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Fostering Student Agency to Build a Whole Child, Whole School, Whole Community Approach

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Abstract

In this practitioner perspective, we explore the concept of student agency through the implementation of a student government association in a laboratory middle school. Interviews with a social studies teacher and her students offer perspectives of the impact of student voice and choice for student experiences. We describe three major lessons learned through this implementation process: students learn to have healthy conflict and cooperative skills; students learn the appropriate processes to enact change in a democratic society; and students learn to conduct service for their peers, school, and community.

INTRODUCTION

The use of democratic principles woven into school structures and instructional practices has been widely encouraged as important practice in adolescent education for decades (Beane & Apple, 1995). Despite advocacy for these practices in the field, the implementation has been more difficult to accomplish. When our state legislated the opening of nine laboratory schools, owned and operated by institutions within the state university system, our college took advantage of an opportunity to build a middle school mission and vision with organizational structures and instructional practices aligned to core democratic principles. In this paper, we explore the use of agency in supporting our school mission through student government in order to support students in their social and emotional development by empowering them with voice and choice in their school experience. We will detail the core values of our school and define agency situated as a democratic principle. The conclusion outlines three important lessons learned in our integration of democratic principles and student agency in our school: students learn to have healthy conflict and cooperative skills; students learn the appropriate processes to enact change in a democratic society; and students learn to conduct service for their peers, school, and community.

School Mission and Values

The mission of the school is to be “a learning community where all students are valued and care for themselves and others. We promote health and wellness and a commitment to learning through experience in a caring, collaborative, and socially just environment.” Our planning process embraced the Whole School, Whole Child, Whole Community Model (WSCC) from the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD) and the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), which was later adopted by the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (NCDPI) (see <http://www.ascd.org/programs/learning-and-health/wsc-model.aspx>). While this list is not exclusive of our core values, the core values of the school that are pertinent to this paper include:

- We are dedicated to the health and well-being of young adolescents with an intentional focus on social and emotional development.
- We seek to build a democratic community, embracing social justice.

According to the CDC,

The WSCC model meets the need for greater emphasis on both the psychosocial and physical environment as well as the increasing roles that community agencies and families play in improving childhood

health behaviors and development. The WSCC model also addresses the need to engage students as active participants in their learning and health. (cdc.gov)

The mission and vision of the school were originally created by a core group of stakeholders including faculty members at the university, public school partners, and teachers from the public school system. We then hired master teachers whose philosophy aligned well with the core values and then were able to adapt and adjust the practices to suit their needs as a team. Students were not integrally involved in the creation and tenets of the school; however, as a school of choice, students picked our environment to suit their individual needs.

Agency as a Democratic Principle

The concept of active engagement of students is a broad concept that has been ever present in middle grades teaching practices. Terms such as “student voice and choice,” democratic classroom practices, student agency, are all common ways to describe the core idea of students’ integral involvement in their own education. According to John Dewey (1916), “A democracy is more than a form of government; it is primarily a mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience” (p. 101). Relatedly, Hadfield and Haw (2007) describe student voice as an “involved act of participation where people engage with organizations, structures, and communities that shape their lives” (p. 488). Essential features of both of these concepts rely on interaction and communication. With the lab school’s key mission working towards the whole child, whole school, whole community, student agency becomes a key feature of productive school culture.

In a broad sense, agency refers to an individual’s ability to determine and act on their own goals (Vaughn, 2018). Bandura’s (2008) conception of agency involves three properties: forethought, which involves adopting goals, creating plans and foreseeing outcomes; self-reactiveness, which is the process of self-regulation and management of actions and behavior; and self-reflectiveness, through which individuals reflect on their efficacy in meeting challenges and self-evaluate their actions with regard to their values. Researchers have defined student agency in a variety of ways, but essential components of these definitions tend to hinge on student choice

and action. In other words, students become agents of change in improving their own learning. These choices and actions are related to approaches and strategies for tackling schoolwork, having a personal connection to material, and having the responsibility for goals and learning outcomes (Rector-Aranda & Raider-Roth, 2015; Reeve & Tseng, 2011).

Opportunities that encourage school citizens to improve the life of the community through service are another hallmark of democratic schools (Beane & Apple, 1995). Service learning contributes to agency and belonging as students identify ways to help others and improve community life (Billig, 2000; Cellio, Durlak, & Dymnicki, 2011). Students are afforded the agency to identify problems that affect their peers and the school community as well as to construct appropriate solutions. To explore the use of agency in supporting our school mission, we share the experiences of Ms. McKinnon (pseudonym, author 3), who serves as the social studies teacher at the lab school as well as the experience of her students.

Agency in the Lab School Context: A Teacher’s Perspective

We asked Ms. McKinnon to define agency as she utilizes it in her classroom. In her own words, agency is “the restoration of student voice.” This sense, that students can have a voice and choice in their goals, actions and function of the learning community are central to the school covenant. This use of agency translates across the school and is threaded within the overall mission of the school. A lot of students come into middle school feeling overlooked and ignored. Many stories are told by the students of how they were not allowed to share their knowledge, express concerns, or enact change in a difficult situation in their previous educational settings. Essentially, students have not been allowed to build autonomy, a hallmark characteristic of a developmentally responsive school (National Middle School Association, 2010). The goal of agency at this school is to restore voice and the power over decisions and outcomes, and education. Throughout the school year, students participate in small, integrated democratic practices to navigate their smaller conflicts in the classroom. They also exercise choice in their work and content in the classrooms, primarily through the use of project-based learning (PBL). Additionally, a school forum is held twice a year as an avenue for

students to share concerns, solutions, and accolades. These opportunities for agency reach beyond the scope of academic instruction and branch into the overarching focus of social and emotional development and wellbeing within the school. To highlight the use of agency in our school context, we are sharing Ms. McKinnon's process for instituting a student government association (SGA). As a new school, teachers and students initially felt the growing pains of establishing systems and routines to foster a healthy learning environment. Within the first few months of the school year, the students expressed a sincere need for a governing student body to collect and filter concerns expressed by students. The first SGA group was formed in the spring of our first year, initially as an elective and then later evolving into an officer-elected system led by the student body. The idea was to triage concerns from the collective school and begin to restore core values to our practices. Now that the group has been functioning for several years, the system has been streamlined. Officers are elected during the first week of school. Ms. McKinnon meets with the newly elected SGA president and works on skills such as meeting agenda creation and more. Agendas assign leaders for three breakout groups: Officers, led by the President; Representatives, led by a senior (8th grade) representative; and Beautification Crew, led by a foreman. Students can sign-up to be a representative or a member of the school beautification crew. Students can run for election of one of four officer seats: President, Vice President, Treasurer, and Secretary. Senior Representative and Beautification Foreman are designated by Ms. McKinnon. All members sign a contract at the beginning of the year outlining their duties and their commitment to those duties. Collectively officers are in charge of the following:

- Gathering student concerns and feedback to the officer group for troubleshooting and discussion; meeting with teachers and administrators to consider and discuss student, activity, or facility needs;
- Coordinating and collaborating with the parent teacher association (PTA) and Enrichment Coordinator on various school events;
- Creating incentive activities for the schoolwide positive behavior intervention and support (PBIS) system, maintaining facilities (i.e., trash,

recycling, minor repairs, community garden maintenance);

- Coordinating and presenting classroom announcements each week to keep students updated on upcoming events.

The SGA has implemented several initiatives at the school to help with overall school culture and community connections. For example, the students write weekly student shout-outs for the school newsletter. This is a way to praise student and teacher behaviors, activities, and events that embody our school mission. The officers provide leadership at PTA events serving in roles such as activity coordinators, supply collectors, and helping hands for setup and breakdown of those events. At school events such as 8th Grade Promotion, Arts Night, or Open House, officers serve as ushers and assistants. They also construct furniture for the classrooms, help teachers maintain larger projects such as our outdoor classroom, and speak and serve as student guides during each of our student recruitment events.

In respect to student agency, Ms. McKinnon chooses the term student government association as opposed to a student council. A student council is led by a teacher and the student body members are the teacher's council members. Ms. McKinnon indicates that this structure allows for student voice but does not give them the ultimate say-so on decision making. Alternatively, a Student Government runs itself through collective leadership. Ms. McKinnon facilitates dialogue and work in which there are conflicting perspectives in order to help reach middle ground or a consensus, and to troubleshoot the concerns students bring about various issues. Otherwise, the SGA makes its own decisions as a collective, voting on all major decisions. All work is recorded, minutes and agendas are posted in a public forum, and an open-door policy is always in place so that anyone who would like to participate may do so.

Agency in the Lab School Context: Student Perspectives

We interviewed a sample of students to share their perspective on the democratic practices in place at our school and many examples of voice and choice in the school context were shared. One student explained, "There are a lot of choices you can make, so many choices. My old school— it was all teacher controlled and then

when I got here it was like why are there are so many choices?" When asked if that amount of choices was overwhelming, she replied, "No, it makes me happy."

Students generally expressed positive feelings about student voice and choice regardless of whether they were integrally involved with the school's SGA. One student who is not a member of SGA explained, "Your voice still gets heard. Like you can literally go up to any teacher with an idea and they'll listen. They tell [Ms. McKinnon] and she brings it to SGA or you can bring the idea right to her." The student went on to provide an example, "Student equality coalition that started last year. It's like an afterschool club that basically talks about all the social injustices. Four of the eighth graders last year asked if they could start it after school."

In democratic classrooms, building student agency involves engaging students in peacefully solving problems that affect themselves or the learning community. At this school, students feel empowered to solve their own problems. One student told us, "I was the problem, I talk too much...I came up with my own solutions, get away from people I talk to a lot."

The feeling of student agency at the school seems to translate into subtle instructional moves in the classroom as well. One student explains, "Sometimes I'm hyper in class and don't focus. There's times I talk a lot or times I zone out cause I'm not paying attention or I'm talking and [Ms. McKinnon] taps me on the shoulder and says 'make good decisions'."

Another student who had recently graduated from the school and moved onto high school expressed that having choices led to greater student responsibility and a positive peer culture in the classroom: "We were given opportunities to speak out and help our classmates solve our problems. We weren't told to just be quiet and let the teacher handle it." For instance, the same student described a situation where she and her classmates worked together to influence less engaged students during SGA meetings. "They would try to migrate to the edges of the classroom and put their backs to the wall so they could do whatever they wanted on the computers instead of looking into service projects but we would get them back to the center and have mostly responsible people sit around them to get them back on task. I'm not

going to lie, we did lose that fight sometimes, but we did try and it worked most of the time."

One student described an example of a problem that she and her classmates resolved through discussion. "We had an issue with our computers. Everyone would be on them in the hallway. Our solution was to try not to be on them unless it was something a teacher asked you to do."

In a similar example, another student described the power of a positive peer culture. "Most of my classmates, there were a good many of us, that did want to get our work done, we would try to get on those that didn't and get them to stop goofing around because when half the class is trying to get them to stop, they get back on task. ... We were much more responsible because we had so many more options, electives, choices of projects, choices of groups."

Lessons Learned

Implementing opportunities for student agency over the past few years has led to significant learning and growth for the whole school – students and staff. As a staff, we collectively agree that there is significant power in students learning governance during their adolescent years. Ms. McKinnon suggests three powerful lessons: students learn to have healthy conflict and cooperative skills; students learn the appropriate processes to enact change in a democratic society; and students learn to serve their peers, school, and community. In addition to these lessons, we recognize barriers of time and buy in from students and staff as well as the challenges presented by school policy in implementing democratic practices.

Conflict is inevitable. Opinions matter whether or not they conflict. Students must learn to navigate this with perspective, patience, and order. Our practicing of democratic voting, the allowance for any student to send their opinion to the SGA, and the multitude of grade-level voices present in our SGA allow students to develop skills that enable them to negotiate and compromise on important issues. Over time, the SGA learns to work together as a team and rely on one another to complete their tasks. At the end of a large undertaking, the SGA feels like a family when celebrating their successes.

Democratic values are important to negotiate conflict in a healthy way as well as to practice

and gain a deeper depth of knowledge of how our government works. Learning and adhering to democratic practices such as collaboration, respectful debate, compromise, and showing up for voting demonstrates to students how citizens in a democracy can enact change.

Lastly, students learn to give. The students in SGA give time more than anything else. They are present at every school event and are prepared to be on-call for student tours and PTA needs at any time throughout the school year. These students stand as examples of our school pride and are models of resiliency. They are expected to be leaders in all capacities in and out of the classroom, and are asked to sign a contract at the beginning of each semester. The SGA plans service projects, incentive programs the students are interested in, conducts polls for student desires regarding spirit weeks, small rule changes, incentive programs, dances, and much more.

Within all the successes of the SGA model at our school, there remain challenges and areas for future growth. Ms. McKinnon cites buy-in, both from students and staff, as a persistent barrier for full success. While all the teachers at the school support the idea of SGA, not all teachers have a full understanding of ways to support the group within classroom instruction. Democratic schools and classroom take the time, a precious commodity in a school setting. More time is needed for developing strategies for implementation and support in exploring professional development to help keep the whole school, whole child, whole community mission at the core.

Students sometimes also struggle with implementation of democratic principles. For example, students are still struggling to truly hear their peers. The idea that a democratic system means students are serving the entire population of the school, and that a student's own personal preference would not necessarily be the outcome, can be a challenging lesson. We are still working through the growing pains of creating a fully student-led organization that does not require as much teacher support.

Another barrier we have encountered is working within the constraints of school policies. Currently our group is not allowed to have their own treasury and build their own funding capacity. This limits what the group can accomplish, despite their lofty goals of offering

quality student-led experiences. Students and teachers alike need support with these issues, from a school policy perspective. Despite these challenges, we recognize that all of these experiences and skills are imperative to students' development as mature, active citizens in school and work environments. It is our hope that engaging in collective leadership and finding strength in personal identities at the middle level will empower students to be active agents of change for issues that matter most to them as they grow into adulthood.

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