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STRUCTURES AND PROCESSES TO ENHANCE STUDENT VOICE

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STRUCTURES AND PROCESSES TO ENHANCE STUDENT VOICE

A DISSERTATION APPROVED FOR THE  
DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP AND POLICY STUDIES

By

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## Acknowledgements

“Success depends on the support of other people. The only hurdle between you and what you want to be is in the support of other people.” David Schwartz

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## Abstract

One role of public schools in the United States is to prepare students to be active citizens within a democracy. An active role requires that citizens be able to voice their concerns and opinions while also considering the opinions of others so that decisions for the common good are reached. Student voice therefore becomes a critical issue within education. In a review of the literature on student voice, it is evident that the current research on student voice is relegated to select group of students but fails to investigate democratic voice of all students. The literature also does not address the structures beyond these select groupings nor does it discuss the processes that enhance student voice for all students. This study examines structures and processes within one middle school and how they facilitate student voice for all students.

Observations, interviews, student journals, field notes, and school documents were used to collect data for this narrative inquiry qualitative study. The analysis process of critical reflection was used to code and theme the data to determine which structures and processes facilitated democratic student voice. The findings show that teacher instructional practices determine the effectiveness of several school structures. When effective instructional practices are used within these school structures, the data further showed that student voice is enhanced through specific cognitive and affective skills. Implications of the study identify a need for changes within teacher evaluation, school scheduling, and mandated testing.

## Prologue: Scraps and Nothingness

Narrative inquiry as a research methodology is non-traditional in that it does not follow the standard five chapter format: introduction, literature review, methodology, results, and conclusion. Narrative inquiry follows a more arts-based format in that it develops through the use of story structures of character, plot, and setting. Using the data collected from multiple sources, the researcher looks for patterns, narrative threads and themes across individual stories as well as across the social setting (Clandinin & Connelley, 2000; Leavy, 2009). The text takes on different forms according to the details of the inquiry as well as the scholarly life of the inquirer.

Because of this tension between the retelling of the stories found within the field texts and the need for such traditional components of a literature review and theoretical considerations, narrative inquiry research will not have specific chapters or dedicated sections found in the five chapter format. Instead the narrative inquiry works to weave the literature and theory throughout the dissertation from beginning to end in an attempt to create seamless connections between experience, literature, and theory (Clandinin & Connelley, 2000).

However, when the weaving is successful, the traditional components are apparent. In the current study, the chapter headings are significant to the story not the research components. Yet, upon closer examination, those components are present. The problem begins in the first chapter and moves from large to small, from democracy to professional learning communities to student voice. These parts come to a focus within the problem statement found in the last paragraph on page 64. The research

questions emerge soon afterward and are stated on the following page. The conceptual framework evolves as the inquirer uses ongoing critical reflection to question and make connections as the story unfolds. This critical reflection process is evident in each chapter, but especially in the final chapter after the story has reached its climax and the denouement becomes the conclusion component.

Because of the ongoing reflective process, the narrative format moves from the present to the past tense and back again many times. The “forward/backward” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) reflection is accompanied also by a parallel “inward/outward” reflective process. Through this reflective process the reader is allowed into the thought processes of the researcher as she questions and studies the experiences within the narrative.

Narrative inquiry often begins with the researcher’s autobiography as much as it is associated with the research problem and questions (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). The need for the inquirer to first examine her own cultural values that are brought to the research and fully disclose them from the beginning adds to the trustworthiness of the study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This begins the interaction of multiple perspectives as the story of the researcher becomes part of the stories of other participants as the narrative unfolds.

We all come to research or any new experience with our own view, beliefs and values that have taken shape based on our past life experiences (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Dewey (1938) proposes that lived experiences grow out of other experiences and lead to further experiences. Life experiences make up the stories that we tell and retell trying to make connections and grasp some meaning of why. As the researcher in

this study, I am part of the phenomenon being studied. In fact, I helped to create and form many of the experiences observed. I am not merely an objective inquirer holding myself above and separate from the study, but find instead that as I delved deeper into the study, that my stories came to light as much as those of the participants. It has certainly caused me many sleepless nights as the stories of my own childhood resurfaced, and I began to see them through a new or refreshed lens. Sometimes the dredged up memories were pleasant, and I welcomed them and was comforted by them. Some, however, brought discomfort from remembrances of forgotten hurts that, now resurfaced, had to scab over and heal again.

The stories that have stolen my sleep are not the actual events but memories filtered through years of experiences lived during the ensuing forty-some years. These stories have now become artfully constructed metaphors (Leavy, 2009) for the real events as I remember them. As metaphors or art, these stories allow not only me, but also the reader to bring his or her intelligence and experiences to the understanding (Leavy, 2009).

Through the writing of this narrative inquiry I have added my stories to those of others in an attempt not to promote myself, but to add what Clandinin and Connelly (2000) call “scraps and nothingness” (104). Perhaps these scraps can provide a basis upon which others can make their own connections. The connections stem from the issue of student voice.

I chose my former office as the narrative setting of this study. By taking the events from my past along with the many experiences of my teachers and students, I have tried to weave a tapestry that reveals not only the surface stories of all participants,

but one that also serves as an interpretation of current theories on democratic learning and student voice. My office becomes what Leavy (2009) refers to as a virtual reality, which aids in bringing multiple voices to bear upon not only the story but also upon the theory and current scholarly literature. Although the actual events within my office did not take place in the one week as written, all of the events are factual and come from detailed field notes, interviews, and school documents. The data became more than facts to be categorized and related. The information gleaned from the interviews, observations, field notes, and surveys spoke of the participants' need for and appreciation of having their voices heard. It, therefore, became only natural to tell their stories in the form of a fictive narrative. Through the use of narrative elements of plot, characters, and setting, I have tried to weave a narrative based on research with "voices" taken both from research literature along with case study interviews, observations and surveys.

A fictive narrative is not fiction per se, (Alvermann & Hruby, 2003) but is a collection of details, characterizations, and experiences witnessed at some time during the data collection. "By themselves, facts do not give us reality," (Cowan, 1988, p. 195) therefore, although the events did not take place in the written order, the conversations are composites of multiple interactions or realities observed during the study, combined to form categories and themes uncovered in the data (Banks & Banks, 1998).

Except for the journey to the hamburger diner, my former office becomes the composite setting for the unfolding narrative as memories of events past and present come together to form a completed study complete with data, theory, literature review, and conclusions.

Building upon Dewey's idea of experience being temporal, Clandinin and Connelly (2000) write, "There is always a history, it is always changing, and it is always going somewhere." My former office, during my last week on the job, provides that temporal place where I am able to remove myself from the data and compare what I have seen and recorded with my own past experiences and knowledge. In my narrative virtual office I search for patterns and connections between the present and the past that might yield new understanding of the social context of student voice.

One of the purposes of narrative inquiry is to develop a better understanding of not only the social context but also of the self, the researcher, me (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). By allowing the narrative to revolve around me in my office, I am able to reveal the ever changing learning process of all participants as we experienced and learned about student voice.

The structures and the processes that enhance student voice serve as the warp threads of the tapestry as it is woven. With files upon files of field notes and collected data, I found the problem of which stories to include in this narrative inquiry weaving always in front of me. The deciding factor was always, "Does it allow the voice of the student to shine through?"

Reflecting upon this question time and time again, I came to realize that we are all students, we are all learning, and are therefore each worthy of speaking our story. As the researcher, I was once a student struggling to have my voice included at school. When I became principal of the school site being examined in the study, I was still learning along with my teachers as we worked to become a professional learning community. We were students of DuFour et al (2002, 2004), Marzano (2001), Lambert



(2003), O’Hair et al (2005) and many others who lent their research to our efforts toward improvement. We studied and learned in an effort to improve our practice so that our middle school students would benefit. The stories of those efforts are student stories that need to be included. Lastly, but most importantly, the stories of the students at the school are paramount to the research. How did the students share their voice through the daily practices with the school?

Hopefully, my stories will piece together with those of the teachers and the students to be told later and show how particular events and occasions are woven together with the many facts and interpretations to produce a “sense of how things go, have been going, and are likely to go” (Clandinin & Connelley, 2000, p6) within the focus of the research topic of student voice.

As I typed the words that became this dissertation, I took several breaks to rest my back, exercise my legs and renew my mind. However, the break that will stand as the most memorable and the only one worthy of mention is the break I took to watch the inauguration of the forty-fourth president of the United States. This study hinges upon the principles of democracy and the urgency of allowing the voices of all people to be heard. Our democracy also depends upon the role that equity plays in making sure the minority voices are heard along with those of the majority.

This sense of equitable voice remains at the forefront of our democratic process even today. As I watched the inauguration of President Barack Obama and Vice president Joseph Biden on television, I could not help but feel a real sense of patriotism as the first African-American president and the first Catholic vice-president were sworn into office. Thousands of Americans are gathered on the capital mall to witness this

milestone in America's history. Millions around the world also watch from other televisions or computer screens, watching a nation come together as a free nation practicing the very principles that we have preached for two hundred years but have too many times failed to practice. "All are equal, all are free and all deserve the opportunity to pursue their own happiness...The world has changed and we must change with it...What is demanded then is a return to these truths...This is the price and promise of our citizenship" (Obama, 2009). With these words resounding in my mind, I offer this study of student voice: the voice of America's future.

## Chapter 1: Democratic Snap Shots

### *Snap Shots*

*Through life's lens  
We filter.  
We focus.  
We zoom.  
We choose  
Which snap shots  
Become our past.*

### Turning Pages

Much like an anxious reader coming to the end of one chapter and awaiting the beginning of the next, I sit at my desk absorbing as much of my present life as a middle school principal as I can before turning the page and moving on to a new life at a nearby university. I know that the dissertation process lies before me, and that there is still much to understand. For the time being, I am tied to this place and its memories, yet longing to find consolation in knowing that my job here is finished and complete. I need my own permission to move on, to turn that next page. That permission has not come. Again, the metaphor of a reader comes to mind as I know that I will have to understand previous chapters before I can make sense of future ones. And so I am caught here in my office with boxes sitting ready so that I can pack up my past but not ready to move into the future.

I listen to the sounds of an empty building, the clock ticking, the leaves blowing against the window outside, my heart beating. It is late May, another school year has ended. But the end has come to more than just a school year, it is the end of my career as an administrator. After twenty-eight years, the last seven of which have been here at Oaks Middle School, I am retiring to share what I have learned in another arena.

I have come in on the first Monday after school is out for the summer to begin going through an accumulation of books, files, and artifacts that stack up after so many years. I know that my garage will not hold it all, and know also that going through it all will take time. I look around my office trying to decide where to start packing up the years of memories. I have until the end of the week to clear out all physical signs of my existence and turn the keys over to the new principal. Five days to take my time and reflect on the past, bring closure to the present, and look forward to the future.

Although I will no longer be principal here, my hope is that I am leaving an important part of who I am, an understanding and commitment to bring all voices to the table of decision-making, and a commitment to teach necessary skills to provide an effective voice to all, especially to students. It has been a long journey that is not over until I walk out the door for the final time knowing that I have completed what I started. So many years, so many meetings, so many conversations about shared leadership and equity. Leaving will be difficult.

Looking around my office I can't help but feel a sense of reluctance and sorrow. The name plate on my desk has been turned around during the shuffling of items in preparation for packing. My name and title stare back at me; "Sharon Wilbur, Principal." When I left the classroom to become an administrator, a colleague had made the sign and presented it to me.

"I don't understand why you want that job, but I hope you are happy and successful," he had said as I accepted the gift.

“Yes, I have been happy,” I think to myself as I trace the letters carved into the pale wood. I have always been fortunate to love each of my educational positions. I loved being a teacher, and I loved being a principal.

“Have I been successful? Now that is a tougher question. There have been many ups and downs. Success is such a fleeting measure. Success based upon what criteria? What signs of success have I left at Oaks Middle School?” I know that the answers will revolve around the issue of student voice and how well I have provided a foundation for teachers to continue to facilitate effective student voice. These answers along with other questions will interrupt me throughout the packing process as tangible items bring back memories of events and people who have shared in whatever successes I have achieved as a principal.

Replacing the name plate back on the desk, the idea of success begins to nudge at the corners of my mind, pushing and prodding, looking for a connection that will lead to understanding. “How do I know if I was successful?” I know that the question will have to be answered before I can walk out the door for the last time, before I can move on to another chapter in my life.

“Well, you have one week to figure it all out,” I say to myself. One week to pack up not only boxes with books and files, but one week to sort through the experiences from the last twenty-eight years and bring them to a conclusion that will free me to begin anew. Teaching and administration have been my life’s work. Now my work and my life are changing, and change is scary. Where to begin?

Dragging the first box over to the book shelf, I begin to clear out the volumes that have served to inform my practice over the years. Noticing the dust on several, I

realize that it has been a while since some of these have been used. I begin placing them into the box and am surprised when I pull out a copy of my high school year book.

“Wow, I had forgotten it was even here,” I think as I run my fingers over its smudged cover. An old classmate brought it to me several years ago after a conversation in which I related that I did not have a copy. I trace the blue lettering on the front, “Greenfield Public Schools, 1969.”

“Nearly forty years ago! Where has the time gone?” I begin to turn the pages as each picture takes me back to the beginnings of my own education.

## A Voiceless Kid

I know that my current educational philosophy stems from the experiences shared as a student in Greenfield, Oklahoma. Greenfield is a small farming community where most families have lived and farmed for several generations. Greenfield School was located in the town itself. I say “was” because it has since fallen victim to consolidation and is no longer there. Few people lived in town. Mainly the owners of the one store, the postmaster, the preacher of the one church and his family, and then a sprinkling of those few who had given up farming but did not want to leave their friends. Even though my parents had moved to California to find their fortunes, they soon moved back, sans fortune, when I was in third grade. Both of my parents had been born and raised there, so it was not like we were strangers in a new place. We had just come home.

Most of the school buildings were stone structures built by the Works Progress Act, WPA. The high school and elementary schools were separated by the football field and playground. The elementary school housed the auditorium where everything from

school plays to 4-H classes, to funerals and wedding showers were held. The school was the social center of the community. Classes were small, and everyone knew everyone else. My graduating class had twelve students.

This is the school that shaped who I am today. It is through the many experiences, snap shots from the past, at Greenfield Public Schools that I have become so interested in, no passionate about, student voice, its importance to democracy, and how teachers can impact its effectiveness. Of course, I did not know about student voice then, about its theories or its importance to school and life. But bit by bit, I did experience the agony and the ecstasy of student voice, of being marginalized by poverty and yet being given opportunities to participate and succeed.

Still turning the pages of the year book, my eyes fall upon a picture of Billy Bob Brown. His picture is on several pages as class president, football player, basketball player, popular guy. As I sit staring at his all-American boy-next-door blond hair and blue eyes I settle in as memories and feelings from the past flood over me, taking me from being a confident administrator in charge of over three hundred students and thirty teachers back to being a small girl on an elementary playground marginalized by circumstances beyond my control.

I was in the fifth grade and standing alone across the dirt road that separated the elementary playground from the high school football field and was trying hard to remain unnoticed. My friends were all seated on the merry-go-round screaming, “Mr. Thompson, push us, push us!” As he pushed them faster and higher, their laughter only added to my pain.

“Come on, Sharon, get on!” My friends called for me to join them as the spinning slowed and before the cries for more pushing began again.

Looking down at my once white Keds tennis shoes, I fought back the tears realizing now that my patch job was not as pretty or as convincing as I had once believed. It was now late spring and those shoes had been purchased the previous fall at the local Pay For Less shoe store where my parents always shopped once a year for our school shoes. We shopped there because of their super “2 for \$5.00” prices. “Once a year” was the key phrase, because whatever we bought that September had to last until the next September. My cloth Keds had not lasted.

Having been raised partly by a frugal grandmother who could patch anything, I had spent the night before cutting out turquoise material from scraps and had carefully sewn new toes on my shoes to cover the holes that had appeared. I had left home feeling very proud of myself and wore my “new” shoes with pride. Until I had met Billy Bob Brown at the water fountain that morning.

“Hey, Sharon, how many patches can you wear? Soon you will have patches on your patches! Just how poor are you?” Billy Bob rode the same bus as me and apparently had been eyeing my clothing all morning.

As he turned and walked away laughing, I looked down at my paisley corduroy pants that Grandma had made me. They were patched at both knees and in the back where I had caught them on a barbed-wire fence and I found myself thinking, “But didn’t he notice how tiny Grandma’s stitches were and how carefully she had matched the patterns so that the patch blended in?” My own patch job on my shoes, although not



quite as good as what Grandma could do, had been a source of pride just a few minutes earlier.

Now, I stood apart from the others. “No, you all go ahead. I feel kind of sick and would probably just puke if I road that thing today.” My sick feeling wasn’t from the merry-go-round though.

When the teacher blew the whistle to come inside, I hurried to my desk, slid my skinny legs underneath so that others could not see my pants and shoes. I buried my head in a book and with one hand above the desk, I turned the pages, but with the other hand, I tried to cover my patches of poverty.

Until that day, I don’t remember feeling poor or less than the other students. However, the comments from Billy Bob placed a seed in my mind that grew and festered as I continued throughout my school years. I became painfully aware of how I **was** poor and did not have what the other kids had. High-top white go-go boots, converse basketball shoes, art supplies, money for snacks at ball games, class rings, letter jackets...these were all objects of desire that I would have to do without because my parents were poor.

My feeling of poverty didn’t end at school. I soon began to also notice the living conditions that I grew up in, seeing our small farmhouse through new eyes. When we moved into my aunt’s old house that had stood empty for years, my dad had chased out the wild turkeys, killed most of the snakes, built on two bedrooms and an indoor bathroom. Now I only saw how the snow drifted in under the floor boards and window panes in the winter, and how my glass of water left on the nightstand would be ice in the morning. I remembered how when we ran out of propane and my Dad didn’t

have money to buy more, he told us to stay in bed under the electric blanket instead of going to school. I never invited my friends to spend the night. When did we suddenly get to be so poor? I didn't understand and spent the rest of my childhood trying to hide the fact.

One thing that I could not hide though was my dark skin. Yes, not only was I poor, but I was also part Native American. It was the "part" that created the most problems. It seemed that I wasn't white enough for the white students but not Indian enough for the Indian students. The first time I encounter this reality was when I was playing in front of my aunt's house in town. Two Indian girls came up as if wanting to play with me, but as soon as I opened my mouth to speak, they stopped and one said to the other, "She's not Indian." With that, they turned and skipped away. I have always been questioned by white kids about my dark skin, but after this experience, I realized that I didn't seem to fit in with either race. Not only did the color of my skin prevent me from being accepted by the two Indian girls, as I grew older, I was constantly quizzed by parents of dates, parents of my children's friends, employers, and students as to what race I claimed. Everyone wanted to know to which race I belonged. I have never known exactly how to answer. Not white enough for one, not cultural enough for the other.

I couldn't change the financial circumstances of my family any more than I could change the color of my skin, but I soon found that I could cause people to see me as something other than "the poor girl with too many patches". I became the smart girl who always made the best grades. I became the artistic girl who could draw anything. I

became the athlete in any sport offered. I worked hard to get people to see through my patches to who I really was. And it worked.

Shaking my head, I return to the present, close the book and place it in the box. On the shelf next to where my year book had stood, I turn now to a row of Ruby Payne books and materials. With my past memories from childhood fresh in my mind, I take Payne's book, *Understanding Students of Poverty* (2001) from the shelf. This has been my bible of choice during the past seven years. I have used many of her observations to help my teachers understand the issues that students of poverty bring to school with them every day and to help them think of how their teaching is vital to the success of these students. I have stood before numerous groups of teachers proclaiming proudly and passionately that I am an advocate for students of poverty. My teachers know that I have strong opinions on democratic ideals such as equity, especially with students of poverty.

As if I am still trying to convince someone, I think to myself, "After all, the success of our country depends upon an educated citizenry. Isn't that what I have read so many times?"

Looking up from where I am sitting in the floor, I see the quote that has graced my bulletin board since I found it, "The devotion of democracy to education is a familiar fact...A government resting upon popular suffrage cannot be successful unless those who elect and who obey...are educated." John Dewey (1906, p 101)

"Democracy, that's where it all begins," I say out loud, knowing that my secretary Patty, who has also come in to catch up on end-of-year paperwork, will probably hear me and think that I have finally lost it. I have been to many conferences

and attended enough graduate classes to know that democracy and education must go hand in hand. But how? How is democracy practiced by students on a daily basis at school?

I think back to that day in fifth grade and ponder how I had experienced democracy. “Is democracy practiced in such simple places and activities found on an elementary school playground?” Even though most of the students cried out for me to take part and ride the merry-go-round with them, poverty had caused me to stay away. Poverty created in me a sense of fear and shame. These feelings caused me to make what Anderson and Larson (2009) refer to as “deformed choices”, choices that would not have been made if resources had been available to me. I was afraid that others would see me as someone less worthy. The common phrase, “the clothes make a man,” became reason for me to separate myself from a simple recess practice.

“Democracy depends upon the participation of its citizens,” I think to myself. “But poverty can cause a person to not participate and therefore become voiceless in decisions and activities that affect her.” I have never made that connection between that day in fifth grade and what I now know about democracy. Leaning back in my chair, I bring to mind the many articles on democratic schooling that I have read and written as part of my doctoral classes. I now have a need to reread them to help me shed light on these new questions caused by my memories.

“In fact, I have a paper here somewhere that I wrote for a class,” I continue to talk to myself as I get up and move to a filing cabinet next to my desk and begin looking for that paper. “Ah, here it is,” I mumble and then settling into my chair, I begin reading “Promoting Democracy in Public Education” (Wilbur, 2005).

The very act of creating a vision for the improvement of public schools requires one to first consider for what purpose schools or education exist. This basic question has been the source of much philosophical reflection on my part as well as discussions by scholars throughout the history of education. As far back as 463 B.C. when Aeschylus wrote about Prometheus' desire to go against the all powerful Gods to extend to mortals not only knowledge, but the fire of imagination and reason, philosophers have attempted to answer the question of what an educated person is (Vellacott, 1961). Fast forward two thousand years and one still finds this same question being debated by modern-day scholars.

As a country founded on democracy as a form of government and life, America has been guided since its inception by a plan through which the citizens are required to exercise their voices by electing a representative government and instituting laws and policies that promote democratic beliefs. Education differs from many other human endeavors in that it is a common experience, requiring the interaction of people. It was this "common experience" which early founding fathers used to exploit for the good of democracy by using it to foster democratic ideals. The Constitution of the United States, along with its amendments, provided a plan by which our citizens were able to promote those values and ideals set forth in the Declaration of Independence. While schools seek to promote academic achievement, they are also responsible for equipping students with the necessary tools to function within a democratic society (Cowan, 1988; Glickman, 1998).

It was not until the 1830's, however, that schools for the common person took shape and became common place (Wyett, 1998). It was clearly intended by the

founding fathers that the common school would provide the enlightened citizenry necessary for the success of democracy. The political context reinforces the historical purpose of educating students to take their place in the democratic process. Students are citizens. The place where they are supposed to learn this process is in the largest public social institution remaining in the United States, the public schools. This institution will be enhanced if educators will create a context where voice is seen as a citizen's right to communicate his/her feelings or ideas.

Support for public education was a new phenomenon. Universal education is only necessary in a democracy. It is, in fact, the antithesis of tyranny, just as it is the foundation of democracy (Wyett, 1998). To serve this foundation, education must be two-fold: academic achievement coupled with community morality and self-actualization (Wyett, 1998). Such philosophies of democratic education were championed by scholars such as John Dewey (1916) who believed that the student should be involved in setting goals and making decisions. He stated that schools should:

1. Be consistent with the basic tenants of democracy
2. Enhance the self-concept of the learner
3. Actively involve the learner
4. Place the concrete before the abstract
5. Be flexible, and
6. Place the teacher in a helping relationship

If America believes that democracy is the best social order, then our schools must reflect those beliefs as they attempt to teach students, who are in the process of

becoming adults, to become participating educated members of that society. Donald Cowan (1988) writes that the purpose of education is to “prepare all students to function in a future society that is yet unknown” (132-133). With the sheer amount of knowledge increasing daily, Cowan (1988) says that the role of education should go beyond rote memory to a higher level that constructs a communications network that allows an individual to create what Aeschylus called imagination, multiple understandings that can be applied to the ever changing needs of society. Ernest Boyer (2005) echoes this sentiment when he writes, “education is the methodical creation of the habit of thinking.” A similar voice is sounded by Glickman (1998) in “Recapturing the Essence of Schools” in which he writes that the goal of education is two-fold: “the maintenance and development of a democratic society” and the creation of a “satisfying and rewarding place for students”. The ability to reason, think and problem solve is an important part of being a responsible citizen.

Students who are afforded the rites and skills of democracy are able to develop what Dewey (1927) calls “the habits of mind” necessary to fully participate as citizens in a democratic society. Whether one calls them habits of mind, principles, or values, democracy depends upon the following necessary characteristics:

1. Communication: Through inquiry and discourse there is an open flow of ideas
2. Problem solving: Through personal reflection, individuals and groups are able to make good decisions.
3. Connections: Through collaboration, collegiality and support, members of a group work towards the “common good”.

4. Equity: Through shared leadership, respect for diversity, and relationships built upon trust, all members feel valued personally and as a part of the group.
5. Commitment: Guided by a set of core values, members are willing to work towards excellence (Beane & Apple, 1995; O’Hair et al, 2005; O’Hair, McLaughlin & Reitzug, 2000).

Schools can be ideal places to develop in students a drive to connect and feel a sense of belonging and power (Sullo, 2007). Schools that teach students how to be powerful in a responsible way improve not only their “pursuit of happiness”, but also promote the “common good.”

As I consider this idea, I try to picture in my mind what such a school would look like. Such a culture might include students and teachers working together to make students’ learning a contribution to their community. Students would work productively, both as individuals and within a group as they participate in productive dialogue, debate and reflection. Students would also begin to understand their roles as citizens by considering multiple points of view, thinking critically, solving problems, and assuming leadership skills. With these skills, students will be able to articulate and assess their own learning in public settings (Sullo, 2007).

Throughout history democracy is often thought of in terms of a type of government or society with distinguishable characteristics. Society is one word, but can be many things. People come together in all kinds of ways and for many purposes. For the sake of this study, we look at education as a society that develops students through their participation in the school or classroom to which they belong. The effect that



education has upon each student depends upon the values and quality of life within the group (Dewey, 1916).

I stop reading here to reflect upon that last sentence. If the end result of the educational process depends upon the values and quality of life of each student, then how did I ever make it? Talk about quality of life, there weren't too many students poorer than I was. What did my teachers do that tore down the walls of poverty that I learned to build around myself? I continue to read, searching for new answers and new awareness.

Glickman (1998) writes that the values that unite a democratic society are the beliefs in "government of the people, by the people, and for the people." Democracy abounds with such poetic phrases that speak to the overriding values. "Life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." "With liberty and justice for all." "United we stand, divided we fall." These very words are recorded in historical documents and have been recited by politicians, teachers, and school children to rouse within us the values upon which a democratic government is built.

However, without actions or processes to drive them forward, these words ring hollow and empty for students in our public schools. Again Glickman (1998) writes that in order to live out these values, citizens must be able to identify, analyze, and solve problems that face not only themselves but the greater community. He adds that citizens must also be willing to take part and assume leadership roles in the process. As part of this process, citizens must be able to freely engage in an ongoing exchange of ideas, valuing diverse opinions and persons, while communicating their own ideas. This type of collegiality and support are part of what O'Hair and others (2009) term

inquiry and discourse. Citizens within a democracy must be able to ask tough questions about an issue, learn from others, and come to decisions that will be good for all. While holding to a commitment to the greater good, individuals are also able to fulfill their needs and aspirations. Thus, each citizen is able to enjoy “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness” while also contributing to the success of others as a whole. Dewey (1916) writes that the purpose of a democratic society is to examine the desirable traits which actually exist and use them to identify and criticize undesirable traits leading to improvement of individuals and society.

Again, I lay the paper down on my desk, and rubbing my temples I consider what I have just read with new eyes. “Citizens must be able to identify, analyze, and solve problems that face...themselves.” I think again about how I had solved my problem of poverty by being an overachiever in every other area of my life. But I know now that even that solution had also caused me a lot of stress. In my efforts to be the best, I had to work twice as hard. In my fear of slipping from being first to last, I can not settle for “A’s” but have to be the top “A”. I have become driven by self inflicted expectations that leave little room for failure. It seems that my “pursuit of happiness” is always just out of reach. “I hope you are happy and successful.” The words of my teacher friend come back to me. “Happy and successful? As a child of poverty, the two seem so incompatible. No wonder so many students of poverty quit trying! Again, I ask myself, “Why didn’t I quit trying? What was it about the teachers at Greenfield that kept me involved?” I know that the answer to my success lies not just in my abilities, but also in the actions of my teachers. I continue to read.

What part do these democratic processes play in today's educational institutions? How can schools create a citizenry equipped to carry out democratic roles needed for the continued improvement of our society? First of all, Dewey (1927) writes that schools must create cultures that are microcosms of society at large, where students have the opportunity to make contributions to this smaller society. He states that through these "miniature democratic societies" students will learn about the roles required of them as adult citizens. Cowan (1988) adds that it is within the power of schools as "communal processes" to preserve the ideals it considers valuable. Glickman (1998) posits that public education is, in fact, the only place that can perpetuate the core democratic values of its citizens. He writes that the original purpose of public schools in America was to educate its citizens so that they could take part in "discussions, debates, and decisions to further the wellness of the larger community." Democratic schools create structures and processes by which democratic values can be practiced, and create a curriculum that will provide students with democratic experiences (Beane & Apple, 1995).

That's it! I drop the paper into my lap and search my desk for my familiar yellow legal pad. "Structures and processes," I say as I write possible research questions for my upcoming dissertation. "In order for students to have a voice to participate in a democratic society, schools must provide structures and processes. But how? These theories have grand ideas, but how do schools and teachers actually do that? What does such a "curriculum" look like?" I am excited as I continue to read looking for clues to these newly articulated questions.

If this is to happen, then these micro-democracies must contain the same principles and uphold the same values of the larger society. Such values include inquiry, discourse, equity, authenticity, leadership, and service (O’Hair et al. 2005). Other democratic skills such as discussion, negotiation, leadership, and understanding give additional insight as to how democratic values are enacted (Wallin, 2003). Shared decision making and a shared sense of purpose tie in to these practices.

Again, it is as if I am reading those words for the first time. Shared decision making, inquiry, discussions, and equity have been often repeated words at Oaks Middle School. But I don’t recall experiencing any of those things at Greenfield. Poverty pretty much took care of the equity issue. But still I had made it. Why? I know that this “why” question is going to nag at me until I reach some sort of resolution. Glancing back at the paper, I see that there is just one more paragraph to read. I pick it up and resume my search for an answer to the connection between poverty, democracy and education.

Just as Prometheus shared the fire of imagination, understanding, or true wisdom with all of mankind, Glickman (1998) also promotes the concept of equity among all Americans as a people, regardless of religion, culture, race, gender, life-style, socio-economic class or politics.

“There! There is the connection! Promote equity regardless of socio-economic class! Promote equity! Equity? How can schools provide equity to students who come with so many different needs and resources?” My mind is now in high gear. The wheels are turning as I turn the words over and over in my mind. “Equity, poverty, democracy, voice.” For just a second, my eyes look around the room and I am

reminded of the reason I am here. “Finish this thing,” I say to myself, “so you can move on.”

The purpose of education in a democratic society is to therefore ensure “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness” to every citizen. Glickman (1998) continues by stating that “an educated citizenry and a democracy were one and the same, the lack of one would imperil the other” (9). He also parallels Cowan’s thinking when he cautions schools against carving their mission in stone. Like Cowan, he believes that just as the needs of society will change, so must the focus of education change. The purpose of education is then to produce an “educated person” who Ernest Boyer (2005) says should possess certain commonalities that transcend factual knowledge and allow each citizen to fulfill their role in humanity by identifying, analyzing, and solving problems for the good of not only self, but for mankind present and future. Democracy demands it of each school, each classroom and each school leader.

“Well, I certainly believe all of that!” I say out loud as I stretch and put the paper back into its file so that it does not get mixed in with the books that I had started packing before I got side tracked.

“But what is the connection between democracy and that poor girl from forty years ago and my passion for student voice? Is student voice the avenue through which equity is promoted?” I can’t let go of the memory brought back by the year-book. I know better than to try to continue with the packing until I have resolved the issue in my mind.

“You’re like a pit bull when it comes to letting go,” more than one person has commented to me. I tend to over analyze everything.

“But it won’t take but just a minute,” is my excuse to begin drawing comparisons on the same legal pad found earlier on my desk. “Let’s see, democracy and student voice...” As I begin to draw, a two sided chart develops showing the dual nature of a citizen’s role within a democratic society.

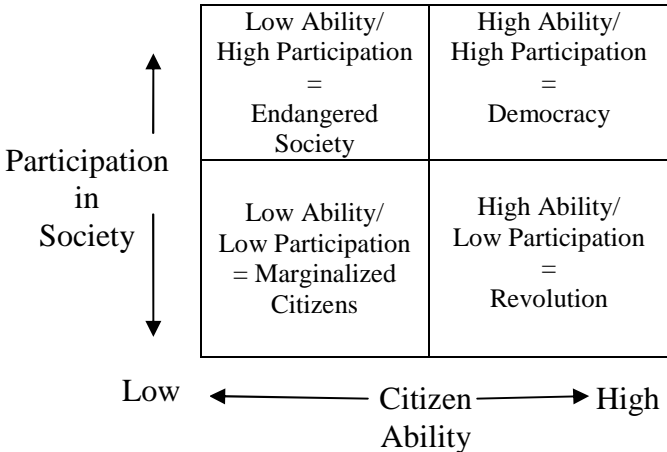


Table 1: Democratic Framework

“Democracy depends upon its citizens to interact with society in a give and take of ideas.” I begin to formulate the comparisons in my mind as I reflect upon the chart and what I have just read. “However, the level of interaction depends upon two things, the ability of the citizen and the opportunities provided by the society. The ability level of each citizen is increased through education and through having the necessary resources that allow the individual to participate. As the ability level is increased, the society is more willing to listen to and accept the voice of the individual citizen. This theory of mine is summed up by a statement I heard recently, “When large numbers of uneducated people realize the power of the vote, our country will be in trouble.” Because ours is a government of the people and by the people, the success of the society as a whole (for the people) depends upon the ability level of each citizen.

However, I know that my chart still does not address the issue of “how”. How do schools increase the ability level of each student so that he or she has an equitable opportunity to participate? How do teachers enhance student voice so that their opportunities for participation are increased? With each new revelation comes a new question. My critical reflection upon issues of democracy, poverty, and student voice seemed to be leading to more questions than answers and the answers did not seem to be found within my own knowledge.

“Isn’t that what David Boren, (2008) former senator, governor and now university president, said in his new book?” I rolled my chair across the room to the book shelf and retrieved my copy of “Letters to America.” Noting the many highlighted passages, I again review Boren’s message. In the book he urges citizens to do some critical reflection about the role that they play in our society and the impact that their actions have on the direction towards which our country is moving. In a time when America most needs for its citizens to seriously consider not only our nation’s impact on other nations, but more personally, our individual impact on our own country, it seems that personal reflection based upon reality has not been the norm. Data are the factual information that Boren pleads for us to examine and reflect upon. In his book, he cites multiple surveys to back up his beliefs and argues that all citizens should make themselves aware of these data and check them against their own beliefs and actions.

Boren also argues the importance of educating the youth of American in the basic values and structures of a democratic country. He posits that one cannot argue or fight for what he does not first understand. Understanding, as part of the learning cycle, comes only after first an awareness of fact followed by reflection upon that fact as it

relates to one's previous experiences. Only by making connections to self does new knowledge become understanding.

Self-reflection is the light that shines through. Just as Boren urges education to renew its efforts to instill in young people a sense of America's history and an understanding of other cultures, there is an underlying message that sheds the light on what is real, data, and letting that light lead us through a process of self reflection for the betterment of the common good.

"Data! I know about data but had never considered it in relation to democracy!" I continue to process and think out loud. "Data-driven decision making is the light that shines through to the truth. Self reflection, as part of data analysis, provides a system that prevents participants from pointing their fingers and blaming outside influences for the results. Self reflection turns the finger inward forcing us to examine our own actions and the impact of those actions on the data."

As I continue to thumb through Boren's book, I look for further connections between these two old concepts. Boren addresses this same issue when he discusses the declining views of foreigners about America. He says that too often we as Americans look at foreigners and wonder "What's wrong with them?" When in fact, we should be looking at ourselves and asking, "What is wrong with us?" This type of blame and shame leads to discord not only on the international level as Boren points out, but also creates hard feelings between citizens within our own country. Such thinking leads to apathy that can cripple one's actions and achievement. In fact, Boren lists apathy as a major cause for the decline in America's foreign perception. To turn the tide, America must begin to teach students to see that their actions do make a difference, not through



gripping or pleading, but through the examination of the data followed by personal reflection and action.

No process is more vital to the role of a democratic citizen than critical self reflection. If we are a government that flourishes only when each individual also flourishes, then as citizens within a democracy we must realize that we do not live in isolation apart from the whole. We are a government that is empowered only when each citizen is empowered. And education empowers. With this final thought, I close the book and add it to a box.

As I place more books into the box, I continue to think, “But what about the children of poverty? How does society provide not only the education but the necessary resources so that all students feel empowered? How did I ever make it from that little girl standing alone on the playground with patched shoes, pants, and emotions, to where I am now, sitting in my office getting ready to leave a successful career?” I pick up the latest issue of *Educational Administration Quarterly* (2009), remembering an article that I had just read of helping students of poverty. Turning to the page marked by the down-turned corner, I again read the high-lighted section.

“The poor are often forced into choices they would not make if issues of bodily and emotional integrity were adequately supported. Rather than being free to choose the life they value, people living in impoverished communities, are often forced into making deformed choices” (Anderson & Larson, 2009, p 77). The authors write that schools must address not only student achievement but the opportunities to achieve. Opportunities are affected by a student’s ability to overcome circumstances created by lives of poverty. When social, economic, and emotional disparities exist a student’s

freedom to choose changes from a real freedom to what the authors call an unfreedom. Deformed choices arise when students feel they have no real freedom in matters that concern them. They become trapped in these deformed choices without the recourses to free them to make informed choices (Anderson & Larson, 2009). As I reflect upon all of this information, I begin to formulate a deeper understanding of how my teachers had provided not only opportunities but also emotional and physical support that allowed me to have real choices instead of “deformed choices.”

As usual one thought leads quickly to another until I look up only to discover that it is now noon and I have only three boxes packed. My cell phone rings and it is my son asking, “Where are you, Mom? I’m at Johnnie’s and I’m hungry.” I promise to stop what I am doing and hurry to meet him. Although I leave my office, lock the door and set the alarm, I am unable to stop the thoughts and questions that continue to race through my mind. “Give it a break,” I say to myself as I pull into the diner’s parking lot. “Enjoy lunch with your son.”

## Chapter Two: The Privileged Poor

*It looks like a weed  
But I'm not sure.  
I've made that mistake before.  
I've pulled it up in impatient haste  
Only later realizing  
A late bloomer lost.*

John, my youngest son, is already seated and waiting. As I slide into the booth, we exchange kisses on the cheek and settle in for mother-son conversation. We give our orders and begin catching up on kids and family stuff.

“So how’s the packing going? Are you ready to move on to your new job?”

“Quite frankly,” I begin as I take a long draw on my diet coke, “I’m not making much head way. I keep getting side tracked by memories and educational journeys. This upcoming dissertation keeps me constantly comparing events and theories.”

“So, Mom,” he asks, “just what is your dissertation thing all about?” I had heard the question from other family members and dreaded going through it again. My mom thought I was leaving teaching to be a doctor when I tried to tell her that I had gone back to school. My husband asked, but then shook his head, gave me a good luck card to hang on my bulletin board, and steered away from the topic after that. But my son deserved a chance so I venture an explanation.

“Well, I am researching how to give students more of a voice in the decisions that face them, especially students of poverty and minority students. I feel a real need to advocate for students who don’t have the opportunities and/or abilities that you had growing up.” I took a breath and paused to see if he was still with me. He hadn’t gotten up to leave and didn’t jump in to change the subject so I continued.

“When I was a student and growing up, I didn’t have much. We were poor. Yet, my teachers and others were always there to provide whatever I needed to be successful. Their help allowed me to express myself, to have a voice that I know I would not have been able to have without them. I can’t help but want to give something back. I have found myself asking, ‘Why did they do that for me?’ ‘Why didn’t they do it for other kids who were just as poor?’”

John, bless his heart, jumped into the conversation at this point. “They saw that you had the ability and the desire. Most kids could care less. Why help kids who don’t try to help themselves?”

“How can they help themselves, John, when they don’t have the resources, opportunities and skills needed? That’s what I am trying to find out. How can teachers and schools provide not only opportunities but also the skills needed? And I don’t mean math and reading skills, John, although they are certainly important. I’m talking about those skills that allow students to have an effective voice in making decisions that concern them. These are skills that aren’t talked about much in schools. I want to bring that conversation to the forefront.” By then our hamburgers had arrived, and we began to eat and talk about other things.

In the back of my mind I continue to play with the question of why my teachers had given me special privileges. Was it because I was poor and they felt sorry for me? That thought makes me angry. I have never wanted anyone’s pity. Was I singled out because I did have special talents? If that is the case, then my cherished memory of all of those teachers becomes a little tarnished. Having been a teacher, an administrator, and now a doctoral student, I have pretty solid opinions about teachers who make

exceptions for the smart kids while turning their backs on the slower students. Surely all of those teachers and parents who had helped me through school would have done the same for any kid! Wouldn't they? My thoughts return to Greenfield Public School.

I was in third grade and all of the other kids had gone out to recess. The rule was that unless you were sick, you had to go outside. But that morning as we had been reading our textbook, I became entranced with the picture on the cover of the book. There was a Dutch boy standing on a dock. In the water, boats were coming and going from the far shore where small houses could be seen. During the class I raised my hand.

"Yes, Sharon, would you like to read now?" Mrs. Dickens smiled and nodded her head giving me the go ahead to begin.

"Mrs. Dickens, why is the boy on the front cover bigger than the boats and the houses? That doesn't make sense!" I ignored the students around me who were shocked that I had interrupted the lesson to ask such an irrelevant question. But Mrs. Dickens' smile grew even bigger as she explained.

"Sharon, that is an excellent question. Boys and girls, have you ever heard the word perspective? It is a word that artists use to make things look closer or further away in a picture. Even though we know that a boat and a house are bigger than a little boy, the artist made the boy bigger to show that he was closer to us." She continued to point out objects not only in that picture but in others throughout the book as examples of perspective.

"Wow! She is so smart! Perspective, huh? I've never heard of that!" I thought. Mrs. Dickens had just opened up a whole new world to me. I couldn't wait to try this

perspective out in my own drawings. Apparently Mrs. Dickens was also good at reading minds because she chose to ignore the fact that I soon left the reading lesson and took out a piece of paper and began drawing the picture from the cover. I never heard the teacher dismiss the other students to recess and was brought back to reality only when they all returned to the room and began to compliment me on the drawing I had completed.

“No wonder she gets to stay in from recess! She’s good!”

The waitress brings me back to the present as John and I order dessert. I share how missed recesses became a way of life for me. Whenever I wanted to stay inside to draw, I was allowed, no questions asked.

“Perhaps that was the first memory of when a teacher promoted my voice as something unique to me but as also having a place within the social environment of a classroom. My artistic voice allowed me to contribute to the needs of the school as I soon found myself drawing pictures for programs, creating murals for banquets, and even providing the last page to that year book that I packed away in my office earlier this morning. Mrs. Dickens promoted my voice as a student by recognizing the talents and supporting by increasing my skills. She also provided me time during recess to practice those skills. Structure and process! Those are the two sides of student voice that my dissertation will be about,” I take a napkin from the holder on the table and write the two words. Under them I write two possible questions, marking through words and rewriting them until I finally am satisfied with:

1. How can schools provide structures that provide opportunities for all students to participate in decisions and events that affect their learning?

2. How can teachers increase student decision-making as part of everyday instruction so that student voice is more effective?

Showing what John what I had written, I explain to John between bites of coconut cream pie, “You know, John, I remember many times when teachers or even parents were there to help me excel. They provided so many opportunities and helped me make good decisions that would affect my future.”

“You were lucky to have such great teachers, Mom,” John smiled. “Small schools can do that. But I don’t see much of that in schools today.”

John’s comment causes me to consider my memory in a new light. Did the smallness of the school and the community or the year that it occurred have something to do with it? I think about the reading about narrative inquiry that I have done and wonder if the context of the memory plays a role in how I am interpreting it. Clandinin and Connelley (2000) write that the context of time, space, and people must all be taken into consideration within the reflection process. As I reflect backward in time to other places and people, I bring with me the memories of later people and events as well as the questions for the future. The authors write that there is no certainty in experience. It is ever changing as I continue to learn. My learning brings a new lens to the experience from events past and exposes them to new interpretations and new learning. “Emotion, value, felt experience with the world, memory, and narrative explanations of one’s past do not stand still in a way that allows for certainty” (Clandinin & Connelley, 2000, p 37).

But it is this intertwining of personal knowledge to social events and experience that make narrative inquiry so compatible for the study of student voice. The diagram that I

had drawn earlier in my office shows the connection between self and social not only in the issue of voice, but also in the area of democracy. Now I am also realizing the connection between the topic of my research to the methodology. I mentally remind myself to draw that out also when I return to my office.

Coming back to the conversation at hand, I continue to share with John memories from Greenfield that remain as pivotal to my sense of self, my promoted voice. But now I also filter my memories through a new lens of time and place being careful to understand how those two elements can influence my interpretations.

“You know, John, I have never told you many stories about when I was young. I just seem to be on a trip down memory lane today.” John just smiles, perhaps recognizing my need to share.

“Go ahead, Mom. I might just get some dirt to use on you later.” We both laugh knowing that John, as the youngest child, loves to tease and is always looking for ammunition.

“Well, there was the time in fifth grade,” the same year Billy Bob noticed my patches I thought to myself but chose not to share that story with John, “when all of the fifth grade students were leaving the auditorium after having just finished our monthly 4-H meeting. Two of the moms who came in to help sponsor us were talking as the students filed out.”

“I heard one of the mothers say to the other one, ‘She’s the only one who could play the part. She is tall, has dark hair, and carries herself so well.’ I started to call for my friend Karlee, thinking that they were talking about her when one of the mothers



motioned for me to come over. Looking around to be sure they meant me, I ventured forth.”

“It was then,” I continued, “that one of the mothers spoke up and said, ‘Sharon, you know that we are planning the 4-H review skit coming up soon. We think that you should play the part of Jacqueline Kennedy. What do you think?’

“What did I think! I couldn’t believe my ears. Jacqueline Kennedy was my idol. But what would I wear? The president’s wife sure didn’t wear patches on her jeans. She probably didn’t even wear jeans. I was one worried little girl.”

“My fears were soon relieved when the other mother offered, ‘And I have just the outfit for you to wear. You look like just the right size. I’ll bring you everything you need the night of the show.’ I was so excited.”

“So how did you do as the president’s wife?” John asked.

“Well, I practiced like crazy for the next week, working on walking just right and talking just right. I wanted to be the best Jacqueline Kennedy that town had ever seen! As I waited in a classroom the night of the program, I tried to picture in my mind what Mrs. Brown would bring me to wear. I didn’t know anyone who dressed like the president’s wife, and I have to admit that I was afraid that maybe she wouldn’t even show up. I was terrified that I might have to go on stage with what I had on. Just then Mrs. Brown walked in and told me to get undressed and then handed me the most beautiful green wool suit I had ever seen. And then as if that wasn’t enough, she also pulled out a matching pill-box hat, purse, gloves, and shoes.

For once in my life I was speechless. Those clothes looked just like what I had seen Mrs. Kennedy wear on television. I didn’t know how anyone in Greenfield could have

clothes that fine! I was dressed in no time and transported to another world of fashion and dignity. As I walked out on the stage that night, I was Jacqueline Kennedy. I nailed the part, heard the applause of the audience, and returned to the classroom/dressing room. Taking off those clothes was hard. They came off a lot slower that they went on. I wanted to stay in them forever. But they were only borrowed. It was only a role to be played out on a stage for one privileged little girl.”

As I finished recounting that story to John, I knew that I had opened the flood gates and that more stories would emerge.

“Do you see, John, how people continued to provide not only opportunities but tangible things like hats and dresses so that I could participate and have a voice? I owe so much to so many people.” By now we have both finished our desserts, but neither seems ready to leave.

John senses my need to continue and asks, “Did the opportunities continue in high school. I remember seeing that picture of you as a basketball player. Who helped you there? You must have had some ability of your own.”

“Sure I had some ability. Once I moved into junior high and began playing basketball, I had grown taller than any of the other girls and boys. Having been raised on a farm where we ran and jumped and worked day after day, I was in good shape and turned out to be a decent ball player. But basketball required extra shoes and extra traveling expenses. During my first games, I tried to make do with my white Keds tennis shoes.” Again, I don’t go into details about my experience with the patched Keds shoes. These were not the same ones I had patched from before, but a new pair.

“These Keds were not meant for basketball and after losing them several times during the game, the coach appeared one night with a pair of high-top Converse basketball shoes for me to wear,” I continued knowing that John would appreciate the fact that his mom had once worn Converse shoes.

“Coach Speed handed them to me and said, ‘Just leave them in the locker room when you are through,’ turned and walked away. No explanation, no reason to say thanks. I did just what he said and the shoes were always there waiting for me. This continued throughout my high school career, a special privilege for a poor kid with talent.” I finish my coke and wave for the waitress to bring me a refill, knowing that I have one more story to share before returning to school. And so I continue and John listens obediently and lovingly.

“During my senior year in high school, my English teacher stopped me one day after class. ‘Sharon, my husband and I are going to a wrestling match at OSU this Saturday and wondered if you would like to go with us.’ I didn’t even know what OSU was but had seen wrestling on TV every Saturday night with my dad. I couldn’t imagine prim Mrs. Smith and her husband at a wrestling match where they throw chairs and people scream and go wild.

“Sure, that sounds great!” I told her. I trusted Mr. Smith to take care of us in case things got out of control.

“Well, OSU was the first college campus I had ever been on. Neither of my parents had even attended high school much less college. Just the word “college” was foreign to me. Sure I knew what college was, but it had never figured in as part of my future. The topic had never been discussed in our house. But there I was, being shown around

the campus as Mrs. Smith told me about dormitories, libraries, student unions and OSU wrestling. Seated on the front row of Gallagher-Iba Arena I was spellbound by the noise and excitement that surrounded us. If the intent of Mr. and Mrs. Smith was to sell me on college, they had succeeded. I wanted to go to college!”

“Before I graduated from high school, I was privileged in many such ways with special gifts and favors. I got to miss Home-Ec class for two weeks straight to practice my hook shot in basketball. My room and meals were paid for by someone so that I could travel with the team to the annual Tonkawa High School Basketball tournament. The week that letter jackets and class rings came in, I was given one along with others, even though I knew I had not ordered nor paid for either. Because I had special abilities, I was given special privileges and was taken care of.”

And until today as I have this conversation with John, I have never questioned those privileges. Until now I have only remembered the people who made it all possible with a fondness and a real sense of gratitude. Now I couldn't help but also think about those other students who came from the same type of home. I remember a classmate, Marshall, who I know was poorer than I was but what I remember about him was Mrs. Smith yelling at him because he could not or would not remember the definition of a direct object.

“Just repeat after me, Marshall,” yelled Mrs. Smith after trying several times to get a response from Marshall, “a direct object receives the action of the verb!” I don't even think she realized that she was yelling.

The rest of us students had certainly never seen her this way, and we all looked at Marshall with looks that said, “Come on, Marshall, just say it so we can go on.” But he wouldn’t. Marshall finally quit coming to school.

Mildred was another one that never made it to graduation with the rest of us. Mildred and her six brothers and sister came to school dirty and tattered every day. She didn’t have a grandmother to patch the holes. She tried hard in class but spent most of her evenings babysitting with her siblings, finding little time for homework. She tried going out for basketball also, but soon quit when she found that gym clothes and basketball shoes were needed and none were provided for her. Mildred was never invited to go to wrestling tournaments or play a lead role in a play. Like Marshall, Mildred finally quit coming to school.

“Mom, I asked if you’re ready to go,” John looks at me laughing at my mental lapse. As my youngest, he understands me well and recognizes that I have slipped into some deep thinking.

“Come on, I’ll get the ticket so you can go back and get some work done.” He gives me a parting kiss and says good bye as I head out the door to my car.

I can’t wait to get back to my office, determined to add to those few boxes from this morning.

Reflecting back on these snap shots, I now see the makings of my passion about student voice and the inequities that abound within the system. Even though the stories just related do not specifically deal with voice in the physical sense, they are very much about a student’s ability to participate in activities in which they exercise any degree of control or communicate their feelings or abilities (Richardson, 2001; Rogers, 2005).

Although the ability and opportunity to vocalize one's opinion is an important aspect in the discussion, these stories show that students can also voice who they are through other opportunities. However, I now see that opportunities were afforded to me because of my abilities and withheld from others because of a lack of those same abilities. This inequality can only be corrected by addressing each component of effective voice.

Putting the car in gear, I head back to school still thinking about the lack of equity in student voice. Branson (2004) states that students basically have three choices: (1) not to participate, (2) participate without effect, or (3) participate effectively. In the first story during recess, I had chosen to not participate. I let my poverty keep me from sharing in an activity that was open to me, but I backed away from it out of fear that others would see what Billy had seen. Choice is a two sided coin; either the group can choose not to include an individual, or the individual can choose to not be included. Students of poverty often choose to not join in for the very reasons I felt. It is better to not participate than to participate and be embarrassed (Payne, 2001).

Payne explains in her writings on understanding poverty that educators can help students of poverty by providing resources (2001). When these resources are provided, the ability to choose is increased. Although basketball was open to all students, my choice was limited by a lack of resources: shoes, money, and transportation. Again, as I look back on the impact of Mr. and Mrs. Smith taking me to OSU, I now understand that they were also adding to my ability to make effective decisions. Information is key to the ability to make decisions, and those trips provided new information that opened up new opportunities for me.

I can now place these experiences into the voice matrix that I have created during this study. It is based on similar ones seen in the works of Lambert (2003) as she looks at building leadership capacity and in the flow theory of Csikszentmihalyi (1997). The matrixes from these studies show a relationship between participation and ability. When applied to voice I find the following interconnectedness.

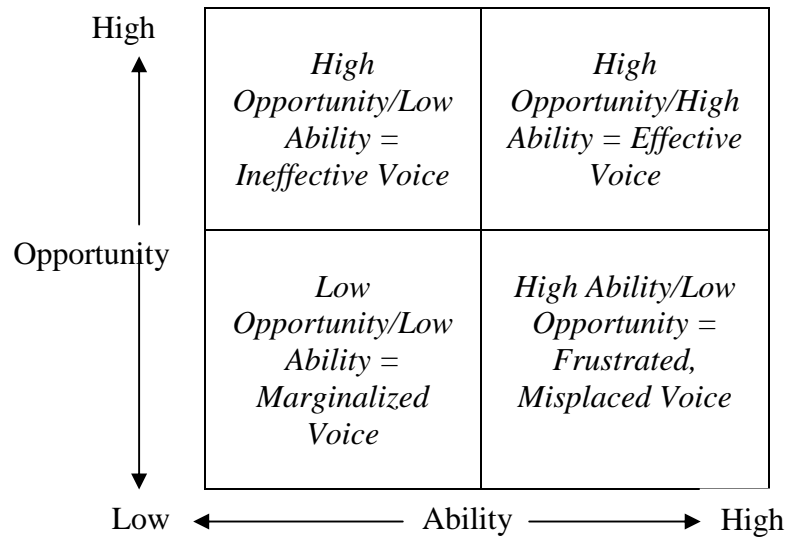


Table 2: Democratic Student Voice Framework

Beginning in the bottom left corner, a student with limited or unrecognized ability and low opportunity will often be marginalized and choose not to participate or will not be invited to participate (Black & William, 2009). Mildred and Marshall fall into this category. Moving up to the top left hand corner, I can see a connection to the story of when I was invited to join my friends on the merry-go-round, the opportunity was high, but because of my lack of resources, my ability to join in would have been limited because of embarrassment. I do not have an example for the bottom right hand corner, because my teachers recognized my abilities and provided adequate

opportunities for me. However, in the years that followed as a teacher and administrator, I have seen students who would fall into this quadrant. Students who have the ability but are afforded no opportunity will usually seek out environments that honor their voice (Foley, 2005). However, reflecting again upon my personal experiences, most of the time I found myself in the top right hand corner with abilities either coming naturally such as my artistic and athletic abilities or abilities that were increased by teachers through resources and information. When coupled with multiple opportunities to express these abilities, I found power through expressing my voice.

The incessant honking behind me brings me back to the present. I see that the light has turned green, and I am not moving. The driver behind me motions for me to move on with one hand, and continues to honk at me as if to say, “Move it, lady!”

Traveling the last few blocks back to the school, I return to my office eager to add to the waiting boxes. Patty is already at her desk and announces that I have a message and need to return a phone call.

“Some school wants to schedule a visit for next year. They want to know if it is too early to get on your calendar.” She hands me the paper with the phone number written neatly and asks, “Are you going to schedule visitors for next year or will you leave it for the next principal to do?”

“I’ll leave the scheduling of his time to him,” I laugh as I walk back to my office, remembering the excitement that visits bring. These visits by teachers, principals, and outside dignitaries have been events that I have always looked forward to and will certainly miss.



Oaks Middle School has received many such visits during the last seven years. I have always explained to visitors that we are a pretty normal school as far as demographics go. The school is comprised of approximately 350 sixth and seventh grade students of diverse ethnic background with 61% Caucasian, 21% Native American, 6% African American, and 12% Hispanic. Over 70% of the students are eligible for the free and reduced lunch program. The staff includes 25 certified teachers, one principal, and two teacher assistants. Nothing extraordinary in those numbers. But then I would also tell them how Oaks Middle School is exemplary from several perspectives.

I told them how our school has been named a model school for the Great Expectations program for the previous four years. Great Expectations is a program that holds as its core values a climate of mutual respect and high expectations for all. It encompasses seventeen classroom practices that must be implemented daily by all staff members as judged by an outside evaluation in order to be eligible for model status. One of those practices calls for students to be held accountable for their own actions. This belief is important to the decisions by teachers to teach decision making skills to students.

Besides being a model school for Great Expectations, the school was also recognized by the National Secondary Schools Association as one of 100 highly successful middle schools in America. As an exemplary school, Oaks Middle School has served as a host school for site visits by over a dozen school districts, a research team from a major university, and the state's Governor and Lieutenant Governor. Oaks

Middle School has been included in three documentary films by different organizations. The school site has been the subject of three previous research studies.

I remember reading from Sarah Lightfoot, (1999) noted educator, who said that we must “describe things that work, define education at its best, document its subtleties and complexities, so that others may feel inspired.” Oaks Middle School is visited for that very reason. Schools must document and share their successes with others (Bernhardt, 2005). Oaks Middle School has shared its many successes with several schools during the past years. But future visits will be with the new principal. So I leave the note taped to my desk calendar so that my successor will find it.

“All right, now back to work,” I say to myself as I return to the bookcase and begin to take down the school portfolios from the past seven years. I have organized and saved every faculty meeting agenda, every magazine article assigned to teachers to read, along with all of the charts and graphs from student data, classroom walkthroughs and surveys. The notebooks provide a week by week outline of the school and its activities. The one dated 2001-2002 draws my attention, and I flip through the pages all encased in plastic pages and remember the rough beginnings of a new principal as I became the teacher of teachers.

### Chapter Three: Teachers As Students

Towards the front of the notebook, I see the faculty meeting dated September, 2001. Thinking back on that time, I picture myself working in my office feeling good about where I was. My first year as principal at Oaks Middle School started off fairly well. I had just completed my first monthly faculty meeting the night before and was sitting at my desk ready to begin a new day.

The door opened and my secretary, who I have known for years and counted as a close friend, came in, closed the door and said, “What in the hell did you do in your meeting yesterday? They are talking about you in some pretty unkind ways down there in the lounge!”

“They’re what? What are they saying? I don’t have a clue!” I thought back to what I remembered as having been a great meeting, trying to imagine what I had done to deserve this.

“We looked at the CRT scores from last year and started talking about our goals for this year. I had the scores broken down by ethnic groups, gender, socio-economic, grade and subject area. Why would that make them mad at me?” But as I heard myself explaining to Patty, I began to remember some of the teacher comments from the meeting. Although they had not directed their anger at me during the meeting, I had detected a certain negative overtone to their discussions.

“Well, you just don’t understand that those Indian kids never do well. Maybe if they’d come to school more often, they’d do better!”

“We teach it, they just don’t learn it! When are the parents going to help us out?”

“It’s just so hard to teach them when they just want to play around and cause trouble!”

This was the tone that the discussion had taken. I had been able to draw them back to planning for the future and assigned them to discuss possible goals for us to work on during team meetings that week.

“Well, they think that you think they are not doing their job. That it’s their fault that the scores are low, and they are mad at you!” I could always count on Patty to tell me the truth, no matter how much it hurt.

“Well, thank you for covering my back. I’ll see if I can smooth some ruffled feathers. Keep me informed.” Patty got up and left me to figure out how to get the teachers focused on improved practice.

Trying to be objective, I went through a well practiced process of critical reflection, questioning and answering myself in my mind. “What was the purpose of my meeting? I had wanted them to examine the facts, the data, have a professional discussion about them, and then come up with a plan of action based upon those discussions. It was part of the ‘plan, do, act’ process that our superintendent had shared with the principals earlier in the summer. Well, it didn’t work too well, did it?”

Today as I look back on that first meeting and that year, in fact, I see that I was asking my teachers to do something that they did not have the skills to do. They were teaching the best that they knew how. And unfortunately, I was being the best principal that I could be also. I was asking them to be Jacqueline Kennedy without giving them the clothes to wear. I was asking them to be champion athletes without shoes to play in. I was asking them to move to a higher level without the skills needed to perform. We

struggled through that first year; they hated me, but I was determined to be better! I read, I went to conferences, and I signed up for a leadership program with a local university.

In the following years I began to learn about Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) and shared bit-by-bit what I was learning with my teachers. As I look through the annual notebooks, I review the power-point presentations and again the articles. The teachers of Oaks Middle School became students of school improvement research, especially the research on PLCs. Through monthly faculty meetings that were aligned to teacher needs, student needs, and current research, together we began the process of building a vision and mission for our school. After much discussion about the purpose of middle school, we finally came to a consensus on: “Oaks Middle School will transition students by providing relevant instruction that meets the academic, social, physical, and emotional needs of students to ensure the success of all.” With our mission written and posted for all to refer to, we continued with the task of aligning our practice with that mission. Student data became the driving force and was soon accepted as standard practice by the teachers.

As I now place the many books on PLC’s into the awaiting box, my mind reviews each of the lessons contained within the volumes and measures how Oaks Middle School measures up against them.

Flipping through the print out of an old power point presentation, I remember how I had begun with basic definitions. Page one states that PLC’s are governance structures that model democratic principles (O’Hair et al, 2005; O’Hair, et al, 2009). This page leads to the next that explains how learning communities are made up of groups of all

affected stakeholders who collectively examine and improve their own professional practice (The Annenberg Institute for School Reform, 1998). I remember how we had discussed how these groups should be at all levels within a district. Teachers gave examples of how teams could be district based to examine practices that affects the system as a whole or school-based to address issues relevant to that site. A district-based team might be a multi-cultural committee made up of parents, community members, teachers, and students to discuss and plan for ways to ensure the equitable treatment and representation of ethnic groups in school programs. I have served on several of these district committees, working with parents and community members to build trust and leadership with stakeholders.

Oaks teachers were quick to point out school-based teams such as the vertical alignment teams they had worked on for the last three years. Teachers across content areas had worked with each other across grade levels to build a curriculum without overlap or gaps.

Whatever the make-up of the team or the topic being discussed, my teachers and I had learned that PLC's are data-informed, standards driven, and focused on instruction, equity and results (DuFour, 2004). We soon realized that as members of a PLC we needed to reflect honestly and openly together about our actions, always seeking ways to do our work better. The ongoing discussions were driven fundamentally by the needs and interests of participants themselves, enabling teachers as adult learners to expand on content knowledge and practice that is directly connected with the work in the classroom (Corcoran, 1995; Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1995; Little 1988; Elmore, 2002). The study of PLC's at Oaks Middle School had caused teachers to

become students again, that is, they began to learn more effective ways to improve their practice.

Coming to another later PowerPoint presentation, I review the three big ideas around which PLC's are developed: ensuring that students learn, a culture of collaboration, and a focus on results (Annenberg Institute for School Reform, 1998). The first idea puts the focus on students learning instead of teachers teaching. No longer will the comment, "I taught it!" or "That's the way we've always done it!" stand as an excuse for students not learning. Members of a PLC ask what they want students to learn, how they will know when each student has learned, and most importantly, what they will do if students don't learn (DuFour, Eaker, & DuFour, 2002; DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, & Karhanek, 2004; Dufour, 1998; Dufour, 2004). In fact, the teachers at Oaks Middle School had a standard form that facilitates a process for asking leading questions centered on those three PLC ideals.

It is this third question that separates PLC's from traditional schools and that caused Oaks Middle School to move from what Reeves (2003) calls "data of learning" to "data for learning". Because teams within a PLC meet regularly to examine student data, their response to the third question about students who do not learn are answered quickly before the student gets too far behind. The daily team meetings at Oaks Middle School created a safety net to prevent such students from falling through the cracks. Regular meetings have allowed teams to focus on timely interventions rather than remediation efforts during summer school or extra courses next semester. In fact, because of the interventions implemented by the teachers at Oaks, the number of students who are required to attend summer school because of failing grades had been

cut in half. By acting quickly, students are directed to activities that provide extra time and assistance until they have mastered the necessary concept.

The second big idea of collaboration reinforces the democratic belief that participants must work together to achieve a collective purpose (DuFour, 2004). Besides teacher team meetings, teachers joined with the principal, parents and students as the building leadership team to engage in an ongoing cycle of questions that promote team learning about student learning. Teachers were no longer isolated within their classrooms doing their own thing. Parents were invited and encouraged to take an active role in discussions and decisions. The community as a whole is now included in the educational process through service learning and through community engagement.

The last big idea, a focus on results, has certainly guided the collaborative efforts of Oaks Middle School in judging their effectiveness on the basis of student achievement (DuFour, 2004). As members of PLC teams, Oaks teachers have applied the three ideas as they stopped assessing their effectiveness on the basis of how busy they were, how much the students tried, how many parents attended an event, or how much everyone enjoyed a project. Oaks teachers stopped working in isolation and worked together to meet the needs of students (DuFour, 2004).

In PLC's, teams not only collaborate and build upon the three big ideas, but they are also committed to a shared mission of the school and see themselves as responsible for the total development of that mission. Collective responsibility as a democratic practice enables individuals working in union with others to undertake fundamental, systemic change (Annenberg Institute for School Reform, 1998). Not only does Oaks Middle School have a working mission statement that drives all instructional and curricular



decisions, we have also become well known for our school creed that proclaims those basic democratic principles that Boren wrote about and which serve to unite the efforts of everyone around a common belief.

Thinking back to the mission statement for Oaks Middle School, I read it once again from the bulletin board in my office. “Oaks Middle School will transition students by providing relevant instruction that integrates the academic, physical, emotional and social needs of the students for the success of all.” As instructional strategies, programs, or ideas surfaced in team meetings or faculty meetings, those ideas were always filtered through the words on the mission statement. Someone might ask, “How does that meet the social needs of a twelve year old boy?” Another might present evidence for how another strategy would address the physical needs of growing adolescents. Oaks teachers made better decisions because they knew what their goal was and believed in it.

Likewise, both teachers and students used the school’s creed as a barometer for their everyday actions and decisions. The creed is posted around the top of the wall surrounding the commons area. I had spent all one summer day of my second year stapling the words to the wall so that all would be reminded.

*“This is a world of choice. Therefore I chose to accept life’s challenges rather than to let others make my decisions. I will base my thoughts, speech and actions on high principles of character, not circumstances. I choose to be respectful even when faced with disrespect. I choose to be honest in the midst of dishonesty. I choose to be compassionate instead of selfish. I believe that the choices I make today affect what I will have, who I will be, and what I will do with my future. I am a person of choice.”*

The creed had been recited in unison every day and had become one of those traditions that make Oaks Middle School a community focused on democratic principles and the responsibility of each citizen within that community.

A final page in the notebook contained bulleted items from a large scale study that found that PLC's lead to improved student outcomes based on components that Oaks Middle School has worked to put in place:

- A shared vision for authentic high quality intellectual work for students. The mission for Oaks Middle School addresses not only the academic needs of students but also the emotional, physical and social needs of the adolescent.
- Authentic pedagogy for instruction and assessment for all students. Teachers at Oaks Middle School use technology and service learning as two instructional practices to connect student learning to the real world.
- Organizational capacity for teachers to collaborate during the school day to reflect upon their practice. All teachers at Oaks Middle School have both a personal and team plan time built into every school day.
- External support from districts, state, parents, and communities (SEDL, 2008). Oaks Middle School has worked to involve as many outside stakeholders as possible including the expertise from the Great Expectations and Technology Grant foundations. External support also comes from parents and community members as they serve on Building Leadership Teams or planning committees. Parents and community

members also share in teaching through our enrichment program and through the mentoring program.

With our mission statement firmly in place and our actions reflecting our school creed, Oaks Middle School set up governance structures to decide what “we” can do in “our” school, not what others need to do. In other words, all stakeholders have become involved, but not in pointing fingers of “blame and shame”, but in investigating how each can do more to move the school as a whole towards becoming a democratic place of learning. Problems are addressed in a respectful, collegial manner that reflect the community discourse found within a democratic community.

Every stakeholder within Oaks Middle School, individually and jointly, meets the definition of community that accepts the responsibility for the learning of all students. The first characteristic of a community, a common sense of identity (Cole, 2002), is shared by students, faculty and parents of Oaks Middle School. The Great Expectations flag flies outside the building signaling to visitors that Oaks is grounded in this common purpose. Along with that sense of identity, Oaks students have a common sense of purpose (Schlager, Fusco & Schank, 2002; Haythornthwaite, 2002; Cuthbert, Clark, & Linn, 2003), which is displayed on the walls of the commons area as their school creed. Teachers are united around not only the school creed but also around the mission statement posted throughout the school. Because Oaks is situated within a small suburban township, citizens are bound together by geographical lines (Haythornthwaite, 2002). Everyone knows everyone else. The fourth characteristic of a community speaks to the need for all members to know what each other knows (Schlager, Fusco & Schank, 2002). Through team meetings, advisory, morning assemblies, building

leadership teams and other structures, all members of Oaks Middle School have access to information in a timely manner. Although Oaks depends heavily upon well-functioning teams with shared leadership, necessary hierarchical roles are in place to facilitate when necessary (Haythornthwaite, 2002). Haythornthwaite also writes that a community is defined by a set of socially constructed rules, behaviors and rituals. Oaks has its traditions that create a sense of unity within as well as keeping it distinct from other schools. As a local t-shirt says, "Tradition does not graduate." Oaks Middle School has been able to develop into a true community that seeks to meet the common good of each member. This sense of community has helped to build an accompanying sense of trust that allows members the freedom to contribute willingly.

By moving away from a system with many segmented stakeholders, effective schools provide all stakeholders with "community-building and professional development strategies that would allow members to learn the ropes of educational practice, implement new practices, and apply new content knowledge" (Schlager, Fusco & Schank, p. 130), by providing the type of support that enables understanding and change to occur (Renninger & Shumar, 2002). Oaks Middle School has been through the change process from a traditional school to a professional learning community and has become stronger because of it.

During the evolution I quickly realized that just giving voice to participants was not enough. Because effective voice is dependent upon not only consent but also upon ability, I also had to develop my teachers not only in content knowledge but also in decision making skills. We all began to realize the power of shared decision making and the importance of providing everyone a voice in the discussions. Some were reluctant

to voice their opinions while others had to be reined in from monopolizing every discussion. It was not long before everyone understood that each voice was to be heard. Equity among teacher voice was being addressed.

But most importantly, I soon realized in that first meeting, that providing an opportunity for voice was not only not enough but could be dangerous. I finally realized that instead of the “plan, do, act” method that had been proposed earlier, I moved the faculty to another process developed by Douglas Reeves (2004). Reeves’ process called for four steps.

1. Observation of data: One must collect many types of data. Many sources of data will provide what he calls the “story behind the numbers” (p. 6). I began to collect data on more than just end-of-year achievement scores. We began to look at attendance, discipline, grades, and anything else that we could chart and graph.
2. Reflection: One must think about the data in regards to one’s own actions and on what research or history says is effective practice. This was the big, big piece that made all of the difference. As I said before, my teachers were doing the best that they knew how. It was not until I provided them with research on effective practice that addressed what the data showed, that they had new ideas to talk about and try. Just like Mr. and Mrs. Smith had to take me to a real college so that I could see it and dream about being part of, so my teachers had to be shown a different way so that they could build new goals to reach for. You can’t believe what you can’t see!
3. Synthesis: One must develop a plan of action based upon the data and one’s reflection. The teachers were now looking at their own practice and reflecting upon how changing what they did might be also change the data. This was a huge shift from

the “shame and blame” attitude they had espoused in that first data meeting. With new ideas to try out, my teachers became risk takers, trying new practices and getting excited about learning!

4. Replication: Do it! Slowly throughout the years, their practices within their classrooms did change. The most amazing change came when teachers began to make connections between what they were doing in faculty meetings and team meetings to what was going on in the classroom. Teachers began to use the same processes that had empowered their voice and had improved their practice in helping students enhance their own practices.

Even though we had been looking at the data, the critical reflection that was part of Reeve’s process was the key that unlocked our efforts and provided new insights. Critical reflection was also the practice that linked this process of data-driven decision making to democratic citizenship. Just as Boren (2008) had emphasized the importance of self-reflection as a practice that will enhance democratic citizenship, empowering teachers within a professional learning community with the process of critical self-reflection is an essential step needed before extending that same power to the students (Mitra, 2003).

Up until that point, little effort had been made by me or any other principal that I knew of to take the same practice of data-driven decision making to the student level. However, students are as guilty as adults in pointing to others to blame for their failures and using the actions of others as an excuse for their own actions. When students believe that their failures aren’t their fault then they also come to believe that it doesn’t matter what they do, nothing will change. “That teacher just doesn’t like me.” Such

thinking leads to apathy that can cripple one's actions and achievement. Again, Boren (2008) lists apathy as a major cause for the decline in America's decline. To turn the tide, the teachers at Oaks Middle School began to investigate how other schools had enhanced student voice.

Based upon articles furnished for study during team plan time, teachers learned that student voice as a democratic principle has been studied at length. They learned that a democratic society is built upon the need for its citizens to engage in political debate that will strengthen the common good (Schmoker, 2006). Teaching students to engage in "argumentative literacy" (Schmoker, p. 69) by examining the evidence, reflecting upon multiple views, making connections among ideas, imagining alternatives, and understanding relevance, all contribute to one's ability to take part in the decision making required of a democratic citizen. Other structures that enhance student voice came from research by Parker (2006) who expanded on Schmoker's argumentative literacy theory by examining the issue of inquiry and discourse within the classroom as structures for increased student voice.

By including student voice in the decision making process, students learn how to live and practice democracy (Prieto, 2001). When students are given some choice over the learning process, they are more engaged and achieve at a higher level (Fletcher, 2007; Rudduck & Flutter, 2000). Allowing for and acknowledging student voice helps students develop a democratic sense of responsibility, caring, feelings of connection, and competence (Mohamed, I. & Wheeler, W., 2001).

Other studies revealed to Oaks teachers that student voice has been effective in school improvement efforts (Holcomb, 2007; Mitra, 2001). Instead of using students

as a data source, research has found that including students in the discussions at higher levels provided the faculty with greater insight into why students do or do not learn (Raymond, 2001; Mitra, 2001; Levin, 2000). In some school reform efforts, increased student voice has helped to address perceptions held by at-risk students and inform teachers and administration of practices that could close the achievement gap (Silva, 2001).

Recent studies also identified technology as an avenue for students to express their voice (Garthwait, 2004; Mitra & Gross, 2009). Student voice has also been examined from the viewpoint of technology enriched instruction. In a recent study, Levin (2007) found that students who had used technology through Information Rich Tasks said that the technology provided several viewpoints to be examined from different sources, allowed students to gather, apply, organize and evaluate that information, and enabled students to get to know his classmates better thus fostering collaboration and friendships. Other studies show that technology can facilitate active involvement, provide direct experiences and situations, allows time for reflection, and provides frequent feedback (Callahan & Switzer, 2001).

Although the literature on student voice in decision making is lengthy, I discussed with the teachers the fact that it does not provide studies beyond designated groups of student assigned to a larger program such as school reform or school governance. The issue of equity and democracy surfaced again in light of this gap in the literature.

In 2006, I had the opportunity to attend and participate in the University Council of Educational Administrators Convention where several speakers asked the question,



“What is the missing piece?” (Elmore, 2006; Glickman, 2006). Why is there a disconnect between what research shows to be effective and what actually goes on in the classroom once the door is closed? Previous research has centered around focus or forum groups rather than on “classroom-focused changes” (Mitra, p. 16). Fittingly, it is the voice of a student that provided the direction for Oaks Middle School.

Still sitting in the floor of my soon to be former office, I realize that my legs have fallen asleep and stand to move to the comfort of my cushioned chair. I sit back and remember a shopping trip made to a local mall recently where it was a student who planted a new seed for student voice. While hurrying through the mall on a previous Saturday, I saw a crowd of teenagers gathered near a table in the food court. As I got closer I saw to my amazement and amusement the reason for the gathering. Standing sheepishly in the middle of the group was one young man with a home-made sign tied around his neck with a piece of string. The sign was on 8 by 10 inch cardboard and in childish hand writing read, “I make F’s. Ask me why.” My first thought was, “Where is his mother?” for I was sure that she had imposed this penalty upon him for his bad grades, and I wanted to congratulate her for holding him responsible for his actions. Not seeing anyone who I thought could be his parent, I continued on my way. But as I walked on, I began to really think about what the boy’s sign said. As a veteran educator and administrator, I have also grappled with why students make F’s. The young man at the mall looked like he had everything going for him. He was young, good looking, was dressed in the latest style, and in spite of his predicament, seemed fairly happy-go-lucky. So why does he and many very much like him make F’s? There are a host of experts out there who are eager to tell teachers why Johnny can’t spell or Sally can’t

read, and districts are willing to pay to bring them in to enlighten everyone on the subject.

During the last several years, many schools like Oaks Middle School have embraced the Professional Learning Community system of having teams of teachers examine student data on an ongoing basis and ask basically the same question. Through the process of data-driven decision making which includes self-reflection on their own practices, teachers work to change their instruction to help students learn. I have seen it in action at Oaks Middle School for several years now.

Although this is a worthy process, and one that should continue, the revelation that comes to me today as I sit in my office surrounded by boxes and books is, “Why don’t we ask the students?” Why do adults who know the power of self reflection for their own practice, not understand that the same process might be as powerful in changing the behaviors of students? How can schools move from a traditional system to a professional learning community and then to a democratic learning community where all voices are heard? Apparently the mother of the boy at the mall had come to that very realization. “I make F’s. Ask me why.”

As I look at the many books still on the shelf, those already packed into boxes, and at the multiple files waiting to be sorted and packed, I ponder the connections across the tenants of democracy, Professional Learning Communities, student voice, and data-driven decision making. The notion that students need to be at the heart of their own learning has certainly been overlooked by adult stakeholders making decisions based upon the numbers (Bullock & Wikeley, 2001). It seems, in fact, that in an effort to meet federal mandates, instead of “no child left behind”, many children are

being left behind as an integral part of the democratic processes of discussion and decision making.

Looking from box to box and listening to the “wheels” turn in my mind, I realize finally that the solution to this problem can actually be found in the professional learning literature which states that everything, including data and resources, and everyone, including administrators, teachers, and parents, should be focused not on what is **taught** but on what is **learned** ( Eaker, DuFour, & DuFour, 2002). This statement is crucial to the whole process. If a school is focused on what is taught, then the discussions and the data are centered on the teacher. Teaching stops with the teacher. Conversely, if a school is focused on what is learned, then the discussion and the data should be centered on the student. The learning stops with the learner. The student now becomes the person closest to the problem. In fact, some states are now requiring school districts to use student-collected data and provide instructional time for staff and students to analyze that data (OSDE, 2005). They list data notebooks, learning logs, charts, graphs, journals, and data walls as examples of data types. Educational leaders are realizing that effective schools are better served if they include students in the discussions about and for learning. And yet here-in lies the problem. Professional Learning Community literature does not tell schools how to include students in the democratic processes proposed for schools. Where and how is student voice supposed to be included? Professional Learning Communities understand that voice is the opportunity to express ones opinion, make decisions, plan, implement, and evaluate ones environment (Rogers, 2005). Because effective voice is dependent upon not only opportunity or consent but also upon ability, effective school leaders develop people in

decision making skills. These skills are what enable teachers to work within teacher teams to make decisions that affect their instructional practices or school improvement efforts. Although many schools are providing students opportunities to share in decisions through representative student government councils and forums or school improvement teams, few schools include all students in the ongoing data driven decisions that affect student learning. Even fewer schools are actually teaching students a process for making effective decisions. Schools that are including *all* students in the conversations and in the data-driven decision making *process* inside the classroom are rare indeed.

“And Oaks Middle School is such a school! That is why I have always been so proud to show how my teachers and students collaborate daily, allowing everyone a voice in the events and decisions.” I place the last of the notebooks into the final box for the day and return to my desk. Looking down at the squares, notes, and drawings, I begin to focus my thoughts on my dissertation and the direction it will take.

“My overall question seems to be, ‘How can schools enhance student voice?’” I mumble as I write it out. Just seeing it on paper helps me to better reflect and break it down into further sub-questions. Thinking back to my matrix on student voice and democracy, I write the words “structure” and “process”.

“What structures can schools provide to increase opportunities for all students to exercise their voice?”

“What processes enhance the effectiveness of student voice?” That pretty much sums up what I am looking for. I consider narrowing the processes and structures down into specific areas such as technology or data-driven decision making, but decide that

with a narrative inquiry, it is best if I just wait and see how the story unfolds. My doctoral committee led me into seeing how a narrative inquiry would be the best methodology for a study on student voice. Since then I have read several books and articles on how the stories lead the researcher through constant critical reflection as the stories unfold naturally. Theories and interpretations emerge as connections are made (Clandinin & Connelley, 2000; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Leavy, 2009).

“Leave yourself open to the stories of the participants,” came the researcher voice from within. I can’t help but remember the beginnings of student voice and the teacher that made all the difference. But those memories are for another day. As I stand and stretch I catch a glimpse of the clock on the wall. It is five o’clock, the end of the first day of packing. Four more days before that final page is turned.

## Chapter Four: What Goes Around

What goes around from you to me,  
From me to her,  
And her to him,  
Goes on and on to fill a void  
In every mind,  
In every heart.  
As fullness comes, it overflows  
Along the path  
From which it came.  
What went before, returns enriched  
By each one's thoughts,  
By each one's joy.  
What goes around, comes around  
To begin again.

I have returned for the second day of packing. It is now Tuesday and as expected, Patty is already seated at her station as I enter the office.

"I put some more boxes in your office for you," Patty says, "in case you need them. From the looks of things, you might need more than a week. Maybe you should consider staying longer." Her attempt at humor only served to remind me of our upcoming goodbyes that I knew would be met with tears and hugs. Such relationships are hard to leave.

"You're always one step ahead of me, Patty. I may just have to pack you in one of those boxes and take you with me." We both laugh as I walk on back to my office and begin another day's work. I resume the task of emptying the shelves of more books. "Why did I ever request the carpenters to build me such an enormous book case? The more room I have, the more stuff I collect." Shaking my head I open the first box and start on another shelf.

As box after box is filled, the shelves begin to show outlines of dust where rows of volumes once stood. I allow my eyes to now wander up and around the room, scanning the walls and their contents. My walls are still covered by the art work that has kept me company all these years. There's Georgia O'Keefe, my idol, straddling an old Harley ready to ride off into the sunset with a young, good-looking man. Posters from various art exhibits on Picasso and Matisse adorn another wall. But my eyes fall and rest upon this year's faculty photograph. Here are my teachers, my team. I have grown close to them and never tire of showcasing the wonderful work that they do with students every day. This next group of visitors, like all those that came before, will leave shaking their heads and asking, "How do they do it?"

Next time, even though I won't be here, I know that they will see teachers venturing into completely new territory. They will see the teachers of Oaks Middle School using the same processes with their students that have enabled them to reach a state of ownership in their teaching practices. It has been a slow process, but they have come so far. The data charts next to the bulletin board were evidence of their efforts.

Using the four step process outlined by Reeves (2004), Oaks teachers became slowly empowered to analyze data and use it to transform their thinking and teaching. Based on the data that came from teacher comments on report cards about why they thought students made the grade they had, teachers discussed how motivation was a big factor in student learning and began to read articles furnished by me to learn more about this issue. One such article was filed away in the notebook along with the agenda for that month. "Six Daily Actions That Motivate Students to Learn" (DuBryn, 2003) provided discussion during team meetings as teachers reflected upon the four follow-up

questions. As they reflected upon student values and including students in decision making, they discussed possible interventions to try. We soon reached at the stage where teachers were even asking for additional data.

“Hey, Sharon, how about bringing us data on grades based on the hour of the class? Maybe that might shed some new light on the issue!” This came from the art teacher whose grade we didn’t even chart, but here he was trying to help the math teachers try to figure out how to improve their scores. Powerful stuff!

One teacher, Mrs. Sullivan, decided to try using the same process of Data Driven Decision Making (D3M) that the teachers had used to see if it would also motivate her students. I didn’t even know she had moved into this direction until one day when I was on lunch duty and a 6<sup>th</sup> grade boy came running into the cafeteria, forgetting the rule about no running, and gave me a high five saying, “We did it! We did it!” But I get ahead of my story. This is Mrs. Sullivan’s story. As I reflect back on that day almost two years ago, I am still filled with gratitude for her efforts to venture into new territory. I remember our conversation from that day very well.

“That’s their data. But the students never see what we see. They are the ones comprising all of that data for us, so I decided to use it in my classroom.” She explained to me later that day that she had begun by showing them their monthly assessment data.

At Oaks Middle School, all students take monthly benchmark assessments that are correlated to the state standards. The assessments are completed on-line so that the scores are tabulated instantly and the data is available in several different formats. Using interactive whiteboard technology, she showed each class the scores for the 6<sup>th</sup>



grade class and asked, “What do you see? What can you interpret from the graph? What is it telling you?” From that information, Mrs. Sullivan asked other questions.

“It was just kind of one thing would lead to another. Sparking the brain, which is what I want them to do. I want them to think critically. I want them to analyze things. What did we do wrong? What could they do to make it better next time? What kind of questions do they need to ask so that they can be successful?” I could tell that she was on a roll that day, so just sat back and listened.

She told me how she found that students in her advanced classes were more verbal in their responses. The others would “chime in” on different things. Even though the lower level students were not as verbal, she told how all students were listening, paying attention and focused on what was happening to “their” data.

“They were not playing or trying to do other things.” However, in an effort to hear from every student, an important aspect of a professional learning community, Mrs. Sullivan took time once a month to have students journal, answering three questions: What had they observed in the data? Why did they think it was that way? How did they think it could be improved?

“It’s just another way for those that don’t like to speak out, they can write. You know, in math they feel embarrassed if they are not correct every time. So that journaling is just another way to reach the learner that doesn’t want to verbalize.” At this point she had laid a stack of journal pages on my desk, showing me what they had written.

“After a lot of discussion, they finally decided that they would probably do better on the monthly benchmarks assessments if they would just do their homework. I

could have told them that, and in fact, I had many times. But it was as if they had just realized it.” Her laughter was proof that she was really enjoying the whole thing. She continued explaining.

“I told them that homework was one place where I can see if they understand the processes necessary to be successful on the tests.” She said that she also saw this in one of the class discussions. “You just have to come see it! It’s amazing!”

And so I scheduled a visit for the next day.

I was late making it to Mrs. Sullivan’s class the next day and tried to slip in quietly. I took a seat close to the door and just listened.

“I just got mixed up on the order of operations,” one student was saying.

To which Mrs. Sullivan replied, “It is not the answer I am looking for, but the process. I want you to be successful as you move up.” Besides the mathematical processes, the classes soon realized that through the process of examining their data, reflecting upon it, discussing those reflections with classmates, and then making plans based upon those discussions, their behavior, turning in homework, affected their achievement.

“Before we go into today’s lesson, take a few minutes now to write in your journals. Remember to write what the data told you, why you think it was that way, and what you plan to do to make it better.” As she walked around the room, I got up and walked also, peering over students to see what they were writing.

Looking over the shoulder of one student, I saw that she had written in her journal, “Most students do their homework. It is only a few who do not.” I observed another student who wrote, “In my seventh hour math class, we have been making a

graph of the percentage of homework turned in. My class started out with a 93% in October. Since then we've gone up and down, and now our color on the graph looks like mountains." I was amazed at the level of comprehension that students brought to their journal entries. I read what one student wrote about the similarities between classes, even between the advanced class and the inclusion class. As a member of the 4<sup>th</sup> hour inclusion class, one special education student wrote in his journal:

"The graph is something we use every day sence (sic) Oct. 31, 2006. We had are (sic) ups and down. 4<sup>th</sup> hour started as a 70% on November 10. We were the dumbest! After that we tried. We did improve. We did get 100%, but knowing us, we went down hill again. But we did better than 2<sup>nd</sup> hour (the advanced class), so maybe we aren't the dumbest." I remember that I had to resist the urge to scoop that kid up in my arms and reaffirm his conclusion. He had shown a deep understanding of not only the data but in his own abilities.

While students were writing, Mrs. Sullivan encouraged the class to also write about possible ideas for solutions to the problems. Students were quick to suggest possible reasons for poor scores. I continued to walk between the aisles and read what students wrote. None of them seemed to mind sharing what they wrote. In fact, several offered what they had written for my inspection. One of them wrote, "They (students) just wouldn't do their homework, so that dropped our percentage way down." Another student showed me where she had noted in her journal, "I think that some people sleep in class, but I won't mention any names." She smiled and pointed to the boy behind her.

Interpreting graphs is one of the required skills for 6<sup>th</sup> grade math and this seemed to be an authentic way to teach it. Because of her studies in faculty meetings, Mrs. Sullivan understood the relationship between relevance and authenticity to motivation. After class I visited further with her.

“What motivated you to begin doing this?” I asked as students were leaving.

“If you don’t relate it to them and what they are about...then it goes in one ear and out the other. It has to be fun for them or you’ve lost them.” She was moving toward the door to meet her next class.

A student who was leaving and overheard my question added, “The graph was a good idea from Mrs. Sullivan. She’s a very smart person.” He patted her on the back and hurried on out the door. I hung around to see some more.

As the next class entered, students took their seats quickly and waited for Mrs. Sullivan to begin. It was a school procedure for all teachers to have bell work in the form of a problem of the day (P.O.D.) posted for students to work on as bell work while the teacher took roll. I noticed that none was furnished and wondered about this slip in protocol by one of my best teachers.

At the beginning of class, I soon found out what had replaced the traditional P.O.D. as the students orally went through the process of determining how many students were in class the day before and how many turned in their homework today. As one student recorded those numbers on the board, another came up and made a fraction out of that data. Another then divided the denominator into the numerator to make it a percentage. A fourth student made a line graph on the poster board posted on another wall which showed each hour and their daily percentage. Incorporating relevant study information

into her bell work, Mrs. Sullivan used student data to review basic math skills of percentages, fractions, decimals, and division.

She later told me that as the process continued, the students began to not only expect it every day, but they began to ask for it.

“At first they did not want to do it, probably because they did not know their basic facts. By working through it every day, they became more comfortable and knew what to do. Students now come into the classroom asking, ‘Are you taking that up as homework? Are we going to graph it? Are we going to make percentages? Are we going to see where we are?’ They want to know if they have increased. They begin to see that there are all kinds of factors that affect our percent.”

It was evident that students did understand the charts and graphs and were able to communicate their findings. They noted how the charts fluctuated not only with one group, but across groups. I read through their journals that Mrs. Sullivan brought me and was impressed with their insight and honesty.

From their writings I did some charting of my own. They shared that students don’t do their homework for 5 main reasons.

1. They just forget. Students go home, play, talk on the phone and play video games until it is late and it’s time to go to bed.
2. They do it but lose it. Students are disorganized.
3. They think it doesn’t matter. They don’t care about their grades or the classes percentages.

4. They take advantage of Booster. Booster is a first hour class that students are assigned to instead of morning enrichment when they have unfinished assignments.
5. They don't understand how to do it. Either they forget how once they get home, or they didn't understand it in class and were afraid to ask.

Other reasons mentioned, but not frequently, were not showing their work, writing notes in class instead of listening and family emergencies. One student did admit to having hers taken away by the language arts teacher because she was trying to do it there before going to math class the next hour. The five reasons listed above were given by the majority of all students at all levels.

Following the data-driven decision making process, Mrs. Sullivan encouraged students to think of ways to solve their own problems. Their solutions were paired with the corresponding reasons in the following chart.

| REASON  | SOLUTION  |
|---|---|
| 1. They just forget.                            | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Incorporate a buddy system to remind each other to do their homework.</li> <li>2. Call or write parents to inform them of when homework is assigned.</li> <li>3. Use our agendas.</li> <li>4. Pin or tape a note on our agenda or binder.</li> </ol>  |
| 2. They do it, but loose it.                    | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Finish it in class, because she gives us plenty of time!</li> <li>2. Organize our binders.</li> </ol>   |
| 3. They don't care and think it doesn't matter. | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Reward us with little treats or with less homework.</li> <li>2. Do more charts so maybe the ones whose charts go down will get a little jealous and want to do better.</li> <li>3. Make homework more interesting.</li> <li>4. Encourage one another.</li> <li>5. Make those who do not turn in homework, go to the back of the lunch line. (They care about that!)</li> <li>6. Send them to ISS (in-school suspension).</li> <li>7. Take away their elective classes.</li> </ol>   |
| 4. They take advantage of Booster.              | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Do away with Booster.</li> <li>2. Make them stay for the after school program instead.</li> <li>3. Just don't accept late work.</li> <li>4. Hold them back in 6<sup>th</sup> grade.</li> </ol>  |
| 5. They don't understand.                       | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. The teacher should require that we all have a certain amount finished before we leave, so she knows if we understand.</li> <li>2. For those who are afraid to ask questions, they could ask questions in the hall between classes where no one else can hear.</li> <li>3. Have parents come in and help in class.</li> <li>4. Have a week-end program with tutors to help with "major" stuff.</li> <li>5. Let students who understand and are finished, help those who don't.</li> <li>6. Do more group work.</li> <li>7. When we call our "buddy", we can also answer questions that they might have.</li> </ol> |

Table 3: Student Homework Reasons

I continued to drop in occasionally during that school year to check on the progress of this new classroom project. Since it seemed that forgetting was the main reason for not doing their homework, the solution that students agreed to try was the buddy system. Students discussed who they would call and showed a desire to commit to this solution. It was left to the students to organize and commit to the plan. However, the charts continued to fluctuate without any one finding an answer to the homework problem. Even though only a minor increase in homework completion was seen, there were benefits to overall understanding of the mathematical and DDDM process, students were more motivated in class, and the teacher was enthusiastic about students' response.

Towards the end of the year, I again visited with Mrs. Sullivan about her student data driven decision making. She knew that I had written a paper about her experiment and had presented it at several conferences. I had expressed to her many times how excited I was to see her take the initiative to try something new. Her project was shared in faculty meetings and generated a lot of discussion about student voice and the importance of teaching them skills for making good decisions that affect their grades. We had talked about the importance of including everyone's voice in the decisions within a professional learning community. We had just begun to discuss other ways that student voice could be enhanced, so I was eager to hear her opinions.

"You have done such a great job getting your students to think critically about their grades, Pat! Where will you go from here? Do you think what you have done would work in other classrooms? How could we share this with all students?" I guess



she could tell that I was sold on the whole thing and was eager to see the practice implemented across the school.

“I don’t know, Sharon. You know it took a lot of time out of class to do that. I don’t know if it was worth it.”

I couldn’t believe my ears! Not worth it? Hadn’t she seen how the kids ate it up? Hadn’t she seen their anticipation? Hadn’t she seen the charts?

“Well, Pat,” I tried to keep my voice calm, “you know that our new superintendent has picked up on this same idea from the state department. I really think she’ll be pushing for everyone to be doing some kind of data with students in every class next year. You will be leading the way.”

“It’s just one more thing to do. I don’t know.” With that, I recognized that “end-of-the-year just let me finish and take a break” attitude and let it drop.

“Well, you know how much I have appreciated everything that you did. You were great!” I gave her a hug and left her with a much deserved compliment. She had taken what she had learned and passed it on. What more could I ask, especially in May?

It is now the end of the next year, and I can now look back at how the actions of Mrs. Sullivan spread throughout the building. With help from the new superintendent’s promotion of student data collection and analysis, the teachers of Oaks Middle School have been able to take the concept of data-driven decision making into their classrooms in multiple ways.

It is from the daily visits into these classrooms and the many conversations about what I saw that yields the data for my dissertation. What goes around has

certainly come full circle from my own cries for student voice, to providing teachers a voice, and now at least one has taken what she learned and tried to provide effective voice skills to all students.

What went before, returns enriched  
By each one's thoughts,  
By each one's joy.  
What goes around, comes around  
To begin again.

I begin to remove the pictures from the wall and lean them together in a corner. The pictures and quotes are also taken carefully from the bulletin board and stored in a file marked as "final bulletin board." For some reason, I find that is important that I remember this last place and the lessons learned here. I stacked the boxes that are now full and taped shut against the back wall and get ready to call it another day. It is now Tuesday and I have three days left. I gather my purse, lock my office door and head towards the front, suddenly realizing that I have worked straight through lunch and am now hungry and anxious to leave.

"Patty, let's turn out the lights and head home. It's time for supper and I am hungry. Why didn't you holler when you went to lunch? You left me to starve!" However, we both know that she had also worked through her lunch. Patty always had work to do and more often than not chose her work over her personal needs.

I wait for her to finish up and get her coat, knowing that if I don't walk out with her, she is liable to stay for several more hours "finishing up."

With my arm through hers, I set the alarm and we walk to our cars, as I count down the days that remain. "See you tomorrow, Patty. Three more days!"

## Chapter Five: Students Speak

Well, the superintendent held true to her promise, and the next year all teachers were asked to include students in collecting and analyzing their own data. It is now Thursday, and as I work in my office, my thoughts are on the “agony and ecstasy” of student data-driven decision making in the classroom. I recall numerous visits into classrooms, still marveling at the patience and ingenuity of teachers as they struggled to bring students into some accountability for their own actions. Spying a faculty photograph peeking from a folder in a nearby box, I remove it and journey back into some of the classrooms of these dedicated teachers.

### The Agony

I remember that one particular 6<sup>th</sup> grade teacher had an especially rough beginning. She had decided to use one day a week of her advisory class time to lead her students through the process of data-driven decision making. Every few years a teacher gets a class of students who are more challenging than others, and this was Marilyn’s year. That first day I visited I remember coming away exhausted just watching her. What perseverance the woman had! In the beginning the majority of her students was rude, made excuses for everything, and really struggled with procedures.

The first day the veteran teacher introduced the process to her students, I was there to watch. She had prepared a folder for each student to record their grades and journal after discussion and reflection. As students entered the classroom, the teacher was at the door to greet them. She asked one girl, Carlie, to hand out the folders while she took care in and took roll and lunch count. It was morning advisory and the class

had just come from assembly where one of the students had been recognized for winning a writing contest and had received a commendation from the Mayor.

“Congratulations, Mary. You’ll have to bring your award so that we can see it,” began Marilyn only to be interrupted.

“Teacher, she won’t give me my folder.” A girl at a side table was grabbing at her folder as Carlie held it away from her by turning her back and ignoring her pleas.

“Carlie, hand the folders out to everyone, please.” The teacher watched as Carlie continued to ignore both her and the girl, but only for a minute. “Carlie, I will finish this. Would you please wait by the door where we will discuss this later.”

Carlie stomped to the door muttering all the way, “I freaking hate her. She always has to have her way.” Once she was seated outside the open door, the teacher addressed the class.

“Class you will find in your folders your grades that we printed off yesterday in the library. Take a minute to look at them. Your grades are personal and I don’t want you to tell us what you made. But I would like you to stand if you are satisfied with your grades.” At this, about half of the class stood up.

Turning to one of the students who were standing, she began asking probing questions. “Tell me why you are pleased with your grades?”

“Well, I have four A’s and two B’s,” replied the student smiling.

“And are you happy with those B’s,” she questioned. “Do you think you could raise those B’s to A’s?”

“No, I’m not that smart,” retorted the student with a smug look on his face. When the other students laughed, his look changed to one of anger, and he sat down.

Not to be disheartened, the teacher continued, “How about someone else?”

Another student who was still standing said, “I have two A’s, one B, two C’s and one D.” A few giggles came from the back corner.

“And are you satisfied with the D? Could you bring it up?” questioned the teacher, still working the process, trying to get students to examine the data and reflect upon their actions.

“Probably. I might could do better,” ventured the student with a shrug before he also sat down.

Now addressing the class as a whole, the frazzled teacher said, “Do better. What does that mean? Do Better? You take your grades home and your parents tell you that you can do better. But how? That’s what we need to discuss. What specific suggestions can you give to your classmates?”

Students began to blurt out answers and the teacher reminded them to raise their hands so that everyone could hear and be heard. Students offered suggestions like study more, ask questions, practice more, go to booster class for help, and stay after school for tutoring. The teacher turned back to the boy with the D’s and asked, “Do you think you could do any of those things? Would they help to bring your grades up?”

But the student remained oblivious, shrugged his shoulders and replied with a non-committal, “Probably.”

Another student told the class, “Well, I have a D and I am glad because last week it was an F!”

Regardless of how she tried to guide them down a positive path, students continued to reply with vague suggestions like “study harder” and “do better”, to which

she always pushed for more specific ideas. Students then began to make excuses and blame others. “The teacher was busy so I couldn’t ask her for help.” “Teachers are too mean.”

Trying to be a good listener, the teacher continues, “Whoa! Let’s not let this turn into a gripe session. What do you mean when you say that teachers are mean?”

“They are too strict. They are always on our case,” two students reply in rapid sequence.

“Why would teachers be strict?” At this point, I was ready to intervene, but trusted the experience and judgment of this teacher, so let the questions stand.

A student who had not spoken up yet, answered this question without thought, “Because I have an F!”

“Well, there you have it,” the teacher replied. I could tell that she was wearing down but thankfully the clock on the wall showed that it was time to move on to next hour, so she finished with, “Please put your folders back on the shelf as you leave.”

As the class left, they tossed their binders haphazardly toward the designated shelf, some falling short and landing in the floor where they remained. The teacher moved to the back of the room and sat down next to a student who had remained quiet throughout the hour. She quietly talked to him about his absences and how they were affecting his grades. She then asked him about a problem that he was having with another student. She had heard that a fight was brewing and reassured him that it takes a bigger man to walk away and not get suspended. “When my son was your age, he struggled with the same thing, but he was able to walk away. You can do it. In fact,

use me as your out. If you feel pressured, come to my room. I'm your advisory teacher, and I am here to help you."

"Thanks," was his reply as he left the room with head down and shoulders bent.

The teacher did not have a class the next hour, so she also brought Carlie back into the room to address her behavior. "Carlie, when I ask you to help me, I count on you to be respectful to all students just as I would. Your behavior today was not acceptable."

"Why you taking her side? Ooh, I get so tired of people always taking the other side!" It was obvious that Carlie had not calmed down, so she excused her to her next class and went to her desk and sat down for the first time that morning.

Thinking back to that first experience, I remember thinking, "This is not working!" But then I remembered how when I first confronted teachers with their data, their responses had been similar. They made excuses, got angry at me and then at each other. But they grew and so would the students. In fact, as I left that sixth grade class that day, I first commended her for her patience and perseverance but then encouraged her to reflect upon what had just happened.

"Oh, I will. I know that they are just kids and we have to teach them. That's why we're here. Hopefully, the next time we will see growth and improvement. We're always looking for ways to teach it in different ways." I had always appreciated this type of personal reflection in teachers.

## The Ecstasy

As the year continued, slowly but surely I began to see growth in the students' ability to look at their data and truly reflect upon it in light of their actions. I saw

students helping other students by offering detailed suggestions. I saw students build relationships with each other and with the teacher. Most of the teachers chose to use the process with their advisory classes, but a few took it into their subject area classes also. I remember two seventh grade classes in particular where students made great advances.

It was later in November when I visited a seventh grade math class. The teacher began by saying, “I know that most of you have very high expectations for yourselves, and I also know that from talking to some of you after the test yesterday that some of you wished you had done better. Let’s talk about that in a little more detail today. When I give back your tests I want you to look not just at your scores, but what you missed and why. Let’s share those ideas.”

At this several students raised their hands and gave excellent tips on how to study for tests in general such as “I went through each section in the chapter and did problems from each section. Maybe one or two unless I didn’t understand it and then I maybe did more.”

“That’s a great tip, Mary. Class did you hear what Mary just said? By breaking the chapter down into individual sections and then checking herself with sample problems, Mary came to the test knowing her material. Anyone else?” As the teacher shared Mary’s response, I noticed that Mary smiled and shook her head with assurance.

Another student then added, “I just slowed down this time. I read the problem and pictured it in my head, kind of like seeing it in my brain.”

“So you visualize doing the problem in your head?” Again the teacher took the time to paraphrase what the student had said to be sure that all of the students heard and to reaffirm the student speaking. “Sometimes just taking the time to think about it,



before doing it, helps. Who else?" She looked around the room again at several hands waiting patiently to be called upon.

Students continued to give specific tips until finally one small boy in the back row was called upon. "Instead of just doing the problem when I study, I went back over the process."

The teacher's eyes lit up and a smile revealed her excitement at his answer. "Class, did you hear what he said. How many of us take the time to study the process. Not just try to memorize answers, but really think about how to do it?"

With that another student offered, "I also find it helps to study the vocabulary word just before the test. When you see a word in the directions or in a problem, if you know what it means, then you know the process even better. If you don't know the word, then you probably won't know what to do." By this time I was totally amazed at the level of understanding that these students brought to the learning.

The teacher finished the discussion by saying, "We've named several things that could help you do better, but each of you are individuals. What works for one person may not work for another. What one needs may not be what someone else needs. As you journal today, I want you to write down only what you think will help you to be better. I will take time to read your journals so that I can help you during the week. I will be asking you about working your plan. If it's written down, you're more likely to follow through."

As students began to write, the teacher walked among the desks and paused at one desk when the girl looked up at her and said, "I could write a personal math mission statement."

“Kind of like we are doing in advisory?” asked the teacher. They then exchanged high fives and the girl smiled and said, “Yeh!”

Before moving on to the day’s lesson, the teacher looked across her classroom and said, “Boys and Girls, you need to understand that the reason that we take time to do this is that in any class or in life, you have to stop every once in a while and look at where we are, what you are doing, and reflect upon why we are doing it. How can we improve? Teachers do it. I do it. Teachers are always looking at how we can improve based upon your data. Hopefully this will carry over into your life, in college, or in your job. So now let’s do math.” With that students took out their books and other lessons were taught.

However, I could not but help think as I left the room, “what a valuable life lesson that was. How many times do teachers stop to teach beyond what is in the text book? ‘Good job,’” I thought as I made my way back towards the office. In the hallway I noted the familiar quotes and student work displays. One such display was titled “You Are An Essential Piece at Oaks”. Puzzle pieces with student descriptions of themselves were linked with other student puzzle pieces wherever students found common connections. Such team building activities are part of the beginning of each school year. Throughout the hallways were other signs proclaiming “It’s wonderful that we are all different yet part of the same puzzle.” “Each of us has strengths and skills to share.” “When we link our individual strengths together, we are invincible.” These displays illustrated in various ways how each person, teacher, student, or parent, was different while still a part of the whole.

Later that day, I remember asking the girl at lunch what she had meant about the advisory mission statements.

“Well, in our advisory class, we all talked about our school creed and what it meant to our school and to us as people. She also shared the mission statement that the teachers use in their meetings. She asked us what we thought our mission in school was. After we talked about it, we each wrote our own and are supposed to keep it throughout the year to see if we really do it.” As she was telling me this, others at her table joined in telling me about their mission statements. Again, I was impressed with their ownership in their learning.

Returning to the girl from the math class, I asked her, “and did you write a math mission statement for class?”

“No, that was just a joke between the teacher and me.” At this I told them all how proud I was of each of them and then moved on to another table as lunch duty called for.

## Climate of Mutual Respect

Throughout the year, I continued to watch for examples of teachers giving students ownership or voice in their learning. Of course, because we are a Great Expectations school, I did not have to look beyond the beginning of each day to see students expressing themselves in honest and creative ways. Each Friday an advisory class was assigned to present during assembly. Rubrics for assembly presentations had been provided in the student handbooks and were used after each performance to allow students to peer evaluate presentations. The most difficult criteria to score an “excellent” mark in was that of “Voice”. An excellent score required that all students

“speak slowly, clearly, and with enthusiasm.” Many times the student body struggled politely to hear as presenters mumbled or raced through memorized lines. However, on one memorable occasion I had the honor to go back to the 6<sup>th</sup> grade advisory class where I viewed the “agony” for an evaluation of their presentation.

“Well, I know that you are all eager to hear how your peers have evaluated your presentation this morning,” I began once I entered the room. The students all nodded their heads with excitement. “Before I share their scores, let me ask you how you think you did.”

Students began to tell how they had really worked with the rubric and each other to try to be the first class to get all excellent scores. As I went through the rubric and related what the other students had decided, I could see the pride in this once unruly bunch of sixth grade students. When I got to the final criteria of “Voice”, I reminded them that no class had yet achieved an excellent rating here, letting the suspense build I finally announced, “But you did!” For once their noise was welcome. They shared high fives and hugs as if they had been long time friends. The teacher had done her job of bringing this small group together as an advisory family. Before leaving, I made a mental note to return again soon and watch her in action.

Morning assembly had provided multiple opportunities to give students a time and place to voice their celebrations, concerns, and talents. Great Expectations holds as one of its eight tenants the necessity of creating a climate of mutual respect. This climate of respect begins each morning when students learn to be part of an appreciative audience for their peers. Although as a middle school, we had found the Great Expectation’s celebrations a little too elementary for 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> graders, the students

came together to create their own celebrations that had meaning to them. These were printed and posted visibly in the commons area for them to choose from each day.

Number seven on the poster was named the “Dontesia” after a former student who made it up after being part of a group that presented at the state middle school conference.

She had shared it with the other presenters at dinner that evening, and was thrilled when they returned to school and her partners shared it with the school. It was immediately decided by the students that it needed to be on “the list”.

Besides the celebrations and announcements, students used assembly to present their student-created videos on the “big screen”. Videos on how to study, how to follow procedures, or how to offer a new student a seat at lunch, were played out before an appreciative audience. Green screen technology and stop action photography became two of the favorite techniques that really showcased students’ creativity and allowed them to share their ideas in respectful ways. Many videos related back to a core subject area or to the basic tenants of Great Expectations.

As I think back on various assembly presentations, I remember students taking school issues such as hallway procedures or lunchroom manners and teaching their peers how to be responsible and caring citizens through student-created videos.

Hallway procedures at Oaks have always included a rule about walking on the right side of the hall. One advisory class used stop-action photography to show students scooting on their bottoms in single file down the hallway, only to meet oncoming students scooting on the wrong side. As different students “wreck” and turn over, the message is not only to the point, but humorous in its presentation. In the video about lunchroom manners, students reflected upon what it must feel like to be a new kid at school. The

video showed the new kid going through the lunch line, picking up his tray, and turning with trepidation to a sea of new faces. As he passes each table, someone motions towards an empty chair and says, “Would you like to sit with us.” With an offer coming from every table, the look of fear is replaced with one of comfort. This video was “replayed” multiple times in the real lunchroom for days after its initial showing. New and old students were always welcomed to any table they passed.

At the end of each assembly, a student always asked if there were any announcements or praises. One day, to my surprise, a seventh grade Indian girl student stood and praised the boys’ football team who had lost for the eighth time that year by praising their efforts and acknowledging their improvements. “You played one of your best games ever, and I am proud of you.” This was the same student who in sixth grade had told me in the office that she hated everyone and that she didn’t care if they liked her or not. She had finally found her place within a climate of mutual respect.

## Involving Everyone

Remembering all of those wonderful morning assemblies, I now lean back in my chair and smile as I remember one person who played a major role. The technology communications teacher had been responsible for the high level of video production found at Oaks Middle School, especially in morning assembly. As I sit alone in my office on this last week as principal, I can’t help but get up and walk one more time the short distance to her computer lab two doors down from mine. I am surprised to see her in the room the first week after school is out, but then think twice as I realize that she puts in many extra hours to help students be successful.

“Hey, girl, I’m not surprised to find you here! I was just in my office and kind of reminiscing about what a great job you and others do to give students a voice here at Oaks Middle School. You will never know how much I appreciate all that you have done.” She and I have become good friends and partners in many productions, but I remember that in the beginning she was my biggest opponent. She had questioned my every decision, often causing uncomfortable confrontations. It was not until we both realized that we were here for the students and that with us, students always came first, that we became partners.

Today, she has a pot of tea brewing at her desk and offers me a cup. As we visit about future plans, my mind wanders back to the many times I had visited her room only to come away in awe at her ability to help every student be successful.

“You know that my dissertation is on student voice, and I also know you do an excellent job at building student voice through videos. Do you have any final words before I leave?” I smile knowing that she is never without the final word and is more than willing to share with anyone willing to listen. Her students and their parents have learned to love and respect her.

“Well, Sharon, I know that you are a data-driven person. And there is nothing wrong with looking at data. Data takes the emotion out of tough decisions. But the problem with focusing only on the data is that we don’t listen to the very thing that we are educating. If I don’t listen to what is being brought to me, then my product or data is not going to be good. I think we need to go back and begin every project with a blank slate. In my class we begin by brainstorming everything. Every idea goes onto the slate which in my class is the interactive white board so everyone can see their idea

and their classmates' ideas. When everyone has at least two ideas on the board, then I let others add to the list, but only after everyone has input. Then they can choose from the entire list to begin working on the idea for their project. Sometimes I team them with other students, sometimes I let them choose who they want to work with. Teamwork is an important concept for them to learn. When they have to meet timelines, they have to work together as a team because if they don't, they are not only letting themselves down, but their team. Those types of consequences become very real in my class."

As I listen to her, I know that she speaks from experience. I have heard her students and have read their comments on various surveys and evaluations. On a recent survey students had commented about teamwork by saying, "You can't do everything by yourself. You never know, others could have some pretty cool ideas." Others remarked about the necessity to share not only equipment but learning. "By having all of the technology we use in technology communications, we have to figure out all the ways to use the equipment and then we have to share it." This ability to teach others including the teachers was shared by many. "Students who work together to find answers learn to cheer each other on." One student summed it up nicely when she wrote, "The addition of technology has students working together with teachers, each learning how to use advanced technology together, not just teachers teaching students. Teachers are learning too."

As to the success that they experienced in this class, one student had written, "Making movies spark kids' interests. Those kinds of things show people that kids really can do something worthwhile." The old phrase, "Success breeds success," was



echoed in student responses such as, “We want to participate and work more because we understand more of what we’re learning so we know we will succeed.”

Shaking my head, I return to the conversation at hand and hear the video teacher continuing her comments on motivating students to always try for their best. “What is that thing you have them recite about good, better, best?” I remember hearing her lead her classes through the chant many times when they seem willing to settle for less than their best. I especially remember a recent visit to her classroom when she was also working with students to examine their grades. With this teacher, the data is not about a grade, but about how students feel about their grades. She understands the importance of student efficacy and motivation, making it part of her daily routine. The day I visited, she had posted the class’ total number of A’s, B’s, C’s, D’s, and F’s, and then she pointed to the columns and began with the questions.

“What is a word or synonym for “C”? Students responded with “average”.

“What about a synonym for “A”? Again the students agreed on the word “advanced.” She continued til she got to “D” and “F”. When most students responded that a “D” was bad and an “F” meant failure, she had turned to them and said, “I like to think of “D” as do-able, you’re not failing, so by doing a little more, you can get up to a “C” or better. As for the “F”, guys when we use words like failure, we are tempted to just give up. So instead of failure, let’s use this as our synonym.” She wrote the words “future improvement” on the board and then said to the class. “Repeat after me, class. Good, better, best, never let it rest (class repeats) til your good is better (class repeats) and your better is best (class repeats).” The teacher went through this three times, and each time every student eagerly repeated each phrase with not only motivation but with

belief. Throughout the last seven years, I have often thought, “She would make a great cheerleader!”

“I wish all teachers had your sense of commitment to students,” I know tell her as the clock ticks on.

“Well, I have always known where your heart lies. Your students are lucky to have you.” We finish our tea and share one more hug before I excuse myself back to my packing and reflection.

### I Can’t Believe She Asked

Back in my office, I realize that almost everything is packed and decide to rest in my own thoughts as I reflect back over the contents of student journals from the past several years. I have told my teacher that her students are lucky to have her and know that students had said that very thing, not only about her, but about many of their teachers and their experiences at Oaks. Students can be very reflective and honest in their journaling (Walker, 2006; Kind & LaRocco, 2006). Journaling promotes critical reflection (Walker, 2006) and the students at Oaks Middle School had been both reflective and honest in their journals.

When teachers began to use data-driven decision making with students to help them develop more ownership for their grades, several students wrote, “When one of my teachers asked me how I felt, it made me feel a lot better. In my classes, most people don’t get asked that. If I get asked, I instantly feel like they care for me. I also feel relieved knowing they are watching out for me.”

Sadly though, the same student added, “Looking back on this school year, few of my teachers ask anyone this.” Along this same line, another student wrote, “My

teachers are nice, encouraging and a little bit rude.” As I reflect on these past comments, I can’t help but wonder if all teachers actually listen to what students were saying. Another jolting journal entry comes to my mind as I remember a student writing, “I started to not like school in fifth grade because I couldn’t keep up with the homework. I can’t stay awake, I don’t get what the teacher is talking about and I forget to do my homework.”

I had used this entry to begin a discussion about homework in a recent faculty meeting, but found few willing to listen to the student’s sense of hopelessness at the overwhelming amount of homework encountered in 6<sup>th</sup> grade. Although they had lost their fear of numbers as data, they were yet unable to see student voice as a valuable source of data. And so, even though most teachers were asking the right questions to help students own their grades, few teachers were actually listening to what students were saying.

“Now, Sharon,” I say to myself as I bring my chair upright, “ don’t turn so negative here at the end. You know that many teachers made efforts to not only ask, but listen to students by giving them choices in decisions.” Sometimes I have to make a special effort to see the positive when as a principal I deal with so many negatives. But when given the opportunity, I can recall several instances when student choice was an integral part of Oaks Middle School.

## Still Listening

Before I become too settled into this line of thought, the school counselor knocks on my door and sticks her head in. “Are you deep in thought? I thought you might need someone to kind of work things through with.”

Motioning for her to come in and have a seat, I smile at her, another colleague that I had come up through the ranks with. We had been at previous schools together and had served on multiple committees throughout the years. I have used her office many times to vent, cry, and plan, knowing that her knowledge of students and middle school philosophy would guide me safely. Today though I was interested in her opinion about how far we had come in meeting the middle school goal of listening to student voice.

She accepts this opportunity to share and begins, “You know that I haven’t been able to be in the classrooms since they have been using data with students, but I know they are doing it. I hear students talking about it. In fact in my enrichment class we have been talking about why teachers are having them talk about their grades and their actions. We talked about what motivation means, and I realized that they really don’t know what the word means. They didn’t understand how it is an internal thing. So we began to make a list of what motivates us and then divided them into internal and external.”

As she went on to explain her project, she revealed the importance of listening to and honoring what students say. “If they came up with a good idea that works, we brought it to you. At first they just gave silly answers, but I still listened and honored their ideas. In fact, they came up with the idea to do a service project by ringing the bell for the Salvation Army downtown. Even though I have found that in past years few actually show up, I still have to honor what the students say or they’ll quit sharing.”

I nod and tell her how true that is. “In fact, I was visiting with the seventh grade language arts teacher just last week about what a difference it made when the language

arts teachers asked students which text books they wanted the school to buy.” We both knew how much money was spent each year on new text books and were also pleasantly surprised when at the end of this year, we had no lost, unreturned, or damaged language arts text books in seventh grade.

“The teachers swear it’s because they randomly pulled students out last year, told them how to use the rubric for textbook selection, and then let them look over the available books.” The teachers actually took the students’ opinions into consideration and chose the one that the students liked. As I continued to share with my counselor, I told her what the teacher had said when she turned in her textbook inventory list.

“Because we included them in the process, I really think that they were proud and very protective of those books. They know how much each one costs. I’ve noticed throughout the year that they have recognized certain parts of the book that they had helped to choose last year. They have looked forward to the Christmas play in the book because they had seen it during the evaluation process. I have noticed that at the middle school level that when we give the students some ownership, they will do more for you. Being able to help choose expensive books made them feel important. It was important to them that we listened.”

My counselor and friend is nodding in agreement and adds that she has also heard teachers talk about the importance of listening to students and acting upon what they said. “I remember her saying in the faculty lounge about how any time students have an ownership in something, it just becomes their own. She asks them what they want from her as a teacher. How can she make it a more pleasant experience for them?”

But the remarkable thing is when students see that she actually does it! Listening means more than asking with students.”

I now begin to rock in my chair, thinking about the teachers that had really listened to their students and changed their instruction because of it. I can’t help but go back to the first class I visited at the beginning of the year only to come away fearful that this whole student data thing wasn’t going to work. Turning back to my friend I say, “You know another good example of a teacher changing her instruction because of what students say, would be Mrs. “M”. At the first of the year, I visited her class and was reminded once again that our sixth grade teachers have a huge job. Our students come from so many different schools and frankly, they don’t like each other when they first get here. As our counselor, you have always stuck to the middle school philosophy of mixing students up equally on teams, but those first few weeks and even months are tough in 6<sup>th</sup> grade.” More than once, I had sat across from angry parents on enrollment night, defending decisions to place students equitably on teams by ethnic, economic, gender, ability, and elementary school.

“Schools have to be places where people trust others before they are willing and able to voice concerns. Building trust requires getting to know people first. Mixed teams and advisories in middle schools are the structures that promote that climate of trust.” She isn’t telling me anything I didn’t already know, but we rely on each other from time to time to keep each other grounded.

“Anyway, back to Mrs. M.,” I said. “After that first visit, I left her class knowing that she would reflect on what she had heard and make changes.” Laughing

has now replaced the frown across my face as I relay the last visit I had with that same group of students.

“You would have been proud. Those same students who either hated each other or just wouldn’t talk and made excuses for everything, had turned into responsible, kind students.” As she begins to explain from her counselor’s perspective how students develop over the course of their sixth grade year, I find my mind returning to that rewarding visit.

It had been just before Christmas and was advisory period before lunch. I had found time before another lunch duty to check in on the progress in Mrs. M’s room. As the students entered and took out their notebooks without being told, I smiled at the change. I soon realized though that there was learning still to be done as students began to grumble about their grades, all trying to talk at the same time.

The teacher began in her patient voice, “Look at your scores. I hear you. I hear you. That’s why we keep talking. We’ve been talking, looking at scores and trying to help you find ways to improve. Some of you have improved. Let’s look at it differently this time. I want you to look at your monthly assessment score and compare it to your scores from week to week. Start with your math scores. Are your grades from weekly grades the same as your monthly scores?”

Many students shared the differences they saw, even the boy who had not spoken up during the first visit added to the discussion. Students began to analyze how preparing for daily lessons was different from preparing for monthly assessments. They were also eager to share how they thought teachers could help them.

“During class we can ask questions if we don’t understand. Or sometimes we can work together,” began one student.

“During monthly assessments we have to finish during that class period. I don’t always have enough time.”

“I get nervous when we have to take the monthly tests on the computer.”

“When others get finished, they begin to talk and that bothers me.”

“I can remember from day to day, but after a whole month, my long term memory isn’t there.”

“Yeh, and sometimes, because we are an advanced math class, we have questions on the test that we haven’t even studied in class. They just expect us to know it because we are Pre-Ap.” I cringed as I heard this remark. This had been the source of a major discussion with the high school math department head and my teachers. We were torn over the purpose of the monthly assessments. Was the purpose to prepare students for the end of year exam? If so, then all sixth grade students needed to take the same test. If the purpose was to determine what students had learned during that month, then 6<sup>th</sup> grade Pre-Ap students needed to take the 7<sup>th</sup> grade regular monthly assessment, since that was the curriculum being used for them. However, if we did that, then the rest of the 6<sup>th</sup> grade monthly assessment scores would go down because we would be pulling out the scores of our brightest students. Now I still shake my head at the stupidity of the conversation. I wondered if teachers were actually more concerned about the appearance of an overall score than knowing if their students were actually learning. Regardless of my convictions, the department head finally got the backing of the superintendent and so as this student just confirmed, it was decided that sixth grade



Pre-Ap students would take the seventh grade monthly assessment regardless of what they were learning in class! And I am now hearing the results of that decision from the students themselves!

Students had even realized that because of the fewer number of questions on the monthly assessments, if you miss one on that test it hurts more than if you miss one on a daily assignment with more questions.

With each student comment, the teacher responded with respect, providing questions to help them figure out how to solve each particular problem. “What can you do about these things, class? If you need more time, could you talk to the teacher and ask if you could have extra time? Sometimes students need to tell us what you need. Last year my seventh hour students turned out to be mostly all visual learners. I found that I couldn’t just tell them something. I had to write it on the board so they could see it. If I forgot, they learned to remind me.”

As the discussion continues, the teacher called upon one student who had volunteered that her daily grades and her monthly assessments scores were similar. “Why do you think they are so close?” asked the teacher.

Before the girl could answer, a student who had been critical and non-committal during the first visit still interrupted, but with an insightful response. “Because she is smart. She doesn’t write notes, and she doesn’t talk in class,” he blurted out.

Without any pause, Mrs. M jumped on the revelation. “Collin, I believe that you are just as smart. So, if you know what she does, and you know that it helps her to make good grades, why don’t you do the same thing?”

Realizing that he had been caught, the boy looked first helpless, but then the proverbial light bulb came on. As he looked first at the teacher and then around at the class he replied, “Because we didn’t notice it at the beginning of the year. We are just now seeing how she does it. I see it now.” With that the grateful teacher smiled and said, “You have all given wonderful ideas for all of us to try and use. Our time is almost up and now it is up to you to do it. We must be committed to change.”

As I left that room, I knew that Mrs. M. had listened to what students said and that as one of the team leaders she would also share what they had said during the teachers’ team plan time. Because she was committed to change based upon student needs, I felt that students would also be more likely to change based upon those same needs.

The counselor’s voice brought me back to the current conversation and I listened to her as she tied up the whole middle school experience with this comment, “It is really neat to see teachers work together as a group. They do things together and with their students. Talk about modify and adjust, they do. Before we had all of the data, teachers used student antidotes to make decisions, so I guess that was just another kind of data. The point is that middle school teachers do whatever it takes to help students be successful. And I am proud to have been a part of it.”

“Me, too, Billie. How about getting some lunch now? Do you think we can talk Patty into a long lunch break and going with us? In fact, get on the intercom and tell anyone who is here, that we will meet in ten minutes at Lou’s for spaghetti.”

Upon returning from lunch, everyone goes back to their respective rooms, leaving me to sort through the stories remembered from this last year. As I enter my

office, I walk to the large window that overlooks the patio area and begin the reflection process that is second nature to me.

“All of these stories are the data, Sharon,” I think to myself. “What similarities and differences do you see? How do they tie back to the research that you have read over the last four years? How do the data reflect back to your past? What do these stories have to offer to future educators?”

As I continue to look through the multiple-paned window, I am reminded of the democratic student voice matrix that I had composed just a few days ago. “If I am looking for structures and processes that apply across time, how do the events of these stories fit into that matrix? Or do they? I have to leave myself open to let the data speak for itself.”

I finish the day in my office, going through more drawers and folders, sorting, saving and discarding reminders of the last seven years of my professional life. It’s a slow process, and at five o’clock, I again call to the front desk, “Patty, lock it up. It’s time to head out.”

## Chapter Six: The Last Box Loaded

### Reflecting Outward

I knew, as soon as I woke up this morning, that it was the last day. “If I lay here a little longer, maybe I can prolong the inevitable last day.” But as the light shines through my window, I am forced to get up and face the fact that, yes, this is the end of a great career. Today will be memorable as I pack not only the physical trappings of my office, I know that I will also have to tie up the mental questions that have plagued me throughout the week.

As I drive to work on this last day, every detail seems bigger, brighter, and more meaningful than I had noticed before. Returning to my office desk, I know that I have but one more thing to do before leaving. I open up my desk computer and begin the same process of sorting, deleting and saving records from the past. As I go into my research files, names and titles of past articles appear. Leithwood, Newmann, Dewey; they are all housed within this piece of wired plastic. Ten years ago technology had taken me by surprise, and I had struggled to keep up. But I managed to stay one step ahead of most and was smart enough to ask for help from those who were ahead. This included most of my students at Oaks Middle Student.

Just the thought of my students and their expertise in technology, brings me back to yesterday’s conversations about student voice. I open up other files and begin to save outcomes to student surveys, student journals, rubrics, interviews, observations, and faculty meeting agendas. I download the file containing my personal reflections, stories and poems. I scan file after file as they appear on the monitor until my eyes begin to pick out re-occurring key words. “Advisory, assembly, equity, reflection,

diversity, shared values”; these words and others begin to appear from every document.

I open a word document on my computer and begin building a chart. “Let’s begin by just sorting some of the data from the events into categories and see what comes up.” I recall the two research questions that I had written out several days before:

1. How can schools provide opportunities for all students to participate in decisions and events that affect their learning.
2. How can teachers increase student voice ability as part of every day instruction so that student voice is more effective.

I begin with just the two columns, “structures” and “processes”, and begin to drop the re-occurring words into place. However, I soon realize that an important element is missing. If structures are just elements of time, place and culture, and the processes column is for student learning, then where do teacher practices go? So I add another column and sit back and stare and think.

“Where does the teacher fit into this picture?” I ask myself as I work with the data. Research has shown for years that it is the teacher that makes the biggest difference in the classroom (Darling-Hammond, 1995), so where does that fit in my matrix?

I began with the idea of a democratic framework that encompasses Dewey’s thoughts on democracy and learning as being two sided, personal and social. As I reflect further upon democratic student voice, I choose to keep the same two factors, realizing that the ability of students to participate personally within a larger social setting through processes such as data-driven decision making or choice are still key. However, now with the actual data in front of me and reflecting outward into recent

research, I am led to the assumption that a student's personal change comes through internal cognitive processes that both effect and are effected by the external social relationships. Further reflection upon the data shows me that the social factors are more complex and could be tied to the work of Stefanou (2009) and others on the impact of various factors that support student decision making and ownership (Stefanou et al, 2009).

Their findings parallel the findings within my data and add to my democratic student voice matrix by proposing that the social context includes both organizational and procedural supports. Organizational supports encourage student ownership of social contexts by giving students choices in such things as classroom rules, due dates for assignments, or choice in class schedules. Procedural supports include student choice in how to present their ideas to the social context (Stefanou et al, 2009). All of these are teacher instructional decisions. So do the teachers' instructional decisions become part of the external processes? My mind is racing trying to sort it all out. So I look back to the research.

Besides these two social supports, the authors (Stefanou et al, 2009) also discuss cognitive supports which relate back to the personal aspect of democratic learning. Cognitive supports encourage students to justify their decisions, generate their own solutions, or evaluate their own or other students' work (Stefanou, et al, 2009).

Although this study did not include a teacher component, Stefanou's (2009) findings support the impact of teacher instructional decisions. In their study they found that teachers who supported student autonomy listened to students, allowed students to manipulate materials, asked for student input, responded to student-generated questions,

encouraged student initiative, reflected upon student input as cause for personal change, suppressed criticism, and highlighted relevance in student terms. These findings are further supported by that of Stiggins (2007), Chappuis and Stiggins (2008), Stiggins and Chappuis (2008) and Black and Wiliam (2009) in their studies on the teachers' role in formative assessment for learning. This body of work is relevant to the current data because so many of the narrative events deal with how teachers implemented student involvement in data collection and analysis as directed by the district superintendent.

In order to account for all of the data, I remember an article I recently read and have saved to my computer files. As I now pull it up, I see the perfect framework, one that captures all three components found within my data: social context, personal cognition, and teacher instructional practices (Henri, 1992; Garrison, Anderson & Archer, 2003). The framework builds upon Dewey's work as to the dual nature of democracy as personal and social as well as his work in constructivist approaches to learning. Called the Community of Inquiry Framework, it has been confirmed through factor analysis (Garrison, Cleveland-Innes & Fung, 2004; Arbaugh & Hwang, 2006). This framework still includes the social and personal components but also adds the impact of teacher instructional supports

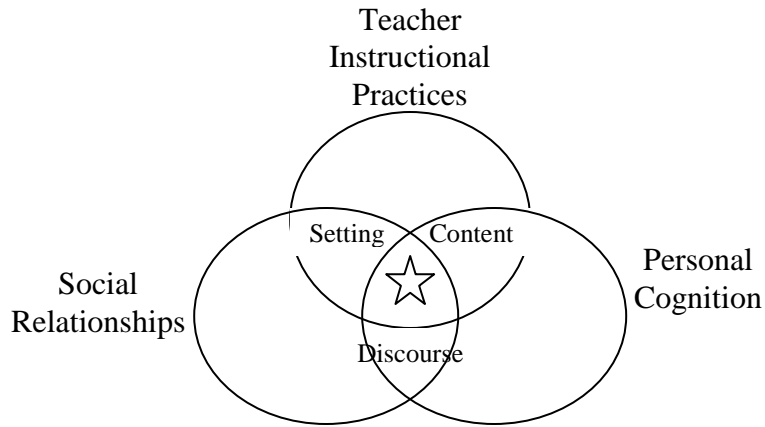


Table 4: Community of Inquiry Framework

According to this model, it is the teacher’s instructional practices in determining content, managing the setting and supporting discourse that determines the effectiveness of all components within Dewey’s democratic framework and within my democratic student voice framework.

As the teacher makes decisions within these three areas, personal cognition and social relationships are increased. This model still fits with my original democratic student voice model because even though the teacher is a crucial component of the model, instructional decisions are still a part of the social realm of the model. Teacher instruction and social relationships work together to enhance a student’s ability to exercise their voice. Everything is either an internal cognitive process within the student or part of the external social component.

The teacher instructional component simply divides the social into two parts: setting and instruction. Setting can be further divided according to Stephanou’s (2009) work into time/place and climate/culture.

My eyes now fall upon the term “internal cognitive process”, and I begin to reflect upon just what processes do the students acquire as a result of the setting and



instruction. Remembering back to my original thoughts when I first built my democratic student voice framework, I was interested in what skills allowed students to have an effective voice within the larger social construct. In other words, if the right external structures are in place, what will the resulting internal cognitive skills be? After all, external structures cannot be called effective unless they create new skills or learning for the students. The Community of Inquiry Framework does not provide those answers. So I guess I will have to come up with a new visual that builds upon and extends this one and allows for the student voice skills to be aligned with specific structures and processes.

The model is getting very complicated in my mind now, and it is only after several attempts at drawing various tables and graphics that I am able to create a visual that fully interprets the interaction of the structures and processes that enhance student voice. At this point, I also remember one of my professors reminding us to always go back to the research questions. “Do the data answer the questions? Maybe I need to keep those questions in front of me,” I think as I take a blank sheet of paper and again write in big letters the two questions that have guided my study.

**1. How can schools provide structures that afford opportunities for all students to participate in decisions and events that affect their learning?**

**2. How can teachers increase student decision-making skills as part of everyday instruction so that student voice is more effective?**

I finally come to the realization that both the structures and processes are external forces that affect the internal student cognitive and emotional skills. I have been trying to include the internal student skills as part of the processes, but finally

understand that it is not part of the matrix but instead is the result of the matrix. It is when these student skills are enhanced that the student is more able and willing to participate in public discourse. The visual becomes a sort of mathematical problem where structure (s) plus process (p) equals cognition (c).

This is my aha! moment, and I struggle to keep from jumping from my chair and running into Patty shouting, “I got it! I got it!” She would surely think, “She’s really lost it now.” So I just sit back and look at the new table and mentally begin to drop the data into it.

Effective instructional decisions or processes that are revealed by the data include inquiry and discourse, active listening, data-driven decision making, and peer/self evaluation. I also come to the realization that although some of the instructional processes could be components of other instructional processes, the data show that each has its own results and requires different skills on the part of the teacher to use effectively. For example, active listening is certainly part of inquiry and discourse, but in and of itself, active listening requires a skill set apart from inquiry and discourse and results in different student skills. Likewise, both inquiry/discourse and active listening are part of data-driven decision making, but again D3M has a separate skill set and results in different cognitive and emotional student abilities. I therefore put the four as separate categories.











| External Instructional Processes | External Social Structures  | Internal Student Identity Outcomes   |
|----------------------------------|---|--|
| Inquiry and Discourse            |  Time and Place: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Advisory</li> </ul>  |  Relatedness<br>Trust  |
| Active Listening                 |  Climate and Culture <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Equity</li> <li>• Diversity</li> <li>• Shared Values</li> <li>• Relationships</li> <li>• Reflection</li> <li>• Commitment</li> </ul> |  Self-respect/Relatedness<br>Respect for others<br>Self-Efficacy<br>Commitment   |
| D3M                              |  Assessments <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Authentic</li> <li>▪ Non-authentic</li> </ul>  |  Goal Setting<br> Commitment<br>Fear/Pressure        |
| Peer/Self Evaluation             |  Assignments <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Electives</li> <li>▪ Assembly</li> </ul>   |  Relatedness<br> Self-efficacy<br>Respect for others |

Table 5: External Processes and Structures With Student Affects

The table shows that when teachers use these processes within the context of the adjoining social structures, then specific student psychological needs are met. It also needs to be noted that even though the teacher processes are effective in all settings, the structures are not necessarily effective unless accompanied by one of the processes. In other words, an advisory class or an assignment is only as good as the teacher makes it.

The student processes listed in the third column are internal and are either mostly emotional and serve to enhance either the student's ability or willingness to express their voice within the social context.

One thing that becomes very clear from the data and is shown by the table, is that the data does not triangulate. In other words, the data interrelates horizontally across the table through four separate areas. For example, in the first horizontal section, inquiry and discourse is seen only as part of advisory where it yields student feelings of relatedness, trust, and commitment. Although it is possible and probably common for inquiry and discourse to also be part of assessments and assignments, the data from this

study does not show it. Likewise, section number four discusses peer/self evaluation as is seen in student assignments. These assignments are seen in both advisory and elective classrooms, but “assignments” is the structure here, not advisory or classroom.

I have to say that the instructional process of “active listening” is the most difficult to categorize. Only after much deliberation and reading, am I able understand the underlying and supportive structures that facilitate active listening. Based upon the work of Parker (2006) the act of listening can be engaging or marginalizing depending upon social positions. The issue of student voice is centered within the greater issues of power and social position as students work to find their place in the conversations and decisions that affect them. Active listening stems from a belief in equity, diversity, shared values, relationships, reflection, and commitment all of which play a role in determining social position.

Therefore, as I go back through the data, it is important that I keep the horizontal sections together to aid in the understanding of how the external processes and structures resulted in specific internal student responses.

Therefore, after much reflection the above table takes into account all of the data collected. By looking at the themes identified in the data through verbatim excerpts from the narratives, I feel comfortable that I will now be able to explain how the external structures and instructional process enhance student identity freeing them to choose to participate and exercise their voices within those structures. I am excited to see how it will all fall into place and know that regardless of the outcome, I am closer to the answers that will free me to move on.

## Structures and Processes

The whole process of narrative inquiry places importance on the concept of place or context (Clandinin & Connelley, 2000). Place or setting within a school work together with pedagogy to shape an individual's identity and social relationship (Gruenewald, 2003). Schools can be environments where students satisfy a basic need to connect and feel a sense of belonging (Sullo, 2007). Setting is also an expression of culture and represents the outcome of human choices and decisions while at the same time impacts those very choices and decisions (Gruenewald, 2003). By creating a nurturing educational climate, educators provide a basic component for learning and social interaction (Perry & Edwards, 2005). Because of this interaction, it is important to consider setting as a component of student voice as seen in their individual decisions and choices.

Even though the data showed that four specific teacher instructional decisions had the greatest effect on student voice, there were also several structures that seemed important when used in conjunction with the instructional strategies already discussed. The data showed that advisory, assembly, and elective classes were times within the daily schedules when student voice was greater. Cultural structures that impacted student voice when used with the identified instructional strategies revolved around two systemic programs of practice: Great Expectations and Professional Learning Communities.

## Advisory/Inquiry and Discourse

### Advisory

Advisory within a middle school serves to create smaller groups of student to foster the building of relationships (Burkhardt, 2001). Through these relationships, students begin to develop a sense of trust and belongingness which has shown to be important to student voice (Stephanou, 2004). Advisory also provides students with one teacher or adult who acts as a student's advocate (Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1989; Burkhardt, 2001). The advisory teacher becomes the one adult that the student can go to when they need help or just need someone to talk to. Lastly, advisory provides a time that has been set aside during the day to allow students to discuss issues that are important to them and their learning (Burkhardt, 2001). As the building counselor told me,

Advisories are small groups of 10 to 12 students so teachers have time to really get involved with kids. Today there are too many stresses. Kids come with the same baggage but now it is out in the open. Students seem to leave their baggage at the door because they know that once they enter the building. They belong to something bigger than themselves. They are part of a team.

All of these components were observed in the data IF the teacher used instructional strategies that facilitate inquiry and discourse.

### Inquiry and Discourse

As I think back to my earlier democratic foundations, I recall Apple and Beane's (1995) statement about the importance of "the open flow of ideas" (p. 4) in education.

When teachers ask probing questions and encourage students to find their own answers, they are also honoring the right of students to contribute to basic democratic processes. Competent classroom discourse requires the sort of political friendship that educates students for a culture of social argument (Parker, 2006) or what Schmoker (2006) calls argumentative literacy. Black and Wiliam (1998) summed up this interaction when they wrote that “learning is driven by what teachers and pupil do in classrooms” (p.9).

Two types of discussions can be used to enhance students’ ability to participate in democratic discourse: seminar and deliberation (Parker, 2006). Seminars revolve around selected texts or a cultural object such as a painting. The purpose of a seminar is to facilitate multiple interpretations leading to deeper learning. The second type of discussion is a deliberation. Deliberations provide opportunities for students to decide which course of action will best address a shared problem (Parker, 2006). During my observations I witnessed deliberations rather than seminars.

In advisory classrooms I visited throughout the past year, I heard teachers engage students in multiple conversations, asking tough questions. These questions encouraged students to look deeper at issues that affect their own learning, share their knowledge with others, and learn from the perspectives offered by others. Early in the school year, Mrs. M. often asked students to look at their grades and discuss how they could improve them. In the beginning, the common answer was, “Do better.”

“Do better. What does that mean? Do better. You take your grades home and your parents tell you that you can do better. But how? Let’s ask your classmates. What can he do to do better?” The teacher seldom allowed an answer to stand without probing for deeper understanding supported by more specific details. Also, “Let’s ask

your classmates,” opens the door for students to offer their own perspective to the discussion. The teacher is basically saying that she doesn’t have the answer to the problem and that it is up to them to come up with ideas. In fact, another teacher was very direct in this intent. “This is going to be a discussion so it’s up to you to make it work. Don’t just sit there twiddling your thumbs.”

In classroom after classroom, I heard teachers ask, “Why do you think...How could you do that?...How do you know?...What suggestions could you give to a friend?...Be more specific...I see some cause and effect. What can you do now to change the effect?” Within every classroom, teachers undoubtedly did far more asking than answering. In fact, teachers did not answer any questions but guided students to find their own answers and then share their answers with the other students so that they could learn from each other.

Even when students gave answers that were unpopular or unacceptable, teachers used questions to guide them in rethinking their response or used classmates to add to their answer. Again, early in the year one teacher led a discussion about transitioning from elementary school to middle school and why some students’ grades had dropped.

She began, “What are some other reasons that you might be having a more difficult time this year?”

To which a student replied, “Maybe we’re not used to the procedures like changing classes. We only had one or two teachers last year and smaller classes. We don’t have as much time in class here. Teachers are meaner.”

Although the first three ideas seemed to be right on track, the teacher recognized the student entering into a “blame and shame” mode, yet still honored what the student



was saying by asking for more details. “Whoa. Let’s not let this turn into a gripe session. What do you mean when you say teachers are meaner?”

Instead of shutting down, the student continued with specific helpful information. “They are stricter. They are always on our case.”

Still validating what the student was saying, but leading her to deeper understanding, the teacher continued questioning with a simple, “Why?”

To this inquiry, another student added her thoughts, “It’s a new school. We now have several classes, and it’s harder to keep up with all of the papers. Mrs. Smith reminded us also that we don’t have all day with her and she has to get through the lesson before we leave for another class. They have to be strict, or we would just get lost in it all.”

“There you go! You’re exactly right.” This teacher could have given the same answer, but through persistent questioning, she was able to lead the students into finding and sharing their own answers. By withholding her own opinion, the teacher is also building trust in her students. Parker (2006) lists caution as a listening skill that asks the listener to pause and think before giving their opinion. The listener trusts that the speaker has the ability to find their own answer. The sharing of knowledge by students builds both a sense of relatedness and trust between classmates. Relatedness, or a sense of belonging, and trust are two necessary components for a democratic community where a “free flow of ideas” (Apple & Beane, 1994, p.4) can happen. Each student’s sense of belonging increases as they realize that their classmates have similar problems and are able and willing to offer possible solutions. Inquiry and discourse allowed students to learn that they have a responsibility for finding the best alternatives

to difficult problems and then implementing what seems to be the best for them (Glasser, 1969). Through inquiry and discourse, the students were allowed to voice their opinions about issues that affected their learning.

This level of trust and relatedness was exemplified through a conversation overheard in another advisory class. When a student started to criticize another student, this teacher immediately stopped the class and reminded them of the purpose of advisory.

“Remember we are Ohana, a family. What is the definition of a family, class?”

Students responded, “A group of people who care about and help each other.”

“And what is our one rule?”

Students responded, “Respect!”

“Then remember that we are a family and will respect the feelings of others.”

As a result of this basic middle school structure and the level of inquiry and discourse that occurs daily, students daily show a sense of belonging. From the seventh grade girl joking and high-fiving with her math teacher about writing a math mission statement to the students in an advisory class who refer to their advisory teacher as their “school mom”, students recognize that advisory is a structure that provides a setting for building relationships.

As a result of countless open discussions students trust their advisory teachers and use them as a support. “When I struggle with homework, I go to my OHANA mother.” Ohana is what one advisory calls their group, and in his journal this student refers his advisor as his school mother. This reveals not only a sense of belonging and a commitment to improve, but the fact that the student wants to go to his advisory teacher

for help, indicates a feeling of trust. Trust adds to the sense of community and belonging which in turn help to increase student commitment. “Kids don’t care what you know unless they know that you care,” is an often quoted phrase at Oaks.

The student in the seventh grade math class referred back to the discussions on school and personal mission statements that had taken place in advisory. Mission statements serve as a written commitment towards a chosen goal. Again, I see how an effective advisory class increases student commitment.

As I continue to look through my files and examine the wealth of data that I have saved, I come across a recent student survey that was used to evaluate the effectiveness of the advisory program at Oaks. Students were asked to rate their advisory class according to the following four statements. The percent of students responding positively (strongly agree or agree) are given after each statement.

1. I believe that advisory helps me to reflect upon my actions and make better decisions. (65%)
2. I believe that advisory helps me to learn to solve problems with other people. (56%)
3. I believe that advisory helps me to build character traits that will help me be a better citizen. (59%)
4. I believe that I have had opportunities to join in discussions about important relevant issues in advisory. (72%)

These numbers further support the rest of the data that shows that although advisory can be a structure to enhance student voice; its effectiveness depends upon the instructional strategies used by each advisory teacher. However, it was also the results

of this survey that caused the teachers to re-examine their instruction in advisory through embedded staff development. So the survey did serve the purpose of inquiry and discourse as new data were gathered from the students' perspective leading to conversations by teachers about their practice.

At this point I remember back to what Mrs. Smith had said at the end of last year about how using data-driven decision making with the students took a lot of time out of her class. She wasn't sure that it was worth the time it took to lead a class through the inquiry and discourse process when there is so much content to teach. Teachers are overwhelmed by the many content standards and skills that they are required to teach and often forget the effectiveness of democratic teaching strategies such as inquiry and discourse. By providing advisory time, schools are giving teachers and students a specific time during the school day to have quality discussions and to build quality relationships. Both relationships (Stefanou, 2004; Gruenewald, 2003) and discussions (Parker, 2006) are integral to enhancing democratic student voice.

## Climate and Culture/Active Listening

### Climate and Culture

Too often, setting is seen in relation to only place and time. However, research shows that setting also encompasses a cultural aspect (Gruenewald, 2003). Culture can be defined as the "reciprocal, interdependent relationships" (Gruenewald, p. 624) between people and the places and times they occupy. Culture speaks to the varied perceptions of diverse participants working and living together within an environment.

Cultures that have been created together by the inhabitants create a shared identity, or what Stefanou (2004) calls relatedness.

Knowing this, I now turn to characteristics of the culture at Oaks that the data reveals to enhance student voice. As I examine the data, I realize that the school's culture has sprung from two predominate well-springs: Great Expectations and Professional Learning Communities. For the last seven years teachers have worked to successfully implement these programs.

### A Great Expectations Climate

Great Expectations (GE) holds as one of its major tenants the belief in a climate of mutual respect. This belief is further supported by several of the GE Eight Expectations for Daily Living that are posted in every classroom and serve as guidelines for student and teacher behavior.

1. We will value one another as unique and special individuals.
2. We will not laugh at or make fun of another person's mistakes nor use sarcasm or putdowns.
3. We will use good manners saying please and thank you and excuse me and allow others to go first.
4. We will cheer each other to success.
5. We will help one another whenever possible.
6. We will recognize every effort and applaud it.
7. We will encourage each other to do our best.
8. We will practice virtuous living using the Life Principles (Great Expectations, 2009).

Along with these expectations, a school creed serves to unite students and faculty in a statement about shared beliefs.

This is a world of choice. Therefore, I chose to accept life's challenges rather than to let others make decisions for me. I will base my thoughts, speech and actions on high principles of character, not circumstances. I chose to be respectful, even when faced with disrespect. I chose to be honest in the midst of dishonesty. I chose to be compassionate instead of selfish. I realize that the choices I make today effect who I will be, what I will do, and what I will receive in my future. I am a person of choice.

This school creed is recited at every Friday assembly and is used to re-direct student behavior throughout every day. These expectations result in a climate where shared values, relationships and acceptance of diversity become guiding principles.

## A Professional Learning Community Culture

Along with Great Expectations, the components of a Professional Learning Community (PLC) help to define the climate and culture at Oaks Middle School. As members of a PLC, the teachers practice processes based upon a belief on equity, reflection, and a commitment to change. In team and faculty meetings they have examined students' data looking for areas of inequity within subgroups of students. With these students identified, they have reflected upon their practice and compared it with research-based instructional strategies in an ongoing effort to improve their teaching.

The instructional strategies came mainly from the research-based seventeen classroom practices outlined by the Great Expectations program, but also included

strategies from book studies on Marzano's "Classrooms That Work" and other research. With our mission statement to guide us, the faculty and I continually reflected upon how each strategy would fulfill the mission and meet the academic, emotional, physical, or social needs of all students. Whether the strategy was review, feedback, questioning, or inquiry and discourse, the mission became the filter. Professional Learning Community practices and Great Expectations provided the tools needed to maintain a climate where risks could be taken and people were treated with respect.

These two programs have become who we are as a school. My teachers, students and I have presented at conferences all over the state, sharing how Great Expectations and PLC's can transform a school's climate. The tenants of both programs are engrained in everything we do. They are displayed throughout the hallways and in every classroom on bulletin boards, on walls and in the actions and speech of students and teachers. They have become our cultural identity and have served to unite us.

## Active Listening

Hearing is not always listening and students recognize the difference quickly. Teachers who actively listen to what students say, send the message that what students are saying is important. Active listening supports the "critical consciousness" that respects the voice of others and offers an affirmation of student worth and value (Clarke, 2006). Active listening stimulates open and frank exploration of ideas necessary in a democratic classroom and establishes rapport with and respect for participants (Clarke, 2006). Active listening enhances student voice because it mirrors

back what students are actually saying. Active listening requires that one practice humility, caution and reciprocity (Parker, 2006).

Listening with humility undermines the listener's arrogance and purposes that one listens because it indicates that he/she does not know everything. Caution causes the listener to slow down and think before speaking. Caution is exhibited when the listener asks questions or paraphrases what is heard before offering his own opinion. Reciprocity requires the listener to withhold feelings of superiority based on race, gender, position or other power status (Parker, 2006). Each of these actions affirm for the student that the teacher actually heard what they said and is interested enough to make a comment and withhold judgment.

Thinking back to my earlier visit to the teacher's seventh grade math class, I replay the conversations in my head and gain a better understanding of how she modeled all of these strategies during one classroom discussion about how students had studied for a previous test.

One student had offered, "I slowed down this time. I read the problem and pictured it in my head, kind of like seeing it in my brain. It's kind of complicated."

"So you visualize doing the problem in your head. Just taking the time to think about it before doing it helps." As the teacher paraphrased what the student had said, the student shook her head as if to say, "Yeh, that's what I meant." Affirmation from the teacher added to the student's self-efficacy.

I also remember another student who raised his hand and shared, "Instead of just doing the problem when I study, I went back over the process."



“Class, did you hear what he said? How many of you take time to study the process? Not just try to memorize answers but think about how to do it.” Such reciprocity served to affirm the student as the holder of valuable information. By showing this type of respect for a student’s idea, the teacher models respect for others while building self-respect within the student. Soon another student was called upon to share.

“I looked at the definitions one more time just before the test.”

Although this was a specific tip, the teacher used questioning to push the understanding to an even higher level. “How does knowing those words help you do better on the rest of the test?” She did not offer her opinion, but used humility to acknowledge that the student was capable of finding his own answer.

“When you see a word in the directions or in a problem, if you know what it means then you know the process better. If you don’t know the word then you probably won’t know what to do.”

In his book *Assessment for Learning*, Reeves (2004) posits that unless we know how and why a strategy works, we will not be able to replicate it. When teachers help students to understand not only how to study better but also why that strategy works, they are providing them with necessary knowledge that will free them to make future decisions without them. Before students can commit to an endeavor, they must have the knowledge and tools to do so. This Oak’s teacher has led the student to understand a necessary process for achievement. Stefanou (2004) confirms this when he writes that when teachers encourage students to generate their own solutions or ask students to justify or argue for their point, students’ cognitive autonomy is increased. It is

cognitive autonomy support that truly leads to the psychological investment in learning that provides the internal motivation that teachers are striving for (Stefanou, 2004) Most students want to do better, but just need the cognitive skills to make it happen (Stiggins, 2007).

Not only does active listening help students to discover deeper understanding, it also enhances their feelings of value (Clarke, 2006).

One student wrote in her journal, “When one of my teachers asked me how I felt, it made me feel a lot better. If I get asked, I instantly feel like they care for me. I also feel relieved knowing they are watching out for me.”

Unfortunately students also commented that this type of questioning and listening was not practiced throughout the school. One student said, “Looking back on this school year, few of my teachers ask anyone this. In my classes, most people don’t get asked that.” This comment reaffirmed to me that it is the teacher’s instructional strategies that make the difference. A class is only as good as the teacher’s instructional processes. In classes like the seventh grade math classroom observed, active listening within a culture of Great Expectations and PLC created high levels of student voice.

## Assessments/Data-driven Decision Making

### Assessments

With the enactment of No Child Left Behind, schools have become more and more focused on testing. Armed with the belief that practice makes perfect, many schools, including Oaks Middle School, are now using ongoing formative assessments to prepare for the end-of-year mandated tests. The use of formative assessments is

nothing new. Teachers have been using information for feedback to modify their teaching for years. However, with the advent of standardized testing and the pressure on schools to close the achievement gap, many schools are now turning to formative assessments that mirror as closely as possible in format the end-of year tests. This means that students are being subjected to multiple, as often as monthly, multiple choice standards-driven tests. Such tests are often taken through commercial online programs which provide student data in the form of charts and graphs disaggregating scores based upon recognized subgroups of students. The teachers at Oaks Middle School have used these charts in their inquiry and discourse process as part of team meetings with success for several years.

Several researchers are also calling for student involvement in analyzing the results of these formative assessments (Black & Wiliam, 1998; Stiggins, 2004). The teachers at Oaks Middle School were directed to include students in the collecting and analyzing of their own formative assessment data.

### Data-Driven Decision Making

I am, therefore, not surprised to see that the next category in my table is data-driven decision making (D3M) and assessments. “How appropriate that this follow inquiry and discourse and active listening,” I think to myself. Reflecting back to the Community of Inquiry Framework, I focus on the area of “content” and think about assessment and the resulting data as an appropriate source of discourse. The teachers at Oaks Middle School had used student data for inquiry and discourse over the last several years to enhance their ability to make decisions that affect student learning. They had successfully used four steps outlined by Reeves (2004) to lead them from the

data to discovering new ideas on how to change their instructional practices. Could the same four steps provide students with the same success? Those four steps include: (1) observe the data, (2) discuss what actions led to the data, (3) reflect upon and choose which action might work for you, (4) and then commit to it. Armed with the Great Expectations belief that all students can succeed and that most students want to be successful, teachers at Oaks used the D3M process to try to give students a process to enable them to accept responsibility for their own learning.

D3M aligns with the external/internal component of my modified democratic student voice framework. Having students consciously and regularly self-evaluate their learning based on their own data takes an external factor and provides a process to internalize it into personal goals (Glasser, 1969). No longer are students bribed by external rewards, but now they learn because that was their own plan that they created. Stiggins (2002) posited that assessment should serve two purposes: to inform instructional decisions and to motivate learning. As part of a professional learning community, the teachers had learned to use assessment data to guide their instruction, but now they were venturing into new territory of student motivation.

Glasser (1969) describes motivation as a process where students take external information and link their behaviors to that information. Once students discover that their behaviors represent a choice that they are making, then they are free to make more effective, responsible choices IF they know what those choices are. This is where data-driven decision making comes in. As students first verbalize what their data means, they have the facts to begin looking for cause and effect. To do this, the teacher leads the class through the first process of inquiry and discourse, allowing students to

participate in discussions about what other students do to be successful or what actions may have lead to unsuccessful results. Either way students begin to collect alternative actions to reflect upon and to choose from. Without these alternatives, they really have no choice but to do what they have always done (Branson, 2004). Data collection is at the center of classroom discussions where internal cognitive and behavioral changes are the goal (Black & Wiliam, 1998). As students consider their past choices and reflect upon alternative choices, they set goals for themselves. Again because the solutions are generated by the student and reflect his interests and values, the level of commitment is increased (Stefanou, 2004).

Thinking back at the many classrooms I have visited throughout the past year, I am drawn back to the seventh grade math classroom and remember how the teacher approached the practice of D3M.

“The reason that we are doing this is that in any class or in life you have to stop every once in a while and look at where you are, what you are doing, and reflect on why we are doing it. How we can improve. Teachers do it. I do it. Teachers are always looking at how we can improve based on your data. Hopefully this will carry over into your life, in college or on a job.” By sharing that the process was not just a school thing, but a life skill, the relevancy of the process was increased in hopes of also increasing the students’ willingness to use it.

I remember that before I left her classroom that day, I congratulated her on her knowledge and skill. “You did an awesome job of increasing not only your students’ abilities but also their commitment to their achievement.”

All Oaks students were able to observe their data by downloading their online grades during advisory time each week. The online grade-book showed students their daily grades, their test grades, missing assignments, due dates, and future assignments. By using this information, teachers were able to lead students in meaningful discussions about how their actions affected their grades on a weekly basis. Mrs. M.'s sixth grade advisory class was just one of several that took that information and used D3M to provide students with a process to make better decisions.

“Today I want you to compare this week’s grades with last week’s grades. Reflect on where you are now compared to last week and why you think you got there.”

“Carl, let’s begin with you since I know you have a good story to tell. Carl, what did you have last week?”

“Last week I had 1 D, 3 F’s, and 2 A’s,” Carl replied.

“Where are we now Carl?” As Carl’s advisory teacher, Mrs. M. already knew that he had improved his grades through his own efforts.

“I now have 2 A’s, 1 D and 3 C’s,” Carl smiled as he held up his print-out.

“What did you do to get there? That is a great improvement!” Although the teacher was quick to praise Carl, she also wanted him to understand what had created that change.

“I worked harder.” As soon as the words were out of his mouth, Carl realized that he would be required to provide more, and sure enough, the teacher was there with the question to push him deeper.

“Worked harder? What do you mean? Class, remember we have to be specific. Carl, give us some examples of things that you actually did to improve your grades.

Some of your friends may be able to do what you did.” This statement added to Carl’s status within the class. By using what Parker (2006) referred to as reciprocity, the teacher acknowledged that students had the ability to help each other. The teacher is not the only one with all of the answers.

“Well, I kept awake in science (class laughs with him). I also did some extra work that she gave me.”

“Were you missing any assignments? Did you have zeros last week?” Again, she knew the answer, but the goal was to get Carl to look closely at his data and see what Reeves (2004) would call the “story behind the numbers”.

“Yes, I was missing 3 assignments in science and 1 in math. Now I only have one left to make up,” offered Carl as he compared his grades from last week and had stored in his folder, with the print-out he now had. Again, Mrs. M. had provided another strategy for students to be more involved in their learning. By having students keep track of the learning by saving and referring back to earlier scores, students have evidence of their progress to manage and adjust their own learning (Chappuis & Stiggins, 2008). Carl now had evidence that he could improve, thus increasing his self-efficacy.

“Carl, how does this make you feel? Write about what you have just shared in your journal. Also write how you will keep this going? What will you do this week?”

Through the four step process of data-driven decision making, the teacher exhibited several tenants of internal control psychology (Glasser, 1969). She had helped Carl to link his data to his behaviors and then through appropriate questioning she helped him to realize his emotional satisfaction that resulted from those efforts.

Now instead of doing his work because someone else is making him or bribing him to do it, Carl will be more committed to do the work because he will remember how he felt when his work resulted in better grades. Because the students came up with the solutions and also had a choice as to which ones would work best for them, their commitment to actually implementing the solution is increased. This cycle of internal control begins with the data and proceeds through discussion and reflection which ends with setting goals for future achievement. The bottom line is that from beginning to end, it is the student's choice. It is the student's data, the student's ideas, the student's choice of solutions, and the student's goal. D3M provides a process that leads students to discover alternative actions and gives them a voice in personal decisions that affect their learning.

As I continue to download files, I come across another file of student journals and my enthusiasm for data-driven decision making is temporarily dampened. Unfortunately, the student journals revealed there were also some negative side effects to the data-driven process. Although each of the previous instructional strategies were found to enhance student voice, I definitely see in the data that the effectiveness of each was increased when the assignment or assessment was more authentic. The idea of authentic instruction goes back to Dewey (1938 ), later to Newmann and Wehlage (1995 ) and more recently to O'Hair, Williams, Wilson and Applegate (2009). Instruction and assessment are considered to be more authentic when students work with content through real world problems, are required to collect, organize and analyze data, are allowed to create new knowledge, and provided with the opportunity to present their findings to an audience (Newmann & Wehlage, 1995).



Although data-driven decision making in itself is an authentic process, when it was used with non-authentic assessments, the students learned the process but did not always come away with the same commitment exhibited when used with authentic assessments.

After the class had discussed their monthly assessments, which are mainly low level questions in a multiple choice question format, they did make connections between their actions and their grades, but also began to relate their individual worth to test scores. Since authentic learning creates value beyond school, often this value becomes personal (Newmann et al. 2001).

As I scan the student journals, the voices of discouraged students cry out to me. Some students, especially those who did well, were able to put tests and grades into perspective.

“Tests just tell the teacher how much you learned.”

“Grades are a good way to tell that you learned the material.”

More students equated grades with being successful not only in school, but also in life.

“Grades are important because they help you succeed in life.”

The saddest thing was when students began to equate grades and especially monthly assessment scores with their individual worth regardless of whether the grade was bad or good.

“When I make bad grades I feel embarrassed. I feel like I’m not a good kid.”

“Grades are important because it makes you a good person.”

Because the only part of the assignment that the teacher related to real life was the final score, students began to see that score as an indicator of worth. Stiggins (2007) warns that educators need to pay attention to the emotional dynamics of assessments from the point of view of the students. The data from the past year serves to reaffirm what Stiggins posited. If students do well on non-authentic assessments, then they remain hopeful and optimistic although still misguided as to the worth of the assessment. “The best thing about a test is that it is most of your grade. I like it when the teacher gives me a pat on the back after I did good on a test. My favorite subject is math because I’m good in there.” On the other hand, if students do not do well on non-authentic assessments, they begin to experience a sense of hopelessness and fear and feel unsafe and embarrassed. “When my grades are low I feel bad. My teachers are mean.” “When my grades are low I feel bad because I think I am not trying as hard as I can.” “When I say I don’t care, I really mean I don’t understand and I am angry.”

Data-driven decision making seems to be only as good as the source of the data. As a process that has the potential to enhance student voice, it is the only process that relies more on the quality of the structure than the other three.

### Authentic Assignments/Authentic Assessment

Moving on down the list of teacher instructional strategies that enhance student voice, I turn now to the power of self/peer evaluation through rubrics. Whether we call it evaluation or assessment, I have worked with teachers throughout my career to encourage them in the use of rubrics as a more authentic form of student evaluation. Rubrics share achievement targets in student-friendly language with specific examples for each level of competency. With a rubric in hand from the beginning of any

assignment, students are able to self-assess throughout the project based upon the criteria established (Stiggins, 2007). I had even modeled the process through the creation of the assembly rubric provided in both the teachers' and students' handbooks.

Throughout the last year I hate to admit that I had not seen rubrics used often. The whole idea of authentic teaching and assessment has yet to catch on, even here in a so-called model school. However, there were pockets of excellence that were very revealing as to how the process of student self evaluation of authentic assignments increased student voice.

## Assembly

The most frequent use of rubrics with authentic assignments came each Friday as part of the morning assembly. As part of Great Expectations, assembly plays an important role in developing democratic student voice. Because all students are required to present at least once as part of their advisory class, every student has the opportunity to demonstrate his learning in a public place. This public display is an important component of authentic teaching (Newmann & Wehlage, 1993) and part of democratic schools (Dewey, 1916). Also by providing a daily venue for student-led presentations, a school makes a conscientious effort to support student leadership and autonomy. Shared leadership provides student autonomy in two of the areas identified by Stefanou (2007): procedural choice and cognitive choice. When students are provided with a time and place to make decisions about what to present and how to present it, they are given power over their learning and the learning becomes more internalized (Stefanou et al, 2007). Through the process of internalization, students

transform externally regulated behaviors into internally regulated behaviors in which their voice counts.

Lastly, because assembly provides students and teachers with a place and time to cheer each other's success, basic psychological needs are met. Stefanou (2007) writes that the students' needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness must be fulfilled in social contexts. Realizing that middle school students already know how to "cut" each other down, Oaks Middle School uses celebrations to teach and encourage students to cheer for each other. By increasing student competence and relatedness, a school also increases the sense of trust and community within the school. This sense of community enhances students' psychological need for relatedness (Stefanou et al, 2007). As this psychological need is met, the student is then more willing to move towards increased competency.

"When I am celebrated in assembly, I feel like I have really done something. It makes me want to do more."

This sense of self worth is especially seen as student presentations showcase students' technological skills. Videos and power-points are now the chosen venue for Friday assembly. Students look forward to sharing their thoughts and opinions with their peers through the latest technology. One student summed it up with this comment.

"Making movies sparks kids' interests. Those kinds of things show people that kids really can do something worthwhile."

Technology became the tool that brought assemblies alive for the students. Technology enhanced student voice by giving consent to their preferred form of

communication. Technology also was the main way that students addressed the creative component of the content on the assembly rubric.

The rubric that is used for assembly presentations addresses three areas of competencies: content, posture, and speaking. Each area has three levels of achievement with examples provided at each level. Individual advisories are assigned a Friday to present at the beginning of each school year so that students know when it is their turn. This is an authentic assignment because students brainstorm ideas and collaborate on their choice for an appropriate topic. They research and find or create their own resources, whether it is music, a play script, a power-point or a video. They have plenty of time to look into their topic in depth before presenting it to an audience of their peers, teachers and parents. Student voice is required from beginning to end of each student presentation during Friday assemblies. It is evident that the structure of a student led assembly provides an opportunity for student voice, but how did the use of a rubric in conjunction with assembly enhance effective use of student voice?

I think back again to that sixth grade advisory class. They had received all excellent marks by their peers because they had used the rubric and had planned and practiced accordingly.

## Elective Classes

Rubrics were also used, although infrequently, in some other classes with success. In the video production class, students worked together with the teacher to create a rubric for their videos. Again, it was the technology and the consent provided by the teacher that allowed students to use technology as a tool to enhance their voice. Although technology seems to be a major factor in enhancing student voice, I did not

list it as a separate structure, because it always came down to **how** it was used that made the most difference. Although many classrooms and teachers had access to the same technology, few used it authentically and allowed students the freedom to express themselves guided by a rubric.

It was just yesterday that I was in the technology communications room visiting again about how she gets students to perform at such high levels.

“The first time we finished a film project, students had to show it in class. First I had them rank themselves, and then we picked a best project. Once we picked the best project, then we went out to the side of it and wrote five things that made it the best project. Once we have those five standards, then all of the others after that, they had to rate their film based on that. Kids ended up asking themselves, ‘Did I do number one? Yes, how about number two? No.’ As they learned to evaluate the work based on chosen criteria they understand why theirs was or was not at or near the top. They also knew when they needed to rewrite, re-edit, or re-film a project. When students are allowed to choose the criteria, it is theirs. I can say it a thousand times, but they don’t hear me. However, the moment that it comes from their peers, that cute boy or that girl with braces, then it becomes real. So we look at what did you do that was right.”

I know that this teacher is right on target. I have been in her classroom when there was a substitute and her students are evaluating student work based upon their rubric in a very professional manner. They know what it takes to be excellent, they have been given the resources and skills to create excellence, so it is their choice as to whether they achieve excellence or not. This practice supports the literature on assessments that involve students in the process (Stiggins, 2002; Black & Williams,

1998; Chappuis & Stiggins, 2008). When students have the identifying attributes of a good performance by using a rubric and are then allowed to self and/or peer evaluate, students' self confidence is increased (Stiggins, 2002).

Peer evaluation with a rubric also builds relatedness and respect for others within the class. Students realize that they are all judged on the same criteria and work together to help each achieve. "Because we work in groups on our videos, now everyone wants to work, instead of just one person," wrote one student on a recent technology survey. Another student wrote about the value of teamwork and respecting each member's contribution, "You can't do everything by yourself. Even if at first you don't want to work in a group, try it anyway. You never know, they could have some pretty cool ideas." Relatedness, self-efficacy and respect for others are enhanced as students work together to evaluate authentic assignments through the use of rubrics.

Assembly is also the one setting that is least affected by teacher instructional practices. Because the rubric for assembly is posted in both the teacher and student handbook and because the rubric is modeled by the principal and the student council during the first few weeks of school, by the time that students are assigned to present, they know the routine and the expectations. When expectations are known ahead of time, student learning is advanced (Stiggins, 2002). With expectations clearly defined and with models of excellence in mind, students look forward to the opportunity to voice their creative side and serve as leaders for that week.

The impact of student leadership and participation in morning assembly reaches beyond the school walls. Parker (2006) writes that citizenship stems from a competence and desire to participate in a self-determining community. At Oaks Middle School,

students practice such participation in preparation for their role as democratic citizens with the responsibility of exercising their voice for the good of the community. Teacher processes used within chosen structures have served to enhance democratic student voice.



## Taking Note

I sigh as I sit back and realize that I have finally reached that place of contentment and peace that comes through understanding. I have the urge to put my feet on my desk, place my hands behind my head and lean back in total satisfaction. However, my fear of toppling over brings my feet firmly back to the floor. As I burn all of my files to CD's, I reflect once again upon the work of John Dewey many years before and realize that I have just lived through what he theorized. By spending the last five days reflecting on previous experiences to discover the "why and how," I am now free to look to the future and ask "what if". Through inward dialogue, I have come to a place where I can now honor not only my past and the many relational events that comprised it, but I can also now look to the future with the promise of continuing the promise. Thinking back to the wish that my fellow teacher had offered when I left my teaching position, "I hope you are successful," I now feel confident in the fact that I have experienced some success. But I have also found that success is not a tangible event but a journey that never ends. Not for me and not for Oaks Middle School. There are goals that wait to be accomplished. I am ready to continue my journey.

The computer signals me that the CD's are finished so I take each one and label it according to its contents. One last box is waiting to be filled, and to that box I slide the CD's into open slots between books and paper files. As I squeeze the last CD into place, the video production teacher knocks at the open door and asks, "Got time for one more visit?"

"Always," I reply as I motion for her to have a seat. She looks around the empty room and her eyes finally fall on the open box and the CD's.

“I see that you have even downloaded your files. So I guess that’s it,” she offers as she lays a gift bag on my desk. “Maybe you can find room for one more thing. Just something for you to remember us here at Oaks.”

Taking the bag, I slowly and thoughtfully begin removing the layers of tissue paper stuffed around the opening. As each colored sheet is removed, I feel the tears welling up and work to keep control. I find inside the bag a journal in which every teacher and some students had entered their fingerprint which the art teacher had then turned into a picture. Under or around each fingerprint picture is a comment or a word of advice from the person. As I read each one, I picture each person in a unique and special way. One teacher who had just finished her first year with us at Oaks Middle School had turned her print into a shopping bag and commented on our daily personal conversations about the latest sales downtown. Another print had become a crown in remembrance of the fact that I always referred to this teacher as the “queen” of POD’s (problem of the day). On the last page I am surprised to see that another new teacher in seventh grade who is also a NASCAR fan, has made a race car out of her print and has written, “Be love driven, not data driven.” Well, that is where I lose all control. The bearer of the gift comes around the desk and we hug and cry together. After several Kleenex tissues, I am able to thank her properly.

“You all have been so wonderful to work with. You will never know how much you have taught me,” I finally say as I dab my eyes. “More than anything, you have all helped me to learn to love and build relationships with those you work with. That last comment just really brought it home.”

“Sharon, we all know the importance of data in teaching, but we all need to stop and reflect upon the real role that data plays in education.” If there had been a soap box handy, I would have offered it. I knew that she was about to offer her parting words of advice, and I sat eager and ready to learn from a master.

“For me, it has to be the relationship,” she begins. “You can gather data all day, and make it say anything you want it to say, but the question is, ‘What is the child saying?’ We don’t take enough time to listen. As educators we think it is our job to talk all hour, all day, and it’s really not. The problem with focusing only on the data is that we don’t listen to the very thing that we are educating. If kids aren’t learning and kids don’t care, we need to look at what we are teaching. Maybe you’re not teaching something that they want to learn or even care about. And so maybe we need to change. That’s not to say that we should throw out math, science, and history, but let’s teach it a different way. The top has to realize that it has to be more than lip service to what you say is really important. If kids are what you say is really important, then start with kids and work your way back up. But we’re all afraid of that.”

As soon as she pauses to take a breath, I jump in with a question, “But how do you do that on a daily basis? It’s easy to criticize, but what do you have to offer as advice?”

“It always starts with choice,” she begins again without hesitation. “Our school creed says it all. The very first line says ‘this is a world of choice. Therefore I choose.’ I can choose to accept life’s challenges or I can let others make my decisions. I use that and I use quotes. I try to empower kids with the tools I’ve been given. But the biggest thing is that I appeal to their human nature. I take time to say to Daniel, ‘Hey, Daniel I

saw you last night in the parade, and I thought you were awesome.’ When you see them you need to stop and talk to them and their parents and their family. You engage them outside of the classroom.”

She motions to the GE posters that I have laid against the wall for the next principal to use. “I do believe in Great Expectations. The most important part of GE is that every child needs a touch, a kind word, a kind look. And so I purposely sign agendas outside my room everyday so that I make time to grab their hand, touch their foot, or just ask them something off-hand like “what’s your favorite color today?” Just taking time to have that one on one contact before they ever walk into the room lets them know that you value them as more than a student but as a person.”

Turning back to me, she continues, “And then you give them choice. You say, ‘Let’s do a project. We’re all going to do public service announcements as a commercial. What are some good ideas?’ I throw it up on the board, and everybody has to come up with at least two ideas. Some kids will try to put twenty. ‘Sorry,’ I say, ‘you already have your two. Let me get two from him.’ When everyone has two then we open it up and ask does anyone have more. Then that kid can add more, and we go until there’s not an idea left. Then I’ll say, ‘Look, which one do you like?’ And they all choose their favorite. Once we get about three days into a project they have to use self discipline. They come in, pull up their calendar, and know exactly what they are supposed to be doing. I don’t have to be telling them every day. I can be in my class, out of my class, next door, whatever, and they will be working because it is theirs. I tell them it’s a respect thing and respect is **not** something that has to be earned. I choose to give respect because that is the kind of person I choose to be. Relationships are about

who are you, not just who you are this hour or this minute. But who are you as a person. It's a relationship issue. That's what that last thumb print is saying. It's the relationship that we have built with you that we will miss."

As I listen, I realize that what she is saying refers back to all of the processes and structures that I have put into my democratic voice table. When teachers actively listen to their students, they do build relationships. The process depends upon the actions that this bright teacher has just espoused so eloquently.

"So what you are saying is that we must do more than just listen, but we must also act?" Just like the teachers that I have observed in classrooms, I lead her to deeper levels and wait expectantly for her answer.

"I don't think that in over twenty eight years of teaching that I have used the same thing twice. It has to be different for each group of kids. The world changes, time changes, technology changes. There's always a different way to do it. And so that's what data tells me. And that's what I want them to see: how do I adapt to the world that is ever changing.

"So data does play an important role?" I venture to play the antagonist.

"Yes, but when I gather student data, I try to go back and let them know that I am willing to change my actions based upon their feedback. If most of them feel like enough time wasn't provided, then I will change that, and I make sure that they know why I changed it. That's when data becomes valuable. Data works when it causes change for the better."

"So you're talking about commitment based on data?" Again, I know that one word is all she needs to continue.

“I want to see data go both ways. I think that data has to be seen as a circle, not an arrow pointing to bad, not a pressure point. It has to be seen as a circle, like a wedding ring, a commitment. If data is real and you are committed to what you do then data changes things for the better. You don’t make it to say what you want it to say. You look at what it really says. Data is about that commitment. Data takes the emotion out. It’s not if you are a good teacher or a bad teacher, it just says that these are the facts. I think we have to train kids in that and be honest with them. Not be patronizing to them. Don’t pass them along and say ‘I am so glad that kid is out of my class.’ But look at what their issues are, read their data and allow them to create personal changes that in turn will allow their data to change in the future. The important thing is how you look at. Do we look at data as a panic button, a pressure point, or do we look at it as that wedding ring with commitment?”

Listening to her finish her thoughts, I now offer my own gift. “I hope that more than anything, I have modeled for all you that sense of commitment. The best gift that I can leave is the message that you have just shared. Do you remember the poem that I handed out at the last teachers meeting? I gave it for a reason. It sums up what you just said about the importance of relationships. Yes, data is necessary with today’s high stakes testing, but I know personally and so do you, that data can be used to drive needed change. It’s just a matter of keeping our perspective, people first, data second.”

While I am talking, my teacher is digging in her pocket and pulls out a piece of folded paper. As I finish my last sentence, she smooths the page out and lays it before me. “You asked if I remember your last poem. I keep it with me. I would strongly

suggest that you leave a copy for the next principal.” She hands me the paper and continues, “Here, use this one. Tape it to the desk. I have copies.”

With that, she picks up the tape dispenser and fastens the paper to the center of the desk. “Now let me help you carry those boxes to your car.”

### Take Note

Take note of all the many things  
Kids say to you each day.  
Take note of whether kids frown or smile  
With every word you say.

Take note of how they watch you.  
Are you doing what you preach?  
They learn not just from books.  
Take note of what you teach.

The notes they take on paper  
Are really just a start.  
Take note of what they carry home  
Embedded in their hearts.

Take note of every thank you  
That a kid has sent to you.  
Be willing and every watchful  
To return those praises due.

Take note, be ever mindful  
Of what students have to say.  
Remember they are the reason  
You come to school each day.

## Chapter Seven: There's No Place Like Home

### Reflecting Inward and Backwards

Later that same Friday, I find myself sitting in my favorite recliner with my favorite classic movie, Wizard of Oz, playing. I have carried in all of the boxes and stored them under the bed in the spare bedroom. As I listen to Glenda, the good witch, question Dorothy about what she has learned from her travels, my eyes begin to get heavy as I listen to an inner voice ask similar questions. “So, Sharon, what have you learned? Now that it’s over and you’re ready to move on, what lessons will you take with you? What lessons will you share?” As I push back on the arms of the recliner, I close my eyes and begin, “Well, I learned...”

First of all, I now realize that the processes and structures that were in place at Greenfield may have been called by different names, but they were basically the same. Although we did not have an advisory time, Greenfield did not need to create smaller groups of students for the sake of discussion. Our graduating class had only twelve students and we discussed everything. I fondly remember Mr. Thompson, our principal and algebra teacher, taking time at the end of a lesson and talking to us about real world issues.

“You know, girls,” he would often say, “there are more women in the world than there are men. So you realize that some of you will have to take seconds.” This would really get us talking about our views on marriage, equality, and growing up. To the boys he offered such pearls of wisdom as, “Boys, remember that you can get more girls with soap than with cologne.” And to us all before we went on our senior trip he shared, “Now remember that when we go to a restaurant and they ask how you want



your steak, they don't mean fried.” Real life issues were part of nearly every algebra lesson. To this day, I can quote his words, but am also able to complete an algebraic equation with ease. Through his own type of inquiry and discourse, Mr. Thompson and others like him were able to lead us in open discussions that were relevant to our lives at that time and that continue to serve us today.

When I think back to the culture of Greenfield, I am amazed at the fact that all though the term “professional learning community” had yet to be coined, the tenants of such a climate were in place. Greenfield, like many small farming communities, held tightly to strong shared values. These values included the belief in hard work, sharing, and a respect for self and others. Farmers worked together to plant and harvest their crops. Women shared sewing patterns, garden produce, and child rearing tips. We were a community in the truest sense.

These values were played out during my freshman year in college. I had won a trip to Washington DC through the local Farmers Union Scholarship program. However, the day before I was to leave with the group, I became snowed in at my boyfriend's house in El Reno. All of my clothes and money for the trip were at home twelve miles west of Greenfield, forty miles from me. But the community rallied as my dad fired up the road grader and took my things as far as the sponsor's house. From there another neighbor pulled their vehicle with his tractor to the highway where the roads had been cleared. When I arrived at the airport in Oklahoma City, there was Pete and Dorothy Bailey with my luggage and an envelope of money from my parents. That community spirit where everyone works together for the success of each individual seems to be the very spirit that today's professional learning community is built upon.

As far as assessments go, I know that when I was a student in the sixties, there were no state mandated tests. I know that we had tests occasionally, but they were tied directly to what we had been learning in class and therefore had meaning to us. Any pressure that we felt came from a personal desire to excel that stemmed from the culture of the community. Our farm kid work ethic led us to do our best at any task.

Another realization that this study has brought to my attention is the importance of authentic assignments. As I look back on my student years at Greenfield, I know that we had a balance of both types of learning. We had our share of diagramming sentences and conjugating verbs, and memorized more than our fair share of facts. However, we also cooked, sewed, and sang our way through a study of South America. We learned biology through the donated specimens from local farmers and through testing our own mouth wash in a Petri dish. We learned history through researching and compiling a book on our town's past. We learned government by having our own mock election. By the way, Billy Bob Brown earned the role of Barry Goldwater and lost.

Overall, even though this was the end of an era where children were expected to be seen and not heard, my teachers seemed to understand the necessary balance between meeting the needs of the student with the needs of the curriculum. Students were valued members of the community. We were the future of the community. Our learning was balanced with necessary authority yet coupled with multiple opportunities to add our talents, voice, and work to that of the adults.

## Reflecting Outward and Backward

As I reflect backwards, I also come to new realizations about Oaks Middle School. Looking back and telling the story has enabled me to separate myself from the

actions and view the different perspectives as objectively as possible. But I know that although I worked diligently to tell the story from all perspectives, it is ultimately my story. I am positive that it would read differently if written by a teacher or a student. But even knowing that, helps me in my understanding about the complexity of school and education. Like all schools, Oaks Middle School is a combination of multiple stories. It can be viewed through the lens of federal, state and district mandates. It can be viewed from the perspective of various programs. Or it can be viewed from the perspective of students and how they learn and live together.

My remembrances stem from the events shared by the students past and present. I now have a better appreciation for the fact that we are all students whose opinions count and whose skills need constant refinement. Thinking back to the processes and structures that were put into place when the teachers became students of the professional learning community research, I realize that they are very similar to those needed for student voice. Through inquiry and discourse, teachers and students are able to reflect inwardly upon their own actions but also learn from others through research or through collaboration. Both groups use data as a source of discussion for personal and group improvement. The training in and implementation of professional learning community research provided the structures and skills for the teachers to experience democratic voice. The teachers became part of a culture where data, discussion, reflection, and goal setting were shared values. Teachers, as students, also experienced a new learning curve as technology was introduced into their practice. In fact, the introduction of technology helped to build a professional learning community (Williams, 2006) as teachers collaborated and learned together.

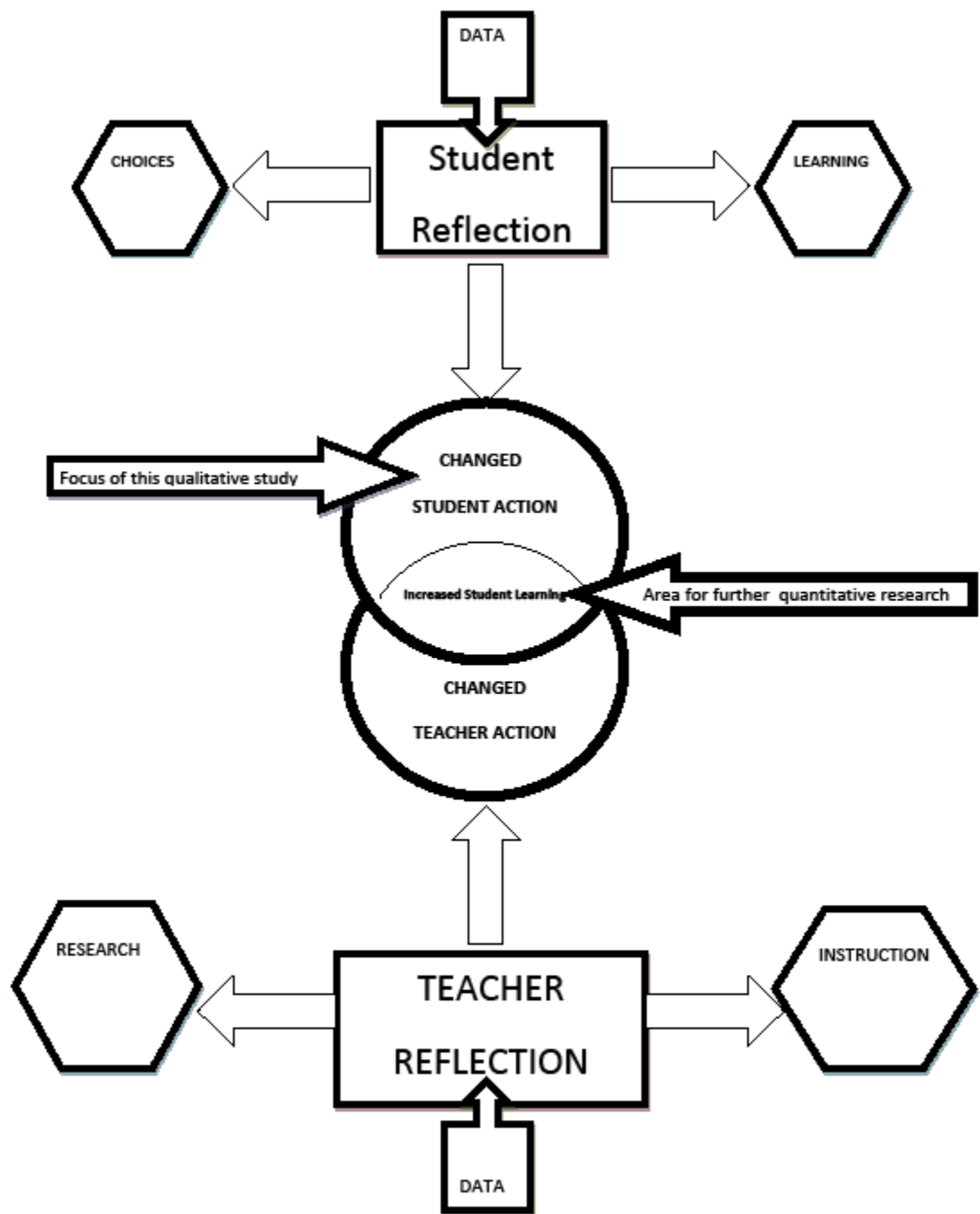


Table 6: Teacher and Student Voice

For a school to create a climate in which all voices are encouraged, enhanced, and acted upon requires skills that are basic to human psychological needs for relatedness and competence. Along with a nurturing climate, both students and teachers also need an allotted time to facilitate the processes. For example, teachers use common team plan time to use inquiry and discourse to examine student data and to reflect upon their instruction. Scheduling provides a time and place for teachers to participate in decisions that affect their instruction and student learning. Likewise, advisory, assembly and electives provide times and places for students to be freed from the pressures of mandated testing and where they are given greater freedom to exercise their voice in decision making and expression.

This revelation leads me to reflect upon why some teachers at Oaks Middle School, who had been trained in the necessary instructional skills, chose to disregard those skills once they returned to their room. The most disturbing part of my story came when the students expressed the emotional trauma caused by misguided structures and processes.

To better come to terms with this revelation, I recall a bit of older research by Goffman (1959) who used the metaphor of life as a stage when he wrote about why humans wear different masks for different audiences. Goffman writes that when an individual has no belief in a specific act, he will choose to “delude his audience” and switch masks with each audience. He goes on to write that humans often do this not only for their self-interests, but because their act is based on individual belief, they believe that they are acting for the good of the audience also. It seems reasonable to

further suggest that directly creating awareness of this cognitive dissonance before the teachers experience dissonance might help reduce resistance (McFalls & Cobb-Roberts, (2001). Other professional development considerations that take cognitive dissonance into consideration would include programs that allow for extended authentic experiences followed up with plans for implementation and ongoing support (Slater & Cate, 2006).

As the former principal and leader of Oaks Middle School, I have to look back and ask myself how I could have changed the beliefs of those teachers so that their actions in class mirrored their actions in faculty meetings and trainings. And now, as a leader of professional development for practicing administrators, what advice can I give to them so that they can also shape the beliefs of their teachers?

These questions seem to be best answered by the work on change theory by such writers as Hall and Horde (2001) and Waters, Marzano and McNulty (2003). Change requires people to stop doing things that they know how to do well and replace them with practice they do not yet know as well (Hall & Hord, 2001). These abilities are tied to value systems and often to people that they hold dear (Heifetz & Linsky, 2002). Most teachers teach the way they have been taught and usually by teachers that they remember fondly. This sense of loss makes teachers feel vulnerable, like they don't know what they are doing. They feel out of control and incompetent and soon lose confidence (Schon, 1987). Individuals react differently to change (McKenzie, 2001). Some fear it, some are highly stressed by it, while others will embrace it. Just helping teachers to realize that these feelings are normal to change is an important part of professional development at this stage. Acknowledging, understanding, and using

teachers' unique teaching situations and past experiences is just as important in professional development as is understanding content knowledge. It seems worthwhile to listen to and discover more about the teachers we are developing before we begin the process (Hughes, 2003). This speaks strongly to teacher dissonance and the important of assessing their beliefs about teaching and learning before planning professional development. It is important for teachers to know why they need the information before they are willing to make that information part of their daily practice.

I specifically recall the Concerns-Based Adoption Model [CBAM] (Loucks-Hoursley, 1996; Hall & Hord, 2001; Hord et.al., 2006) helps leaders to use teacher concerns and abilities to guide professional development (Hord et.al., 2006). In CBAM the level of readiness is based upon questions that participants bring to the learning. Effective leaders are good listeners and are able to interpret questions raised by teachers to assess their true feelings. A teacher who asks, "How will it affect me?" is still at the personal level, whereas the teacher who is asking "How do I find the time to do it all?" is at the management stage. The final stage of readiness or concern is reached when teachers are asking, "How could I change this to have a bigger impact on my students?" Teachers who are still at the personal level will require different professional development activities than those who are the impact level. These levels correspond to what Waters, Marzano and McNulty (2003) refer to as change orders. First level change orders are those that are consistent with existing values and norms and can be implemented with the existing knowledge. A change becomes second order when it requires people to learn new approaches, or it conflicts with prevailing values and norms. Second order change requires leaders to work more deeply with teachers to

overcome feelings of stress, fear, and even grief. The type of knowledge to be shared is based on the level of concern or order of change. Sometimes teachers need information about “why” this is important. Other needs require information about knowing “what” to do, while other needs are fulfilled by knowing “how” or “when” to do something. Labeled as experiential, declarative, procedural, and contextual knowledge, the knowledge taxonomy will help leaders to understand how to plan various activities and strategies (Waters, Marzano & McNulty, 2003). In fact, these same authors posit that a leader’s responsibilities should be balanced equally with recognizing at what stage of change the learner is and then knowing what information is needed for that stage. It is a balancing act that they feel few administrators successfully manage. Developing skill and competence varies with each individual. Good leaders plan ways to anticipate and facilitate change at the individual level (Hall & Hord, 2001).

I know that as a principal, I was not trained to do any of these things. I, like many others, were not trained in data analysis, change theory, active listening, inquiry and discourse, or peer/self evaluation. What I now know, I learned late in my career as part of my doctoral studies. And yet these processes are the very ones that provide our students and teachers the skills and opportunities to internalize what we teach. Unless the learning is internalized, then as actors upon the stage, the teachers will pay lip service to effective strategies but then fall back into old ways when the classroom door is closed. Unless the learning is internalized for students, then as actors upon their own classroom stage, they might memorize for the present, until the test is over, or they may just shut down all together and put on a mask of rebellion.



Looking back on my years of leadership, I know that these processes were made possible through the ongoing support of teachers, professors, staff development presentations, and through constant critical reflection. Likewise, in looking forward, I now realize that is also where my future lays.

## Reflecting Inward and Forward

Shifting to a more comfortable position in my chair, I continue to think and dream ahead to my new position where I will work to educate principals and superintendents to build professional learning communities. Perhaps I need to examine the focus of my instruction in light of my new learning. Change theory is part of the professional development, as is data-driven decision making through inquiry and discourse. But now that I have a better understanding of the impact that these processes have on student voice, I can share with greater authority and conviction.

## Reflecting Outward and Forward

At this point, I find it necessary to look beyond myself and my past and personal future. From the very beginning of this dissertation process, I have been anxious about having something to offer the academic research world. What does this study add to the literature? What are the implications for educational policy and practice? What are the implications for future study? I now believe that this study does provide new information that can serve to guide future educational policy, practice, and research.

## Adding to the Literature

Previous literature on student voice addressed the topic only from the standpoint of a select group of students (Holcomb, 2007; Mitra, 2001) or within select content

areas ( Garthwait, 2004; Levin, 2007; Mitra & Gross, 2009). Previous studies did not include detailed processes or structures that facilitate voice for all students across all disciplines. Although some studies revealed the interrelationship of teacher instruction, social relationships and student cognition, as seen in the Community of Inquiry Framework, this study extends that framework by providing details as to which settings, which content, and what kind of discourse work together to enhance student voice as part of not only student cognition but also student affect. The value of a study as this one lies in the rich descriptions that are provided by participants (Creswell,1994). These details provide valuable information for teachers and administrators.

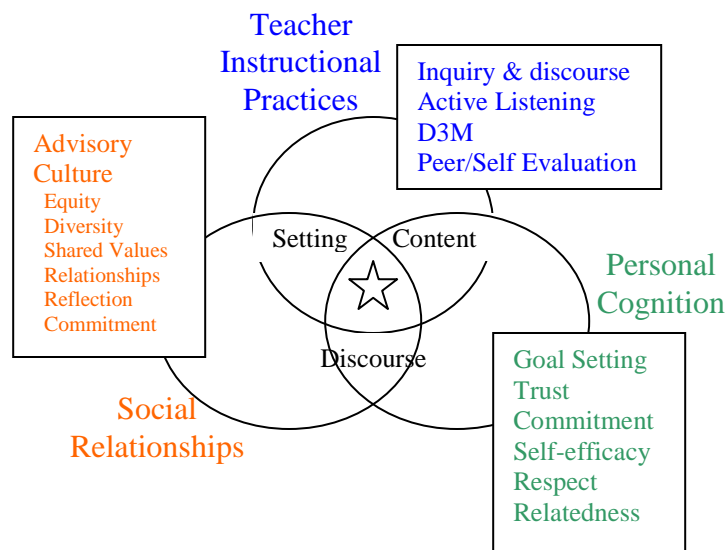


Table 7: Extended Community of Inquiry Framework

As the table shows, teachers can create an environment of setting that increases the necessary social relationships that increase student voice. By setting aside a specific time such as advisory, schools provide structures where topics such as equity, diversity, and shared values can be discussed. These discussions will lead to stronger relationships, more personal reflection, and greater commitment by students. The second section of the diagram, teacher instructional practices, indicates that teachers can increase student voice by utilizing inquiry and discourse and active listening as content instructional strategies. As part of evaluation after the teaching and learning, teachers can also use data-driven decision making and peer or self evaluation to further aid in student voice. Finally, when the first two components of social relationships and instructional practices contain the specified details, then the third component of personal cognition will result in specific student identity traits. By creating a safe and nurturing setting where content is delivered and evaluated through inquiry and discourse, student engage in discourse that helps them to set, commit to, and believe in their ability to reach personal goals. In addition to these personal benefits, students also gain in their relationships with others. Trust, respect and a sense of belonging are all social identity results. The diagram thus provides not only structures and strategies for schools and teachers to use, but also provides possible results in student cognition.

## Educational Policy and Practice

In light of the findings and my on-going reflection, I would suggest several implications for future changes in both policy and practice. These changes fall within the areas of testing, teacher preparation, school practice, and future research.

### Implications for Testing Policies

Both the federal and state educational testing policies need to be re-examined both on the quality of the evidence they yield but more importantly on the effect they have on future learning. High-quality assessments encourage further learning; low-quality assessments hinder learning (Black & Wiliams, 1998). Understanding the emotional dynamics of the assessment experience from the student's perspective is crucial to the effective use of assessments to improve schools. Students' thoughts and action regarding assessment results are at least as important as those of adults. The students' emotional reaction to results will determine what they do in response (Stiggins, 2002). Our current non-authentic and overused assessment system is harming many students and therefore defeating the purpose of the system to begin with; leaving no child behind. Stiggins (2002) compares our current high-stakes testing system to a dragon and writes, "some come to slay the dragon, while others expect to be devoured by it."

In fact, it was an Oaks teacher, who put the whole testing process into perspective with what Stiggins and others have found:

The problem we have in education today is that we don't want input from the children. We feel pressured with the input from the top with government.

And so we in turn inflict that pressure upon students. The important thing is

how you look at. Do we look at data as a panic button, a pressure point, or do we look at as that wedding ring with commitment?”

The data from quality assessments is necessary and can be used for change. But the assessments need to be improved. Multiple choice text-based assessments do not adequately measure what students know and can do (Kelly, McCain, & Jukes, 2009). Nor do these types of test measure the skills that are needed in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century (Kelly, McCain, & Jukes, 2009; Wagner, 2008). Today’s students need to be included in the big picture. By providing a place and process that allows students to examine their data and reflect on it beyond just the numbers, they will gain a better understanding of their learning. And as educators we must be committed to change our practice based upon what the data and the students say.

## Implications for Teacher Preparation Programs

The National Council for Accreditation for Teacher Education (NCATE) provides specific standards for teacher preparation programs. These standards include teacher knowledge of pedagogical skills of inquiry, critical analysis, and synthesis of content (NCATE, 2009). In addition to these skills, NCATE standards also address authentic teaching criteria through the use of real-world contexts (NCATE, 2009). Additional literature calls for the teaching of “21<sup>st</sup> Century” skills that include critical thinking, problem solving, collaboration, adaptability, initiative, oral and written communication, analysis, and curiosity and imagination (Wagner, 2007; Cristensen, 2008; McLeod, 2009). However, research reveals a professional dissonance with the transfer of these standards and skills to the classroom. Inquiry is not the predominant method of instruction (Parker, 2009; Wagner, 2007). Students work alone, rather than

collaboratively 93% of the time (Wagner, 2007). Instead of critical thinking and problem solving, students spend five times as much time on basic skills (Wagner, 2007). These findings were replicated in this study. 21<sup>st</sup> century skills were observed mainly in elective classes and in advisory classes.

This disconnect between what is taught and what is practiced suggests a need for more rigorous classroom experiences before teacher certification. After teachers are certified, then it falls to the administrators to maintain expectations that are in line with NCATE and state standards. Therefore instituting a system by which to ensure that the teacher preparation standards are in line with the on-site evaluation standards so that what is taught becomes more evident in classroom practice.

## Implications for School Practices

As school districts and individual school sites feel the pressure of high-stakes testing, leaders have made changes to school schedules in hopes of raising test scores. Many schools are “doubling” up on math and reading classes to give students extra time to invest in these tested content areas (Wagner, 2008). Students who perform low on these tests are expected to take remedial courses in place of elective courses. And yet, this study shows that the very classes that are being dismissed for the sake of testing, are the ones that enhance student voice along with the cognitive and emotional skills required for a commitment and self-efficacy towards the work required for the tests. Because of the pressure to increase test scores in reading and math, schools are doing away with advisory classes and elective classes. Even some middle schools, for which the basic tenets are built upon the importance of advisory and exploratory classes, have

fallen to the pressure of high-stakes testing and have eroded the very foundation of the middle school philosophy.

However, this study implies the importance of schools affording a time and place for students to participate in relevant discussions, to build quality relationships, and to share in the decision making process that affects their learning. Like Mrs. Smith, many teachers say they don't have time for these processes in the content classroom. This leads back to the importance of teacher preparation programs providing teachers with skills to integrate these skills into their every day practice. Until then, school leaders might want to rethink how they schedule their school days.

Educators also need to examine the authenticity of their instruction. They must make a concerted effort to connect student learning to real world issues and contexts. Schools need to be less insular and move the classroom walls to include a more global perspective (Kelly, McCain, & Jukes, 2009). Technology can be a tool that takes learning beyond the school day, place, and textbook. Instead of isolated authentic pockets of excellence, authentic lessons must become the expected norm.

Not only might school leaders want to reconsider their schedules, but the study indicates that they might also focus more attention on their conscientious efforts to build a climate or culture that supports student voice. Oaks Middle School chose to be a Great Expectations school. This commitment required hours of training and constant vigilance. As I often told visitors,

Great Expectations is not about what kind of students we have. We have all kinds of kids just like you. Great Expectations is about how the adults treat the students. It is a mind-set that acknowledges that as an individual, I choose to

be respectful even when treated with disrespect. That is why the first GE practice is, ‘The teacher models the desired behaviors.’ It begins and ends with the teacher attitude.

A school leader and faculty can say that they want to have a culture that reflects shared values, mutual respect, reflection, an appreciation for diversity and a commitment to equity, but unless they make a conscientious effort to work towards those things, a nurturing climate won’t happen. The development of social structures must be an important part of the school improvement plan. Leithwood’s (2003) research on leadership affirms this belief when he writes that leaders must develop not only the people, but also the vision and the organization. Unfortunately, he also writes that few principals are trained to do all three.

There are efforts currently in place to provide training that encompasses all three areas of leadership described by Leithwood (2003). Through a partnership between the university, public schools, private foundations and the state legislature, the K20 Center at the University of Oklahoma provides such leadership training. Through its leadership seminars, principals and superintendents receive authentic instruction in developing a vision for their school, developing the people through the understanding of CBAM and the process of inquiry and discourse, and also in developing the organization into a professional learning community. This program can serve as a model for administrative training at the university level. Another suggestion for change might include a requirement for administrator internships, much like the student teaching required for teacher certification. Experience with effective coaching might go far in preparing administrators for the rigorous demands of the profession.



Both teacher and administrative preparation programs could benefit from a university/state sponsored model schools. Such schools could provide actual classroom observations so that perspective teachers and/or administrators could see first-hand what authentic teaching and learning look and sound like. A model school could also serve as the site for internships as students work alongside veteran master teachers or administrators.

### Implications for Further Study

Because this study stems from my experiences with my teachers and students from one middle school, the findings may not generalize to other settings. However, the purpose of the study was not to generalize, but rather to better understand how various structures and processes enhance student voice. Even though that goal has been met, further study at other schools at different grade levels, would help to provide a better understanding beyond Oaks Middle School. Do the same processes work within other settings or structures? How can further educational research listen to and take into account the voices of students?

As I look back at the various aspects of this study, I finally realize that student voice is not only the topic for research, but may also be a partial solution to the problem. In fact, it was a researcher who asked, “What is the missing piece?” If teacher preparation programs are providing educators with the necessary skills, then why does research continue to show that practices such as inquiry and discourse and authentic teaching and assessment are not common in the classroom? For the answer, I believe that we need to look at the teacher evaluation system.

Current teacher evaluation systems require an administrator to observe veteran tenured teachers once a year. Most evaluation instruments include criteria that encompass the three components of the Community of Inquiry Framework (Henri, 1992; Garrison, Anderson & Archer, 2003). Teacher rapport falls within the setting component, instruction is a major criteria within both, and assignments and assessments criteria match up with the content component.

However, even though the instruments match up, I question the value and strength of an evaluation dependent upon one observation. I would suggest that teacher evaluation be extended to include those who are present in the classroom on a daily basis, the students. Using a business analogy, education would do well to listen more to their customers and their perceptions of satisfaction. Successful businesses regularly survey their customers and use the data from those surveys to constantly improve their service and/or product. Educational researchers are now calling for school leaders to do the same; listen to your customers (Wagner, 2008; Christensen, 2008; Kelly, McCain, & Jukes, 2009).

This study showed that when students were provided with detailed rubrics, they were able to self assess from the beginning to the end of a project. I would offer that students be provided with a rubric for teacher evaluation. The rubric would include the three areas outlined in the Community of Inquiry Framework (Henri, 1992; Garrison, Anderson & Archer, 2003) and use the structures and processes identified in this study as benchmarks.

|                                 |                      | <b>Advanced (3)</b>   | <b>Satisfactory (2)</b>  | <b>Needs Improvement (1)</b>   |
|---------------------------------|----------------------|---|--|--|
| <b>SETTING/<br/>CONTEXT</b>     | Culture              | The teacher meets satisfactory requirements plus expects all students to treat each other accordingly.  | The teacher treats all students fairly, appreciates the unique qualities of each student and helps all students be successful. | The teacher favors some students and seems satisfied when most students understand.                              |
|                                 | Adult Advocacy       | The teacher makes an effort to ask about my school and personal problems because he/she cares about me.   | The teacher helps me with school problems and personal problems if I ask him/her.  | The teacher helps me with the work in this class but does not get involved with other school or personal issues. |
|                                 | Student Identity     | I feel like a valued member of this class and look forward to being here.   | I feel safe and happy in this class and like it.   | I feel pressured, fearful, or angry in this class and do not want to be here.                                    |
| <b>CONTENT</b>                  | Authentic Lessons    | Lessons in this class are about real world issues that allow students to use multiple content skills in creative products.  | Lessons in this class are about real world issues that allow students to use content skills from this subject.                 | Lessons in this class consist mostly of worksheets, lectures and notes learned from a textbook.                  |
|                                 | Authentic Assessment | Using a rubric, learning is assessed by students or peers throughout projects for continuous improvement.   | Using a rubric, learning is assessed by the teacher for a final grade.   | Learning is assessed individually by multiple choice tests.  |
| <b>DISCOURSE/<br/>PROCESSES</b> | Inquiry & Discourse  | The teacher asks lots of questions and ensures that all students give input.  | The teacher asks lots of questions and mostly calls on students who raise their hand.  | The teacher tells students what they need to know and discourages questions and discussion.                      |
|                                 | Active Listening     | The teacher listens to students without interrupting or judgment. He repeats what we say for clarity or emphasis and often changes his actions or beliefs based upon what we say. | The teacher listens without interrupting or judgment and repeats what we say for clarity or emphasis.                          | The teacher either criticizes what we say or does not respond before going on to the next question.              |
|                                 | D3M                  | The teacher sets instructional and learning goals with us based upon our data and discussion.   | The teacher has us set personal learning goals based on our data and discussion.   | We seldom talk about what we have learned or what we plan to learn.  |

Table 8: Student Rubric for Teacher Evaluation

Students are the only ones who know if the behaviors listed in the above table are practiced on a daily basis.

I realize that teacher evaluation is often regulated by teacher/district negotiated agreements and guarded closely by teacher unions. However, I do know that good teachers already incorporate some sort of student evaluation as part of their personal growth plans. In this study I heard several teachers talk about using student feedback to improve their practice. Perhaps, instead of letting student evaluation of teacher practice be part of the formal evaluation system, school leaders might use student input for individual growth plans. Accountability for this process could be provided through the addition of one more category to the formal evaluation instrument. This addition could be labeled “Personal Growth”, and could require that teachers develop an annual growth plan with input from students, administration, and personal reflection on data. This allows teachers to maintain their voice gained through professional learning community practice, but also ensure that their practice is really meeting the needs of all stakeholders, thus maintaining alignment with the foundational beliefs of a PLC. Further research could investigate the possibilities of adding a parent rubric for additional input for teacher reflection and growth.

Boren (2009) reminds all of us, researchers and practitioners, that understanding is part of the learning cycle, and as such comes only after first an awareness of fact, followed by reflection upon that fact as it relates to one’s own experiences. My wish is that this study has shed some light on what was real for the participants of this narrative

and that it lead others through a process of self reflection and further research for the betterment of the common good.

The sound of the front door opening and my husband calling out to me, jar me from what has been a much needed nap. However, as I pull my chair to an upright position, I mentally cling to the lessons revealed in slumber. Reaching for my laptop that lays in constant readiness by my chair, I call out “Hello” to my husband and then begin a new word document and type, “Structures and Processes to Enhance Student Voice.”

## Appendix A: Methodology

### Sentimental Journey or Scholarly Research

As I sit here reflecting upon how my choice of methodology unfolded, I recall a particular day in a qualitative research class. By that time, our cohort of PhD students had spent two semesters together, yet we were each still jockeying for position within the class. Some spoke out with assurance, while others were still timid in voicing opinions. I kind of walked a balance between the two. Although not afraid to speak my mind, there were still many times when I felt like I was in over my head and just kept quiet for fear of being discovered as unworthy. Those old ghosts of childhood still hovered around the edges.

The class was taught by Dr. Vaughn who is much like a work of modern abstract art being viewed by a critic who is used to realistic art where a house is a house and a tree is easily recognized as a tree. Although the critic is attracted by the surface beauties of the work, he remains confused by the many elements that lay hidden through metaphors of abstract shapes, colors, and lines. At this moment, I was still lost in the details.

“All right you guys, we’ve been talking about naturalism and epistemological underpinnings and how it all relates to different methodological approaches, so I’ve sent you all Dan’s dissertation. It’s an autobiography and from the naturalistic viewpoint is...” Dr. Vaughn had been rambling for most of the morning talking about positivism, post-positivism, truth with a capital “T”, epistemology, axiology, and ontology until my brain was swimming trying to make sense of all of these “ologies.” But being the good student that I was, I opened up the document and began to read.

During lunch break I couldn't wait to question a fellow student about what we had read. "Well, what did you think about Dan's dissertation?" I was not willing to offer my opinion first, still feeling like I didn't have a good enough understanding to make any judgments.

"What a bunch of crap! All I saw was some guy writing about how he went to school and learned. Although a sentimental journey, I certainly don't see how that counts as scholarly research! I mean, where was the problem, the literature review, the theoretical framework? I didn't get it!"

Boy, was I relieved, because I didn't get it either. And quite frankly, it would be many months before I even began to have a grasp on the depth of scholarship interwoven into many of the more arts-based methodologies such as autobiography, fictive narratives, auto-ethnography, and narrative inquiry. How could the telling of stories be considered sound research?

## Research Question

As I struggled with this question of methodologies, I also began to formulate my research topic. Because of basic values that I brought to my studies about democracy and equity, my interests focused more and more on the importance of student voice within the educational system and how schools can increase participation for all students while also enhancing decision making skills, both of which might increase the effectiveness of student voice. This study, therefore, asks two questions:

1. How can schools provide structures that provide opportunities for all students to participate in decisions and events that affect their learning?

2. How can teachers increase student decision-making as part of every day instruction so that student voice is more effective?

This study examines the processes that enhance student voice along with the structures that provide opportunities for students to express their voice. In light of the study's purpose, this section will clearly describe the methodological approaches used for this research and will explain why those methods were chosen.

### The Site

The data was collected from a single exemplary middle school, referred to as Oaks Middle School. Narrative inquiry works well when there is a small sample such as data from one school (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). The actual school is comprised of approximately 350 sixth and seventh grade students of diverse ethnic background with 61% Caucasian, 21% Native American, 6% African American, and 12% Hispanic. Over seventy percent of the students are eligible for the free and reduced lunch program. The staff includes 25 certified teachers, one principal, and two teacher assistants.

Oaks Middle School is exemplary from several perspectives. It has been named a model school for the Great Expectations program for the previous four years. Great Expectations is a program that holds as its core values a climate of mutual respect and high expectations for all. It encompasses seventeen classroom practices that must be implemented daily by all staff members as judged by an outside evaluation in order to be eligible for model status. The school was also recognized by the National Secondary Schools Association as one of 100 highly successful middle schools in America. As an exemplary school, Oaks Middle School has served as a host school for site visits by



over a dozen school districts, a research team from a major university, and the state's Governor and Lieutenant Governor. Oaks Middle School has been included in three documentary films by different organizations. The school site has been the subject of three previous research studies. Sarah Lightfoot, (1999) noted educator, said that we must "describe things that work, define education at its best, document its subtleties and complexities, so that others may feel inspired." Oaks Middle School was chosen for the former studies as well as for this study for that very reason. Schools must document and share their successes with others (Bernhardt, 2005). Oaks Middle School was chosen for that very reason.

The teachers of Oaks Middle School have been through the change from a traditional school to a Professional Learning Community. They have experienced having the authority to voice an opinion without having the skills for critical reflection. In the first year of implementation of the PLC model, teachers were given data about student achievement for the previous school year. The data showed a significant gap between achievement for Native American students and Caucasian students. The data also showed a discrepancy between scores for low socio-economic and high socio-economic students. When faced with these facts, the teachers immediately became defensive, placing blame on the parents instead of looking at instructional practices. This defensiveness resulted in goals for the year that were directed at parent involvement and student attendance. Although these are worthy goals, the teachers used them as a diversion tool to direct attention off of them and their practice to an outside source. It was not until the principal began to teach and model the process of data-driven decision making that included self-reflection against what research says is

effective practice, that teachers were able to affect change in student achievement. It took two years, but through steady progress and commitment to the process, the time came when the school was able to celebrate a closing of the achievement gap between Native American students and Caucasian and a narrowing of the gap between socio-economic groups.

When this study began, teachers had experienced enough success with the process to be willing to try it with students. They were also close enough to the beginnings of their own process to remember how they reacted and were ready for the same type of initial responses from students.

Students observed ranged in ability from learning disabled to advanced learners. Students and teachers were from different classes including math and language arts classes, one elective technology class, and two advisory classes. The math classes included were one Pre-Ap or advanced class, two were average ability classes, and one was an inclusion class made up of both average and special education students. The inclusion class was team taught with the special education resource teacher. The language arts classes included both 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> grade classes that ranged from advanced to regular level students. The advisory classes were assigned homeroom classes where small groups of 12 to 15 students interact with the teacher and each other to discuss relevant issues such as traits of good character, how to study, as well as just sharing of personal concerns, joys and goals. The technology class was a 7<sup>th</sup> grade class where students use technology to produce multimedia communications around topics ranging from core class concepts to public service announcements to personal music videos. All of the classes reflected the demographics of the school at large.

During the year of the study the classroom teachers had been directed by the district superintendent to use various data sources with the students but had not provided any training on how to implement it. The superintendent had served on state site visits to at-risk schools and had decided to take a proactive approach by implementing the essentials of effective schools as outlined for school improvement. One of those correlates included the gathering and analyzing of data by students during class time (OSDE, 2005). Because the teachers at Oaks Middle School had a long history of using data within their teacher team meetings as part of a professional learning community, it was a natural transference for them to take what had been successful at the teacher level and try it with their students. Such risk taking is encouraged within a professional learning community. The former principal had supported the process through her frequent visits into all of the classrooms and the subsequent posting of what data use was evident. The current principal, who was in his first year of administration during the last year of the study, continued to support the teachers' efforts by allowing them to take the lead in applying the data-driven decision making process to classroom instruction.

## Data Collection

Data for the study was subsequently collected from classroom observations, teacher interviews, classroom charts and graphs, administrative documents and student journals over a one year period. The data table below itemizes the data sets:

|  | Observations                            | Interviews | Student Journals | School Documents  |
|--|---|------------|------------------|---|
| Teacher #1:<br>6 <sup>th</sup> math                | 2                                       | X          | 32               | Classroom charts & graphs   |
| Teacher #2:<br>7 <sup>th</sup> lang. arts          | 2                                       | X          | 24               |   |
| Teacher #3:<br>6 <sup>th</sup> lang. arts/advisory | 4                                       | X          | 25               |   |
| Teacher #4:<br>6-7 <sup>th</sup> elective/advisory | 6                                       | X          | 42               |   |
| Teacher #5:<br>6-7 <sup>th</sup> math              | 2                                       |            | 22               |   |
| Teacher #6:<br>6-7 <sup>th</sup> science/advisory  | 1                                       |            | 22               |   |
| Teacher #7:<br>Counselor                           |   | X          |                  |   |
| Researcher   | Hallways Assemblies<br>Lunch Team Mtgs. |            |                  | Faculty mtg.agendas (29) student survey results (2) staff dev. plans (3) teacher handbook, student handbook, Student achievement Data: 2008, 2007, 2006, 2005, 2004 |
| TOTAL  | 17                                      | 5          | 167              |   |

Table 9: Data Sets

By gathering data from a variety of grades, and subjects (both core and elective), and from multiple student sources, I was able to obtain a cross section of the voices at Oaks Middle School.

Because I had been the former principal at the site, problems of potential bias had to be accounted for in the methodological design. Such bias was lessened by my

on-going presence in classrooms and by my visibility within the community over the years. Students and teachers were used to having me step into the room for varied amounts of time. The data came from multiple school artifacts, documents, and student journals that were all a natural part of the classroom. By using these multiple data sources, strengths are increased and weaknesses are overcome (Yin, 2003). For example, a weakness of observations is the possibility that the observer might be biased and that the participants might react differently when being watched. However, when observations are combined with the data from 167 journals entries, these weaknesses are overcome by the journals strengths of being unobtrusive, making reactive and investigator effects very unlikely (Tashakorri & Beddlie, 2005). Likewise, the strengths of an observation's ability to tell what participants actually do, as opposed to what they say they do, helps to negate the weakness of the journal entries' incompleteness or interpretive validity. The qualitative interviews provided the needed time to ask probing questions that would yield more in-depth information. Thus, by considering the strengths and weaknesses of each data set, I was able to uphold the integrity of the data strategies so that the reader could have confidence in the findings (Tashakorri & Teddlie, 2005).

### Narrative Inquiry Defined

With research questions in mind and a site to study, I began to investigate several methodologies, trying to find the best fit, critically reflecting upon each as to its congruence with the purpose of the study. As each methodology was investigated, I also reflected upon issues of trustworthiness and transferability. With strong guidance by my dissertation committee, I finally chose narrative inquiry as the methodology of

best fit. The purpose of this section is to clearly describe what narrative inquiry is and explain why it was chosen.

Just as the two words indicate, narrative inquiry is the act of making inquiries, asking questions, within the context of telling and retelling narratives or stories. These stories belong to participants in the educational world as they learn and teach. The stories show the different lives, their actions, the values, attitudes, beliefs, social systems, institutions, and structures and how they are linked to the learning (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). This linking of characters to place, conflict and action mirrors the elements of short stories. Yet narrative inquiry is more than just a story.

## Data Analysis

Narrative inquiry requires the researcher to continuously engage in critical reflection about the stories collected (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Ellis, 2004; Leavy, 2009). This reflection takes places as both an inward/outward and forward/backward act (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Based upon Dewey's (1938) belief that all experience is both personal and social, narrative inquiry holds that people can only be understood in relation within a social context. As I collected stories from the field, I was constantly comparing them to my own beliefs (inward) as well as against the values of the participants themselves and current theory (outward). This process is similar to what Merriam (1998) refers to as constant comparative analysis. I used response teams of teachers to maintain validity. After each observation I sent my typed field notes to the teacher to ensure that what I had written and interpreted connected with what they remembered happening and with how they interpreted those experiences. While I was not observing classrooms, I met with

teachers during their team times to discuss what my findings so far and get their feedback and thoughts. I discussed interpretations about methodology, theory, data analysis, and process with colleagues. This member checking provided collaborative reflection and building of knowledge that is central to narrative inquiry and connects to Dewey's theory of knowledge being both personal and social.

Dewey also wrote that experience is temporal in that it grows out of past experiences and leads to future experiences. "There is always a history, it is always changing, and it is always going somewhere" (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). As the researcher, I constantly compared what I saw and recorded with my own past experiences and knowledge as well as with the past stories from the participants. I searched for patterns and connections between the present and the past that might yield new understanding of the social context.

One of the purposes of narrative inquiry is to develop a better understanding of not only the social context but also of the self, the researcher, me (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Leavy, 2009; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). When the inside/backward reflections became overwhelming, which they did on some occasions, I found it necessary to seek reflective partners to aide in my understandings.

Such an incident occurred in the very beginning when I entered Dr. Vaughn's office with the first of my stories typed up, stapled together, and held firmly in my lap. As I began to explain my understanding of the necessity of reflecting inward and background as a way of making connections with the participants of the study, I felt my throat tightening as my emotions came to the surface. I closed the door, and poured out my heart about my struggle for voice as a student growing up poor in rural Oklahoma.

“You know, Sharon, that this whole voice thing is about power, and you are still struggling with it even though you think it was over years ago. I use openness to maintain power. You can’t talk about me if I have already said it. Where you, on the other hand, deal with it by not talking about it. But now that you have to discuss it as part of your paper, you are just now dealing with it. I really believe that our pain leads us to a better understanding.” She continued to share some of her past experiences and together we were able to help me work through this new sense of vulnerability.

And what understanding did I get from that inward/outward, backward/forward reflection session? Even though I had read in several books that the researcher needs to be cognizant of the emotions and values that participants bring to the experience or study (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Lincoln & Guba, 1985), it was not until I actually went through it myself, that I can now say that I really understand it. This experience also helped me to realize how a person can feel threatened when confronted with data, whether in the form of numbers or stories, that are revealing of their personal lives. Yet, rather than to stay in that state of threat and fear, I have to look outside of myself for the answers. This collaboration that leads to understanding is also central to narrative inquiry.

Lastly, it is important to note that the stories that make up a narrative inquiry are just that. They are stories; they are not the actual event. The stories stand as virtual realities, metaphors for the real thing (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Leavy, 2009). It is similar to taking a photograph or painting a picture. The picture is just a representation of the real person. Yet, when viewed by an audience, we hear such comments as “It looks just like her. It looks so real.” The whole idea of reality and truth becomes a



major issue in trustworthiness. Instead of asking if the narrative is true and real, Clandinin and Connelly (2000) write that the test of trustworthiness should be in asking, “does the story or narrative seem like it could have happened?” Because every experience is perceived differently by each person who shares in it and in the telling and retelling of it, the story can take on various appearances. Yet each is “real” to every person when it appears or seems to approximate the actual original experience from the perspective of all participants. Member checking provides this confirmation.

### Voice Defined

And so, knowing what narrative inquiry is, I have the responsibility to determine if it is the best methodology for the study of student voice. If narrative inquiry is to lead to deeper understandings made through connections between the knower and the known, then I need to take this time to share what I currently know about voice, particularly student voice. Student voice is more than physical vocalizations. Student voice is any activity in which students exercise any degree of control or communicate their feelings (Richardson, 2001; Rogers, 2005). Voice is associated with empowerment when students are given input into any decision that affects them and their learning (Rogers, 2005). Voice is a layered issue that encompasses both ability and participation (Branson, 2004). In schools, voice becomes an issue of distribution of power and status (Richardson, 2001) as decisions are made about who gets to speak and whose ideas are accepted and acted upon (Richardson, 2001). In a democratic society each individual retains the right to choose where, when, and how he wishes to participate (Branson, 2004). However, that decision is altered in part by the person’s ability to participate.

Basically, a student has three choices: not to participate, participate without effect, or participate effectively (Branson, 2004).

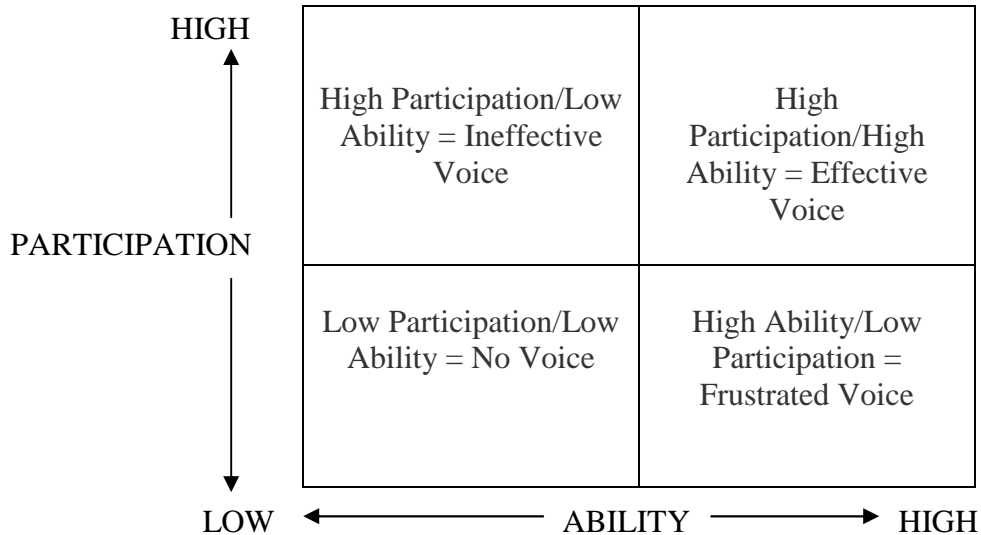


Table 10: Democratic Student Voice Matrix

The matrix above shows the relationship between ability and participation. The effectiveness of one side of the matrix depends upon the effectiveness of the other side. For example, students who have little decision making ability and also have few opportunities to make decisions or to participate, have less effective voice. These students are disengaged. Moving up the ability continuum, students with high ability but who are not provided opportunities to participate become frustrated and will either rebel or also become disengaged in the academic world yet will seek out other realms where their voice ability is welcomed. On the other side of the matrix, opportunities are increased, but voice is still ineffective when abilities are low. All of the opportunities in the world will not empower students who do not have decision making skills because their voice will not be considered as valid. The optimum area for effective voice comes

when both ability and skill are high. The student has strong decision making skills and is empowered when their ideas find opportunities for participation.

## Congruency of Voice and Narrative Inquiry

From this definition of effective voice, I now move into the beginning argument for congruence of research purpose to methodology. Because all research methods are housed under certain philosophical or theoretical perspectives, each of which illuminates a different aspect of human action necessary for a complete understanding (Mertens, 2005), it is important to address issues of compatibility or congruence of method to those perspectives. During the process of critical reflection, I began to find multiple connections between the dichotomy of effective voice and that of the ontological basis for narrative inquiry. These connections were not present in the beginning but unfolded along with the stories as I journaled and made notes to myself about my own learning process.

Narrative inquiry requires that the researcher (self) must interact with the participants (social) in order to build an effective (trustworthy) voice for the research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Clandinin & Connelly, 2004). Because narrative inquiry carries with it the need to balance the telling of the voice of the researcher with those of the participants (Clandinin & Connelly, 2004; Leavy, 2009; Lincoln & Guba, 1985), we see again the inward/outward points of reflection. This relationship of self/social, inward/outward, mirrors that of student voice as the researcher (self) interacts with the participants (social) to validate the written narrative. Just like in a democracy, the issue of voice becomes a balancing act as voices of individuals are given equitable access to

opportunities that affect both the individual and the social. This balance becomes one of power through voice.

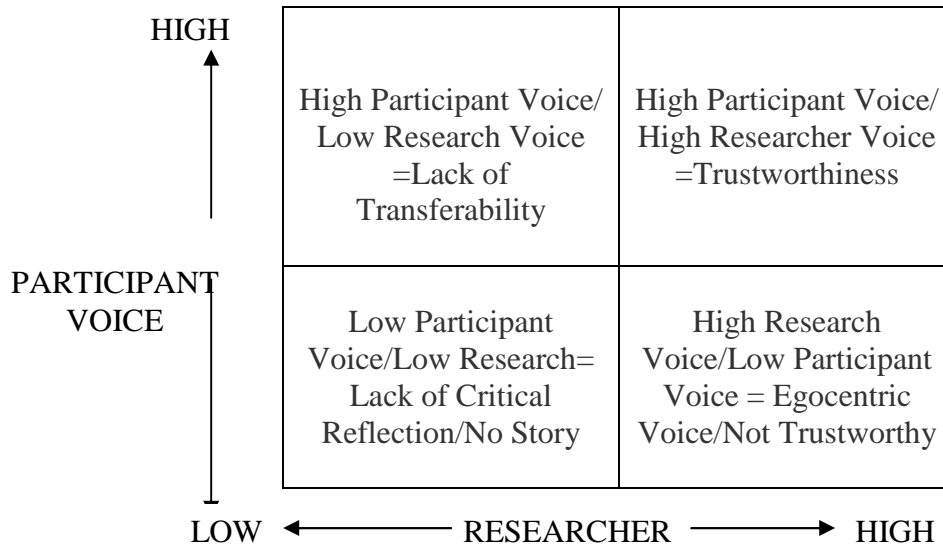


Table 11: Researcher/Participant Matrix

The congruence of methodology continues as I compare the basis of narrative inquiry to that of not only voice and ontology, but also across the realms of axiology, epistemology, process, and personal resonance. Lincoln & Guba (1985) propose this resonance or congruency as a test of trustworthiness. They argue that the extent to which personal values, axioms, theories, philosophical underpinnings and methodology align, the research will produce findings and interpretations that are agreeable and trustworthy. Through critical reflection I came up with the congruency chart below.

| <b>Narrative Inquiry</b>           | <b>Axiology/<br/>Democracy</b>             | <b>Ontology/<br/>Multiple Truths</b> | <b>Epistemology/<br/>Relation of knower to known</b> | <b>Process/<br/>Critical Reflection</b> | <b>Authenticity/<br/>Arts Based Format</b>               |
|------------------------------------|--|--------------------------------------|--|---|--|
| Research Voice (Self/Inward)       | Pursuit of happiness (Self/Inward)         | Knowledge as known to self           | Values of researcher made known                      | Self Reflection (Inward)                | Resonance with who I am (self)                           |
| Participant Voice (Social/Outward) | Well being of common good (social/outward) | Knowledge constructed by group       | Interaction between researcher and participants      | Collaborative Reflection (Outward)      | Metaphors with multiple meanings by participant (social) |

Table 12: Methodology/Philosophical Underpinning Congruency Chart

Picking up the comparison with the third column, I again find strong congruence between the epistemology, the relationship of the knower to the known, and the narrative inquiry methodology. Narrative inquiry seeks to tell the stories of all participants, including the researcher. One of the my greatest dilemmas continues to be how to write the stories so that I express my own voice in the midst of an inquiry designed to tell the participants' experiences and to represent their voices, all the while also attempting to create a text that will speak to and reflect upon the audiences voices (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This multiplicity of voice is further complicated by the fact that each participant brings multiple voices to the experience (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). As the researcher I can and do speak through my student voice, my teacher voice, my administrator voice, and my human voice. And then as I re-read and edit what I have written, I take on the voice of the reader. The balance that is to be maintained comes from the inward/outward reflection on my part. When I reflect outward, I step back from my personal involvement and see the stories from a larger perspective. This

distancing during the reflection process decreases the risk of becoming so involved that I lose objectivity (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). As a researcher in a narrative inquiry, I walk a thin line, balancing my involvement with my objectivity so that I remain close enough to truly understand the lives explored yet moving away enough to be objective. This ability to move between intimacy with field participants and a reflective stance (inward/outward) allows me to honestly interact with teachers and students that I have known and worked with for years yet stay aware of my responsibilities as a researcher.

With these understandings of the study and the philosophical underpinnings that accompany the study, I decide to use the process of critical reflection to guide my actions. Critical reflection is a step in Reeves (2003) process of data-driven decision making: An observation of immediate or concrete experiences, critical reflections upon those observations, production of new implications for action, and actively testing the new assumptions. These steps are cyclical in that the fourth step on testing new assumptions creates new experiences that can be observed. I see a strong connection between these four steps and Dewey's theory of learning as social and temporal. With an emphasis on plurality, these strategies also embrace the issue of the multiplicity of voices represented in the study.

The experiences that come into play in step one of Reeve's cycle are stories or events that Dewey spoke of as being formed by previous experiences and leading to future experiences. These experiences cause us to raise questions about why and how and what if. The learning that comes from these experiences is derived through inward dialogue with the self as comparisons are made against previous knowledge as well as through outward dialogue with participants who were part of the experience. This

dialogic process creates a synergistic communication between and among participants (Russell & Kelly, 2002). Together the members of the group practice individual as well as group reflexivity. Reflexivity is defined as the “honoring of oneself and others in our work through an awareness of the relational nature” of the experience (Russell & Kelly, 2002). Through the use of response teams, I worked with participants to examine stories and interpretations, allowing all members to offer their own interpretations. This process not only adds to the overall quality of the findings, but often the participants discover new insights into the experiences. As humans caught up in the day-to-day living, we sometimes fail to notice the changes that are occurring right before our eyes. By engaging in conversations throughout the experience, participants have the opportunity to disengage from the event and partake in outward reflection. When a team is working well, all members attend to their own reflexivity while simultaneously serve as checks on one another’s reflexivity (Russell & Kelley, 2003). We keep each other honest. Through this process of give and take, all members have the voices honored as they see their contribution adding to the generation of new knowledge that is included in the writing of the paper.

This team approach was important during all stages of the study. As I struggled with the formulation of the research questions, I talked to the teachers in the study, to fellow students, and to various members of my committee. I listened to conversations by students in school. I discussed the issues surrounding the study; the issues of democracy, student voice, equity, and decision making until we all seemed satisfied that my questions focused the study on the important factors of structures for opportunity to participate in decisions and abilities to participate effectively in decisions. The first

question addresses the democratic value of collaboration, while the second leans more toward the value of equality.

## The Researcher

By staying in the field throughout the study, I was able to follow the experiential learning cycle from beginning to end. As new experiences surfaced, I was able to sit and visit, take notes, compare ideas, reflect, take more notes, and begin again.

Critical reflection comes quite naturally to me, but like all of the aspects of the study, I have gained a much deeper understanding of the process. Throughout my educational career, I have practiced critical reflection. When confronted with a puzzling or surprising situation, I wrote about it in the form of letters, stories, poems or drawings.

During the process of reflexivity, I went back to the boxes of files that I had brought home when I left as principal of the school. Like most teachers, I had saved every card, note, and picture. I had also saved what I had written during troubling times. There was the poem I had written for a faculty meeting when I tried to help teachers understand the importance of seeing every child as worth saving. There was the short poem, “Snap Shots,” that I had written for the technology communications teacher who was questioning how she fit into the big picture. There were funny remakes on the “Night Before Christmas” in which we all gained a better perspective of the need for purchase orders. And then there were several poems that simply expressed gratitude for the many contributions that teachers make every day. I had saved them all and some I have chosen to include in the final writing of this study. They are not only



part of my story but played a role in developing the bigger story of the study. Multiple voices from multiple participants produce multiple truths.

Narrative inquiry gives the researcher free reign to use such poetic license; which brings me to the final column in the congruency chart (Leavy, 2009). Narrative inquiry resonates with who I am. Besides being the researcher, the student, the principal or the teacher, I am an artist. I paint pictures. I sculpt. I write. Although art is my passion, not my job, narrative inquiry as a form of arts-based methodology (Leavy, 2009) is personally a more authentic method of relating the findings. There has been a dissonance between my researcher identity and my artist identity. Through the process of reflection, I have been led back to who I am and the relationship with my work.

Yet, through the undertaking of this research, I have also come to the conclusions that art is much like narrative inquiry in that it encompasses the use of metaphors which allow the viewer or reader to add her own meaning or interpretation to the project. The arts often jar people into seeing things differently, to transcend differences, and to foster new connections (Leavy, 2009) Grounded in exploration, revelation, and representation, art advances human understanding at levels that surpass intellectual but touch our emotional ties to larger issues of love, death, power, and hope (Leavy, 2009). Leavy goes on to explain how arts-based research also is useful in raising awareness for giving voice to subjugated perspectives. Arts-based research is particularly useful for research projects that aim to describe, explore or discover processes that mirror the unfolding nature of social life. For me, narrative inquiry allows me to access marginalized voices of students, engage in reflexive practice, open

my findings up to a public discourse, while at the same time practice who I am. This all leads to further compatibility between the research, the researcher and the method.

## Procedures

The summer before the study began, I filed for and received approval from the Office for Human Research Participant Protection for an IRB.

At the beginning of the school year, I scheduled a meeting with the new principal and explained my research and provided a letter of consent along with a statement of the purpose of the study. I asked permission to schedule a time to meet with teachers to explain the study and obtain teacher consent. I also asked for permissions to meet with parents and students to also explain the study to them and get parental and student consent.

I met with teachers during their team times and received one hundred percent of the consent forms returned. I left a sign up poster for teachers to schedule observations times for every Friday during the first semester. Teachers were asked to give their name and the hour or hours in which I would be invited to observe. Each Friday when I arrived at the school, I checked the poster for invitations. Several teachers gave a “standing invitation” to observe any time. I therefore always had classrooms to visit.

Even though all teachers signed consent forms, only seven ever signed up to be observed. The process of signing up freed most from feeling like they had to live up to any preconceived expectations from me. Even though I was no longer the principal, I think that most of them still looked at me from a hierarchal perspective.

Between classroom observations, I also walked the halls observing student work and school materials posted throughout the buildings. Sometimes I just sat in the office

helping the secretary answer phones and assist students and parents as they came in. It was nice to be there in a role other than the principal. I was able to see the daily happenings from the view of an outsider with insider knowledge; that inward/outward narrative thing again.

I originally met with parents during the back to school night. After a short power-point detailing the purpose of the study and the activities that would be involved, I again had one hundred percent consent. Parents knew me from my past position as principal or as their former teacher; they trusted me.

The study was explained to students during a morning assembly. A shortened version of the power-point in kid friendly terms was used to explain the research. Students were told that even though their parents had signed consent forms, they had the right to not participate, but again, they all did.

Toward the end of the first semester, I selected three of the teachers and the school counselor for follow-up interviews. Based upon what I had seen and heard in classrooms, I conducted open-ended interviews with each of the four. The school counselor was interviewed for her whole school perspective. Each of the interview participants had been at Oaks Middle School since its opening and therefore was able to reflect back on the changes that had taken place both personally and within the school.

At the end of the third quarter, I asked for student journals to be collected and turned in. All student names were removed by the teachers before they turned them over to me. All I knew was what teacher they came from, the grade level, and the class.

All of the interviews, field notes, and journals were transcribed and put into secure files on my laptop. As I transcribed each, I constantly reflected on what I typed,

thinking about connections between what I was typing and what I had heard and seen and remembered from other places and times. By staying in tune with the three issues of temporality, place, and sociality (Clandinin, Pushor, and Orr, 2007), I tried to stay faithful to the components of narrative inquiry methodology. Temporality reminded me to always look at events as a process, not just as an event void of time. Sociality kept me in tune to personal conditions such as the feelings of all participants as well as the surrounding factors and forces. Finally, the issue of place required me to think about the impact of each classroom on the experience. In this way, I was able to draw deeply upon the process of analysis found within narrative inquiry.

## Issues of Trustworthiness

The success of any research study must be linked to the research purpose and questions and how well it communicates the research findings (Leavy, 2009). In conducting arts-based research such as narrative inquiry, the researcher needs to pay attention to not only the rules and traditions of qualitative research but also to the artistic craft they are adapting (Leavy, 2009). Credibility and transferability are two rules or traditions for ensuring the quality and trustworthiness in qualitative research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

## Credibility

Credibility ensures that the study reflects the experiences of those studied. The extended time spent in the field and the level of engagement by myself as the researcher strengthens my ability to portray the natural day to day lives of the participants and their experiences. Clandinin and Connelley (2000) refer to the ability of the researcher to

intimately join in the narrative long enough to be able to truly grasp the many threads of events as they intertwine. As the researcher, I was constantly aware of the selection of which stories to tell and which ones to not tell, realizing that the stories not told are also part of the total narrative experience. These stories not told are similar to the negative space created in art. Negative space, although not the object emphasized in the final production, still surrounds and helps to shape the quality of the art. As such, artists and narrative inquirers must always be alert to the impact of untold negative space (Leavy, 2009). Credibility is aided when the researcher reveals this selection process, the possible alternative stories, and other limitations (Clandinin and Connelley, 2000).

Credibility also speaks to a reductionist believe in one truth. Because narrative inquiry is grounded in the ontological believe of multiple truths, it is impossible to ascertain the certainty of any real truth. As Clandinin and Connelley write, “emotion, value, felt experience with the world, memory, and narrative explanations of one’s past do not stand still in a way that allows for certainty” (p. 37).

There is no certainty in experience. Because experience is ever changing, our learning brings a new lens to each experience and thus exposes new learnings or truths.

## Transferability

Transferability asks if the findings of this study apply to other contexts. Narrative inquiry style is free from much of the academic jargon, presenting a representation that can be shared with diverse audiences, expanding the effect of scholarly research to more effectively serve the public good. Ketelle (2004) advises the narrative inquirer to

“Take the readers in hand, take them where you’ve been, tell them what you’ve seen, give them stories you’ve heard. Most of all, write for them, the ordinary folks out there” (p 452).

Although a narrative inquiry may contribute to the development of a theoretical framework and associated literature, in this case the impact of Dewey’s personal/social nature of democracy on student voice, it is not intended for replication (Clandinin & Connelley, 2000). The narrative inquiry instead seeks to offer readers a “place to imagine their own uses and applications” (p 42) through a vicarious testing of possibilities exposed in the research (Clandinin & Connelley, 2000).

### Artistic Craft

Faulkner (2005) warns that researchers who come to arts-based methods must not assume that they can “dabble” in an art form such as poetry or story telling without any research into the discipline. As a former language arts teacher I have a background in writing which aided me in the formation of plot, conflict, and character. I consciously worked to intertwine the facts from the data sources into the elements of short story to provide a seamless representation. My art background also helped me in the reflective process as I worked to make connections between theory and experiences. The arts are based on the use of metaphors of color, shapes, words, or musical notes as a means of communicating feelings, values, and emotions. The more effective these artistic aspects are, the more likely the artist is to affect audiences in their intended ways. This audience affect necessitated the use of cross-discipline collaboration, reflective teams both from within the site and from the research world. Multiple drafts

were sent to writing experts, seeking advice on writing flow and character and plot development.

The tensions that are created by the constant balancing of artistic craft and rules and traditions are what constitute narrative thinking. Just as narrative inquiry requires the researcher to move back and forth between self and social interpretations, between past, present and future times, I have also made that conscious effort to be aware of both the artistic and research aspects of the study. When I first read that the narratives researcher's experience is always a dual one (Clandinin & Connelley, 2000), I soon realized that this duality would be experienced at multiple levels. The study has created in me a greater understanding of the connections between the personal and social nature of democracy, the personal and social nature of voice, the personal and social nature of narrative inquiry, and the artistic and rationalistic nature of research.

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