

**TRANSFORMING THE SCHOOL REFORM AGENDA:
A FRAMEWORK FOR INCLUDING STUDENT VOICE
IN URBAN SCHOOL RENEWAL**

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Abstract

This article advances a framework for educators to create pathways to elicit students' diverse perspectives as qualitative data sources in the process of urban school renewal. Elements of the framework are discussed in conjunction with relevant research and findings from videotaped interviews with elementary (n = 144) and secondary (n = 28) students. Examples are shared through web links to two documentary short films co-produced by the authors that feature authentic student voices sharing their unique perspectives within urban public school contexts. Listening to students enables educators and other adults who work in urban schools to reflect on their beliefs and practices, and to engage students in organized public engagement and decision-making as members of school committees. If educators are to support the academic and affective development of all learners within a positive school culture, listening to students share their stories must be as important as analyzing quantitative measures such as standardized assessment results.

Keywords: student voice, qualitative methods, urban school renewal

You know, students, teachers, and administrators, they are part of us as we work together in the school. So we all have to have the type of understanding of what we might say before we accomplish the work. –David, High School Senior

David attended an urban public high school in the Midwestern United States when he shared his story as part of the documentary film project titled, *What Teens Love & Hate about School* that explored students' attitudes and learning experiences within urban high schools (Friend, Caruthers, & Riggs, 2011). The results of these interviews suggested that the students

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wanted “caring teachers who listen attentively, provide engaging learning opportunities, and who demonstrate high expectations for achievement” (Friend & Caruthers, 2012, p. 366). This use of film as a form of arts-based, qualitative inquiry (see Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Friend & Militello, 2014) produced compelling insights into the students’ perceptions of teaching and learning practices, in addition to conveying their views about the culture and climate of their schools. Yet, the work of educational researchers and policymakers seeking to *reform* urban schools relies mainly on statistical data and hypotheses created by privileged outsiders (see Banks, 1998). Researchers use methods that “often fail to acknowledge the cultural assumptions that undergird the methodologies employed” (Blanchett & Zion, 2011, p. 24). Kytle and Bogotch (2014) identified five national reform models, including Accelerated Schools, Coalition of Essential Schools, Comer’s School Development Project, Effective Schools, and Success for All as widely used by educators. Yet, none of these address student voice as a significant element of school reform and as a qualitative data source, overlooking the affective link in school reform (Cook-Sather, 2006; Fletcher, 2005; Holfve-Sabel, 2006; Mitra & Gross, 2009; Rubin & Silva, 2003).

Hence, there is more to the story of urban schools, and the key to unlocking these stories is within the students who attend them. James (2007) argued that the illumination of the complexities of this process “enables illustration of the necessary and ongoing relationship between structure and agency, a core theoretical issue of sociological concern” (p. 267). In other words, “giving voice to children is not simply or only about letting children speak; it is about exploring the unique contribution to our understanding of and theorizing about the social world that children’s perspectives can provide” (p. 262) which points to a number of problems regarding practice. The first is authenticity raising such questions as: “What is the risk that children’s voices may be employed simply to confirm established prejudices rather than to present new insights based on children’s own perspectives as social actors” (p. 262)? The second highlights the danger of “glossing over the diversity of children’s own lives and experiences” (p. 262), failing to see their uniqueness as well as their collective experiences as children. Finally, “the whole question of ‘voice’ assumes, implicitly, children’s active collaboration in the research process; it positions them as participating subjects rather than as the objects of adult research” (p. 262); subjecting them to similar power dynamics reflected in contemporary research and the “researcher–researched relationship that has encouraged a greater politicization of the research process” (p. 262). Accompanying the complexities of student voice is the deficit approach that has characterized most urban schools.

Research and legislation focused on conventional school reform, turnaround schools, and at-risk students share a deficit approach that emphasizes what students cannot do and the background experiences they do not have. Urban school reform can be enacted as a “tool of oppression” that cites quantitative evidence, commonly referred to as achievement gaps, to “shape and control equity, voice and representation and to silence and marginalize some groups” (Cross, 2011, p. 44). In contrast, pedagogies such as culturally responsive teaching “improve the performance of underachieving students from various ethnic groups—one that teaches to and through personal and cultural strengths, their intellectual capabilities, and their prior accomplishments” (Gay, 2010, p. 26). Kohn (2004) supported a shift from a paradigm of school *reform* to one of school *renewal*, stating that “the status quo could use some serious reimagining” (p. xii). In this article we propose a framework for involving students’ voices in urban school renewal efforts, which requires valuing their cultural backgrounds and building upon the unique strengths they bring to school. This article will share voices of students like David to illustrate the

framework for adult-student interactions within the context of urban education renewal to listen to stories from the stakeholders with the most to gain or lose – the students.

Conceptual Framework

Student Voice

You have to follow along with your teacher and you can't just do it on your own if you already know what you're doing. –Amy, Fifth-grade Student

Listening to the students' experiences within classrooms and the broader school community provides insight into how instructional practices and the culture of the school are being received and interpreted. Amy's statement reflects her belief that she was not being taught at the appropriate level of difficulty; all students were expected to learn the same content at the same pace. Cook-Sather (2006) stated that, "'student voice' as a term asks us to connect the sound of students speaking not only with those students experiencing meaningful, acknowledged presence but also with their having the power to influence analyses of, decisions about, and practices in schools" (p. 363). Faced with the technical tools of standards-based reform, educators find it difficult to "find the substantive theory, models, research, and resources needed to advocate for student voice" (Fletcher, 2005, p. 4); as a result, student empowerment and democratic practices within schools are greatly compromised. Oakes and Rogers (2007) further expand on the effects of technical and professional reforms in that "new rules, structures, and practices either 'fit' within the prevailing logics or they are not powerful enough to counter the multiple forces that maintain the unequal status quo" (p. 196). Such reforms result in problems that perpetuate "dominant cultural norms and politics of privilege that sustain structures of inequality both in and out of school" (p. 197).

Student voices are often cast within dominant power structures of schools that influence what students say and how it is heard. Blanchett and Zion (2011) stated that, "the ways that dominant narratives and the systems of power and privilege are instantiated, constrain the ability of marginalized groups to participate in the construction of knowledge" (p. 26). In overt and subtle ways, students' sense of agency is closely connected to their schools' institutional agendas, which supports the status quo of the existing norms of "institutional and cultural capital" (Robinson & Taylor, 2013, p. 43). In the above discussion, James's (2007) explanation of agency and structure highlights the influence of institutional structures that stifle student voice. Educators must be consciously aware of power dynamics between teachers and students and work to empower students in authentic ways. As Cook-Sather (2006) stated, "if students speak, adults must listen" (p. 367), which requires a cultural shift. Educators and policymakers who are used to being dominant must change their paradigms of power in order for students to exercise their own agency and experience liberation within school contexts. Pedagogical practices that engage students are essential to "re-imagining" (Kohen, 2004, p. xii) more democratic public schools through school renewal that prepares students for public engagement.

Engaging Student Voice for Public Interest

Whether in terms of curriculum, pedagogy, or student behavior management, adults are accustomed to maintaining authority in schools. Many of the students interviewed by the authors

referred to their urban schools feeling like prisons with metal detectors, security guards, and restrictive policies for student activities during the school day. Mitra and Gross (2009) discussed issues of dominance among teachers and students:

Learning how to enable youth to share their opinion and participate in decision making is particularly challenging in school settings because teachers are used to being in control. Even in healthy school climates, the sharing of power with students can be perceived as threatening to teachers. (p. 537)

Sleeter (2014) raises the challenge of how to help teachers prepare students for citizenship and public engagement that lead to a multicultural democracy in a society that is becoming increasingly diverse. This mirrors Banks' (2006) views of the goals of multicultural education, "to teach students to know, to care, and to act to promote democracy in the public interest" (p. 145).

Drawing on the work of Dewey, Oakes and Rogers (2007) note the absence of a collective public sphere where people can come together to solve problems with the intent to confront deficit thinking and "politics of privilege" (p. 197) that continue to promote inequality. Oakes and Rogers suggest that organized activists are best to take on these challenges, which they describe as, "learning about power, exploring the power of learning, and leaning to be powerful" (p. 201). Anyon (2014) insisted that educators, who are trusted by community members, are in unique positions for "movement building in poor neighborhoods... and social activism" (p. 11) because "they are in close proximity to, and able to have continual contact with, community adults and youth" (p. 11). Using students' voices for participatory decision making and action will require that administrators, teachers, and other school staff become willing to share power and address difficult issues and controversy (Sleeter, 2014). Students' voices, coupled with teachers who help students understand the hegemonic discourses connected to the intersection of race and poverty, as well as action agendas for equitable outcomes contribute to more powerful renewal initiatives within schools (Cook-Sather, 2006; Fletcher, 2005; Kohn, 1993; Mitra, 2005; Robinson, & Taylor, 2013).

Framework for Including Student Voice

The framework (see Figure 1) introduced in this article provides ways to think about opportunities for meaningful and effective inclusion of student voice in urban school renewal. Students' and educators' cultural backgrounds and lived experiences differ in terms of age, race / ethnicity, socio-economic status, gender, religion, language, ability / disability, sexual orientation, and more. The purpose of the framework is to suggest multiple pathways that enable diverse students in the school to share their unique voices, experiences, and ideas through ongoing, systematic processes. Our framework for student voice supports a shift from conventional reform that is embedded in deficit orientations to culturally sustaining pedagogical practices and democratic decision-making processes that empower students and build upon their strengths and diverse backgrounds (Gay, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 2014; Miller-Lachmann & Taylor, 1995; Paris & Alim, 2014; Scheurich & Skria, 2003; Williams, 2003). Culturally sustaining pedagogy "seeks to perpetuate and foster linguistic, literate, and cultural pluralism as part of the democratic project of schooling and as a needed response to demographic and social change" (Paris & Alim, 2014, p. 85). The framework is designed to serve as a flexible structure that underscores the

ways educators can foster students’ abilities to transform their passive roles as recipients of information to engage in dialogue and collaboration to actively generate new knowledge and powerful understandings related to issues of diversity and equity in urban education.

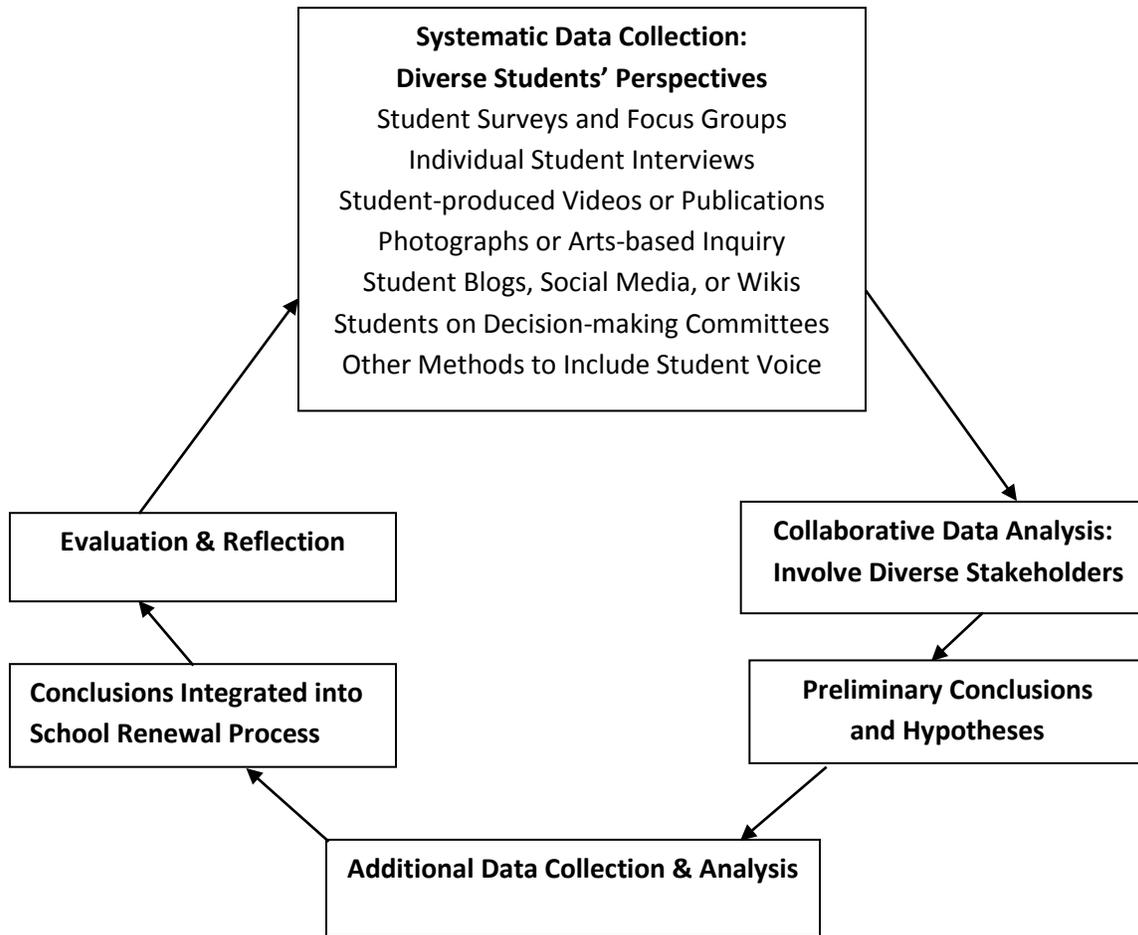


Figure 1. Framework for Including Student Voice in Urban School Renewal

Systematic Data Collection: Diverse Students’ Perspectives

The types of data that may be collected through implementation of the framework include the following sources of information: surveys, interviews, focus groups, visual and video projects, social media, and student participation in governance. Schools already maintain quantitative data such as student demographics, grades, attendance, discipline, graduation rates, and achievement results on local measures and nationally normed standardized assessments. The framework for including student voice suggests ways in which educators create pathways to seek

students' diverse perspectives as qualitative data sources in the school renewal process. 'Qualitative' data, as opposed to 'quantitative' data, enable investigators to understand the "phenomenon being explored" (Creswell, 2007, p. 3). In this case, the phenomenon involves understanding diverse students' learning experiences, attitudes toward schooling, cultural backgrounds, and personal development within unique school contexts. Power and Scott (2014) stated that "too many educational leaders become so narrowly focused on student achievement that they fail to consider that the ultimate aim of education should be the full development of the child" (p. 51). If educators are to effectively meet the academic and affective needs of all learners, then listening to students share their stories must be as important as analyzing the quantitative data. There is much that we can learn from our students.

Collaborative Data Analysis and Preliminary Conclusions

The students' experiences and perspectives are sources of qualitative data that help to understand the quantitative data that are abundant in schools. A diverse group of school community members, including students, come together to make meaning of these data during review sessions. Such an approach raises the empowerment and ownership of participatory action research which encourages "joint collaboration within a mutually acceptable equitable framework to understand and/or solve organizational or community problems" (Patton, 2002, p. 183). Inviting students to be co-constructors of knowledge through participatory action research and data analysis supports democratic practices in urban school renewal, providing "practical ways to increase the meaningful participation of everyone involved in the educational experience, including parents, local residents, and especially students themselves" (Apple & Beane, 1995, p. 101). The diverse team members draw conclusions or make hypotheses based upon their review and discussion of the information that has been collected.

Additional Data Collection, Analysis, and Evaluation

Once the data gathered with students have been analyzed by a diverse group of stakeholders, the group may decide to collect additional data such as conducting interviews or focus group sessions with students or having students create video projects that explore the initial conclusions or hypotheses. Any of these actions would result in additional qualitative data from the students' perspectives that could be analyzed by the group. This is also a critical point in the process for the stakeholder group to explore the literature and research findings that are available to inform the conversations and planning. Final conclusions are made based upon the insights provided by students, the analysis of the data, and relevant research that have been gathered to investigate topics associated with school renewal. The point is that in participatory action research, there are no surprises about the findings, because participants have been involved in the project from start to finish, even in the process of selecting the facilitator for the group (Wadsworth, 2006). As part of the framework to include students' voices, the regular evaluation and reflection of the process is important to assess the effectiveness of data collection, data analysis, and integration of school renewal goals with conclusions based upon students' perspectives and other available data sources. This assessment could be done by a school leadership team, or by an advisory committee comprised of diverse membership that includes adults and students with the responsibility for facilitating the evaluation and reflection related to the framework implementation. Administrators and teachers cannot "go where they have not

been; in other words, if educators have not experienced using their voices to interrupt and deconstruct their own praxis and reflect on its meaning, they are likely to enact hegemonic narratives that present barriers” (Caruthers & Friend, 2014, p. 12) to adult-student advocacy and inquiry. Educators have the power to transform oppressive practices in schools through engaging in participatory decision-making and culturally sustaining pedagogies that are inclusive of diverse students’ voices; such actions model similar expectations for helping students reflect on narratives that guide behaviors.

Methods: Applying the Framework to this Study

Elements of the framework were applied by the authors during the production of two documentary films (see Table 1) that utilized narratological inquiry through videotaped interviews with elementary (N = 144) and secondary (N = 28) students, along with observations in Midwestern urban schools, to explore the ways in which student voice can contribute to reculturing and school renewal (see also Friend & Caruthers, 2009; Friend & Caruthers, 2012). Identification of the participants was accomplished through the purposive selection of three elementary schools and two high schools that provided, the “greatest opportunity to gather the most relevant data about the phenomenon under investigation” (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 180). All students in grade levels approved by the school administration were invited to participate in the videotaped interviews through a letter and consent and media release form that was signed by the parents of the participants. Every student in each school site who returned the consent form was included in the interview process.

Table 1
Links to Documentary Film

Elementary Student Documentary Film	What Kids Love and Hate About School http://vimeo.com/54523282
High School Student Documentary Film	What Teens Love and Hate About School http://vimeo.com/53853260

The major questions guiding the inquiry included: What do kids love about school? What do they hate about school? What changes would they make in their school? What do students want to say to teachers? Interview questions were crafted based upon language that could be readily comprehended by students. We asked questions that mirrored the overarching research questions but were contextualized according to the students’ unique perspectives. These were:

- What are things you like about school?
- What are some of the things you do not like about school?
- What would you change if you were in charge of the school?
- If you could talk to teachers, what would you say to them?

Semi-structured, contextualized interviews, that incorporated these four questions, produced a unique set of questions for each participant (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006; Merriam, 2009).

For example, when we asked about what things students liked about schools, contextualized questions were often structured to continue conversations related to an expressed perspective: What was it that you liked about . . . ? How did this make you feel? How did other students respond?

In addition to individual student interviews, qualitative data can be collected through focus group interviews, which occur in one session with a small group of students, where a facilitator poses a set of questions that prompts discussion that encourage all students to participate in a meaningful way. Patton (2002) stated that the focus group, “Is an interview. The twist is that, unlike a series of one-on-one interviews, in a focus group participants get to hear each other’s responses and to make additional comments beyond their own original responses as they hear what other people have to say” (p. 386). This group dynamic and the interaction among participants can be seen in some of the video clips of elementary students in the film where three students were simultaneously interviewed.

Digital video recording captured students’ voices as “stories about school,” which provided thick description for analysis and interpretation. We listened to students’ voices as a critical component for supporting urban school renewal and used a deconstruction process, “exposing a concept as ideological or culturally constructed rather than as natural or a simple reflection of reality” (Alcoff cited in Collins, 1990, p. 4). Thematic analysis supported our understanding of the data in context, providing a “broader interpretive framework that people use to make sense of everyday happenings/episodes, usually involving past-present-future linking” (Grbich, 2013, p. 221). The identified themes informed the video editing process to select representative clips for inclusion in each of the short documentary films, similar to the process employed to illuminate findings in text-based research articles using selected quotations from the participants’ contributions to the data.

Discussion and Implications

If I could talk with teachers, I would actually tell them to sometimes put their feet in our shoes, because they only see their perspective - not ours. –Isabella, Tenth-grade Student

As Isabella expressed during her interview, students want to talk with teachers to share their perspectives. Power and Scott (2014) described the importance of sustaining the “delicate balance” between adults in positions of authority and students, stating that, “They must encourage students to feel a sense of ownership of the school while also challenging students to strive for the ideals of community” (p. 60). The ways in which adult-student interactions are framed matter to students, and “insincere gestures” may contribute to students withdrawing their participation and feeling alienated from the adults in school (Mitra & Gross, 2009, p. 536). Stories from students like Isabella illustrate the value of skills for adult-student advocacy and inquiry within the context of urban education renewal (Senge, Cambron-McCabe, Lucas, Smith, & Dutton, 2012). Since cultural patterns of behavior or often deep-rooted cultural predispositions are learned attitudes and behaviors that people may not realize they have (Manning & Baruth, 2004), we encourage adult and student conversations that allow both to inquire about the assumptions and thinking of others.

Educators, community members, and students might spend time with a trained facilitator learning advocacy and inquiry skills or ways of talking together. Senge, et al. (2012) suggest ways of balancing advocacy and inquiry so that all persons involved confront their own and others’ assumptions, reveal feelings, and build common ground. “The technique is simple to

describe: Balance advocacy for your view against inquiry into others' views. Lay out your reasoning and get others to challenge it" (p. 104). Practicing advocacy and inquiry through adult-student interactions should be done first with less sensitive topics before addressing the more difficult conversations.

A more sustained collaboration between adults and students can be developed when students partner with educators in school renewal efforts through their involvement in governance and membership on school committees (see Cook-Sather, 2007). Kirshner and Pozzoboni (2011) found that, "students, particularly students of color from low-income families, are often left out of policy decisions that affect their lives" (p. 1633) and that, "students do not want to be passive recipients of decision making by others" (p. 1651). Including students in decision making as members of school committees can be emancipatory, and the practice provides a dedicated "space for student voice work" and a regular "time within the school" for students' voices to be heard (Robinson & Taylor, 2007, p. 12). There must be sensitivity to the nature of this work listening to students' beliefs, attitudes, and meaning-making, particularly when a student shares an idea or suggestion that does not lead to desired changes. One such example from the documentary film involved a fourth-grade student who wanted to transform the basement of the school into a roller skating rink where students could go after they finished their work. While this wish could not be fulfilled, her desire to be more engaged in learning through an activity called 'rocket math' was communicated to the teachers to reinforce pedagogical practices that many students found motivating and that were correlated to improved mathematics achievement results. This same school also had an anti-bullying policy that was not working, according to the stories shared by students, which led to transformative conversations among students and educators to address pervasive bullying issues in their elementary school. While every idea cannot be implemented, every student's voice can be honored with the same respect afforded to educators and parents who advocate for school renewal initiatives that may or may not be realized.

Conclusion

Educators are in a unique position for "movement building in poor neighborhoods. They are in close proximity to, and able to have continual contact with, community, adults, and youth" (Anyon, 2014, p. 11). The framework for including students' voices, coupled with advocacy and inquiry, is designed to operate on a continuous cycle, so that there is a regular system for collecting qualitative data from students using any of the methods that have been described. The framework also creates opportunities to equip students with the skills they need for public engagement. The facilitation of this process could be the responsibility of one standing committee, or may be done by several collaborative groups. Robinson & Taylor (2007) stated that, "listening to pupils itself is not sufficient, it is what happens with the information, what is done with it, that is also of great importance" (p. 14). The engagement of students in urban school renewal is central to 'doing something' with the insights and ideas contributed by students with diverse perspectives. The possibilities and potential of the framework for including students' voices are as diverse as the unique context and individuals who make up each school community. Establishing fundamentally different schools requires different ways of seeing and knowing, in addition to innovative ways of sharing and co-constructing knowledge, making the experience of previous excluded groups more visible and inclusive and putting them at the center of our thinking. This distinction is the major difference between reformed schools and renewed or transformed schools.

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