and changes within schools.

Like previously mentioned studies, Mayes (2013) also showed that there are benefits to small group leadership opportunities where power is shared between adults and students. One compelling aspect of this research was that students within the study praised the researcher and teachers who were able to carefully share power with students while leading the group overall. This research shows the importance of shared leadership planning. Students in the study

mentioned that certain teachers were not good leaders while others were. The difference between the two was the component of shared power. This study is significant because it shows that leadership can be shared within schools to include students in the conversations around their education.

At my PNW school site, there is currently the use of student voice surveys, once-monthly group meetings with administrators and a select group of leadership students, and ambassador students in leadership positions around the school. On the surface, all of these strategies look great, but I feel that the PNW school site is falling short of including marginalized voices, much like what happened in Holquist & Wall's (2021) research. PNW school site has the beginning of really great leadership opportunities for kids but does not reach out to marginalized students. There is also a lack of general knowledge of staff regarding some of these practices. Planning as a community school team to ensure staff understands what happens in these leadership opportunities could increase the success of these groups. If teachers can talk to students about these opportunities, then more students are likely to participate. Overall, the research is supporting these practices, and the PNW school site is utilizing many of the researched methods but has room for improvement as well.

These are some strategies and practices that are working well to foster agency in students and encourage students to voice their opinions in schools. Strategies include leadership opportunities, shared leadership between staff and students, careful planning and scaffolding of student voice and agency, student voice surveys, and small group meetings. PNW school site

uses many of the strategies and practices research has covered. They should continue to grow in that practice to benefit students and the school community.

What Students Have Said About Having Voice in School

The third research question involved knowing how students felt about their voices being heard in schools and how much agency they felt. I found various research articles that included what students have said so far (Balfe & Travers, 2011; Duckett et al., 2010; Earl & Lee, 2000; Mayes, 2013; Ng, 2018; ; Quaglia Institute, 2013; Sellma, 2009 Zion, 2020). Student's seem to want the use of more student voice and agency practices that make them feel included (Balfe & Travers 2011; Mayes, 2013; Ng, 2018), but often they feel unheard or bring up negative aspects of school when provided the opportunity to give input (Duckett et al., 2010; Mitra, 2004; Quaglia Institute, 2013; Sellman, 2009) This does not surprise me given that the inclusion of student voices beyond surface level inclusion is still a novel concept in education practices. Schools in the United States are just beginning to gain traction with these ideas. It makes sense that students when asked if they feel heard or that their voices matter, would respond in ways that indicate it is not happening currently.

Students recognize that they are not in power in the classroom and at school. For example, students have conveyed that certain leadership styles that allow for meaningful student participation make students feel heard and good about the learning environment (Mayes, 2013). This is important because, as specified in Quaglia Institute's findings, only 46% of students feel they have a voice in school decision-making in the United States (2013). Furthermore, just over half of students at 52% felt teachers were willing to learn from students at the time of this study,

and even less knew the overall goals their schools were working toward. This is extremely problematic given that shared leadership is one of the larger practices in student voice and agency that appear to work given the current research.

One way that this could be changed is educators and administrators implementing strategic scaffolding to include students in practices that encourage their sense of agency through student voice. Research showed a positive link between the success of student voice practices and agency to intentional scaffolding and planning done by teachers or administration (Kim, 2022; Metson et al., 2022; Ng, 2018; Soini, 2023; Yang, 2019). This relates to power dynamics that exist within schools between staff and students; a theme that occurs throughout the research. What I learned from the research is that we cannot get rid of this construct because it is ingrained in our societal structures. Students also do not typically have the confidence to take the lead in these adult-dominated spaces. One instance of research stands out to me where students reported feeling a higher sense of learning agency in their classrooms when coupled with the teacher providing necessary scaffolding and social support to the students (Soini et al., 2023). For successful outcomes of student voice and agency, there needs to be scaffolds to help transition power to students (Kim, 2022; Metson et al., 2022; Ng, 2018; Soini et al., 2023). If we want to change the narrative of how students are feeling currently then we as educators must first act to implement small and meaningful practices that encourage agency and voice.

At the PNW school site, it is hard to know how students feel about the student voice practices being implemented as I do not have access to that information. Students overall seem happy at our school. The school has used student voice surveys regarding why students are

absent but might in the future use that model for understanding how students are feeling about the climate of inclusion of students in choices and agency. In my own classroom, I try to check in on how students feel about what we are doing in the class, such as what they want to work toward, what they feel they have learned, and sometimes if they feel like they need a break from the curriculum. While this is accessible to some of my students, others rely on echolalic responses and verbalize minimally. This makes the inclusion of their voices in class that much harder. Often, I try to provide all students in my class with choices. This is a strength of my practice because I feel that it helps students feel a sense of agency in what they choose to do. Overall, the prospect of including practices that encourage student voice is promising. Students are not currently feeling heard, nor do they feel they can make meaningful decisions in their education environments in the United States. As educators, we owe it to our students to do better and learn ways to include their voices, share leadership and power with them, and find strategies that support these endeavors.

Trends in Research

When looking at the larger scope of the research that has been done so far a few trends are noticeable. First, the trend of availability of research on student voice is changing. Over half of my research is from 2010 to 2023. This is not because studies were excluded prior to this but because they don't exist. The inclusion of student voice and agency in schools is not a new practice but one that is just beginning to take traction in the research. When I began my research in 2020, I faced challenges in finding enough literature to support this project fully. Currently, in 2024, there is more literature available on student voice and agency. This could be because of

shifts in generational culture. Many Millennials and some of Generation Z's children are entering the school system. Millennials and Generation Z tend to value social justice, inclusion, and fostering change. Additionally, these generations have entered the professional world and may be contributing to the growing body of research on this topic.

Current research is also focused on social justice and policy change movements. Before 2020, many research articles focused on student outcomes, achievement, and school improvement (Ducket et al., 2010; Earle & Lee, 2000; Mameli et al., 2019; Ng, 2018; Quaglia Institute, 2013; Yang, 2019). Whereas more recent research focuses far more on student voice involved in policy change and social justice efforts (Holquist & Walls, 2021; Robinson & Taylor, 2020; Zion, 2020). There is also a shift in the overall culture of student voice. Student voice in the early 2000s looked more like offering students the opportunity to engage in classroom discussions. Today, it looks like students participating and engaging with their education in a way that can bring change to the education system (Balfe & Travers, 2011; Cook-Sather, 2020; Halliday et al., 2019; Holquist & Walls, 2021; Schnider et al., 2021; Vaughn et al., 2020; Zion, 2020) The focus of what student voice looks like has vastly shifted over the last 20 years.

I speculate that even more research will come out in the coming years related to student voice and agency because of this increase in available literature from 2010 to 2024. There has overall been a large increase in available literature in the past 14 years. One explanation could be newer generations of parents and educators being involved in education. The shift in new generations with different values entering parenthood and having children come to schools

brings with it change. Additionally, these generations are now adding to the current research and are professionals in the education workforce. This is likely to help create even more movement to emphasize student voice and agency in schools. Regardless of the reason for the increased availability of student voice and agency literature, it is something that is becoming more relevant and commonly studied in educational research. This is promising for those in education who want to see our students have a voice and power over their own education.

Implications for Future Teachers, Students, and Schools

Student voice and agency are something that school districts need to focus on for the well-being of students and the betterment of communities. All too often it is easy to fall into old patterns of teacher-centered methods of learning, and assuming as adults we know what is best for the education of our students. As the research has shown, it is easy to fall into the patterns of power dynamics already established in the education system (Cincera et al., 2011; Dorner, 2015; Duckett et al., 2010; Halliday et al., 2009; Mayes, 2023; Mitra, 2004; Robinson & Taylor, 2013). The research indicates that there is much to be learned by students. It has strong implications for positive outcomes when districts, schools, and teachers meaningfully plan and foster the use of strategies to include the voices of their students.

Teachers and administrators need to work together to implement practices and strategies that are effective in the research of this project. Heavy emphasis needs to be placed on including students in leadership opportunities where students can participate in a community with educators. The research supports students in leadership roles and has been shown to positively affect school. Outreach efforts need to occur in schools to reach students who may otherwise not

participate in student leadership opportunities. These strategies include student voice surveys, small group meetings, and fostering positive relationships between staff and students.

Districts and administrators need to ensure that educators have adequate training available to them on student voice and agency practices. The cultural shift in students having more power in classrooms and schools is a recent change in education. Many teachers in the field may not know pedagogical practices that encourage and foster the growth of agency and voice in students. With training, districts, and administrators can ensure that all staff can provide these opportunities to our students.

It is imperative that school administrators share the overall goals and values related to student voice activities they choose to implement in schools. Without clarity, breakdowns can happen in executing student voice practices, like the service-learning groups that were conducted in Bergmark et al. (2014) research. In this study, many teachers did not understand the reason behind the projects and did not encourage students to lead or use student voice strategies like scaffolding power. Administrative staff can help prevent examples like this by offering clear values and expectations of the school's vision. They also need to work with teachers to intentionally plan the shift of cultural norms around students lacking power and voice in schools. Without intentional planning, student voice and agency do not happen in a way that makes a difference in schools.

Finally, school districts, administrators, and teachers must give careful attention to the voices they are including or excluding. Marginalized voices of students have and will continue to be left out if planning is not intentional to work against dominant cultural views. Metson et al.

(2022) is a good example of intentional planning that teachers can look toward when modeling student voice inclusion of marginalized students. The teacher in this research implements strategies such as allowing students time to reflect and be vulnerable in classrooms, providing additional scaffolding when there are language or cultural differences as barriers, and giving ample opportunities for collaboration. She also emphasizes that teacher reflection is important to understanding the needs of marginalized students such as her class of English language learners. If teachers and administrators can provide marginalized students with student voice opportunities through careful planning, we are likely to see healthier students and healthier schools as we begin to include everyone at the table of education.

Implications for Future Research

Future research needs to be done to further understand specifics about strategies and practices to help guide educational leadership in schools across the United States. Currently, the research, while favorable for the inclusion of student voice, is not specific. There are various ways each of these practices were carried out in research such as the use of student surveys. Should they be conducted and created by students, or would they be better created by adults gaining to learn more about their student body? These are the types of questions I still have after my research. One study I would like to see is qualitative research of different iterations of a single strategy, like student voice surveys, and implement them at different schools in a single district. This might look like several schools implementing different types of student voice survey creations. For example, having several schools in one district have students co-create student voice surveys with staff to understand school culture. Then, other schools in the same

district have students completely create the surveys independent of adults. Finally, several other schools would then utilize given student voice survey questions by researchers to understand school culture. Schools in this study should be given the option to choose the type of survey they would use to help examine the overall culture of the school.

More studies need to be done to have a clear direction for administration in buildings to implement best practices of student voice work. Additional research that could be conducted also includes a meta-analysis of literature concerning how leadership groups involving students are run and the impact of the methods used in those studies. There is a lot of research that was found in this project on leadership opportunities for students. A meta-analysis of various studies and how they impact student voice and agency in schools would be beneficial to the research. It would also help to provide administrators with clear examples of leadership opportunities that work and do not work.

These are the recommendations I have for future research. Most of the studies in this project show positive implications for schools, students, and classrooms, but which strategies and practices are best? Without comparing the current research and adding more that compares these strategies to one another, we may never know what works best. Without additional research like this, it will be difficult for districts, administrators, and educators to know which of these strategies and practices works best when concerned with increasing student voice and agency in schools.

Limitations of the Project

There were many parameters to what was included within this project. To start, I began my research with the range of the past 30 years spanning to the late 1990's. I started my research in 2020 and did not finish until 2024. In 2024 I shrunk my range of dates down to 2000-2024 to ensure that the research was relevant to current day practice. When my research of this topic began, I was primarily focused on finding research related to special education inclusion and voice. Search terms included: special education, inclusion, voice, disabilities, elementary, secondary, and education. As my research shifted to be primarily focused on student voice, I used search terms: student voice, student-led, student-centered, student engagement, elementary, secondary, and education. As I discovered more research, I also added the term student agency to my key terms and to the overall project. When I added the term agency, I began finding more research relevant to this project. Additional search terms used included: student-voice surveys, student leadership, democratic learning, and service-learning. These terms were used toward the end of my project to find more literature on some of the initial strategies of student voice and agency I found.

There were various reasons why certain research was included or excluded in this project. I sought to have a cohesive paper that primarily focused on student voice and agency of students in schools. There were many sources that did not get included in this project because they were too specific to certain content areas in education related to student voice. These included physical education, music education, theater, math and science practices. I also excluded studies on teacher preparation programs and higher education. There was more research on student

voices, including college-aged students. However, this project is focused only on primary and secondary-aged students. I also excluded studies I found in my initial searches for special education inclusion and voice. Many of these studies were primarily focused on the inclusion of students with disabilities in general education contexts and not their ability to participate in voice and agency. Included research needed to meet the criteria that they involved students' voices either in the research itself or in the school they attended; it also needed to relate to a larger scope of education that could be transferred to school in general. In addition, only studies that were within the last 25 years were included in the research. These are the parameters for the projects included research.

Another aspect that needs to be mentioned is that while researching in 2024 I was experiencing health problems that impacted my ability to research. While I will not go into the specifics it is important to mention that this impacted my ability to focus on the research as much as I would have liked to. These problems arose during my research. I found myself unable to be at my computer as much to ensure that I was finding all available articles on student voice. For this reason, there are likely bodies of research I could have missed in my research. I also had a significant gap in time between when I started my research in 2020 and when I finished the research in 2024. I began my research fully online during the COVID-19 pandemic and decided to take a break from my graduate studies to focus on being a new teacher entering the field of education post-COVID-19 lockdown in 2021. Some articles included are from the early 2000's because of this gap. Many of the articles I found in 2024 were from the last 10 years, whereas the earlier ones were found in 2020 when I first started my research into student voice. These

personal events are noted to better help readers understand the potential limitations of my own research of the currently available literature.

Conclusions

Students have been historically overlooked in education, and it is time to see significant change. In this project, I have compiled the current and relevant research pertaining to student voice and agency, made relevant recommendations, and discussed trends of the research being done on student voice and agency. The use of student voice and agency in schools is backed by research. School districts, administrators, and teachers need to shift their practices to include student voices. Successful findings of the project include student voice and agency, resulting in higher student engagement, the well-being of students, and, in some instances, increased student performance in schools. Key themes that emerged from the findings include roles of power between staff and students, inclusion of marginalized students in voice practices, and strategies that are being used in schools across the world. Attitudes around shifting power to students in schools needs to shift to see meaningful changes in student voice in schools. Without cultural shifts to change schools and include practices in this project, students will continue to be excluded from critical conversations and feel alienated from their education.

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