Empowering Students to Take Control Through Student Leadership Teams

Andrea Gratton, *Orleans Elementary School, Vermont*
Kyle Chadburn, *Orleans Elementary School, Vermont*

Abstract

As our educational system becomes more focused on personalizing learning for students, it is increasingly important for educators to empower students to take an active role in their learning and their communities. In this practitioner perspective, two educators reflect on the process of establishing student leadership teams in their school, and on the research that supports such efforts toward developing systems of student agency and self-advocacy in education.

INTRODUCTION

Middle school students are full of contradictions. They straddle the line between child and adult without definitively claiming a side. They demand respect but deny responsibility. They tell you that you are the greatest teacher in the world one day and then tell you how much they hate you the next. They repeatedly leave class for bathroom and drink breaks because they cannot focus long enough to make it through even the most exciting class period, but they would sit and watch YouTube videos for days on end if you let them. They rave about how much they love the project they are working on in your class and then, in the same breath, tell you how much school sucks. They cannot agree with one another on anything, but they all seem to want the same thing: power and control.

Our students come from a rural community in the Northeast Kingdom (NEK) of Vermont – another contradiction in their lives. The NEK is well-known for its natural beauty, and yet it is also home to high rates of poverty and addiction. Power and control are difficult for the adults in this community to find, let alone our middle school students. For so many of the students we teach, school has been an experience that is inflicted upon them. School is not providing them with authentic learning experiences or preparing them for the "real world;" they navigate the real world every day as they learn how to deal with the effects of trauma, financial instability, food insecurity, substance abuse, or homelessness. Rather, for too many of our students, school is a prison-like system devoid of power and control – a place where they are told what to do, when to do it, and, in many cases, how to do it.

Student Leadership Teams

With that in mind, we began the school year focused on ways in which to empower students

to take control of their learning and steer their school community in a more positive direction. Among the many ideas we generated as possible ways to increase student empowerment was a collection of leadership teams. Initially, we planned on three teams: one focused on collaborating with teachers to design learning activities, one to make positive change in our school culture, and one to explore issues of social justice and take action. However, we soon realized that until we addressed the issues of culture and justice in our school community, students would not be prepared to think about curriculum. It was far too difficult for them to shift their mindsets about learning until they could see school as a more positive part of their lives. Therefore, the Learning Team quickly dissolved and our focus turned to the Culture and Justice teams. Each of these teams meets with us once a week before school for approximately thirty minutes. The members of these teams are seventh and eighth grade students who volunteered to join and sixth grade students whom we recruited based on leadership potential that we had observed in them and hoped to foster.

The Need to Focus on School Culture

John Weiss writes, "Schools can empower and amplify students' voices in many ways. Improving school climate is the most obvious and the least restrictive because students have the most to gain when the school climate is safe and supportive and the most to lose when it is not" (Weiss, 2018). In the past few years, we have noticed that it has become more difficult to

build the relationships necessary to establish a positive and supportive school climate. Students are increasingly disengaged in learning and resentful of the expectations to which they are held at school. We have also noticed that many of the interactions students have with staff and each other are disrespectful and lack empathy.

We recognized from these observations that in order to shift this culture, we needed to involve students in the process. We hoped that students would be able to help us to identify the root of the problems that exist in our school's culture and to devise appropriate solutions. In turn, we aspired to help students take an active role in making change because "participating in reform efforts increases students' agency, self-worth, respect, and sense of membership in the school" (Mitra, 2008).

The Need to Focus on Social Justice Issues

Given the high poverty rate in our community and the lack of diversity, it is especially critical to provide students with a safe and informed environment at school to discuss issues of race, gender identity, and sexuality. In the article "What White Children Need to Know About Race," Ali Michael and Eleanor Bartoli state that "the research suggests that for fear of perpetuating racial misunderstandings, being seen as a racist, making children feel badly, or simply not knowing what to say, many white parents tend to believe that there is never a right time to initiate a conversation about race" (Michael & Bartoli, 2014). Many of our families struggle to have conversations about social justice issues, often because they fear that they do not possess the right language or understanding to do so. When the topic does come up, the result is rarely a dialogue. Instead, parents simply instruct their children "not to be racist, not to talk about race, not to use the word 'black,' and not to notice racial differences." However, "when children only know what not to do or not to talk about, they don't have the lenses to understand racial dynamics in their lives, nor the skills to address them" (Michael & Bartoli, 2014).

As infrequently as students have conversations about race at home and in school, most students have even fewer opportunities to discuss gender and sexuality. In many ways, the reasons for this are similar to the challenges of discussing race. In addition to those challenges, parents and teachers may also feel uncomfortable discussing gender and sexuality or they may even feel that it is unnecessary. However, by not having these conversations, we are dismissing an entire community of people. In fact, according to GLSEN's 2017 National School Climate Survey, "Schools nationwide are hostile environments for a distressing number of LGBTQ students" (Kosciw, Greytak, Zongrone, Clark, & Truong, 2018, p. xviii). Providing students with opportunities to explore issues of gender and sexuality at school gives them the tools needed to understand, support, and empathize with those who may identify differently than they do. This benefits all students as it "contributes to a more respectful student body by raising awareness of LGBTQ issues, as well as demonstrate[s] to LGBTQ students that they have allies in their schools" (Kosciw et al., 2018, p. 66).

Our Experience

As our work progressed, we soon realized that with each success, there was also an accompanying challenge.

The Culture Team's first major project was to redesign the process by which students are nominated for our quarterly academic awards. Students voiced that they felt the current process was not meaningful to them. They noticed that the same students were recognized each quarter for the same things, predominantly grades. Other worthy qualities were going unrecognized. As a result, they designed a nomination form based on our supervisory union's cross-curricular proficiencies (CCPs) which acknowledge communication, problem-solving, perseverance, and citizenship. Students are now able to nominate each other in addition to nominations made by teachers. Ava, a sixth grader on the Culture Team, explains that this was an improvement because "we're the ones… recognizing people. It's coming from students themselves, so it might mean more to them." However, building an award around the CCPs has been challenging. At this point, students still lack a firm understanding of the specific skills that fall into each category, which makes it difficult for them to accurately determine which actions are worthy of formal recognition, so teachers still hold the responsibility of providing most of the nominations.

The first step for the Justice Team was to determine and discuss the purpose of the team.

Together, we brainstormed social justice topics that we might be interested in pursuing, which led to the development of two sub-committees on the team. One of these sub-committees focused on learning more about race and issues of racial justice, and the other focused on developing a better understanding of gender and sexuality. The highlight of our early work was having students develop and deliver a lesson about the language connected to gender identity to our staff at our weekly staff meeting. The team was surprised by how much new information they were able to share with the staff, and the staff was surprised by the amount of passion displayed by the students who presented. This clearly reaffirmed the importance of hearing students' voices when analyzing the needs of our school. As Frankie, a sixth grader and member of the Justice Team stated, "It's important because you want to hear student voices so it's not always 24/7 teacher decisions." The unfortunate reality is that teachers' time is stretched incredibly thin, and so this was the only opportunity that team members were given to present at staff meetings this year. Originally, the intention had been to showcase students monthly at staff meetings, and though the initiatives we focus on at those meetings could certainly benefit from students' input, we have yet to find a consistent and authentic way to keep students involved in those meetings.

Another project that each team worked on was designing a bulletin board in the middle school hallway. The Culture Team created an inspirational winter themed bulletin board to promote positivity and kindness across the middle school, and the Justice Team created a word wall to share important terminology used to discuss gender and sexuality. The creation of the Culture Team's board was an amazing display of self-direction. We provided students with the task and within two weeks they had worked together to plan, design, and create the display without any teacher input or guidance. The word wall, on the other hand, was a huge time commitment that took up nearly half of the year. Students first had to educate themselves before they could educate others, and then once they felt comfortable with their own understanding, they had to find ways to explain terms in kid-friendly language. Students also spent an inordinate amount of time finding just the right images to provide appropriate visuals to aid the viewer's comprehension. In juggling all of these elements, there just never seemed to be enough time to make any significant progress.

In fact, the remainder of the challenges we have faced with the leadership teams this year have revolved around some aspect of time. We applied for, and were awarded, a grant from Teaching Tolerance and the Southern Poverty Law Center that would allow us to build a library of social justice themed books for all ages. The goal is to develop lesson plans, in collaboration with student team members, that could be used to teach younger students, other middle school students, and community members about issues of social justice through the lenses of these texts. However, our limited meeting times have restricted our ability to be successful with the latter part of this plan.

Similarly, we worked hard at the outset to find mutually agreeable times to hold our weekly team meetings. Yet, despite our best efforts, it has still been difficult to have our entire team present for these meetings. Frankie explains, "The biggest challenge, if we're being completely honest, is showing on time and being there... We don't have that much time. It's at 7:30 and school starts at 7:55. That's probably the hardest thing." We have a core group of highly committed members that make it to every meeting, and the fact that the most committed individuals are sixth graders gives us hope for sustaining the teams in future years. However, the lack of consistency in attendance presents us with numerous additional challenges, including having to routinely get team members up-to-speed about the projects we are trying to do.

A Look Toward the Future

It has been an honor to watch our students discover their voices while they take charge and lead the way in making the changes they want to see in their school community. Despite the many setbacks and challenges our teams have faced, we are looking forward to continuing these teams in future years and watching how they evolve over time. We hope that by addressing some of the challenges we faced this year we will be able to attract more members and make a larger impact both intrinsically, by empowering more students to see themselves as leaders and changemakers, and extrinsically, by improving our school culture and opening up crucial lines of communication around issues of social justice.

REFERENCES

Kosciw, J. G., Greytak, E. A., Zongrone, A. D., Clark, C. M., & Truong, N. L. (2018). *The 2017 National School Climate Survey: The experiences of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer youth in our nation's schools.* New York, NY: GLSEN.

Michel, A., & Bartoli, E. (2014). What white children need to know about race. *Independent school magazine*. Retrieved from https://www.nais.org/magazine/independent-school/summer-2014/what-white-children-need-to-know-about-race/.

Mitra, D. L. 2008 Amplifying student voice. *Educational leadership.* Retrieved from https://www.ascd.org/ASCD/pdf/journals/ed_lead/el200811_mitra.pdf.

Weiss, J. (2018). Involving the stakeholders that matter most: Student voice in school reform. *ASCD Express.* Retrieved from www.ascd.org/ascd-express/vol13/1313-weiss.aspx.