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# THE NINTH GRADE EXPERIENCE:

# EXAMINING THE ROLE OF STUDENT VOICE IN THE

# SCHOOL REFORM PROCESS

BY

# CHRISTOPHER BITGOOD

# A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE

# **REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF**

# DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

IN

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# UNIVERSITY OF RHODE ISLAND

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# DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY DISSERTATION

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#### ABSTRACT

This study examined the emergence of student voice in the school reform and intervention process, and documented what happened when a systematic effort was made by school leadership to cultivate student voice, and to engage students in a cooperative effort to change a pressing problem of educational practice, specifically the difficulties students face in their ninth-grade year. This used use Participatory Action Research (PAR) methods to merge scholarship and praxis to effect educational change, supplemented by an established pre/post quantitative survey to confirm the results of the intervention. The intent was to broaden the scope of school leadership, public scholarship, and student advocacy by engaging students in a democratic dialogue about the difficulties students experience in the ninth grade, which evidence strongly suggests is the most crucial year in K-12 schooling. Previous research has suggested that the voices of students may provide the tipping point to shift the culture and practices of high schools to be more effective for students (Cook-Sather, 2006). Therefore, a systematic attempt was made to assess and develop student voice throughout the school year. A small group of ninth grade students worked in concert with school leadership to develop a ninth-grade improvement plan. The plan was then presented to district educational policy makers for negotiation and implementation. This study documented the dialogue about the freshman experience between school personnel in positions of power and the students they are trying to serve. As mentioned, this qualitative component was supplemented by a pre/post quantitative survey, in the interest of an additional triangulation.

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#### **CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION**

This study examined the emergence of student voice during the school reform process, and documented the efforts made by school leadership to collaboratively work with students to change a pressing problem of educational practice, specifically, difficulties encountered by ninth graders. A small group of ninth grade students worked with school leaders to develop a ninth-grade improvement plan for implementation. The study employed participatory action research (PAR) to merge scholarship and praxis to affect educational change. The goal of this study was to broaden the scope of school leadership, public scholarship, and student advocacy by engaging students in a democratic dialogue about the difficulties they experience in ninth grade, a crucial year in K-12 schooling. Previous researchers suggested engaging students in school reform efforts to help improve high school culture and practice (Conner, 2015; Mitra, 2014).

#### **Statement of the Problem and Research Questions**

Nationally, student retention is higher in ninth grade than all other grades (Herlihy, 2007). The transition to ninth grade is the most difficult transition for students in K-12 education (Barber & Olsen, 2004). The National Center for Education Statistics reported more U.S. students enrolled in ninth grade from 1980 to 2011 than any other grade, and projected this trend will continue until 2023. Theorists refer to this population trend as the *ninth-grade bulge* (Kennelly & Monrad, 2007; Osler & Waden, 2012) or the *ninth-grade bottleneck* (Wheelock & Miao, 2005). To compound the problem, approximately 22% of all first-time ninth grade students repeat their freshman year of high school (Neild, 2009).

Upon entering high school, ninth grade students transition into a larger environment, experience more independence, and receive less academic support, while experiencing increased academic expectations and organizational and pedagogical changes (Smith, 2006). Anxiety about school is common for students entering high school (Morgan & Hertzog, 1998). Fullan (2013) reported that 95% of kindergarteners stated they love school, but by ninth grade that number decreased to just 37%, the lowest reported score in K-12. Previous researchers examined why ninth grade is so challenging for students (Akos & Galassi, 2004; Johns, 2013; Newman, Lohman, Newman, Myers, & Smith, 2000). Johns (2013) found that an unsuccessful ninth grade year had academic and social consequences far beyond high school. Smith (2006) noted that failing a ninth-grade course has higher correlation to dropout rates than courses in any other grade. Kennelly and Monrad (2007) found that only 12% of freshman who repeated ninth grade go on to graduate high school. Many researchers have recognized students' difficulties in the ninth-grade year as a root cause of dropping out of high school. Despite efforts to improve the ninth-grade experience, seemingly capable freshman students continue to struggle and are retained at a higher rate than other grades (Hapken, 2014).

To meet the challenges of ninth grade, many school districts dedicate resources to improving students' freshman experience. Most ninth-grade reforms involve *freshman academies*. Freshman academies are small learning communities that support the unique needs of first-year high school students through personalization, care, and academic and social support (Kemple & Herlihy, 2004). Freshman academies locate ninth grade classes in one area of the high school and designate specific teachers to work only with freshman students. The smaller teams increase tracking of student progress and social/emotional needs. Herlihy (2007) found that schools with functioning freshman academy programs increased freshman promotion rates.

A gap in the literature exists, however, as most intervention programs receive no feedback from students and fail to address ninth grade problems through students' self-reported experiences (Hapken, 2014; Newman et al., 2000). Akos and Galassi (2004) noted that voices of ninth grade students were "heard infrequently" in previous research (p. 212). Choate (2009) recommended directly asking students about their perceptions of ninth grade when making program changes that affect them. Hauser, Choate, and Thomas (2009) noted the limited inquiry that examined freshman stakeholder perceptions of the difficulties they encounter in ninth grade. Research projects on adolescents in schools rarely include participant descriptions of their experiences in their own words; student voices are notably absent from most existing theory (Cook-Sather, 2002; Mitra, 2014). Luttrell (2010) suggested that researchers examining the lives of adolescents in schools look for ways to empower them in the research.

The present study seeks to understand the problems that ninth graders experience in high school in their own words and to document a small team of students and a school administrator working together to generate change. Specifically, the study seeks to answer the following research questions:

1. What do the students at Plains High School say about their experiences in ninth grade?

2. What do students say about student voice and empowerment at Plains High School?

3. What happens when students and a school administrator partner in the

school reform process?

#### **CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW**

#### The Need for Student Voice in the School Reform Process

Most past research on ninth grade students neglected the voices of students themselves, even though the policies and practices that emerge from the research affect them the most. Cook-Sather (2002) stated that most researchers of adolescents in schools conduct research *on* them, not *with* them. In fact, most educational researchers conduct studies on students without the involvement of students, the primary stakeholders in their education (Cook-Sather, 2006). Kozol (2001), as cited in Cook-Sather (2006), stated that "the voices of children have been missing from the whole discussion of education and educational reform" (p. 361). Students are the most directly affected by educational policy, but are the least-consulted in policy creation (Cook-Sather, 2002).

Since the passage of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) in 2001, American school administrators faced an unprecedented number of federal and state policy reforms and accountability mandates that failed to improve student outcomes (Cook-Sather, 2002; Ravitch, S., 2014; Rothstein, Jacobsen, & Wilder, 2008). Educational reforms failed to make schools places where students feel invested in their own education. Cook-Sather (2002) and Mitra (2005) suggested that this is because previous reform efforts relied on adults' ideas and conceptions about what education should be. They positioned students as *passive recipients* of education. Oldfather (1995), Cook-Sather (2002), and Mitra (2005) wondered how the voices of students might influence policy development if students had authority and knowledge to participate in the critique and reform of education.

Researchers and school practitioners increasingly embraced the view that students have both the right and the insight to contribute to school reform efforts. Youths working on collaborative reform efforts can improve educational outcomes and serve as positive catalyzers for school change by bringing a fresh perspective. However, research on school personnel working directly with students on reform issues remains sparse. New research is necessary to solidify efforts and move research forward (Conner, 2015). Rudduck (2007) suggested that "students have a lot to tell us that could make school better" (p. 591).

What exactly is student voice, and why is it valuable to educational reform efforts? Cook-Sather (2006) described student voice as a range of activities that reposition students as active participants in educational research and reform. Conner (2015) offered a further definition of the term as "a strategy that engages students in sharing their views on their school or classroom experiences in order to promote meaningful change in educational practice or policy and alter the positioning of students in educational settings" (p. 3). Conner (2015) suggested that student voice has three primarily goals: (a) to share students' experiences and perspectives on educational issues with adults; (b) to call for school reforms that students feel will better meet the needs of themselves and their peers; (c) to reposition students in existing school power hierarchies to be agents of change.

At the local level, student voice is a form of distributed, democratic school leadership. Students' perspectives inform recommendations for policy and practice by partnering them with educational researchers and practitioners (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009; Cook-Sather, 2002; Mitra, 2005). Student voice is the way in which students share in the school decisions that shape their lives and the lives of their peers. The voices of students are a fundamental component for understanding schooling. Students have unique perspectives on what happens in classrooms. Lincoln (1995) believed that students' unique position in schools affords them an emic or insider view that differs from those of outsiders, including those of adult insiders (e.g., teachers and administrators). Student voice puts students in the position of *translating* why they struggle in school into language that adults can understand (Cook-Sather, 2006). Students experience hidden obstacles and challenges that adults cannot see. Lincoln (1995) believed adults often underestimate or dismiss the ability of students to be "shrewd observers" who possess insight about their experience of schooling (p. 89). Bundick (2012) and Mitra (2005) noted that when schools actively provide students with authentic, meaningful roles in the decision-making process, students are more likely to display increased autonomy, emotional well-being, and a greater sense of school belonging and engagement. Based on eight years of survey data, Qualgia (2014) found that if students believed they had a voice in school decision-making, they were seven times more academically motivated than students who did not believe they had a voice. Similarly, Mitra (2014) found that when students are more engaged in school through youth-adult voice efforts, they experience improved academic outcomes and induced a greater connection to school.

Researchers, policy makers, and school leaders must advocate for student voice in school reform efforts and invite students to join conversations about school reform (Cook-Sather, 2006). Engaged students collaboratively generate knowledge that is valuable and might form a basis for action. Without students' perspectives on the experience of schooling, policy makers have an incomplete picture and are unable to empower and reposition students in educational decision-making (Cook-Sather, 2006).

The premise of the present study is that a solution to ninth grade difficulties may be to partner students, researchers, and leaders in the school reform process. Many researchers have called for the development of collaborative research projects involving students with opportunities to voice their opinions on school reform efforts (Anderson, 2009; Conner, 2015; Mitra, 2014; Yonezawa & Jones, 2009). The American Educational Research Association cited the need for researchers to become advocates to improve educational practice and educational outcomes for all students (Snow, 2015). Educational research requires democratic, sustained inquiry embedded in educational institutions rather than top-down, highly politicized research imposed upon school-based practitioners (Anderson, 1999; McDonnell & Weatherford, 2016). Dewey (1916/1944, 1927/1954) maintained that scholars must engage with *publics* to foster a democratic and public solving of educational and societal problems. Cook-Sather (2002) said that "every participant in formal education needs to ask him or herself where the opportunities for this kind of dialogue exist or could exist within his or her context" (p. 10).

Anderson (1990) called for research that explores school administrators' roles as advocates for students, particularly practitioner researchers who serve the dual roles of researcher and educational administrator. Pounder (2000) stated that one of the most compelling arguments for a school administrator conducting action research is that it "brings together knowledge production, dissemination, and utilization into a cohesive whole" and creates a "research triangle" between academic researchers, educational practitioners, and students (p. 469). This is particularly relevant in the current corporate-influenced educational climate; top-down policy mandates deemphasize the local construction of knowledge in schools and ignore the complexities of how context affects individual educational experiences (Ravitch, S., 2014).

According to Mitra (2007a), school leaders "play a crucial role in enabling and sustaining student voice initiatives" by establishing distributed leadership practices that allow students to have a voice in the school decision-making process (e.g., sharing their opinions on problems and potential solutions) (p. 237). At the present time, school administrators serve as mediators and translators of top-down educational policies. Educational leaders, particularly principals, are often at the intersection of policy and practice. They must reconcile themselves between competing, disparate stances on external mandates and advocating for their students. School administrators are in a position of power and control over their students, but Anderson (2009) noted that they are uniquely situated in a high-leverage position to effect educational change for students. Anderson (2009) stated that school leaders who embrace a more open, empowered position have a professional, moral, and ethical responsibility to their students, called *advocacy leadership*. Adopting and cultivating a stance as a practitioner-advocate allows school administrators to become tenacious advocates for their school's clients (Anderson, 1990). Mitra (2014) suggested that school administrators consider partnering with students because reform efforts that from the

ground up (i.e., generated in local contexts) encourage ownership and local buy-in from students and staff.

Collaborative research with students creates a counter-hegemonic way of thinking about school structures due to the unique way that students experience their education. Such participatory research provides a transformative method from a person-centered and equity-oriented stance that empowers participants to have a voice in research about educational programs that directly affect them. Done correctly, participatory research is transformative at the institutional, community, and individual levels. It is relevant research that holds the democratic promise to inform and empower, and to provide agency for individuals within a system, resulting in transformative actions and equitable, stakeholder-generated change.

Teachers and administrators who conduct educational research with students combine educational theory, practice, and educational policy. They gain an insider's view, an emic perspective, that is not available to outside researchers (Campbell, 2013). Practitioner-based research is pragmatic in nature; it focuses on a problem of educational practice with the specific goal of improving practice and meeting the learning needs of students. Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2009) suggested that school administrators examine how school leadership translates into person-centered, systematic, and proactive approaches to empowering constituencies.

## **Democracy and the Promise of High School**

In 1996, the National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP) released a report in an attempt to restructure high schools for the 21<sup>st</sup> century. It stated that "many young people lack a grounding in, and an appreciation for democracy" and

suggested that the nation's high schools restructure their mission to ensure that their students "understand the genius of American democracy" (p. 107). The report referred to high schools as the "bulwarks of democracy" and stated that "democracy and education are inextricably bound in the United States" (NASSP, 1996, p. 107). Twenty years later, the calls for high school reform were largely unanswered, and the promise of high schools where young people find their voice was unfulfilled. If anything, democracy in American schools diminished in the era of corporate-influenced educational reform; students today have less say in their schooling.

Student voice initiatives are consistent with the purported civic mission of schools. Many high schools have mission statements that speak directly to the promise of preparing students for participation in a democratic society. However, Noddings (2013) questioned whether schools could proclaim to "teach democratic values without (actually) living them" (p. 12). Schools need to look deeper than compulsory civics classes to determine if they are teaching democratic processes. School leaders should examine the functioning of the school to determine whether their schools are congruent with Dewey's vision of schools as places of participatory democracy where students and adults share an equitable exchange of ideas. As Noddings (2013) wrote, Dewey put his trust in the "communicative interaction of the group working together for improved education" (p. 12). Dewey (1997) believed that effective thinking and problem-solving must start with the experience of those living with the problems. Students co-construct solutions to problems by working together towards a common purpose.

It is a fundamental responsibility of schools to prepare students to live in a democracy, as schools serve as a proxy for society (Westheimer & Kahne, 2004). If schools are to further democratic aims and nurture the goals of democratic life, it is incumbent on school leaders to teach students how to ask critical questions, including critical questions about their schooling and school structures. School leaders should form communities of inquiry where students work together to understand problems through multiple viewpoints and develop common solutions. School leaders must ask themselves what schools need to do and what students need in their lives to be effective participants in a democratic society. Quaglia and Corso (2014) suggested that listening to students' voices is a formative assessment of the purported mission, conditions, and structure of the school itself.

#### **School Boards**

The various governing bodies of American schools are at odds. For example, despite repeated calls for more democratic forms of governance, the National School Board Association (2009) issued a position statement on involving students in school decision-making at the board level. "We oppose giving students voting status on boards, and we do not subscribe to the 'out of the mouths of babes' model of school governance" (National School Board Association, 2009, p. 8). In many states, youth participation on school governing boards is illegal (Mitra, 2007a). In the states with student representatives on school boards, most students lack formal voting rights and simply read a script that a building principal prepares.

The United States has many educational mandates, but no mandate exists for involving students in conversations about educational policy. Many other countries recognize that students should have a voice in their own education. For example, the United States is the only member of the United Nations that failed to ratify Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, which stated, "When adults are making decisions that affect children, children have the right to say what they think should happen and have their opinions taken into account" (Conner, 2015, p. 5). Students are the direct recipients of educational policy and often have unique perceptions about how policies affect them, how to improve policy, and how to involve students in discussions that shape educational policy and practice to benefit staff and students (Cook-Sather, 2006).

# Conceptual Framework: Adults and Youth Working Together in a Community of Practice

Researchers use social learning systems to solve pressing educational problems. The professional learning community (PLC) model, first developed by Dufour and Eaker (1998), is a well-established method of social inquiry in K-12 education research (Blankenship & Ruona, 2007). A PLC is a learning community linked by a common interest, such as solving a problem of educational practice, in which members work together to accomplish what they cannot do alone (Dufour & Eaker, 1998). PLCs focus on a process of collective inquiry and action-oriented results. PLCs attempt to bridge research and practice to improve student achievement (Dufour & Eaker, 1998). Dufour (2004) defined a "professional" in a PLC as "someone with expertise in a specialized field…who has pursued advanced training to enter a field" (p. xi). A problem with this definition is that it still places the locus of educational expertise firmly in the hands of adults or professionals, which lessens the expectation that students can be experts of schooling, a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Bielaczyc and Collins (1999) suggested re-conceptualizing schools and classrooms as cooperative learning communities through a radical departure from the traditional view of schooling as the process of individual knowledge transmission to a community-based approach to education. Individual expertise advances the collective knowledge of the group through a shared purpose of solving a common problem. A suitable social learning framework for involving students in the process is the Community of Practice (CoP) model. A CoP is a model for social learning theory developed by Lave and Wenger (1991). CoP is an interpretive framework for examining how students and educators navigate and work together towards a common goal. Wenger (2011) stated that "communities of practice are formed by people who engage in a process of collective learning in a shared domain of human endeavor such as schooling" (p. 1). The CoP framework is particularly promising as an interpretive tool when buttressed with previous findings (Akos & Galassi, 2004; Choate, 2009; Letrello & Miles, 2003; Newman et al., 2000). Students report social interaction with peers as their primary support system in schools. Mitra (2005, 2008a) found that a CoP model is a useful lens for examining the process of adults and youth working together in a social learning structure for educational change (i.e., members of the community work together to learn from each other and mediate each other's learning). Lincoln (1995) found that when students and adults combined their power and knowledge, they solved educational problems and created new forms of wisdom.

Mitra (2008b) found that the CoP lens was useful in studying existing power imbalances in schools. Cook-Sather (2006) believed that the central factor of any discussion of the role of student voice in schools is power. An understanding and examination of power imbalances is crucial to understanding the role of student voice in educational reform; successful reform efforts often hinge upon shifting existing power relations in school hierarchies. Cook-Sather (2006) noted that learning community frameworks such as CoPs often model student exchanges that are similar to those that happen in student voice partnerships. CoPs depend on similar core elements that support successful student voice efforts, e.g., trust, democratic interaction, shared responsibility, and capacity building (Cook-Sather, 2006). Pires (2012) noted that the concept of CoP in schools provided a clear area for future research that accounts for a level of complexity and interdependence that is missing from many educational models; it provides district leaders with a "broader understanding of the social dynamics at play within a school" (p. 144). Lave and Wenger (1991) suggested that rethinking schooling from a CoP perspective would be a fruitful exercise.

## **Components of a Community of Practice**

The theoretical concepts of a CoP began in Lave and Wenger's *Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation* (1991). Lave and Wenger (1991) used the concept of peripheral participation to examine how newcomers and apprentices learn in specific contexts and make sense of those communities. They found that the components of a CoP evolved over time as the concept developed in different settings. The term *legitimate peripheral participation* designates how novices to a learning community first enter at the edge or the *periphery* of the community and move towards the center as they gain experience and knowledge while becoming full participants/experts in the community (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Learning in a CoP happens as newcomers gain knowledge. Mitra (2008b) applied this concept to student voice efforts in schools; students move from the periphery to the center as their participation in the group increases over time. As students engage in the conversations and activities of the group, they become full members and may change their perspectives while becoming empowered. Wenger (1998) noted that there is not an expectation of equity in a CoP in the sense that all members will contribute or interact in equal amounts, but rather that the structure and conditions of the CoP *allows* all members to genuinely contribute (i.e., legitimately participate) as much or as little as they like without a fear of reprisal. The shared goal of the community is the *joint enterprise*, the way members works towards a common purpose. Joint enterprise is the process of community building, the ways that individual members come together through the shared activities of the group.

The term *shared repertoire* refers to the way that the group produces and shares common meanings, artifacts, and activities. As individual members join the group, they bring terms, meanings, and perspectives to the community. They may or may not share these individual meanings with other members of the group. The process of negotiating conflicting viewpoints and meaning through social interaction is one of the central tenets of a CoP. For example, when adults and students work together in a CoP, they often have differing terms for similar concepts (e.g., curriculum, instructional practices). Through dialogue in the community, adults and students negotiate and reify common meanings that become a shared repertoire. *Identity* describes who each member of the community is and what they bring to the group. It also describes the way that learning and participation in the community changes group members. *Meaning* refers to the initial meanings of experiences that members bring to the community and how participation in the community helps participants make sense of things (i.e., develop new meanings). Meaning also describes the way participants in CoPs reify knowledge and attach personal value.

Wenger (1998) used the term *trajectory* to refer to the way in which community members on the periphery move towards the center of the community, becoming full participants. Mitra (2008b) expanded the term to *learning trajectory*. A learning trajectory in a CoP is the way students' perspectives, identities, and future aspirations change because of the meaning making that happens in the community. A summary of the components of a CoP appears in Table 1.

# Table 1

Community of Practice Dimensions

Dimension	Definition
(	
Mutual engagement	Building relationships with others in the
	community through direct interaction and
	reflection, and reconciling conflicts.
Joint enterprise	Members of the community working together for
	a common purpose and potential solutions.
Shared repertoire	Negotiating, producing, and adapting shared
	language and artifacts through discourse and
	reification.
Identity	A way of talking about how experience shapes
	identity and how learning changes self-
	perception.
Legitimate peripheral	Examines how members can move from the edge
participation	or periphery of the community as their knowledge
	and participation increases. <i>Legitimate</i> can refer
	to the genuine opportunities that participants must
	contribute and engage with the community.
Meaning	Examines the way participants make sense of
8	their experiences and construct new meanings
	through critical reflection and social mediation.
	The way that knowledge takes on personal value
	to the member.
Trajectory	A way of talking about how participation in the
	community changes aspirations for the future.

*Note*. Adapted from Lave (1991), Wenger (2008, 2009), and Mitra (2008b).

# **Transformative Learning**

Mezirow (1990, 1997) defined transformative learning as the process of critically reflecting upon experience to elicit a change in meaning, frame of reference, and action. Transformative learning has the power to change perspectives, worldviews, and actions. Meaning is the process of making sense of personal experiences. Interpretations of meanings guide decision-making and actions. Critical reflection means to examine and critique current beliefs and meanings. In these terms, learning is the process of critically reflecting on and examining current meanings and then making a revised interpretation of an experience that leads to improved or reflective action (Mezirow, 1990). Learning is the process of moving from the old meaning to the improved interpretation and subsequent action.

Although Mezirow (1990) dealt primarily with adult learning, the critical reflection of experience is relevant to educational settings and schools. Hargreaves (2017) used Mezirow's framework to examine how students make meaning of their classroom experiences by critically reflecting upon their experiences of schooling. The process of critical reflection helped students transform their views of their classrooms and helped Hargreaves use the students' reflection to improve their experience. Many of the phases of Mezirow's transformational learning framework align with the CoP work of Lave and Wenger (1991) and Mitra (2008b). Wenger (1998, 2008, 2009) addressed the fundamental role of critical reflection in learning and the transformational possibilities of moving from a newcomer to a full participant within a CoP. Similarly, Mitra (2008b) described students coming together in a CoP to share and examine their perspectives on schooling; they transformational learning adapted to school improvement in a CoP appears in Table 2.

# Table 2

Mezirow's Process of Transformational Learning Adapted to School Improvement Steps in a Community of Practice

Steps	Description
Disorienting dilemma/	Problem:
Sense of alienation	Student: "I hate school;" "School doesn't work for
	me;" "There's no connection between school and my real life."
	Adult: "Why are so many kids failing?" "Why is
	our attendance so low?" "Why aren't students engaged in my class?"
Self-examination	Examining the current individual meanings,
	listening to others experiences in the group.
Relating discontent to	Voicing individual experiences and meanings in
others	the CoP, communicative learning.
Explaining options of	Talking about better ways to do things, developing
new behavior	possible solutions.
Building confidence in	Capacity building, empowerment, increased
new ways	agency, repositioning, reaching consensus.
Planning a course of	Developing a cooperative school improvement
action/Knowledge to	plan, discussing strategy. Capital needed for
implement plans	implementation.
Experimenting with	Developing new possible roles, change in frame of
new roles	reference.
	Student: change agent, policy maker, critical
	evaluator
	Adult: facilitator, advocate, mentor
Reexamination of	Evaluating and reflecting upon the solution.
outcomes	Continuous reflections, improvement.

Note. Adapted from Mezirow (1991), Lave and Wenger (1991), and Wenger (1998).

#### **Chapter 3: METHODOLOGY**

#### Aim of the Study

The aim of this study was to examine how ninth grade students experienced their first year of high school and to document what happened when school leaders attempted to collaborate with students as co-investigators to improve that experience. Specifically, this study attempted to address the following research questions:

1. What do the students at Plains High School say about their experiences in ninth grade?

2. What do students say about student voice and empowerment at Plains High School?

3. What happens when students and a school administrator partner in the school reform process?

#### **Qualitative Research Approach**

Participatory Action Research (PAR) is a well-documented, structured methodological approach to research that emphasizes participation from research participants to collectively understand a problem and collaboratively try to change it (Reason & Bradbury, 2008). McIntyre (2008) states that PAR can take different forms of research design, but all share the same common goals: "(a) a collective commitment to investigate an issue or problem, (b) a desire to engage in self and collective reflection to gain clarity about the issue under investigation, (c) a joint decision to engage in individual and/or collective action that leads to a useful solution that benefits the people involved, and (d) the building of alliances between researchers and participants in the planning, implementation, and dissemination of the knowledge created through the research process" (p. 1). PAR members participate as co-researchers in a community of inquiry to address issues that individually and collectively affect them. Previous researchers suggested that high school culture and practice can improve by engaging students in school reform efforts (Conner, 2015; Mitra, 2014). Herr and Anderson (2015) explained that PAR is an excellent methodological choice when the goals of a study are social knowledge creation, critiqued practice, and organizational transformation. When researchers collaborate with students, PAR can be a powerful tool for educational transformation that generates local, contextualized knowledge about how policies and programs directly affect students. PAR can provide a conceptual bridge between theory and practice.

PAR studies in schools strengthen student voice education reform efforts and provide students with a framework for participating in educational decisions that affect them (Dolan, Christens, & Lin, 2015). Another benefit to PAR projects is that students gain a feeling of authentic empowerment when adults take them seriously as knowledgeable participants in conversations about their education (Cook-Sather, 2002; Herr & Anderson, 2015). In short, PAR is a transformative method of research that empowers participants to have a voice in research and produces practical knowledge that can positively impact the people most affected by the problem under study.

## **Positioning My Values**

My personal and professional experiences and beliefs influenced my epistemological stance and the design of the study. I have been a teacher and school administrator at the research site for 23 years. Early in my career as a school administrator, I redesigned the ninth-grade program to improve freshman retention rates. This was my first introduction to action research, practical research grounded in local context to generate organizational change.

Cook-Sather (2002) said school leaders must help students realize and exercise their own power. Anderson (1990) recommended that school administrators take a critical constructivist view of their own practice and the dominant organizational structures in their schools to facilitate change from the inside. Herr and Anderson (2015) suggested that school leaders should find new ways to "foster more authentic and voluntaristic spaces for collaborative inquiry in schools" (p. 46).

I strongly believe, as past researchers have suggested, that students are knowledge experts about their experiences of schooling. Consistent with the work of Cook-Sather (2002, 2006) and Mitra (2014), I hold the view that students have a right to a voice in their own education. I believe that people socially construct knowledge in communities of inquiry. Partnering with students in the research process helps me see blind spots in my own practice and provides missing insight to improve the experiences of freshman year students.

#### **Research Design**

The study included two phases of data collection to strengthen the study through explanatory mixed methods and provide a more comprehensive understanding than either method could provide alone (Bulsara, 2015). The survey provided a baseline measure of student voice in the school. The qualitative focus group content offered richer, more contextualized data than the survey could provide.

**Data collection 1.** I began data collection by conducting a survey in the spring of the students' freshman year of high school. The purpose of the survey was to establish a broad picture of the ninth-grade students' perceptions of their experience of high school in order to establish a baseline as to what extent students believed they had a voice in school decision-making processes. Using the survey allowed me to capture general perceptions from the larger population of students before moving into the focus group phase. I administered the Quaglia School voice survey (Appendix J) to the 65 (38.3% of the class) ninth grade students who completed the survey assent forms. The Quaglia School voice survey is a national survey instrument with high validity and reliability that was first given in 2009. In addition to measuring levels of student voice, the Quaglia School voice survey measures school climate and student engagement. In the 2013-2014 academic year, 66,314 students in grades 6 to 12 in 234 schools in the United States completed the Quaglia School voice survey. Of those respondents, 14.3% (9,494 participants) were ninth grade students (My Voice National Student Report, 2015). I obtained student and parent consent prior to survey administration. Responses to the survey were anonymous. Information from the survey informed the initial focus group questions.

The Quaglia School voice survey contained 67 survey statements. The participants responded with their level of agreement with each survey statement on a five-point Likert-scale (Strongly Agree, Agree, Undecided, Disagree, Strongly Disagree). Sample survey statements included "students have a voice in the decisionmaking at school" and "students work with adults to find solutions to school problems." I analyzed survey data through a simple frequency distribution to ascertain students' agreement or disagreement with the survey statements.

**Data collection 2.** For the second round of data collection, I conducted a focus group with ninth grade students to gain deeper insight into their perceptions of their schooling experiences. Focus groups are common in PAR because they support the epistemological framework of social constructionism and the processes of group problem-solving, capacity building, and reflection (Chiu, 2003). The focus group meetings occurred during the last three months of the students' freshman year. Choate, Hauser et al. (2009) suggested assessing stakeholders' perceptions at the end of their ninth-grade year as evaluations of the success of a freshman transition program.

The Quaglia School voice survey responses and literature review informed the initial focus group questions (Appendix K). I collected data during focus group sessions through semi-structured group interview techniques (Morgan, 2009). The focus group structure was an integral part of the research design due to my belief that the participants would socially mediate and translate each other's ideas better with their peers in a group discussion than with myself in individual interviews. Kirshner, Bemis, and Estrada (2013) found that student voice efforts improved when students shared their experiences and ideas with each other in a group format.

In total, seven weekly focus groups sessions occurred during normal student advisory periods. Each advisory period met for 55 minutes. The advisory period was an ideal time for the focus as it was an existing school structure that provided a dedicated time and place for students to meet without disrupting their normal schedule. I tried to be consistent with the advice of Cook-Sather (2002) who stated that one of the first steps to authorizing student perspectives is to ensure that there are legitimate and valued spaces within which students can speak. The semi-structured interview protocol (Appendix K) consisted of 15 open-ended questions that focused on the challenges of high school, school engagement, and the level of student involvement in school decision-making processes.

# Setting

The setting for the study was Plains High school, a rural, medium-size comprehensive high school in New England. Plains High School is in a state with one of the largest wealth divides and achievement gaps in the country. At the time of the study, the total enrollment at Plains High School was 664 students, 162 of which were first-year freshmen. Of the 664 students, 53% fell below the state poverty level and received either free or reduced-price lunch. Additionally, 14% qualified for special education services, and 13% received modifications under section 504 of IDEA (i.e., educational accommodations or modifications of some sort). The students at Plains scored below the state average on the state's standardized achievement tests and are over-shadowed by their peers at more affluent schools.

Like many small towns in New England, the town of Plains was economically depressed for many years following the closure of several mills and manufacturing companies. Unemployment in the town is twice the state average, and many residents struggle to find employment. Due to these economic conditions, the school system received no increases in funding for 15 years, resulting in various cuts to educational programs and staffing. Parents were generally supportive of the efforts of educators, and considered schools *a way out* of the cycles of intergenerational poverty in the town.

Students in the school district have historically struggled with the transition from eighth to ninth grade. Approximately 20% of first year high school students did not attain the required six credits to achieve sophomore status and were retained in the ninth grade for the following school year. Further tracking of four-year student cohorts revealed that 60% of students who were retained their freshman year did not graduate on time or dropped out before their senior year. Ten years ago, I was a beginning school administrator tasked by the superintendent and high school principal to develop an intervention plan to help incoming students successfully transition to ninth grade. Over time, the implementation of a freshman academy model at Plains reduced the annual freshman retention rate from 20% to between eight to 10%, however many students still struggled with other factors during their first year of high school, and school officials continued to search for an intervention model that would help more students. This was my first experience with action-orientated research, in which I used existing research about freshman transition and implemented it into the local context at Plains. That initial intervention took the form of a freshman academy, a school within a school at Plains High School. Freshman academy programs typically dedicate a core team of teachers to ninth grade students and place them in a dedicated building or wing of a larger building to create a smaller learning community within the larger high school setting. Freshman academies are one the most prominent intervention models that address the difficulties students have upon entering high school.

A freshman academy program to support ninth graders existed at Plains for seven years prior to this study. The freshman academy is in a dedicated wing of the larger high school. Ninth grade students attend core academic courses in the freshman wing but leave for elective classes. Freshman students form two instructional teams based on 8<sup>th</sup> grade standardized achievement scores in order to create two heterogeneous groups. Freshman teachers work exclusively with one team, but both teams share student services staff (e.g., school counselor, special education case manager).

# **Participants**

The participants for this study were all first-year freshmen at Plains High School. All first-year freshmen at Plains high school were eligible to participate in Phase One of the data collection (the Quaglia School voice survey). For Phase Two of the data collection, I selected focus group participant members using a purposeful sampling strategy (Merriam, 1998; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Purposeful sampling is the most common sampling strategy in PAR to select participants who are knowledge about the phenomenon under examination (Herr & Anderson, 2015). Initially, 14 freshman students volunteered for the focus group portion of the study. Of that number, one student was unable to obtain parental consent, and one student left the focus group after the first session. Twelve students continued through all seven sessions. Each focus group session lasted for 55 minutes during the normal student advisory period. Students received a school store gift card for their participation, and I provided food at every meeting. The demographic makeup of the 12 participants was as follows: 7 girls and 5 boys, all between the ages of 14 and 15 years old. Ten were White, one was Asian, and one was African American. There was a mix of grade point averages (GPA) amongst the participants. Two students were currently failing one or more courses and held a GPA of below 70; five had a GPA of between 70 and 85; the remaining five had a GPA of 85 or better. Five of the students qualified for free or reduced-price lunch, and three qualified for special education services. Nine of the students attended Plains Central School in the same district for eighth grade. Two students came to Plains from other districts within the state, and one moved from out of state.

### **Permission and Consent**

I obtained permission from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Rhode Island College and the school district's research officer to conduct this study (Appendix B). All parents of first-year freshman students received a cover letter detailing the research study (Appendix F) and permission forms for the survey (Appendix H) and the focus group (Appendix G). I read all first-year freshman students a recruitment script at a class meeting (Appendix C), and asked them to take the survey. Students who declined to participate in the survey incurred no penalty. For the focus group, I asked for student volunteers. Student volunteers provided parental permission and their own assent (Appendix E) to be part of the study. Students who opted out of the study at any time incurred no penalty or consequences.

# **Qualitative Data Analysis**

I used a digital device to record the audio from all focus group sessions. After each session, I transcribed the audio recordings into Microsoft Word. After the initial transcription, I listened to the recordings again while reading the transcripts to ensure accuracy, write field notes, and refine the questions for the next focus group session. To maintain what Herr and Anderson (2015) called "democratic validity," I started each subsequent focus group session by member checking with the participants to make sure I accurately interpreted their perspectives (p. 69). I read the student responses back to them and asked clarifying questions. Sometimes, I used the overhead projector to display their responses. I repeated this iterative process through all seven focus groups sessions.

As I conducted the focus groups, I simultaneously analyzed the data. First, I organized and segmented the written transcripts for coding by comparing blocks of text and looking for generalized themes and patterns. If I asked a follow up question at a different session, I organized that text into a thematic thread of text. From those thematic threads, I developed initial codes. I generated code categories using a concept mapping software, Inspiration 10, so that other researchers could follow my data trail and trace my thinking as I moved through the analysis (Miles & Huberman, 2013). Each code category received a subcategory containing participants' responses from the transcripts and a short code description (Wolcott, 1994). From the codes and descriptions, I wrote analytic memos (Luttrell, 2010; Marshall & Rossman, 2011). Analytic memo writing allowed me to play with my interpretation of the data and begin the process of assembling data, codes, and categories into prose. The memos served as conceptual rough drafts of the data analysis and helped me hone my findings.

### **Issues of Trustworthiness in a Qualitative Study**

To ensure the trustworthiness of the study, I attended to its credibility, generalizability, dependability, and confirmability. I tried to be as transparent as possible regarding my own position, biases, and assumptions to ensure the study's *dependability* through my reflexive field notes. To ensure *confirmability*, I provided an audit trail of the data and coding maps so that other researchers could review my findings. I used multiple sources of data and multiple methods to triangulate and confirm findings (Luttrell, 2010; Herr & Anderson, 2015). To provide credibility, I used member checking to validate initial interpretations of data gathered through the focus groups by relating the data back to the participants to *confirm* the analysis (Creswell, 2009; Merriam, 1998). I recorded my own thoughts and reactions in a field journal as I collected data from the focus groups. I used analytic memos as I interpreted the data. Although the generalizability of the study is limited by its scope, I provided a rich description of the participants and their context so that readers might determine whether aspects of the study's findings are applicable to other settings (Herr & Anderson, 2015).

## **Research Relationship, Positionality, and Bias**

A goal of this study was to bring about organizational change in my own professional setting, but I hope to expand this knowledge to other practitioners who wish to do similar work in their schools by partnering with students to affect educational change. An unavoidable dilemma for any researcher who wishes to study their own professional setting is the issue of ethics, power, and knowledge creation. To help with these dilemmas, I tried to be as transparent and honest about my process as possible.

I was the researcher for this study while being an assistant school principal at the research site, an insider working in collaboration with other insiders (Herr & Anderson, 2015). My intent in both roles was to gain a deeper understanding of how ninth grade students experienced their freshman year and to work with them to improve that experience. I conducted the focus groups myself because a fundamental aspect of this study was to examine what happens when a school administrator works directly with students on a problem that affects them both (Anderson's (2009) idea of advocacy leadership). However, as Herr and Anderson (2015) cautioned, when an insider to a setting is also the researcher, they must take precautions against feeling like a *privileged expert* with absolute knowledge of the truth. As Carter argued, "practitioners' accounts of their reality are themselves (just subjective) constructions of reality and not reality itself. They do not have privileged access to truth" (Herr & Anderson, 2015, p. 65).

By conducting a PAR study with my students, I hoped to avoid what Nathan and Petrosino (2003) termed *expert blind spots*, gaps in practitioners' knowledge that they are unable to see themselves. By working together with students on this study, I hoped we could uncover each other's blind spots to improve the situations for us both. I tried to safeguard against letting my perspectives become dominant by pulling data from a variety of sources to ensure the data was honest, trustworthy, and true to the participants' voices.

I was in a position of power over my students. An inherent problem in practitioner-based research is that the researcher's role as a school leader may color the data from participants. PAR studies must account for these power relations. Negotiations of power are at the root of any discussion of student voice (Cook-Sather, 2002). However, power relations are difficult to measure because they exist within organizational school practices and structures. Anderson (2009) warned that even well-intentioned efforts to involve research participants in the decision-making process can have the opposite effect by unintentionally using collusion to reinforce existing power structures. Nygreen (2009) cautioned that although PAR studies hold the promise to disrupt unequal power relations, in practice, they may actually "reproduce or exacerbate power inequities while obscuring these processes through a discourse of false egalitarianism" (p. 19). To mitigate possible ethical conflicts, I purposely removed myself from administrative duties or any direct supervision over the ninth-grade class during the study. Another principal took over responsibility for all the administrative duties concerning the ninth-grade class.

#### **Data Security**

All the data, including the Quaglia School voice survey results and focus group transcripts, remained electronically secured with passwords on data storage devices. Responses to the survey were anonymous. Each focus group participant received a unique study I.D. code number stored in a locked cabinet separate from the master student demographic list. Any references to participants in the study use only pseudonyms to protect the identity of the participants.

## Limitations

This study does not attempt to generalize its findings to all school settings, but rather to capture data in a specific context during a set span of time. My transparency in describing the setting, context, and methods of the study allows other researchers to decide whether the study's findings are applicable to their own settings. This study included data from a small sample of participants during a short time at the end of the participants' first year of high school. Not all freshman students chose to participate in the study; therefore, the study did not capture all students' views. Further research with a larger sample would help with the confirmability of the study.

I thought it was important to conduct data collection myself, but my position as a school administrator may have affected the student responses in the focus groups. I tried to mitigate power issues through the research design and member checks. My administrative position and experience as the architect of the original academy created the potential for unintentional bias in the findings. This study only explored perceptions of students due to my belief that they are the most knowledgeable informants of their ninth-grade experience of programs and policies at Plains High School. I may have a biased view; many teachers and administrators may not view student voices as a legitimate source of data when making educational decisions. For the purposes and scope of this study, I excluded other voices (e.g., parents, teachers, and other administrators) that could add to the conversation and enrich the data in future studies.

#### **CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS**

The goal of this study was to examine how students at Plains High School experienced their freshman year and to document what happened when students and a school administrator partnered to improve that experience. Specifically, the data gather during this study answered the following research questions:

1. What do the students at Plains High School say about their experiences in ninth grade?

2. What do students say about student voice and empowerment at Plains High School?

3. What happens when students and a school administrator partner in the school reform process?

In Phase One of the data collection, ninth grade students completed the Quaglia School Voice survey to provide baseline student perceptions. The survey data informed answers to research questions one and two and informed the creation of indepth interview questions for the focus groups. In total, 65 ninth grade students completed the survey assent form and responded to the survey. Of the respondents, 44.6% were male and 55.4% were female. All students were between the ages of 14 and 15, and 76.9% planned on going to college. The remaining 23.1% were undecided.

In Phase Two of the data collection, I conducted seven weekly focus groups sessions during students' advisory periods. Twelve students attended all seven focus group sessions. Each session met for 55 minutes. The focus group included follow-up questions to the survey to provide a richer context to evaluate the survey data. In the following discussion of the findings, pseudonyms appear in place of student participant names to preserve their anonymity. In the discussion, I use direct quotes from participants' responses as often as possible to be true to their voices. In summary, answers to RQ1 and RQ2 emerged from the Quaglia School voice survey results and focus group participant responses. Answers to RQ3 emerged from the focus group participants' responses, researcher field journal, and analytic memos containing my reflections on the process.

The findings below are categorized by themes that emerged during the research process. For ease of navigation in this chapter, the themes generated by the research, and possible implications of the finding are summarized here. The findings from research question one are grouped into the following themes; the transition into high school, different academic expectations between middle and high school, the importance of prior school connections, reflections on the freshman academy structure, what students said about being successful in school, support systems, teaching and learning, earning credits, school choice, school attendance, and the relevancy of school for preparation for the future. The findings from this research question have implications for teachers, school administrators, policy makers, and researchers examining the transition into high school.

Themes generated from the findings of research question two include; students' reflections on their voice in classroom decision making, lack of school empowerment, school governance structures for students, their beliefs about students' ability to change schools for the better, schools as a democracy, and the role of students serving on a school board. The findings from research question two have ramifications for school administrators and researchers examining student voice in high school classrooms.

Research question three contains student participants' reflection on the partnering process and their suggestions for improving the process in the future. The findings from research question three have implications for other practitioners and researchers wishing to undertake similar work and partner with students in their own contexts for the purpose of school reform.

# **RQ1:** What do the students at Plains High School say about their experiences in ninth grade?

The Quaglia School voice survey results and focus group responses regarding how students experienced their first year of high school answered RQ1. The survey asked participants about school climate, classes, teachers, and the institutional support they received. Specific survey responses appear in the following sections. An overview of survey results for RQ1 appears in Table 3.

# Table 3

# Survey Results for RQ1

Question	Total in Agreement	Male	Female
School is a welcoming and friendly place.	61.5%	58.6%	63.9%
I feel accepted for who I am at school.	47.7%	51.7%	44.4%
Teachers make an effort to get to know me.	35.9%	39.3%	19.4%
I have difficulty fitting in at school.	26.6%	35.7%	29.4%
Teachers care about my problems and feelings.	27.9%	23.1%	31.4%
I enjoy being at school.	32.8%	32.1%	33.3%
School is boring.	54.1%	55.6%	52.9%
Students are supportive of each other.	25.8%	38.5%	16.7%
Teachers help me learn from my mistakes.	25.8%	38.5%	16.7%
School inspires me to learn.	43.5%	48.1%	40.0%
I enjoy participating in my classes.	43.5%	37.0%	48.6%
Teachers enjoy working with students.	45.3%	41.4%	48.6%
If I have a problem, I have a teacher with whom I can talk.	43.5%	33.3%	51.4%
Teachers respect students.	49.2%	56.0%	44.1%
Students respect each other.	28.3%	38.5%	20.6%
Students respect teachers.	43.1%	48.3%	38.9%
My parents care about my education.	98.5%	96.6%	100%
I have a teacher who is a positive role model for me.	78.1%	72.4%	82.9%
Teachers care about me as an individual.	37.5%	42.9%	33.3%
Teachers care if I am absent from school.	37.7%	30.8%	42.9%

Focus group findings. The transition to high school places significant academic, social, and behavioral demands on students. Students need additional skills and understandings besides those measured by achievement tests to succeed in high school. Neild (2009) found that inadequate preparation for the organization and climate of high school was a major source of difficulty in the transition to ninth grade. Students often approach the transition to high school with mixed feelings of worry and excitement (Akos & Galassi, 2004). Newman et al. (2000) found students' anxieties about high school to be diverse (e.g., safety concerns, bullying, getting lost, and failing to get to class on time). Schools can ease these demands by providing a safe, supportive environment to help students succeed during freshman year. Rudduck (2007) found that students' accounts of their experiences of schooling causes beneficial systemic change in schools. *Experience* is a very broad term, and the students in the focus group voiced opinions on a wide range of topics that shaped their high school freshman experience. These topics included: support, views of teaching and learning, and the best approaches to learning. Students talked about the complexities of their high school lives. I began the focus groups by asking follow-up questions to the survey and questions from the focus group questionnaire (Appendix K). Participants reflected on their freshman year.

*On the transition into high school.* Difficult transitions from middle school and increased graduation requirements cause students to struggle in high school and drop out. Solutions, such as freshman academies, help students transition into high school and bridge two different instructional models. Efforts to improve freshman success decrease the number of high school dropouts. Smith (2006) found that

students who went on to college had a significant decline in grades during the transition to high school, which associated with the likelihood of leaving college before graduation. This is worrisome, as Grossman and Cooney (2009) found that almost all students experience a drop in GPA upon entering high school due to the increased homework demands and time outside of school required for adequate study.

I asked students for their perceptions of the differences between eighth and ninth grade. In the following excerpts, the letter "I" stands for interviewer. Student pseudonyms appear before their responses.

Shelly: Like, I thought it was going to be really stressful here, but it wasn't as bad as people made out. We have more freedom than we had in 8<sup>th</sup> grade, and we had a different schedule to get used to, but it's not as hard as I thought. Frankie: Yeah, all the switching around is, like, really complicated Holly: I thought it was going a be a worse version of middle school, but when I got here it was, like, not as much stress as there was in middle school. Everybody just chilled out.

Holly: I feel like there was so much drama in middle school and there is not as much here. There was a lot more eighth grade.

Shelly: Yeah, I got beat up in eighth grade just for that reason.

Angel: There's not a lot of physical violence here, but a lot of mental violence. I: What do you mean by "mental violence"?

Angel: Well, a lot of people here like to play games. Everyone likes drama, everybody wants attention, that's all they want. They just crave attention so they start drama. Shelly: There's always gonna be drama. You know they can't control social media, or us arguing with each other. There's no possible way, like, you can control it.

Newman et al. (2000) found that students experienced a change in social status and identity after the transition from eighth to ninth grade and that this adjustment to high school may cause academic and social difficulties. Akos and Galassi (2004) found that ninth grade students often cite the social aspect of the transition to high school as the most difficult. Starting all over again at the bottom of the social hierarchy was a concern for the students in the focus group.

Angel: When you're in eighth grade, you feel like you're the top of the food chain. You feel like you're the boss of everyone, but then you go to ninth grade and you go straight to the bottom again. It's harder to meet new people, you're in an environment of older people. You don't exactly know what you're doing, so it's intimidating. Like you walk around and you're like "that's a senior he knows exactly what he's doing" and then you think about yourself and you're like "what am I going to do in my life." So, it's intimidating, it's really intimidating to go from the top of the food chain to the bottom.

One participant, Casey, expressed her anxieties about becoming a sophomore in the fall.

Casey: Actually, from eighth grade to ninth wasn't that big a deal, but from to freshman year to sophomore year, wow! I feel like that's a crazy change. Seventh, eight<sup>,</sup> and ninth grade are, like, the same, but tenth is, like, a complete change, and I feel like it shouldn't be like that, like it shouldn't be so much harder.

I: Why do you think that?

Casey: Because we are babied in ninth grade (in the freshman academy), when you are in tenth, there's no supports, you are off on your own.

Ali: Yeah, I feel like there's going to be a lot more stress.

Interestingly, Casey felt that the freshman academy at Plains provided too much support. The freshman academy provides a hybrid model, bridging the eighth-grade team approach with the freedom of high school schedules and separate class periods. The intent was to fade the support of the academy away as students approached their sophomore year.

Angel: I mean we don't know yet, but what we've heard is that sophomore year is the hardest year.

Angel's sentiment was the most common response amongst the members of the focus group, except for Ali's response.

Ali: I heard that junior year is the hardest year or the most important year.

I: Who told you that?

Ali: My guidance counselor told me that junior year is the hardest year because of the SAT and college applications.

Ali's concerns about junior year were not common among the participants. Ali was the highest-achieving student in the focus group, academically. As such, she received more pressure from her counselor because of the belief that Ali was going to college. Other participants did not receive the same narrative from their counselors. Only three months from the end of her freshman year, Ali already felt anxiety because of her counselor's expectation that she will go to college. Other students who were lower academic achievers with the same counselor did not receive the *importance of the junior year* narrative, and did not express the same level of anxiety.

I: Do you guys care more this year than you did last year (8<sup>th</sup> grade to 9<sup>th</sup> grade)?

Shelly: I care more this year

Angel: I am more scared this year, they (the teachers) are like "okay, you have to know your career." Don't I have a couple more years to figure out what I'm supposed to do?

Holly: Yeah, in eighth grade, we didn't have to worry about all this, but here we are pushed into it and told that we have to do this or that. We should be more prepared in eighth grade and maybe think of, like, an outline of what you want to be. But here, they're like all of a sudden "okay, you need to choose your career, what you want to be." It's really confusing sometimes. Frankie: They are, like, okay, you are going to need to take this class at some point.

The students in the focus group almost unanimously cited the pressure they felt from their counselors to choose a career or college major.

*On different academic expectations*. The students in the focus group referred to different academic expectations between their eighth and ninth grade teachers.

I: What would you tell the eighth graders to expect next year at high school?

Angel: Um, I would tell them that they can't expect to get away with not doing their work. That's what it was in eighth grade; if you didn't do your work, they

(the teachers) would be, like, oh it's fine. Just do it in class and I'll give you credit. In middle school you couldn't really fail.

Casey: In eighth grade, the teachers, they would let you slack off on certain of the teams. It's very different here. It depended what team you were on, like the orange team, they had a lot of work to do. The red team, we didn't really have to work.

Holly: You really didn't have homework in eighth grade unless you didn't finish your work. The teams were really different. The orange team had a whole bunch of work to finish every night. In the red team they had no homework. But in the red team they had a lot of activities.

I: Is that different from eighth grade?

Shelly: Yes. From my experience teachers didn't really care. You would just pass no matter what.

Casey: Yeah, like in eighth grade, honestly, like one person out of the whole eighth-grade probably failed, and that's just because they didn't try at all. Cat: Yeah, we had a few teachers on orange team (in 8<sup>th</sup> grade) that if you lost your homework you would have to redo it. They would always let you make up the work.

Overall, students reported an increase in academic expectations at the high school level. Participants noted differences in academic expectations in eighth grade depending on their team. The focus group participants all referred to not being able to fail in eighth grade and about the discrepancies in academic expectations in eighth grade. The students felt that there was more accountability for school work at the high school level.

*Importance of prior school connections*. Connections to the school prior to entering high school eased the students' transitions to ninth grade (Butts & Cruzeiro, 2005). If the participant had a prior school connection to the high school (e.g., involvement in a club), it helped them transition into ninth grade. Newman et al. (2000) suggested that students who did well in ninth grade had accurate expectations of what was necessary to be successful there. Similarly, Grossman and Cooney (2009) explained that high school students stated it would be helpful if other students relayed information to them before the transition into high school.

I: If you had siblings, or knew people that went here before, did it help you prepare for high school?

Casey: For me, yes, because my sister, she got me to marching band, and I was here all the time so I knew like every part of the school.

Holly: Same thing happened for me because like my family they run road races and track. We are always here so it wasn't hard for me to come here.

Ali: Yeah, I knew some of the high school kids from Rotary Interact club, so it wasn't really hard for me to come to the school at all.

Angel: Well, I've moved so much of my life, and I'm so used to making new friends that it wasn't hard for me to come here at all.

Shelly: Like, her and I have been friends since six grade. But here, I've made so many new friends.

I: What about if you came here from different middle schools?

Angel: So I've moved around a lot during my life, but I knew a lot of people from here from social media before I met them in person. Before I came here, I asked my other friend if she knew anybody from Plains High School, and she said "yeah," so I became friends with them on Snapchat before I even came here. Social media's crazy!

Holly: Yeah, it's insane.

Angel: That's a difference in our generation, because we can meet so many people online, or on social media but not actually be able to meet them until we come to school.

Many participants noted the importance of prior connections to the high school as beneficial to making a smooth transition. Students in the focus group who participated in extra-curricular clubs or had prior high school experience reported an easier transition to high school. Interestingly, the students in the focus group noted the ability of social media to create virtual communities in which the students met online before they met in person, establishing peer networks before the school year.

*On the freshman academy structure*. Upon entering high school, many students feel lost in the larger school setting. Freshman academy structures are the most common ninth grade intervention. In one recent study, high schools with fully functioning freshman transition programs had an average high school dropout rate of just 8%, while high schools without a freshman transition program had an average rate of 24% (Grossman & Cooney, 2009). The freshman academy provides a hybrid 8<sup>th</sup>/9<sup>th</sup> grade model before students fully transition to high school in the 10<sup>th</sup> grade.

At the time of this study, Plains High School had a freshman academy structure in place for a period of seven years. The purpose of the freshman academy was to support first year high school students and increase freshman retention rates. I asked students about the freshman academy structure at Plains.

Angel: I feel like the freshman academy hasn't helped us out at all because next year we are going to be expected to do more, and most people aren't ready for it because they are babied in ninth grade.

Casey: I feel, like, you let kids get away with too much in the Freshman Academy.

Shelly: Yeah, the teachers In the Freshmen Academy let us get away with too much.

Holly: Like Mr. M., he lets you get away with too much. He is a nice person, but other teachers won't take it.

Angel: I feel, like, it's really relaxed here, and I like that. I went to another school before I came here, and it was really strict. Like, they would give you one warning, and if you didn't listen you went straight to the office. And, like here, they give you, like, so many warnings. Like, they literally repeat themselves. If they say stuff, then they should make you do it. Casey: Because they always told us that you can't act the way we did in eighth

grade because you guys wouldn't deal with it. But most of us when we came up we acted the same way.

I: What you mean by acted the same?

Casey: Like not doing our work, acting up in class and talking, not listening to the teacher or paying attention.

Students in the focus group felt that their freshman academy teachers were not strict enough, let students get away with too much, and did not follow through with behavioral redirections despite repeated warnings.

*On being successful*. On the survey, students reported high perceptions of their own ability and work ethic. An overwhelming 90% of students reported that getting good grades was important to them, and 71.2% said that they put forth their best effort at school. However, only 32.8% reported that they enjoyed being at school. I: If you didn't try to be successful in eighth grade, are you going to be successful in high school?

Holly: No, no way, like in eighth-grade I didn't do so great because I just didn't care. But I do now. Here I'm trying.

I: What was the difference? Why do you care now?

Holly: Like, I know that I'm going to need what I learn here; it's not just for no reason. They don't just put you here. And I realize that.

Casey: Yeah, I'm trying this year, but it's like, you know from home life. My mom will take my cell phone if I don't do well. Now I have to pay attention!

I: How do you get that motivation?

Donny: Well, you have to want it. You have to see and understand what the good outcome is gonna be, of getting good grades I mean.

Casey: I feel that it's a little bit of both because the student didn't put

forth the effort then the school can't help them.

The students listed the ability to focus, being responsible, getting your work done on time, and accepting responsibility for mistakes as skills that were necessary to be successful in high school. I asked the participants if they thought a lot of students owned up to their mistakes.

Tom: It depends, people don't want to snitch on other people. Especially if it's their friend, or someone that they know. They don't want to tell if they know their friends gonna do something to them, or not be friends with them. Ron: Like, if your friend does something and you tell the truth to someone (teacher or administrator) that he did something bad, then sometimes that person isn't your friend anymore because you snitched on them.

Loyalty to their peer networks was a constant theme throughout the focus group discussions. Both genders talked at length about being loyal to their friends, but the males in the focus group often used the term "snitching" when I asked about owning up to their mistakes, especially when asked if they were likely to be truthful with adults in the building.

*On support systems*. I attempted to explore who students turned to when they have an issue or concern in school. Based on research (Neman et al., 2000) support structures fall into three categories: teachers, parents, and peers.

*On teacher support*. Newman et al. (2000) found that most first-year high school students reported feeling that teachers and administrators did not care about their well-being or how well they did in school. Only 27.9% of the survey respondents at Plains felt teachers cared about their problems and feelings. I asked students if they would go to their teacher if they had a problem in school.

Angel: It depends on the problem. I don't really talk to teachers about my problems.

Holly: Yeah, I only ask teachers for help if it's a problem that keeps going on. Like if it keeps going on for a long time I'm like umm, "okay I am gonna tell you now."

Shelly: A lot of teachers, when you tell them a problem they'll be like "okay, I'll deal with that" and then they just ignore it. Some teachers will try to relate to your problem, but they're an adult with different problems, so how do you relate with it if you're an adult?

Casey: I don't really go to a teacher. I feel like a teacher doesn't understand. They're just like "here's a punishment," "here's an afterschool," or "just stop talking to them."

Angel: Or they just put you in TAC (temporary alternative classroom, an inschool disciplinary structure), but once you get out of TAC the problem is still there.

Holly: Yeah, they just give a punishment, thinking that that'll solve the problem, but it's still there after the punishment. They just ask you for your side of the story and then give you a consequence, like you have a lunch detention. They think that it just solves it.

Angel: No, in middle school, they don't care, they're not going to take you seriously. I feel like if you could talk to the teachers and they would listen but not help. They don't hear you out, they don't even listen, they say "right, okay, thanks bye," or just give you a lunch detention. They don't, like, solve any issues.

Generally, the members of the focus group reported that teachers were not their primary forms of support for social or academic issues. The participants thought that adults in the building could not or would not help them solve their problems. They reported that they would not go an administrator or an adult in the building because adults "don't hear you out" and cannot relate to problems because they are adults. Further, the participants thought that school personnel would issue a punitive consequence for bringing an issue to an adult or just ignore the issues.

*On parental support.* On the survey, 98.5% of the students believed their parents cared about their education (100% of females). However, only 45.9% reported that their teachers and parents stayed in regular communication. Choate (2009) compared the perceptions of ninth grade students to the perceptions of their parents and teachers, and found that teachers and parents viewed academics as the primary benefit of high school. However, students believed that the social aspect of high school was the most important. The student participants in the focus group had differing perspective on the role of parents in supporting students.

I: Is it important for your parents to care?

Holly: I think those kids whose parents don't really care, well, they're not really going to try.

Angel: That's not always true. Some kids prove everybody wrong, sometimes you want to prove that just because your parents don't care, you do. It's important for you to care too.

Casey: Well, if I'm not behaved and get good grades than I get consequences at home.

The students commented on how much they confided in their parents on school and peer issues.

Shelly: My mom knows everything I do. I tell her everything.

Angel: Um, my dad does not know everything! I'd like him to be a big part of my life, but, like, I never go to his house and he never does anything, and he doesn't really care. My life is so complicated I don't even know how to explain it.

Parental support and consequences at home were important motivators for some students, but not all the students in the focus group felt that their parents cared about their academic achievement. As Angel was quick to point out, many students that she knew, herself included, worked harder to prove their parents wrong.

*On peer support*. Overwhelmingly, the participants reported their peers to be their primary support group and first level of problem-solving. The students knew just what member of their peer groups had expertise or experience with a specific problem and who to go to for help. The students were well-versed in ways to access resources in their peer level, but they struggled to navigate adult resources available at the school level. Some students reported going to their parents for help, but most felt that adults did not genuinely address their problems.

I: How important are your friends to you if you have a problem or question?

Shelly: Really, really important!

Casey: They are important, but you know, you have to choose the right people.

Angel: You just have to be good at picking friends. If you pick the wrong friends, they can hurt you. Some people have like awful backgrounds, and like awful friends so they can't concentrate.

*On teaching and learning*. Mitra (2007b) found that considering student perspectives on teaching, learning, and curriculum improved classroom practice and academic outcomes. Rudduck (2007) and Hargreaves (2017) used students' reflections on their teachers to drive instructional and pedagogical changes in classroom practice. At Plains, 61.7% of the survey respondents thought that their teachers cared about their academic success. However, only 43.5% of respondents reported that they enjoyed classwork. Only 23% of students felt teachers made school an exciting place to learn, but 73.3% believed learning could be fun and 74.2% enjoyed learning new things. Only 37.5% of respondents believed teachers cared about them as individuals. I: Talk about your teachers, do they help you with academics?

Angel: No, like half my teachers don't help me. I feel, like, they just show you something, and they are, like, "now you have to know this." Like, I am a good student, I seriously do my work, but they move so fast. They either explain it too much, or they don't explain it at all. They just give you a packet and say you gotta know this.

Casey: I mean here, they're, like, really obsessed with making sure we get good grades and do our homework. They're always on you.

I: Does that help you focus?

Angel: No, not really. I feel like teachers who are really strict and yell at me stress me out.

Ali: I feel like stress does help, you but not a great deal of stress.

Cat: Another thing in ninth grade year is or is not a lot of stress but I feel like in 10<sup>th</sup> grade year there is a lot of stress. Like I feel like you should slowly build up.

Throughout the discussions, students expressed concern regarding pacing, content, and modes of instruction. The focus group students articulated the kind of teachers they wanted and the types of pedagogical approaches they felt were most effective. For example, they drew a clear distinction between two freshman academy math teachers.

Shelly: So, I like Ms. N, she's really nice, but with Ms. N will all get distracted. I like Ms. L too, she's really nice, but yeah, like Mrs. R, she's really strict.

Casey: But Mrs. R, she's a teacher where you get stuff done.

Shelly: Yeah, with Mrs. R, you need to get stuff done now, like you need to really get it done. She's really strict.

Students liked Ms. N., but they knew they could easily get her off task. In contrast, the students referred to Mrs. R. as "really strict" and some admitted to disliking her. However, all the students in the focus group admitted that "in her class, you got stuff done."

I: Do some of your teachers give you more options about how you learn? Shelly: I mean I love reading, don't get me wrong, but there are certain things that I don't like to read. For example, in Mr. F's class we read Romeo and Juliet. I mean, everybody says Romeo and Juliet is a great book, and it might be a great book, but even though I read it, I don't understand it. Ron: Well, my class is better because I have Mr. C, and for Romeo and Juliet we did things on the computer, like I really understood that way. It was really fun. We made things on the computer to act out parts of the play. I understood it better that way.

Todd: Yeah, in my class, we got to watch the good Romeo and Juliet movie. I understand it better that way. Now we are reading Of Mice and Men, and we are going to do the same thing.

I: Do you think learning can be fun? Not just in school, I mean like learning anything. Tom: Yeah, if you're interested in it, it's fun. You want to learn about it if you're interested in it.

Josh: It can be fun, but, like, Algebra is not going to help me at all so that's not fun at all. But other classes are more fun because I'm interested in the topic. Ali: Yeah, I like certain classes because of the teachers.

Donny: About what Josh said about how algebra doesn't help him? I agree with that, but math would help you if you wanted to be like a welder or scientist. But if you are never going to use Algebra, then it shouldn't be, like, a required class.

Josh: We should have a say in what we learn, because sometimes, the stuff we learn, there's like no point.

I: So are the teachers more important than the class content?

Angel: Yeah, I like certain classes because of the teachers.Donny: Well, like if you don't like the topic but you like the teacher sometimes a teacher can change how you really feel about that subject.

Holly: Yeah, but, like, I love science, but I hate the way Miss L teaches it!! Shelly: I feel like I can like Spanish, but I hate the way Miss B teaches it, it's, like, so boring.

I: Do you think learning can be fun?

S: (Lots of No's from the group)

Angel: I mean, some classes are more fun because you're interested in the topic.

Holly: Yeah, I like certain classes because of the teachers. Like if you don't like the topic but you like the teacher sometimes a teacher can change how you really feel about that subject.

Josh: Yeah, I mean, you want to learn about it if you interested in it, but, like, algebra is not going to help me at all, so that's not fun.

Grossman and Cooney (2009) found that high school teachers are more likely to employ teaching styles that involve lecturing and less likely to include discussion of students' ideas. However, Daniels, Bizar, and Zemelman (2001) found that the academic achievement levels of students were higher when teachers employed cooperative learning experiences.

I: Do you feel you learn better when a teacher tells you stuff or when you get to discuss it as a class together?

Donny: I like discussing it as classroom, instead of the teacher just writing stuff on the board.

Angel: Yes, conversation like this is much better than writing stuff on the board and telling us to write it and copy it down. Like the conversation we are

having right now. It's much easier than saying, please explain to me on a piece of paper (the survey) what you want to change.

Overwhelmingly, the students in the focus group preferred class discussions to a traditional lecture format. The students reported that they learned better when they could talk about their ideas with their classmates.

I: Do you ever teach somebody else or learn from your friends?

Casey: In most schools, they don't allow that because the teacher wants to be the one talking about stuff. But if you know someone that is closer to you, they can explain it better because they know you, and know how you think. Angel: Exactly, that's why we learn most things from social interaction. Shelly: Yeah, I'd rather have one of my closest friends explain it to me. Angel: A lot of times the teacher explains to the class, but we don't get it, so we ask our friends because they know how to deal with me, and a lot of times the teachers won't. They just say, "Are you listening?" or "Are you paying attention?"

I: If you want to learn about something that we didn't teach in school how would you learn about it?

Josh: I would watch YouTube, or ask my friends.

Angel: I feel like the Internet is what teaches us.

Holly: It's mostly from advice from my friends.

Eli: If you want to find something out, you go in the Internet, and type in exactly what you want to find.

Students reported that if they want to learn something new, they go to the Internet, social media, or one of their peers. They found knowledge from their peers or the Internet to be more relevant to their lives. For example, Angel's response to the question "Do your friends ask you to teach them new things?"

Angel: Yes, so mine is like people skills. People ask me, like, how to solve problems they are having with somebody else, or how to talk to people, or how to get through situations with their friends.

Indeed, the other students regarded Angel as an expert on social interactions. Her friends knew how to access her knowledge if they had a social problem. She was frequently in the hallways during both passing time and class time holding "counseling sessions" with her classmates.

The participants learned most things from their peers, including in the classroom, where they often referenced the role of their friends as translators of adult ideas. This is consistent with previous findings (Akos & Galassi, 2004; Choate, 2009; Letrello & Miles, 2003; Newman et al., 2000); students reported their primary support system in school, both socially and academically, was social interactions with their peers.

*On earning credits and being "off-track."* Upon entering high school, students must meet state-mandated requirements to proceed to the next grade level and graduate from high school. This is the first time in their educational experience that students encounter this credit system. Hertzog (2006) identified the need for ninth grade students to accrue high school credits as a major stumbling block during their first year. McLaughlin and Talbert (2006) found that many freshmen lacked a fundamental understanding of the high school credit structure and failed to receive enough credits to advance to sophomore year. This may account for the freshman bulge (Kennelly & Monrad, 2007; Osler & Waden, 2012) or the freshman bottleneck (Wheelock & Miao, 2005).

Allensworth and Easton (2005) found the best predictor of a ninth-grade student to graduate from high school on time was that they were on track with their credits. Standardized test scores prior to high school were not reliable predictors of graduation; 25% of students with high standardized test scores in eighth grade were off-track credit-wise during their ninth-grade year (Allensworth & Easton, 2005). Students who do not accumulate the required number of credits to proceed to sophomore status are in significant danger of not graduating on time or dropping out. Allensworth and Easton (2005) noted that even students with low standardized test score in eighth grade could be successful and on-track for graduation if they attended schools with strong freshman support programs. I explored the idea of earning high school credits with the focus group.

I: So, what do you guys think about the idea of earning credits in high school?

Casey: Most people don't care. I mean they know about the credits; they just don't care. In eighth grade, they were just, like, "put your phone away, you need to do this," but when I came here it was, like, totally different. You have to actually pass your classes.

Angel: I feel like some freshman do and some freshmen don't take it [credits] seriously.

Josh: Wait, don't your grades get turned into credits?

Eli: As long as you have the academic classes, you can get eight credits, so it's important that classes are not study halls. Then you graduate.

Casey: Yeah, like you have to take math; you have to take social studies. You need four years of credits [math] to graduate.

Even though the students were approaching the end of their freshman year, there were many misconceptions within the group about what exactly high school credits were and why they mattered.

*On choice.* Neild (2009) found that ninth grade students have more success transitioning to high school when their teachers share classroom decision-making with them. Similarly, von Mizener and Williams (2009) found that student choice positively affects academic performance for disengaged high school students and students with behavioral issues. Quaglia and Corso (2014) found that students had more positive experiences of schooling when they had a choice in their classroom and school practices.

Daniels et al. (2001) found that high school students were more likely to stay engaged in school activities if they had some choice in the activities. Glasser (1998) suggested that teachers should organize classroom activities around cooperative learning, support, and student choices about what and how they learn. Kohn (1993) found that academic achievement increased when students had a choice in how and what they studied.

The word *choice* has a connotation of *school choice*, but it is important to acknowledge that the students at Plains wanted to have more choices *within* their neighborhood school. For example, the freshman students at Plains reported feeling

frustrated with the lack of variety of classes that they could take. Many students had to take study halls due to a lack of elective choices due to budget concerns and the district's strict alignment to a Common Core curriculum. Overall, the students in the focus group reported wishing they had more choices in the classes they took and a say in how their classrooms operated.

I: How important is it for you to pick your classes?

Holly: Yeah, at my old school, we got to pick more classes, and I was really excited. But when I came here, they just told you what we had to take. So I was excited to take honors English, but the only extra-curriculars that I have are chorus and gym.

Shawn: Yeah, I signed up for classes I wanted, but didn't get any of them. Tom: I came here late, so I got what they gave me.

Shelly: At my last school, we got to sit at the computer and pick the classes that we wanted, but here, I didn't get to pick.

Cat: Yeah, so this year I have gym because I needed it, but next year, I want all academic classes and no study halls. The first half of this year, I had two study halls, and this half, I had one. I was like this is insane because I need credits and having three study halls is not going to help. If you ask for something like that, like more classes, they should give it to you because I just don't want to sit in study hall wasting my time.

Donny: I think next year, you shouldn't give us as many study halls, because so many freshmen have two study halls or one study hall. So, I think instead of giving them a study hall, maybe give them like an easier course class. You should know that you just don't get a whole, like, hour here to mess around. Because a lot of freshmen don't use that as a study hall.

I: How important is it that you get to pick classes that you actually want to take? Angel: It's really important because I signed up to take a course, and they still didn't put me in it. They say they let you choose your classes, but they don't really. Like, if I want to be in pottery, they wouldn't put me in it. It's weird. Josh: I feel, Like, as freshmen it doesn't really matter because they give you what they think you need, not what you want.

Angel: At this school, they ask you what classes you want to take, but then they tell you what classes you are going to take. Like here's math, here's science. They should change that.

Shelly: It's boring this year, but I'm excited for next year because I feel like I can pick more classes. Like, for example, I'm taking human development, which I'm excited for. I feel like sophomore year we have more choices.

I: Is it better if they give you choices about what you want to do?

Josh: Yeah, so in middle school you could choose if you want to do softball outside or football or stay in the gym, and people did what they wanted to do. Frankie: Give us choices.

Ali: Yeah, because in gym we don't really do anything; you just stand around. So, if we could do something specific like yoga, that would be good.

Tom: Yeah, at my other school, for gym you could pick like football or other stuff. Here all they care about is if you change.

I: How important is it for you to have a voice in picking your classes:

Frankie: I think that it's really important for a student to say they want to take a class they actually enjoy. If they don't want it, they're not going to put their heart or their effort in and want to work.

Donny: Well, if it's a class that you want to take, then your desire to learn from it will better. And it will be easier to retain information and get good grades in that class because you have motivation, and you want to learn about that.

The focus group participants referred to the need for more freshman elective courses. Almost all the students in the focus group said they would like school and learning if they had a choice in what classes they could take. The students also commented on their dislike of study halls. They felt they were "wasting their time" when they could be earning credits. Even in mandatory classes, such as gym, the students expressed their desire to have a choice in the types of activities. They stated that even a limited choice was better than no choice.

Due to limited enrollment spaces in elective classes, freshman often cannot take classes because guidance counselors enroll students in classes from the top down. For example, Frankie had career aspirations of becoming a chef, but had to take only academic preparation courses.

Frankie: I would like to take a food course, but freshmen really don't have a chance to take foods. So maybe the school should offer an intro foods class for freshman that shows what the course would be like.

Shawn offered a compromise.

Shawn: So maybe our core classes should be picked for us, but for our electives, for example, instead of just putting us into say an art class, and that person is not an into art, but wanted to take tech, why did they end up there? Donny expanded upon this idea and suggested introductory exploratory classes for freshman students to try out different courses.

Donny: Every freshman has had this experience at least one time where a senior was like "I hate freshmen." So I went home and asked my dad, "Hey Dad, what's the problem with freshmen"? And he said, "Because they're immature and only 14 or 15 years old." So at first I was like "I feel mature," but then when I thought about it, I was like "well maybe we are not as mature, we are just beginning." So something that I think would help would be to give freshmen some classes that would start our brains spinning about would we might like to do.

Choice was an extremely important motivator for the students. Very few elective courses were available for freshman. They mostly received a prescribed set of classes to prepare for state standardized testing. The students looked forward to becoming sophomores because they would have more choice over their classes. They suggested the idea of freshman introductory classes so that they could try out different curricula beyond the prescribed academic core. I asked the students for suggestions on expanding the current curricular offerings at Plains to develop a pathway that students could take to have an input into those courses. Angel provided a concrete example. I: Are there classes that you would like to take that we don't offer here? Angel: Geography: you guys need to add a geography class. Because when I came out here from (another state), nobody out here knew geography. So not for nothing, but most of my friends don't know geography.

I: So, if you wanted to take a class that we didn't offer, would you guys feel comfortable asking for a class?

Angel: I feel like it's about the person again, because some people like other ideas, and like to talk to people, but some people are more independent, sometimes when you think about the problems yourself you get more into depth with it.

Some students reported using a combination of peer teaching and the Internet to learn new skills. For example, I asked Donny how he would teach someone to play the guitar if someone asked him.

Donny: Well, I'd tell them to start by going on the Internet and watching videos on how to play your scales and stuff. But, I mean I know a bunch of people in the school that play guitar, so I think that would be cool if we all got together in like a club or something.

Angel: It depends on the person; if they're a shy person, then no

Shelly: I feel like a lot of freshmen are scared to try a club.

I: The ones we have or to ask for new clubs?

Donny: Both, well I'm not a big sports person and they have sports, but that's not for me, and they have like board games and stuff but that's not for me either. The [existing] clubs to me right now, they just don't seem like something that I would be interested in. I: Give me an example of something that you might be interested in?

Donny: Maybe an outdoor club that met after school. Or like a band type club for different types of instruments, like guitar.

I: So let's use that guitar club as an example and let's walk that through. How would you get that club into place?

Donny: I would find a teacher who could do it and maybe knew how to play the guitar. That would be the first thing I would do is find a teacher who knew how to play guitar.

Angel: Ya but that would depend on the teacher, and if they wanted to work with us.

I: What helps you stay focused in school?

Angel: Well if you're not behaved and don't get good grades, then I get these consequences at home.

Shelly: You know how you were talking about how high school should prepare us for what we want to be? But we don't have any classes or any clubs that, like, teach us how to fill out taxes or how to deal with insurance and stuff. I feel like that's a major thing that'll help all of us.

I: So like real life things?

Shelly: Yeah, because we don't really learn any of that, and kids come to high school and they don't know what to do in real life. It's hard to process all that. Holly: There should be a course like real life skills.

Donny: For careers, as freshmen, I'm pretty sure that most all the freshmen don't know what they want to do. I mean I'm one of those rare freshman who knows what he wants to do, so I think that since most freshmen don't know what they want to do, we should open them up to more opportunities, and give classes for them to try different things, maybe just the one semester class, you know, to help them decide what they want to do when they're older. Shelly: I know in seventh grade if you are in Miss F's class, you filled out checkbooks, and you went on this field trip to this career place.

Ali: Yeah, that was fun!

Shelly: But that was in seventh grade. I mean I didn't forget about it, but how can we learn about that again before senior year?

Angel: Yeah, because we don't really learn any of that, and kids come to high school and they don't know what to do. It's hard to process all that.

Students failed to see the relevance of school to real life.

*School attendance*. Zsiray (1996) found that many high school dropouts underestimate the importance of freshman year and attribute their dropping out to difficulties encountered there. Quaglia (2014) found that most students do not drop out of school or do poorly due to a lack of academic capacity, but rather a lack of engagement in school. Grossman and Cooney (2009) found that students ill-equipped to handle the ninth grade transition were set on a path towards school disengagement just two years before they could legally drop out. Many more students passively dropout by attending school infrequently and disengaging from interactions in their classrooms.

Grossman and Cooney (2009) found that students' poor relationships with teachers were primary precursors to dropping out. Many high school dropouts cited conflict with teachers as a problem they encountered during schooling (Newman et al., 2000). Mitra (2007b) found that school personnel often cite a lack of student motivation or poor parental support as reasons why some students rarely attend school.

The State Department of Education cited Plains high school for chronic absenteeism (10 or more absences in a school year). At the time of this study, 12.3% of freshman students were chronically absent for the school year. On the survey, only 37.7% students thought that their teachers cared if they were absent from school.

I: Do you know some kids who stopped coming to school?

Josh: Yeah, I mean there's some kids here. Like there's a kid in my study hall who just stop coming. He doesn't come to school anymore.

I: Why do you think kids stop coming to school?

Josh: I think they just want to drop out. I don't think they want to come. Casey: I think that the kids who come to school every day want to get good grades so they can get into a good college, or fulfill a dream, or get a job, and the kids that don't want to come to school I can't explain it. Josh: Yeah, if I thought that math taught me something useful, then yeah. If I thought I needed to know that that, I would come to school to learn it Holly: I think that the reason why a lot of people drop out is because of stress. Like maybe the stress of getting your work done or not knowing what they want to do or have no clue, like, where they're going in life, or also, like, their parents not caring.

I: Does your background effect your motivation to come to school?

Holly: Yeah. The kids that are spoiled, the kids whose parents are teachers, or the kids whose parents discipline them, I think those are the ones that go to school, and I think the kids with parents who don't care, those are the ones who don't go to school.

I: What is your most important reason for coming to school?

Eli: Because I have to be here. If I didn't it's illegal.

Angel: It depends on your mood. Sometimes you want to come to school so you can tell your friend something. Sometimes you don't want to come to school but your parents make you, and sometimes you come to school 'cause you want to learn something.

Shelly: Because there's, like, kids that you can't hang out with, like, outside of school.

Holly: Yeah, I can't talk to my friends outside of school because my parents took my cell phone away.

Angel's response to the question "Why do you come to school?" was as follows.
Angel: I don't know, the only thing I really actually care about is friendship.
Like even though I get my work done, I would say having friends.
Shelly: Like you don't need me to come into school every day; you have other students. If I don't come to school, you'll still have other students to teach.

Overall, the students in the focus group reported compliance, parental influence, or social reasons as motivators for attending school. Academic interests, clubs, and sports were secondary. By increasing opportunities for student engagement, especially with student input, schools could decrease absenteeism. I: Do teachers communicate to you why it's important to go to school? Do see the reason?

Eli: Yes, to graduate.

I: Okay, so let's go deeper. What does is it mean to graduate?

Josh: You know, like, get a job, get prepared for life, that stuff. Donny: I was thinking, in my opinion, school doesn't always need to teach you, school just gives you a basis of things that are good to help you, but I think it's the school's responsibility to teach you about other things like hobbies or something you can find and do on your own.

*Relevancy of school and preparation for the future*. Mitra (2007b) found that students who struggle in school often attribute their failure to a lack of fit between what the school provides and their self-perceived needs. To that end, this section details the discussions in the focus group of the alignment of the school experience to the aspirations of students. Specifically, do the freshman students at Plains consider their experience of schooling to be relevant to their future?

On the survey, 65.6% of students reported they were excited about their future, and 77% believed that going to college was important to their future. But only 47.5% of students believed that school was preparing them well for their future. Nationally, in a 2015 study, only two in five students (38%) reported that their classes helped them understand what was happening in their everyday lives (My Voice National Student Report, 2015). Similarly, just 34.4% of Plains students believed their classes were relevant to their everyday lives.

I: Does school prepare you for real life? That was one of the questions on the survey.

Josh: No, not really, they're not connected.

Shawn: Well, for your future job. When you need an actual job that needs math then it would benefit you, but, like, I can't explain it. Some things we learn here we use, but other things we don't use and will never use.

Holly: You don't know what can happen. You could not get into a place you want to go, and you have to do something else. You have to do another thing. Angel: A lot of people want to do undecided arts and majors because they don't know what to do with their life. I've known some people that have gone to college for science and end up doing nothing even near to that.

Holly: Sometimes you think that you want to do one thing, but have to change it because that's what your life's about.

Josh: Some classes teach us things that we don't need to use. Like math teaches us formulas that we're never to use. That's why I don't get, like, why we have to learn it.

Donny: But you don't know if you'll ever have to use it. That's why they make you take it.

Shelly: There's things that we don't learn that we are actually going to need when we get out of here

This dialogue is extremely important to reform efforts at Plains because it addresses the ways in which school personnel could bring students' lives into the classroom to help school be more relevant. Kincheloe (2007) called it a "fatal pedagogical mistake to set up a dichotomy between school and the real world." (p. 749). The students' remarks could have positive pedagogical impact if teachers integrated the issues and experiences that were important to students into the classroom.

I: Will school help you in your future life?

Shelly: I don't know, I don't know about my future life yet. I mean it helps you get to college, and that's part of your future life.

Holly: It's hard to see yourself in the future. I can be like "I'm going to do this," but I can change that in four years. I mean you can see yourself one way as a freshman, but the next year you could be totally different.

I: Do you think that school helps to prepare you for your future life?

Josh: I don't know, I don't know about my future life yet.

Eli: I don't know, I mean it helps you get to college, and that's part of your future life.

Ali: Sometimes when you say what you want to be there just like do this this this and this, and a make it sound so simple but we start growing up and realized it's not so easy to do what you want to do. And when you try to do something else it's just harder to change what path you are on.

I: Should schools do that? I mean should schools prepare you for real-life?Shawn: Well, not everyone's going to want to do the same thing. Everybody grows up with different ideas about what they want to be.Donny: I believe it is the school's job to prepare you for a job by teaching courses, but I don't think it's their responsibility if you fail a class. It's the kids fault. It's the teachers fault if they're not teaching you right, but I feel like it's

the kid's fault if they do not want to learn. Like if they put their homework away and be like "I don't have to do my homework."

Angel: It can also be a kid's fault. Like, let's say the kid wants to be a police officer and actually pursues that, and another kid says he wants to be a doctor, and goes through every course and the police officer goes to college and does a police officer college thing indicated that want to be a doctor just said that to get through a class and goes to a different college, or to just put on his resume that you want to be a doctor when you didn't even really want to be a doctor.

Students reported that social interactions were most relevant to their real lives. For example, Angel thought the "people skills" that she learned in school were the most relevant to her real life:

Angel: I don't necessarily think that academics teaches us about life, but I think the people in school do teach us about life.

I: In what way?

Angel: So, like relationships, how to work out things, and talking to other people.

Ali talked about her plans after high school.

I: Do you guys have an idea of what you want to do after high school?

Ali: Yeah go to college and get, like, degrees.

I: A degree in what?

Ali: Medicine.

I: Do you feel that school is helping you prepare for that?

Ali: I mean, some courses would help with that, like medical courses, or like the new CNA (Certified Nursing Assistant) course.

Qualiga and Corso (2014) stated that if students understand the purpose of their education, they are 17 times more likely to be academically motivated. The next section attempts to explore that concept by examining students' perceptions of the purpose of school.

I: What do you think is the purpose of school?

Josh: It's to help you make money. It's to help you get a job.

Eli: I don't see the purpose of it. We come because we have to come. Holly: Well, like she just said, high school is just to get you your diploma, because when you're out in your life, and you don't have your high school diploma, they will think that you are dumb.

Shelly: I really think you can't even work at McDonalds without a diploma. I mean you can get a job without a diploma, but it's not a good job that you really want.

I: What do you guys think the point of college is? What is the big picture?Holly: So then you go on to college to get a degree, and then people think more of you.

Angel: It's just a label; it's not something you really need. It's just a label to tell people you actually did something while you were in school.

Casey: It will help you with your job. If you want to be a marine biologist, you go to college to help you be a marine biologist. There're colleges that help you

do those things. Like for veterinarians, if you want to do that, there's a school for it.

The students in the focus group cited economic gain, compliance, and social standing as the purposes of their schooling. Of all the participants, only Casey, Donny, and Ali saw schooling as helping them to achieve their future goals. For example, Donny countered the other members about the role of college in his future.

Donny: Well, I want to say something. I personally think that college isn't necessarily just a label. So my dream is to work with special ed. kids and open up a summer camp, and if I don't go to college, I can't do that. I can go for things like human development and psychology that will help me, so along with that label comes stuff that I learned, so it's worth it for the job that I want.

I: Do you think the school is helping you work towards that goal?

Donny: I think it's harder to get help from teachers and the authorities at school for what you want to do because the teachers and guidance counselors are doing things that they wanted to do. I mean they wanted to be teachers and they are teachers. But, if you want to be something else, maybe it would be nice if the school brought in people from outside careers to talk to you about what you want to do. I mean the courses here, for I want to do, but they're not really good for what I need to know.

Plains had a career day, but Donny could not attend because only juniors and seniors could participate. Various students in the focus groups commented that they would like to receive exposure to careers earlier than their junior year. Also, students stated they thought they were more likely to listen to people in outside careers than teachers or counselors talking about other careers. Donny's response and the suggestions from the focus group raised an important debate about the role of the school in providing outside experiences beyond a core curriculum.

I asked the students about the role of the school in this regard. The town of Plains, like many small rural New England mill towns, was economically depressed and many residents did not venture far from the town's borders. The Plains school district severely limited out-of-district field trips due to budget constraints. I: This is kind of a small town. How important is it for you guys to have outside

experiences through the school?

Angel: I feel like we should be able to get out there and learn what else there is in the world. Because there are like certain kids that don't even leave this town. That is insane to me. There is a big world around us and to only experience a little part of it, that's just nuts.

Casey: Yeah, it's a big world out there. We're only staying in our little corner. Ali: We should have more field trips.

Holly: Yeah, but a lot of families around here can't afford stuff.

Cat: Yeah, you should tell people what they have to pay. And if it's gonna cost more money from their parents and stuff.

The students in the focus group clearly felt that the school had a responsibility to provide students with exposure to "the big world out there," beyond the school. Students wanted more field trips and recognized the importance of experiences outside of school, but also recognized the economic hardships of many of their classmates. This led to an impromptu brainstorming session about alternative methods of funding fieldtrips to be more inclusive of their classmates with economic needs.

Summary of RQ1 findings. RQ1 examined what the ninth-grade students at Plains High School had to say about their experiences in their first year of high school. The students reported a wide array of topics: attending school, the high school credit system, academic and behavioral expectations, and the role of peer support. The students reported that their peers were their chief support system in school. Repeatedly, the focus group participants referred to the power of their peer social group to help them solve problems, navigate school structures, and learn new things. Like the findings of Newman et al. (2000), peer relationships were central to the freshman experience. They explored the role of prior school connections and reported using social media to develop peer networks prior to entering high school. Students recognized that their choice of friends was crucial to their success, and stated that loyalty to their peers was the primary reason why students did not "own up" to their mistakes when confronted by adults about school discipline issues.

The students listed several challenges they faced during their first year of high school. Changes in academic expectations and pedagogical changes between eighth and ninth grade were obstacles that students encountered upon entering high school. Additionally, an unfamiliarity with the school's credit system was problematic for many of students. Only two of the participants in the focus group reported that their parents were their primary support system; almost all stated that they did not rely on their teachers for support. The students offered several suggestions for ways to improve the freshman experience. Specifically, the students wanted more choices of classes to take as freshmen and more input into how they learned in class. Students reported wanting more real-life classes that connected to their world, which included opportunities to travel beyond the confine of the school and town. The students that were the most engaged in school were those who understood its relevance to their future life. Students learned through social interaction and technology.

## **RQ2:** What do students say about student voice and empowerment at Plains High School?

RQ2 examined what students thought and said about the ways they felt their voices were heard and the ways they felt empowered at Plains High School. Like RQ1, answers to question two emerged from a combination of survey responses and student responses in the focus groups.

**Survey results overview.** Seven survey questions asked what students believed about adults in the school regarding openness to their ideas and suggestions. An overview of survey results that relate to RQ2 appears in Table 4.

### Table 4

Survey Results for RQ2			
Question	Total in	Male	Female
	Agreement		
Students have a voice in decision-making at school.	29.2%	27.6%	30.6%
Adults at this school listen to students' suggestions.	37.3%	40.7%	35.3%
Adults and students work together to make our school better.	39.3%	44.4%	35.3%
Students work with adults to find solutions to school problems.	34.4%	40.7%	29.4%
Students develop programs that improve the whole school.	31.1%	37.0%	26.5%
Teachers encourage students to make decisions.	41.0%	48.1%	35.3%
Teachers are willing to learn from students.	37.7%	37.0%	38.2%

The survey results suggested that the students at Plains did not feel empowered in decision-making processes. In fact, only 29.2% of students believed that students had a voice in the school decision-making process, and just 37.3% thought that adults in the building took their suggestions seriously.

**On teachers.** Teachers are the primary gatekeepers in schools. They interact with students every day. On average, high school students spend more waking hours with their teachers than they do with anyone else. Rudduck (2007) asked high school students about the qualities that they recognized in a good teacher and found that students wanted teachers who were respectful of students and honestly valued their

opinions. Students wanted teachers who were enthusiastic, positive, and did not make fun of or humiliate students. The students in Rudduck's (2007) study respected teachers who respected them, let them have a say, and genuinely listened to them. The students also liked teachers who were not sarcastic, explained things, and took time to go through things that students did not understand. Rudduck (2007) suggested that sharing the teacher criteria that students identified with caring teachers might increase respectful and responsive teacher-student relationships. On the survey in the present study, only 37.3% of respondents thought that adults at Plains listened to students' suggestions.

I: Do you think that your teachers value your opinions?

Shelly: Well, they don't always take us seriously. It depends on the teacher. Some teachers will listen to you and respect what you're saying, and some teachers won't.

Casey: Yeah, like if another teacher was doing this (running the advisory), they wouldn't actually listen to you. They would be just be saying stuff to get what they need to get done. Without anyone else there (another adult), they wouldn't listen because they don't care. Some teachers will ignore you, and some teachers are really sarcastic about it.

I: Can you explain?

Shelly: Well like take Mr."S." for example. Well, just say that he is saying something and you don't agree with his opinion and you say something out loud. He will basically make fun of you for saying your mind (all the students nod their head and say "yeah" together). It's just the way his personality is. Tom: Yeah, in my class sometimes kids asked questions and he makes fun of them for it. Even if we think something different, we still have to use his words.

I: Is that fair?

Eli: Well, if Mr. S. thinks what you say is stupid, then yeah I guess? I: Are there other teachers like that?

Josh: Yeah, Miss "R." If you ask her a question, she doesn't always answer it, she'll say "you can't ask this question, we are working on this now." Holly: Exactly, like if you don't understand something in Mrs. R's class, she says, "Just write it down." (All agree)

Donny: Another thing with Mr. "M." is that, like, if I asked him a question because I didn't understand something, he wouldn't necessarily say it in a way for you to understand it; he would just say it the way he said it before. Ron: Mr. "M." writes things up on the board and says copy it down and you

copy it, but I never remember it.

Donny: Different students learn different ways. Some are hands-on. I feel like we don't all get to learn those ways. I feel like we should have a say in what we learn and how we learn it.

**On classroom decision-making.** Taines (2012) suggested that students may have different ideas than adults about changes to policy and practice that best support their learning and growth. Only 41% of the survey respondents thought their teachers encouraged students to make decisions. We discussed students' decision-making in the focus group.

I: Do teachers encourage you to make classroom decisions?

Shelly: Some teachers, like Mr. Scott, do. He gives you choices about what your homework will be.

Angel: I've only had a couple of teachers that have done that, but it makes a class really fun.

Donny: So, like Mr. M., he's the kind of teacher who likes the lesson on the board. I literally said many times that if you could do some other things, like play a game with the curriculum, it would make learning fun and way easier to learn. My math teacher last year, he played games, like whoever would solve the problem for us would get Starbursts and things like that. That might sound like it's for little kids, but it really made the learning fun. That would be helpful like if adults did that, it changes the way we learn. Like I've suggested things to Mr. M. about our class, but he laughs it off, and then continues to do it his way.

Josh: So, I'd ask him a question, and he'd be like "okay, be quiet, we'll go over it," but I don't understand. He'd tell me to write it down, and even though I write it down, it didn't help me understand.

Holly: Like we asked Mr. M. if we could decorate his room, and he said yeah, but we never did it.

The students in the focus group were very astute at recognizing how they learned best. They were very frank about the qualities of their teachers and could identify teachers they thought were rigorous versus teachers who were "nice" but easy to get off-track. The students commented that even a seemingly simple choice of homework assignments or decorating their classroom could positively affect their classroom engagement. Grossman and Cooney (2009) found that high school teachers often employ teaching styles that involve lecturing, but students reflect upon and understand their own learning best through other pedagogical strategies.

**On voice and empowerment.** The students discussed their sense of having a voice while in school.

I: Has anyone ever asked you for your opinion the how the school should run? Shelly: Yeah, so sometimes they'll ask you like what would you do if you were the principal of the school for a week. What would you do if you could change something about school?

I: Do you think they took you seriously and would do what you said?

Holly: No, some of them, no.

Angel: Some teachers will listen to you and respect what you're saying, and some teachers won't.

Josh: They don't. If it's a club, they might take you seriously, but if it's like something like you want them to change the way they teach, they won't take you seriously. They won't do that.

Casey: It depends, I mean some people will be like "I love your ideas," and other people will be like "No, we have to the stick to these rules."

Holly: Mr. "C." is not hard about that; he'll go along with anybody's opinion

**On classroom voice.** Rudduck (2007) found that teachers often restrict classroom participation to students who have social capital, those who are socially confident and outspoken.

I: Do you think students feel comfortable voicing their opinions in class?

Shelly: I mean, there's maybe two teachers for me that I'm comfortable asking questions to.

Donny: I'd be comfortable doing it, I mean giving my teachers my opinions, if I thought something was actually going to happen.

Angel: Yeah, it depends on the teacher, or the person. But he (Donny) and I have similar personalities [extroverts]. Some people might be too shy to say what they really want.

Shelly: Maybe a shy person could talk to somebody they are more comfortable with in the building.

**Students and school governance.** Daniels et al. (2001) found student voice in the governance of high schools to be almost nonexistent and suggested administrators develop participatory school governance structures to include student voice in the governance of high schools. A student council is the traditional model of student government and representation in high schools. However, Mitra (2014) found that most student councils held little actual power; they focused on organizing school social events and did not represent a cross-section of the school's population. Conner (2015) found that some scholars of student voice distinguished student voice work from student governments that organize social events such as dances, pep rallies, and fundraisers.

Two of the focus group members, Ali and Kat, were members of the ninthgrade student council at Plains. To explore the students' perceptions of the student council and student government, I asked "What is a school council and what they do?" Ali: They plan things, like they plan a school dance and organize the fundraisers.

Angel: But let's be real here. How much did the student council change school this year?

Ali responded to the criticism with frustration.

Ali: So me and Kat, we are part of, like, the student council, and like everything we tried to change it but would just get shut down by Mrs. L. (the advisor).

Donny: Wow. Yeah, that's bad; that's really bad!

I: Like what?

Ali: Like she wouldn't let us do certain fundraisers.

I: Why do you think she would do that?

Ali: We'd say something, and she would just move on. She really wouldn't acknowledge it unless it was something she wanted to talk about.

I: So that partnership with an adult is important?

Ali: Yeah, it's really important!

Ali felt that the student council followed the adult advisor's agenda. Nonstudent council members of the focus group were frustrated by the efforts of the student council, and Ali was frustrated with her involvement and the other students' perceptions of the student council. I asked the focus group for suggestions to improve the student council structure.

Holly: I think we should have more student leadership because I feel like we don't have a lot. Right now, there's not a lot of people to go to. There's not

enough of the actual school society participating in saying stuff to the school council.

Shelly: Yeah, I think that if there was more representation it would help the school more.

I: Can you explain?

Shelly: Well, there should be some freshmen on it, some seniors on it, you know, like a mixed group. I think it would be much better if they were mixed together. Then, you could do big things, things besides like dances, like actual school things.

Donny: I don't think you should choose the student council so early in the year, because at the beginning of the year, we don't know everybody, especially the kids that are from other schools. And because the people who do run, they all know each other and support each other. They are the popular kids. They need to like listen more to their peers.

Overall, students in the focus group felt dissatisfied with the ninth-grade student council. The students felt underrepresented and stated that only a small group of insiders were on the student council. Students outside of the council felt frustrated with the council's ability to change. Even Ali, who was in the student council, felt frustrated that the adult advisor controlled the group. She stressed the importance of genuine adult and student partnerships. I asked the students for suggestions to improve student voice.

I: What would be some better ways for students to get their voices and ideas to be heard?

Shelly: Like maybe have a group like this that means more than the advisory, or have like a box somewhere for someone who's, like, afraid to talk. Donny: Yeah, that's a good idea. So, say, like, anybody in the school has an idea, and you have an idea box where you or (the principal) or other authorities look in the box to see what our ideas are, like, for my example, of creating a guitar club. Or, maybe there could be something on the announcements like a student is looking for a guitar club: are there anybody or any people interested? come see whoever

Casey: Maybe, you know, a way for other students and teachers to know what their interests are. Because if you're doing a club with just a bunch of kids, but, like, the teacher has no interest in what they're doing, there's, like, no point to it.

Donny: Yeah, I'm just like thinking about it, and if there was a way to voice your opinion without insulting anybody else, or whatever, just so somebody could say what he thought without anyone taking it the wrong way.

**On students' power to change schools.** From the onset of the focus group, the students overwhelming reported that they did not have the power to fix schools. They did not think that adults valued their opinions. Early in the focus group meetings, I asked the students, "Do you think it's possible for students to fix problems in the school?"

S: No

S: Maybe, I don't know

I followed with the question, "Do you guys think that you have knowledge and ideas that might help improve the school?

S: Kind of.

S: I don't know

Ali: No, we are just one person in this huge school.

I: But who is better at talking about your experience than you?

S: Nobody

I: So, if somebody on the outside makes decisions about how schools are run, or about what kids should learn, does it affect them?

S: No

I: Who does it affect?

S: Us, the students!

High school students spend more of their waking time in school than any other setting. Therefore, I tried a discussion strategy that I adapted from Wood (2005) to make them conscious of the sheer amount of time that they spend in school.

I: So how old are you guys?

S: (Students responded with 14 or 15.)

I: And you have spent 10 years in school counting kindergarten?

S: Yeah (all agree).

I: Ok, so in one year in school, a student spends about 1300 hours. If you have been in school for 1300 hours each year for ten years, how many hours is that?

S: 13,000

I: So, should you have a say?

Donny: Yeah, because that's so ridiculous!

Ali: Oh my god, yeah! Because if we come to a school, like, every day, for a good amount of our life, then we should have an opinion.

**On schools as democracy.** Mitra (2007a) found that youth-adult partnerships improved when schools intentionally created a democratic community for discussion. Plains High School, like most high schools, had mission statement posters in every room of the school. One of the statements on the poster stated, "Students of Plains High School will understand and value the rights of a democratic society." However, Dewey (1997) advised that it is not enough to simply *tell* students about democratic practice; rather, they must also *live* this experience. I posed the following question to the focus group: "What does the word 'democracy' means to you guys?" Eli and Ron responded with programmed responses.

Eli: Democracy is the ability to vote and have a voice in government.

Ron: Yeah, it's what the United States has for a government.

I: Ok, but what does that really mean?

Angel: It means you can give out your ideas, and other people can say what they think about them.

Shawn: It means people pick their leaders.

Holly: That you get a voice. That you have a say.

Donny: Listening to other people's opinions.

I: Should school be a democracy for students?

Eli: It should, but it isn't - because nobody listens to kids.

Shelly: Adults don't listen, and they think they're always right. Like our parents, they don't listen, and think they're always right.

Holly: You have a say in it, but you can't control it.

Donny: It should be because our opinions count; every student's opinion counts.

The students in the focus group were familiar with the textbook definition of democracy that they learned in their compulsory civics class. The students could define the term, but not apply it to themselves or their schooling. Most felt that school should be a democracy, but overwhelmingly thought that it was not. I was anxious to understand how their views of government power structures translated into their understanding of school power structures.

I: Is important for citizens the United States to understand how the government works?

S: Yeah (all agree).

I: Should be important for students to understand how the school works?

S: Yes (most nod their head).

I: What's the difference?

Angel: There is a difference. I mean it's like the government. It's run by adults, so they think that kids are, like, foolish.

Eli: And this is school. They [adults] think we're too stupid to know what's good for us.

Overall, there was a fundamental lack of understanding about the power structure of schools. The students still saw a separation between the government structure and their school structure, and a firm line of delineation between themselves and adults. To the students, democracy was a concept that existed in text books, not in their lives. Sussman (2015) suggested making formal school power structures visible to students so they understand the intricacies of the systems they are trying to change. School administrators can help build the students' self- and critical-awareness of the schooling structures by sharing their knowledge and helping students strategically plan activities to ensure the best possible reception of their work (Mitra, 2007a). School administrators can assist students by engaging them in the process of understanding the structure of their worlds to change them for the better. I adapted this strategy by engaging the students in a conversation about how their school operated.

I: Has anyone ever talked to you about how schools are governed?

Eli: Well, my mom owns a preschool, and, like, she had to go to school for a teaching degree. Not just preschool, but like all of it, and so she told me about, like, the board and all that.

I: Ok, what is a Board of Education?

Eli: It's people who get together and put their ideas about education into the school.

Shawn: It's the people above the principal.

Donny: Yeah, but, you know about how the school is governed because of your mom, but like a lot of people were never taught that.

Eli had the most formal knowledge of school power structures of anyone in the group. Yet, he was consistently the most doubtful when it came to the belief that students could change schools.

Forms of governing. I also discussed forms of governing with the students.

I: What do you guys think about kids actually being on the school board?

Donny: I think it's a pretty good idea, because if kids are on it, they're more likely to have the same perspective that you are. But an adult, you know, they're not in the society of ninth graders. They don't know what's going on in the school.

Eli: Well, adults don't listen to kids anyhow, so it won't change anything. I asked the students where they thought they were located in the school's power structure:

S: In the middle or at the bottom.

I: Where should you guys be? Where you guys want to be?

Shawn: We are at the bottom, 'cause, like, you guys, you run our school system. Like the students, they just come into the school.

Donny: In my opinion I believe the students should be at the top, and, this might sound crazy, but I believe the school isn't for, you know the teachers, I mean they're getting paid but, we should be at the top because they should be doing everything for us. If you look at it like we're the ones getting education. Shawn: But, the teachers should be doing stuff for us. But they are still in control.

I: Do teachers work on your behalf?

S: No (most students shake their heads accordingly).

### I: Should they?

Donny: Yeah. I mean if we come to school every day to learn and grow and get knowledge for our success as adults, then the teachers should be able to

see what our necessities are going forward, and find ways of helping us. You know, like, telling us what we need to learn. We would help them to do it because they're trying to give us the knowledge. I mean some people can't learn certain ways, like the way some people teach. It's just the way it is, but it would be nice if teachers could hear out what the students want, and then try to take that in and work with kids.

**On the schedule change.** A major topic of discussion in the focus group was the schedule change. The previous year, Plains High School changed from a fourblock semester schedule to an eight-period yearly schedule for *curriculum continuity*. Students attend eight classes per day for the entire year, instead of just four for each semester. This was a concrete example of a school policy decision made by adults without input from the students. However, the students had to live with this policy every day. This was a turning point in the study; I began to feel that the students reached a level of critical consciousness, what Freire (2000) called *conscientization*. The dialogue transcended from issues of pep rallies and clubs to a bigger school issue, the recent schedule change. This was the first big discussion of the students in the focus group that was unsolicited by me. The students were independently thinking critically about their school structures and policies without me guiding the conversation.

Ali: So, like last year, you guys changed the schedule, and I know the seniors don't like the new schedule. They weren't asked about changing to the new schedule. We [freshmen] didn't have the new schedule, but I heard it was better because you had more time and didn't have to rush around so much. Casey: Yeah, a lot of upperclassman said that they didn't like it because

it's pretty clear that nobody asked them about changing the schedule.

Somebody should have asked them.

### I: Why do you say that?

Angel: I mean, for the teachers it's no real big problem because they are like, "my next class comes in, and I just teach, then the bell rings and they leave." They don't have to move. But, for the students it's like, "I have this class, and I have to go here first, and I then I got to figure out where to go next." "First, I'm here, and after this, I have to go upstairs, and then I have to go over there." The teachers, they don't have to move, but we do.

Holly: Yeah, we have to, like, memorize our classes, and you have to do that every single year.

I: So, who does changing the schedule affect the most?

S: Us, the students.

Summary of RQ2 findings. RQ2 addressed the ways and degree to which Plains students felt empowered and able to express their voices and have them heard. On the survey and in focus groups, students reported that they did not feel empowered and that teachers did not truly value their opinions. The students in the focus group commented on their classroom experiences with teachers and suggested ways to improve that experience. They explained that student input on homework, instructional strategies, scheduling, electives, and even how their classrooms were decorated affected their engagement in school. The students in the focus group described how teachers treated them; teacher quality was a key component in their experience of schooling. The students' commentaries on their teachers were consistent with Rudduck's (2007) findings that students want teachers who are compassionate, respectful, and genuinely care about student opinions. They prefer teachers who shared some classroom decision-making with them.

The students spoke at length about the school governance structure they were most familiar with, the student council. They expressed discontent with the school council's inability to affect change at Plains. Ali, a member of the focus group and freshman student council, expressed frustration with the adult agenda of the student council. The students offered practical suggestions for improving the council (e.g., having a more representative membership and the power to address issues beyond grade-level dances). The students in the focus group lacked a fundamental understanding of the larger school governance structure. Discussing the district structure, the role of the school board and the superintendent was a good strategy for raising students' awareness and increasing their influence. We discussed the role of students serving as voting members on school boards. The students agreed that this would be a worthwhile endeavor. When I asked them about the democratic role of schools, the students in the focus group agreed that a school should be a democracy but were adamant that it currently was not. Students could recite the textbook definition of democracy but struggled to apply the concept to their everyday lives.

The discussion of the schedule change at Plains provided a tangible example of how school policies that directly affect students change without their input. The students noted that it was difficult to remember which class that they had in the new, overly complex schedule. They struggled to navigate crowded halls to get to those classes, and several students stated that their teachers also felt overwhelmed by the new schedule. It is also worth noting that they laced the feelings of empowerment to question the purpose of the schedule change in the first place. This point provided a perfect future opportunity to suggest that students and teachers work together in a CoP to develop a school schedule that fits their needs.

Finally, making students aware of the sheer number or hours they spend at school was an effective consciousness-raising activity. Students realized that they should have a voice in school decision-making. Most of the students in the focus group were unaware of the large percentage of their lives that they spent in formalized schooling. Bringing up that point provided a bonding experience for members of the focus group.

# **RQ3:** What happens when students and a school administrator partner in the school reform process?

Data from the focus group participant responses, researcher field journal, and my analytic memos of reflections on the change process informed answers to RQ3. While no survey data applied to answering the third research question, the focus group data included students' reflections on the change process, their beliefs on their ability to affect change, and their suggestions for improving the process in the future. My researcher reflections, specifically regarding the CoP framework, PAR, and transformative learning, appear in Chapter 5 of this study. During the last three focus group meetings, I asked students to reflect on the change process as experienced by them through the focus-group experience. I: What do you guys think about this process? Has it been helpful?

S: Yes (a lot of yeses).

Ali: It's better than a regular advisory; we're actually trying to make a difference.

Kat: I really liked this idea of taking the time to talk about our experiences! You should do it with every freshman class.

Angel: You should do it for sophomores, too.

Donny: So far, in this advisory, I feel like it's getting to really good places. You're doing a lot as an administrator in our school. I was thinking that if this does really well, then maybe not just having it as an advisory, maybe make like a club to voice our opinions.

Overall, most students in the focus group found the process of talking about their freshman experiences to be valuable and wished to continue it again next year as sophomores. The students preferred it to a regular advisory and remarked that they could "see the purpose" of this advisory. Donny suggested running it as club, opening it up to other student members, or allowing other students to drop in to meetings to express their opinions. Earlier in the focus group meetings, I asked students about their beliefs that students had the power to improve schools. The students unanimously thought that they did not have the power to change schools. At the last meeting of the focus group, I revisited this question.

I: So, when we started this, did you think that kids could have the power to change schools?

Eli: No.

Angel: Yes, but just a little.

Donny: Like when I first started, no, but, like, after I went through this, I thought there is a chance.

I: Do you think going through this process has changed the way you guys think about if kids can improve schools?

Shelly: Yes.

Eli: No.

Angel: Yeah kind of, just like we needed more time.

Ali: So, I don't think it will have a big impact, but maybe a little.

Donny: I think if it had more people, then it would have had a better outcome.

Almost all the participants felt that the process of working together in the focus group changed the way they thought about students improving and reforming schools. The students commented that to have a bigger impact on change at Plains, they needed more time and more members in the group. They started to brainstorm ways to recruit new members. I asked the students in the focus group why they thought that other students in the freshman class did not initially volunteer for the focus group.

Donny: I believe that nobody wanted to do this, because they don't believe that they can change things. They haven't seen other school years change. And they don't believe it can happen because, like student council, they'll say that they'll do all this stuff, but really it's dances and fundraisers.

Angel: I'm sure they didn't think that things were going to change. I think if this were to become a bigger thing, there'd be more change, and people would be interested in sharing their ideas. Casey: I think if we show a change, more people would join.

The students commented on the common belief that most students in the ninth grade felt change was not going to happen. They believed that the current school structures and processes were synthetic. The students were adamant that the group needed to demonstrate change to get more people involved and legitimize the process (i.e., prove it is possible for students to have an impact). I asked students for further suggestions to improve the process for next year.

I: If we do this again next year, what should we do differently?

Angel: Start earlier in the year.

Kacey: Have a regular meeting time.

Donny: Maybe make it not just like an advisory, make it like a club. Holly: Maybe have it like every two weeks, or every week after school Ali: We need more time to work together to improve this. Otherwise we don't change anything and it just stays the way it is.

The students wanted more time to continue the process, and wanted to continue the process in tenth grade or for all four years. Angel suggested that we should start earlier in the year. I explained to the group that I purposely collected data at the end of the year so students would have as many freshman experiences as possible. The students agreed they had come a long way since the beginning of the year, but reiterated that it was important to meet on a regular basis throughout the school year to sustain the momentum we achieved. Early in the study, I thought students might reach a certain level of awareness and wish to continue the group themselves; my role would shift to being a participant. I asked the students who they thought should be the facilitator of the group.

I: If we did this again, do you think that I should run it, or have a student run it?

Angel: Definitely you, because when a student is in power over other students it doesn't seem that fair.

Donny: And you're like part of the head of the school, so you know everything that's going on. The teachers don't because they're worried about what they need to do. So, you know what's going on, but the teachers don't because, they're not paying attention to the school.

Casey: Yeah, if another teacher was doing this they wouldn't actually listen. They'd just be saying stuff to get what they need to get done. Without anyone there in the room, they wouldn't listen because they don't care.

Ali: I feel like not everyone wants to get things done – or they to try get things done for themselves.

I was unsure of their responses, having fully expected the students to prefer other students in facilitator roles. Why were they more comfortable with me in a position of power leading the group? They did not think it was fair to "have a student in power over other students." Was it because the students were comfortable with historical power roles despite their new-found roles as change agents? Was it because the simple act of listening to them granted me their trust? Was it because the students felt other teachers "just went through the motions"? Or was it because not everyone in the school wanted to "get stuff done"? I believe the mutual trust within the group was a key component. I asked the students whether they knew the purpose of my project. I: In your own words what do you think was the purpose of me doing this was? Kat: Well, we're talking to the vice principal about how school could be improved.

Tom: It's your job.

Eli: Because you have a paper to fill out. It's because of your project. Donny: Well, I think to make the school a better place, because you're working in it as well. It's not just us freshman here for you guys.

The student responses were mixed, which was troubling for me. Several students still viewed the study as "your project," not "our project." Most thought the process was valuable, but did not take ownership of the project. While reviewing the transcripts, I noted a puzzling response: "it's your job." Does that mean it is part of my job to do this research or talk with students about their experiences? The response of Eli was typically blunt and to the point. "Because you have a paper to fill out" (Eli). Donny's response hinted at the school as a community where everyone could work together to make it a better place.

**Summary of RQ3 findings.** RQ3 addressed what happened when students and a school administrator partnered in the school reform process, in this case improving the ways freshman students at Plains experience their first year of high school. Much as Freire (2000) suggested in his pedagogy for the oppressed, Mitra (2014) stated that student agency begins when youth have an increased ability to articulate their opinions to others and begin to construct new identities as change makers. This section described the ways that the students in the focus group discovered and developed those skills and changed their thinking on their abilities to change the school. By their own admission, some of the students volunteered for the focus group because they genuinely wanted to change things; others joined the advisory for the gift card and food, and some joined to get out of their original advisory because they found it "boring." However, after joining and participating, most of the students stated that they enjoyed the process and found it helpful. Initially, all the students thought that they had no power to change things. In retrospect, I see that I naively overestimated the students' beliefs that they could change things in their school. After the focus group, most students felt there was hope they could change things (1) if they had more time, (2) if they could attract more members, and (3) if they could demonstrate the difference their efforts made to others in the school.

Finally, the students in the focus group wanted to continue the work the following school year and have me stay as the group facilitator. I do not think I added any special value to the group. Rather, no adult working with students can go far wrong if they heed the advice of Mitra (2008a) who believed that students' abilities to interact and change systems in schools depends on how they perceive that they are valued by adults. This is an important finding of RQ3; any caring adult can work in meaningful partnership with students – if they genuinely listen to their voices and honor their suggestions. The positive work done in this group and the shift in the participants' thinking is evidence of that.

#### **CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION**

This study examined how ninth grade students experienced their first year of high school and examined what happened when students partnered with a school administrator to improve that experience. This chapter provides an in-depth discussion of the findings of the focus group, the process of partnering with students in the research process in a PAR study, and some speculations on the CoP framework and its relevance to this study and its purpose. This chapter also includes a section on what that occurred during the following school year to build upon student voice efforts and to disseminate the knowledge from this study to the larger school district. Mitra (2007a) called for more research in which school administrators reflect on their experiences of collaborating with students on school reform issues and share those reflections to legitimize such research and enable other administrators and researchers to undertake similar work. In keeping with those recommendations, a significant part of this chapter is my reflections as administrator and researcher.

#### Sustainability and Follow-up

In the spring after the last focus group, the students formally invited the school principal, district superintendent, and school board members to the school to present their plan for consideration (Appendix L). The principal and two board members agreed to attend, but the superintendent was unavailable despite repeated attempts. At the meeting, Donny and Angel, the two most vocal members of the focus group, presented the freshman improvement plan. The board members and principal seemed receptive, and promised to consider implementing some of the students' ideas for the following school year.

After the school year ended, I felt renewed in the promise of public education. This study gave me a dedicated time and space to engage in dialogue with students without being mired in the daily bureaucracy of school management, which brought me back to why I initially became an educator. Eager to share my refreshed sprit and enthusiasm, I proposed to present my findings at a summer administrative retreat with my fellow administrators and the superintendent in the district. The retreat began with an overview of current problems that the district was facing: low attendance, increasing graduation rates, low standardized test scores, and lack of student engagement. I thought that this was a perfect lead-in to the study. I explained the research findings and suggested that all administrators in the district try a similar project, meeting with students in an open forum to discuss their experiences and codevelop ways to improve that experience. There was a less than enthusiastic response. Most of the school principals stated that it was a good idea, but they "just didn't have the time." It was acceptable when I did this work on the periphery, but when I tried to bring the findings back to the center of the administrative group, I met considerable resistance.

In the fall of the following school year, I continued to meet with the advisory students as sophomores. A core group of first-year participants stayed, others left, and new members joined. The school implemented some of the initiatives and suggestions. For example, the interest groups for clubs that Casey suggested became part of the school's advisory structure, but it was for adults' interests, not students' needs. The students in the focus group explained that the adult system co-opted and retrofited their idea for pairing students-teacher interest. Donny: I mean, it's cool that they listened to our idea, but some of the things that they (the teachers) came up with, I mean I don't know a lot of kids that are going to be interested in those things (e.g., a quilting club).

Some positive change did occur the following year. Ali got an additional pep rally, and students had more freedom in planning the event. Donny was able to find other like-minded students and a faculty advisor to start an outdoors club at Plains. The school administration asked students to be part of a school schedule review committee.

In November, I asked the Plains school governance council to discuss the findings from this study. The Plains school governance council is an advisory committee of parents, teachers, and the principal; no students sit on the council. The governance council's mission is to advise school policy with more input on school decision-making than a traditional parent-teacher organization. The members of the school governance council were very receptive to the students' improvement plan and asked what they could do to help. I suggested they select students to sit on the council to represent the perspective of the students at Plains. The members agreed and asked the high school principal to find two student volunteers to serve on the council.

#### **Discussion of Follow-up**

Adult *outsiders*, such as parent groups and members of the school governance council, were more open and supportive of the students' ideas. The agreement of school governance council to place students on its advisory board was a key step in garnering support for the students' improvement plan and a radical shift for a committee that holds power over the governance of Plains high school. However, gaining an audience with staff in the district was much more challenging. The superintendent refused to grant an audience to the focus group members, and my enthusiastic presentation at the summer administrative retreat fell on deaf ears. Evans (2009) found school decision-making is a source of tremendous power struggles that is closely guarded by the faculty and staff. Teachers and administrators often worry about losing power through acceptance of students as legitimate voices in school decision-making. For school administrators, undertaking collaborative voice efforts with students might lead to knowledge that counters the top-down reform efforts school administrators must enforce (Mitra, 2007a). Thought not the same, administrators *can* support students voice efforts by buffering students from administrative bureaucracy, *if* they pursue an advocacy stance rather than a strictly managerial stance. Because youth-adult partnerships often operate in contradiction to traditional student-teacher roles, bureaucratic rules often create barriers to collaboration.

Throughout the study, I became more student-centered in my practice, critically reflected on my own practice, and experienced friction in my organization. School leaders must ask themselves if their actions are congruent with their beliefs about what education should be. Conner (2015) argued that administrators and teachers are in an untenable position if they try to protect the status quo, despite student voice data that indicates students believe current practices do not help them learn.

My next step was to seek other adult faculty at Plains who might be receptive to trying some of the students' suggestions for improvement. I asked teachers to consider the potentially beneficial pedagogical changes in the classroom if they incorporated students' feedback into their practice. The takeaway from my attempts to disseminate data to my colleagues at Plains is that there is enormous capacity and consensus for meaningful, if gradual, change. My plan is to start with a small number of adults who are sympathetic to the tenets of collaboration with students to enact school change, and demonstrate that the process of cooperative inquiry can mutually benefit both students and adults. An important component of student voice efforts is the support of someone in an influential position of power in the school (Mitra, 2007a).

It is my intention to continue this process beyond the scope of this study. It will take time, additional buy-in from students and staff, and small pockets of success before the project has true community ownership. This further work and inquiry will build this model at the school level. In terms of the sustainability of the project, I doubt that I would have gained local approval for this project without the state mandate that Plains participate in the State High School Reimagined Project. Sustainability without the broader support and acceptance of students as legitimate voices in change by district leaders is an issue that I must address.

### **Next Steps**

This study did not attempt to devalue the voices other relevant stakeholders, such as teachers and parents, but rather focused on overlooked voices in educational policy and reform, namely, the students themselves. Mitra (2009) explained that teacher empowerment is when adults in a school can share their views and have significant roles in decision-making; if this is the case, it is more likely they will accept and include student voices as well. Listening to students and validating their voices is the first step in introducing meaningful school reform, but it is not the endpoint. If adults are uncomfortable listening to what students say and do not make time to put their ideas into practice, student voice efforts are likely to be in vain.

To ensure the sustainability of the student voice project at Plains, I intend to use Mitra's (2009) advice to prepare adults to be receptive to the voices of students by measuring their perspectives through a survey and engaging them in a focus group with students using a similar methodology to this study. Engaging school staff in conversations with students may align perceptions while moving to a reform consensus. It is entirely possible that many of the students' perceptions remain hidden to school staff and administrators, just as they did to me prior to this study. Bringing students to discussions about how to improve school policy, curriculum, and pedagogy is an excellent way to validate the voices of students.

#### **Reflections on the PAR Process**

I chose a PAR methodology for this study in hopes of democratizing the collaboration process and mitigating some of the power differentials inherent to this study. However, Nygreen (2009, 2013) noted *critical dilemmas* and tensions within the PAR process. Luttrell (2010) suggested that being a reflexive researcher means critically inspecting the research process. Therefore, I adopted Maguire's (1987) approach of providing a personal narrative of obstacles, challenges, struggles, flaws, and successes I encountered during the PAR process to benefit others undertaking similar work.

What is the purpose of engaging students as researchers in a PAR study? Students conducting research can provide powerful pedagogical insights. Dewey (1916/1944) maintained that students can reach higher forms of cognition and knowledge if adults build lessons around their life experiences and encourage them to critically reflect upon those experiences to bridge school and the real world. The critical reflection process that happens when students examine the rules, expectations, and structures of their education increases their engagement as they develop a practical agenda for change.

A central tenet of PAR is to include the participants in the research process and interpretation of the data. When adults interpret data through their lens, they translate findings into adult themes shaped by beliefs about their expertise in school decisionmaking (Cook-Sather, 2002). However, when students cooperatively engage in data analysis, they retain their own meaning and serve as translators of each other's ideas (Mitra, 2008b).

For this study, I incorporated ways for the students to be involved in the research process through my research design in the second phase of data collection, the focus groups. For example, the initial focus group questions reflected the Quaglia School voice survey responses and the literature review on ninth grade transition research. I began the focus group conversation with those questions, then let students take over the conversation. One of my key roles as facilitator was to avoid placing constraints on the conversation. The students sometimes generated new questions that I had not considered. In terms of data analysis, I shared typed transcripts of focus

group conversations with the students so that they could play around with the data to help them visualize and reflect on their ideas.

I started each subsequent session by member checking (i.e., displaying the written transcript on the board or displaying a list of initial codes). The students reviewed the transcripts and codes and told me if they agreed or if I had missed something. Through this iterative process, the students informed the coding and analysis process. The use of members as translators to mediate each other's thinking was critical.

I chose PAR to move beyond traditional notions of adult expertise and reposition students as experts of their own experiences. Despite these efforts, some power inequities were still present. I was still the assistant principal, and they were still the students. However, I did my best to develop a mutual trust, and come together as a group by attempting to be open and transparent about the decisions I make as an administrator to the students. It was important to expose my thinking about my practice for them to critique and place myself in a vulnerable position. The changing power relations were not about equity of power, but rather about empowering and repositioning the students. Nygreen (2009) stated that it is naïve to think that a PAR study will equalize power; rather, those in power can share their power to help participants in a PAR study become more empowered by exposing governing structures.

### **Transformative Learning**

Fielding (2004) said that school transformation requires a disruption of the ordinary way of doing things, which demands as much of teachers as of students. It

requires a transformation of what it means to be a student and what it means to be a teacher or school administrator. Change requires a reexamination of traditional knowledge and structures and pushing against the status quo.

Mezirow's framework adapted to a CoP (Table 2, to be discussed shortly) is a framework to examine how students transform through the process of learning from one another. For example, the first step in the Mezirow (1997) framework is the problem, a *disorienting dilemma*. For the students, this could be the feeling that teachers at Plains did not genuinely care about their problems or feelings (27.9% of survey respondents) or that they did not understand a connection between school and real life. As a school administrator, my concern was the disengagement of freshman students at the school.

The next steps, according to Mezirow (1991), are *self-examination* and *relating their discontent to others*. In the context of this study, the self-examination phase included students individually reflecting on the problem: the obstacles they faced during their first year of high school. Relating discontent to others is the first step that happens socially when students and an administrator come together in a group setting, realize they share a concern, and relate their experiences to others in the group. In this study, that process happened during the first focus meetings; students talked about their experiences of the first year of high school, and their narratives resonated with other members of the group. (Relating that experience to other members of the group is the galvanizing activity of a CoP, again, to be discussed shortly, the activity that brought the students together as group to improve their school.)

The next phase in the transformational process is explaining the options for new behavior (Mezirow, 1991). This happened when students in the focus group moved beyond talking about experiences to collaborating on possible solutions to improve their experiences and the experience of future students. For example, students in the focus group agreed that the school should provide outside experiences but that not all of their classmates could afford field trip fees. They collectively brainstormed on alternative funding methods to remove the financial barrier that excluded some of their classmates. Through this process, students moved into the next phase, *building confidence in new ways*. The students developed new capacities (e.g., collaboration skills, knowledge of the school's governing structures) and felt empowered. This happened as the students' discussion of their experiences and their suggestions for change became codified in the written freshman improvement plan (Appendix L).

Mezirow's (1991) next stage, *planning a course of action*, happened when we discussed the most effective strategies to share the students' improvement plan with outside audiences. Which audience would be the most sympathetic to our cause? Who would help us to implement the plan? These were important questions as we moved from developing knowledge towards plans for implementation of the students' ideas. Part of this phase was the students and myself trying on our new roles. For example, the students moved from mere commentators to actual architects of change and policy makers. Angel and Donny became the presenters of the plan to adult audiences.

Finally, we moved into the last stage of Mezirow's framework, *the reexamination of outcomes*. This happened the following year at Plains when some of the students' ideas were put into practice. Students and faculty evaluated the outcomes of the actions. This is the last stage in the iterative process of critically reflecting on the process and outcomes of the focus group to refine the knowledge we produced and repeat the reflection, social knowledge construction, and implementation cycle. A concrete example of this is Ali's experience in the focus group. When I asked the group if they thought they had power to change their school, Ali replied, "no, we are just as one person in this huge school." As the group created ideas for improvement, Ali suggested an additional pep rally to recognize students in the school other than the football team. She suggested that students should organize and plan it. In the fall of the following year, Ali told me that she was contemplating leaving the focus group for another advisory because some of her friends were in the other advisory. However, when school administration announced that there would be an extra pep rally during the year to recognize a larger population of students, Ali approached me in the hallway.

Ali: Are we really going to have three pep rallies because of what I said in the advisory last year? Well, I guess that I'll stay in the advisory then.

Ali transformed from a skeptical student to a community collaborator. This example demonstrates how fragile student voice change efforts can be, depending on short-term wins that demonstrate to students that they can make a difference.

#### **Contributions to Research**

How students experience the beginning year of high school can drastically shape their future educational trajectories, and schools with fully operational freshman transition programs are more successful in acclimating students to high school than schools without such programs (Herlihy, 2007). To date, past research has provided little data on how students perceive these programs and how they think schools could improve them. This study resulted in practical, if modest, school improvements by involving students in a process of evaluating their freshman experience and implementing their suggestions.

The findings of this study contribute to the current body of research on the transition to ninth grade and student voice literature. A significant amount of research addresses problems that ninth grade students experience upon the transition into high school, but the first year of high school continues to be problematic for many students. As Mitra (2007b) notes, "Many high schools have struggles with how to improve outcomes, few have gone straight to the source and asked the students for their advice" (p. 727). Therefore, this study addressed what many previous researchers found to be missing from the current literature on the ninth-grade transition (i.e., students' perceptions of their experiences in ninth grade and potential solutions).

This study did not attempt to create generalizable findings for all school settings, but rather captured data at a particular site during a specific time. I hoped to build upon existing knowledge about ninth grade student voice to provide suggestions for future researchers to expand on research of this pivotal first year of high school. Through this study, I built upon previous research efforts regarding how students work with adult educators to address problems of schooling. The findings may have implications for programing and policy to improve the ninth-grade experience for future generations. As other researchers suggested, qualitative inquiry adds to the existing knowledge base on the ninth-grade transition (Choate, 2009; Hapken, 2014).

This study addressed one problem of educational practice, the difficulties students face during their freshman year of high school. A secondary goal was to develop a framework for working collaboratively with students on all problems. I used a PAR methodology to develop a method of democratically distributed school leadership. This study adds to the existing student voice research to reexamine creation of school policies that affect students.

The specific context and demographic makeup of Plains high school make the findings unique. However, the findings of this study are consistent with those of Glasser (1998) and Rudduck (2007), who noted the importance of student choice in schools. The students in the study talked about choice as a key factor in school engagement. The students wanted more choice in classes and more classes that supported their interests and aspirations. The students wanted choice in how they completed assignments and how they demonstrated learning. They requested more choices for gym (yoga) and sports (tennis), fewer study halls, and more opportunities to take meaningful classes. The students in the focus group unanimously thought that even limited choice was better than no choice. Students wanted more extra-curricular activities, more student leadership opportunities, and more social activities (e.g., the additional pep rally). The students suggested later start times for school and more say in how they learn. Students wanted classes that better prepare them for real life (e.g., how to fill out tax forms).

The findings of this study support Newman et al. (2000) regarding social interactions as the primary system for adolescents in schools. However, this study expanded upon those findings in one important way. The students in this study

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reported having developed supportive peer networks via social media prior to the first day of high school, even if they came from different sending schools or had never met their peers in person. This finding has implications for future researchers studying high school students' peer support networks beyond traditional face-to-face interactions.

This study explored student voice and its intersection with school leadership because of the belief that students are experts of their own experiences of schooling who have value, knowledge, and insight for school reform. Other critical stakeholders, such as parents and teachers, were not part of this study. Choate (2009) recommended that further research is necessary at local levels regarding stakeholder perceptions of the transition to ninth grade. Future researchers should explore the intersection of school voice and teachers' perceptions. The goal of this study was to develop interventions by collaborative methods that value local knowledge production and contexts to present a practical agenda for change. By communicating my process and findings to other researchers and practitioners, I hope to encourage them to pursue similar avenues of inquiry,

#### **Recommendations for Research and Practice**

The successful transition into high school can benefit students in their high school experience, work, and college careers. PAR has proven a promising area for further study to support collaborative school improvement efforts that involve students in distributed leadership in schools. However, I see great promise in articulating a CoP social learning system for schools, rather than the traditional PLC model that prohibits student participation. It is to that potential to which I offer the following speculations.

#### Speculations on the Relevance and Potential of the COP Framework

Although beyond the theoretical and practical scope of this study, it is worth speculating on the relevance and potential benefits of employing the CoP model to my overall purpose. The CoP model originally explained the way apprenticeships occur within situated learning contexts (Lave & Wenger, 1991). The CoP framework has since been developed as a social theory of learning by Wenger (1998) to describe the way newcomers or novices became full participants of a group or community, and the meaning making that occurs through their participation in a CoP. A summary of the social learning components of a CoP appears in Table 5.

#### Table 5

#### Componets of a Social Theory of Learning



Note. Adapted from Wenger (1998).

Often newcomers in a CoP receive help along the way from more knowledgeable group members. However, an important distinction in this study is that when adults and students come together for school reform, all the participants are newcomers, including the adults. All participants learn from each other. Adults are not necessarily knowledgeable group members who indoctrinate students in the adults' ways of thinking. Rather the promise of adult-student CoPs is development of new ways of thinking and new perspectives that neither side could achieve on their own.

Adults and students work together in a CoP to make sense of each other's views, develop data, and solve problems. This study relied on the idea that students in the focus group would mediate each other's ideas and collaboratively develop solutions. CoP provided a useful lens to examine the ways students in the focus group talked about their experiences of their freshman year in a group setting. They examined the ways a learning community expands its knowledge through a public discussion on issues that directly affect them.

I selected the CoP theoretical lens to speculate as to how students and adults can learn from one another and engage in collaborative inquiry around a common purpose, improving the freshman experience. The CoP framework situates learning in collaborative social terms and places students at the center of knowledge production. This view is counter to the traditional notion of schooling as a didactic model of instruction. I see further potential in the CoP framework to balance the inherent power differentials of an adult or adults working with students, and offer here an analayis of the study as examined through the CoP framework. Mirta (2008b) cautioned that there is very little point in eliciting students' voices as data if adults merely analyze and filter them through adult language. When the focus group came together, there was not a shared language. I entered with adult language, and the students shared a common language: "kidspeak." Results from the survey showed that 53.3% of respondents thought bullying was a problem at Plains. As a school administrator, I knew of a very small number of formalized bullying complaints or physical altercations in the school. I was curious why students thought that bullying was such an area of concern.

Angel: There's not a lot of physical violence here, but a lot of mental violence. I: What do you mean by "mental violence"?

Angel: Well, a lot of people here like to play games. Everyone likes drama, everybody wants attention. That's all they want; they just crave attention so they start drama.

Angel's term for bullying was "mental violence." This dialogue started a broader discussion within the group. Students used terms such as "drama," "head games," and "messing with your head" to describe the ways students at Plains could bully others beyond adult conceptions of bullying. This was just one example in which the students and I negotiated and developed a shared meaning of a particular term. The adults at Plains thought bullying was not a problem, but the students disagreed. This dialogue had immediate practice implications; the adults in the school looked deeper for subtler, more nuanced forms of bullying.

Through the first few focus group meetings, we continued negotiating terms and language to reify common meanings within the group. It took time for us to come together as a group, but we developed a shared knowledge base and a greater appreciation for each other. I shared adult language and reform terminology; they shared their ways of speaking. By working together, we developed a shared repertoire of collective meanings.

A central feature of a CoP is the notion of legitimate peripheral participation. Wenger (1998) defined participation in a CoP as members moving from the periphery of the community as their knowledge and participation increase. Bielaczyc and Collins (1999) found the participation roles of the members of a CoP are context-dependent on specific topics of conversation. For example, in the present study, some focus group members contributed more to the conversation at a given time, depending upon the topic. Students often participated by commenting on other students' ideas. Students would move in from the periphery if someone's comments resonated with them. Through this process, students' individual expertise helped to establish their identities in the group. Students moved to the center of the conversation when the discussions focused on something they identified with or that resonated with their individual expertise (Bielaczyc & Collins, 1999). For example, Angel would move to the center of the conversation when the topic of social interaction came up. Angel viewed her area of individual expertise as interpersonal skills and social networking. She displayed great pride in the fact that her peers came to her to ask for advice about social issues, and she was happy to share this with the group. Recall this quote from Angel when I asked, "Do you have skills that your friends ask you to teach them about?"

Angel: Yes, so mine are, like, people skills. People ask me, like, how to solve problems they are having with somebody else, or how to talk to people, or how to get through situations with their friends.

Donny's expertise was the connection of school to life and future aspirations. Not only could he articulate his own goals, but he helped other members of the group understand how school was or was not preparing them for what they wanted to be. Even Eli, who was the resident cynic of the group, moved to the center of the conversation when issues of school hierarchy and power emerged in the conversation. His comments on power were honest, raw, and initially frustrating to me. They provided counter points and represented a narrative about student voice held by most adults. His views were the most ardent adult criticisms of student voice, voiced through the mouth of a student; he was a *natural devil's advocate* for the group and created tension for other students to push back. This moved the conversation deeper than I would have been able to if I tried to guide it as an adult. The way the other students and Eli worked together to reconcile their differences was useful. This interaction highlights the potential usefulness the CoP framework to understand how individual member's meaning shape their identities and and mediate the thinking of other members as they come together as community engaged in a common practice.

Students' roles can change over time as they move from the periphery to the center of the conversation and vice se versa. The experts of the group impart their advice to other members and use individual interests to move toward a common goal. For example, in the course of this dialectical process, I tried to develop an atmosphere where all focus group members had a legitimate opportunity to participate. Wenger (1998) stated that a key component of a CoP is that opportunities exist for all community members to participate to whatever extent possible; students in peripheral roles or those providing minimal contributions also have valuable contributions. I thus tried to develop an atmosphere of trust in the group so students could voice their opinions and respect each other's suggestions for improvement without fear of reprisal. Mitra (2005) found a baseline of trust to be a key component of successful student-adult partnerships. Similarly, Allensworth and Easton (2005) found fewer ninth grade course failures occurred when there was a high level of student-teacher trust. Students are more likely to trust someone they know than an outsider. Therefore, it was crucial to develop trust within the focus group. As the facilitator of the focus group, I had to trust the students and let my administrative guard down. I was open and honest about sharing my thinking on the freshman academy and school policies, and I tried to be open to students' criticisms of my decisions and ideas. For this study, I was in the position Herr and Anderson (2015) called an insider working in collaboration with other insiders. I took precautions against feeling like a privileged expert with absolute knowledge of the truth.

It was important that I share my thinking as a school administrator so students developed a deeper understanding of the motivations for changes adults were trying to make. As we worked towards a mutual understanding, we realized that students and adults often want to work on the same issues and learn from one another. Mitra (2005) suggested that there is capacity building that must place take when learning to work with students, or leading by getting out of the way. I documented my initial struggles as the facilitator as I determined how much to talk, when to step into the conversation,

when to lead, when to get out of the way, how to guide, and how to foster and encourage. It can be uncomfortable for adults, especially in schools where they are content experts, not to know the answer, and to trust instead in the collaboration process to find an answer. Horton said, "You don't need to know the answer, but you can help them get the answer by respecting their knowledge" (Kincheloe, 2007, p. 751).

The CoP could be an apt conceptual model for this study that warrants future study of adult-student collaboration in school reform. The CoP framework facilitates social learning and collaborative inquiry, and it does not limit participation to adult experts the way a PLC model might. Working collaboratively in a CoP requires specific capacity building for adults and students. Daniels et al. (2001) advised that school voice structures in high schools "require explicit nurturing, since students unaccustomed to responsibility don't automatically welcome it, or understand how to exercise it" (p. 89). Unless formalized structures exist to involve students in school change, students' ideas of how to makes things better are likely to go unnoticed.

#### **Further Suggestions**

I recommend continued collaborative research by partnering with ninth grade students to learn their perceptions of ninth grade and collaboratively exploring ideas to improve that experience for future students. This is consistent with the view that schools are or should be democratic learning communities.

Focused collaboration between middle school and high school staff is necessary to align classroom experiences and expectations for students. The students in this study spoke of the misalignment of classroom expectations, practices, and policies between their eighth and ninth grade years. Future researchers should analyze both the eighth and ninth grade experiences of students by conducting other stakeholder perception surveys and focus groups to gain insight into how students, parents, and school staff understand the transition. I recommend that school personnel utilize student interest inventories to drive curricular offerings for students. The students in this study overwhelmingly spoke about choice as a significant factor of engagement in school. Allowing students to have some choices in their classes, assignments, and school policies may improve student outcomes.

Another finding of this study is what happens when a principal runs a school advisory. Teachers lead most high school advisories; school administrators have no direct contact with students during advisory meetings. However, advisory should be a two-way endeavor; having direct conversations with students is an excellent leadership strategy. School administrators should participate in an advisory with students so students can share their experiences of school policies and co-develop a framework for action. Kincheloe (2008) and Noddings (2013) questioned whether students learn about true democracy if they do not practice it in their schooling. I recommend that school personnel reexamine the purported mission of school advisories and develop the school advisory into a structure for students and school staff to openly voice concerns and collaborate on improvement strategies. Engaging students in a collaborative setting to provide them with a voice in their schooling is a way to create a democratic community.

Data in this study point to shortcomings in school and teacher practices, but it is important not to frame teachers as a deficit. My intent was not to devalue the perceptions of other relevant stakeholders. However, student voices are most essential to school reform because they live the results of policies and practices. Cook-Sather (2006) suggest that educators and researchers ask students: Is this working for you?

Students and teachers should be natural allies in schools; both often feel excluded from conversations about policy in this era of top-down educational mandates. Formalized school structures should provide a dedicated time and space for students to share their perspectives with adults. When adults and students co-design programs and policies, they feel invested in their success and can accomplish more. Listening to students on matters of school reform offers greater possibilities; students' suggestions help us all to reexamine assumptions about problems and possible solutions.

There is limited exposure to student voices as a source of data in teacher and administrator preparation programs. More preservice training on listening to and partnering with student to increase educational improvement is necessary. As Mitra (2008a) suggests, training must prepare adults to listen to students on matters of school reform, which is the opposite of current preservice educator training. School administrator preparation programs create the idea of teachers as experts who dogmatically follow the tenets of top-down reform efforts, rather than being advocates for their students. This is especially true for *teacher-proof* curricula, national standards, and *one size fits all* federal policies. Researchers must build the democratic capacity of future generations to ensure that they understand the benefits of student voice and explore strategies for involving students in school reform efforts.

University school administrative leadership programs should include student voice; students are valuable data sources, and their inclusion reflects a more democratic distribution of school leadership. Future school leaders will need training on ways to listen to the ideas of students and harness insights for positive school change. Working collaboratively with students may be more effective and empowering than current performance-based models of school leadership. In this study, listening to the voices of freshman students, I would strongly argue, improved the leadership practices of one administrator.

I recommend that future researchers continue to explore the critical constructivism work of Kincheloe (2007, 2008) when examining democratic school change efforts. In this study, the participants and I developed the ability to use and build upon each others' critical reflections to improve as the study evolved. I initially perceived work during the focus group to depend on concepts of social constructivism, which was true. However, as the study progressed, I realized I underestimated the critical component of this study when I tried to explain and expand the students' work to other administrators. I thought of working with students as fundamentally good practice, and vastly underestimated the political and organizational barriers to systemizing the students' ideas to move this work forward. Kincheloe's (2008) critical constructivist lens would have better prepared me to teach the students to reflect critically on their schooling structures and school practices, and to meet the organizational obstacles I encountered trying to systemize student-centered change at Plains.

An effective strategy that emerged from the focus group was to unpack the school governance structures with students. Most of the students were unaware of the structures that governed seven hours of their day. I recommend future researchers use the strategy I adapted from Wood (2005) to make students aware of the amount of time they spend in school

Finally, I recommend future researchers undertake student voice efforts following the advice of Conner (2015), who cautioned researchers not to exclude discussion topics that adults might consider trivial or inconsequential. Student voice efforts must incorporate a student lens. For example, Taines (2012) asked students about issues that matter to them in school, and students identified the cleanliness of the bathrooms and the quality of the food as affecting their motivation to attend school and engage in the classroom. When students explain the issues that they find important and their experiences as learners, they engage the first goal of student voice.

In this study, I was initially frustrated during the focus groups by the students' inability to see bigger issues that I thought were important (e.g., school attendance, dropout rates). The students mentioned what I considered to be smaller issues (e.g., dances, pep rallies). This was my mistake. The issues that students discussed were exactly the reasons they disengaged in school. We were talking about the same goals through different lenses, language, experiences, and approaches. The students taught me that the things that were most important to them were key reasons students stopped attending school. A key strategy that emerged was thus to first ask the students what they would like added to school (e.g., tennis team, geography class, guitar club) and

then expand the dialogue to develop structures to put those ideas in place. Students became more empowered and moved toward larger issues in focus group discussions.

#### Conclusion

As Rudduck (2007) stated, "School reform is not a question of a quick makeover to meet the requirements of a movement, rather it takes time and involves looking critically at the structures and policies of a school to review the goodness of fit between schools and the needs young people, and listen to their commentaries as a way to help them learn better and improve their experience" (p. 588).

Attempting to make sense of experiences is a fundamental part of being human. Educators and school policy makers should follow Dewey's (1916/1944) advice to build lessons around the life experiences of students. Wilson and Corbett (2014) noted that student accounts of their experience and suggestions for improvement will not be widely accepted in today's era of narrow school accountability measures. However, the findings of the present study support movement in the opposite direction so students and adults might co-create quality schools through meaningful collaboration.

This study does not provide a prescriptive *one best solution*; rather, it suggest pragmatic solutions from a democratic community of inquiry in a specific context. I endeavored to be as transparent as possible so that other educators and researchers might decide if they wish to undertake similar work in their own school or research settings. It is important to share this work with others. As Anderson (2009) stated, individuals cannot bring about change at the level of public policy, but collectives of

students, educators, parents, and community members can work together to generate change.

This study is the documentation of the process of one school administrator partnering with students for school reform (i.e., the success, struggles, and transformations during that process). It documents my reflections as an administrator of the way I reconciled my responsibilities to the students and the conflicting needs, values, and philosophies of my professional practice. Implementing programs from the top-down without consideration for how programs affect the lived experience of students is problematic. Many reform attempts fail because adults designed them and judged them solely by adult metrics. By partnering with students, school leaders can generate a realistic agenda for change that benefits students and adults (Rudduck, 2007). For students, an opportunity to talk about things that matter to them can increase their engagement and improve their experiences of schooling. When students feel adults take them seriously, they develop a feeling of belonging and membership in their school communities and a sense of empowerment. For adults, the benefits of listening to students include new insights into how students view schooling and how teachers can increase the capacity of students to change things for the better. Partnering with students allows adults to understand problems and solutions from different perspectives. These partnerships provide both adults and students with reaffirmation and a renewed sense of the promise of education.

April 2017       Pending IRB approval, read the student recruitment script to all freshman during a freshman class meeting. Then, allow time for parental information and consent to go out and be returned. Also, allow time for the student consent to be obtained.         April 2017       Freshman take the Quaglia School Voice Survey during the January scheduled advisory after IRB approval.         Focus Group Questions and Topics (35 minutes): Tell about your experience so far in 9 <sup>th</sup> grade?       4/13, 4/20, 4/27         How has this year been different from last year (8 <sup>th</sup> grade)?       Describe a typical day for you in school.         Focus Group Questions and Topics (35 minutes): Tell about you return the state of the	Table 6		
Date       Activity       Plainfield High School Advisor Dates 2017         April 2017       Pending IRB approval, read the student recruitment script to all freshman during a freshman class meeting. Then, allow time for parental information and consent to go out and be returned. Also, allow time for the student consent to be obtained.         April 2017       Freshman take the Quaglia School voice Survey during the January scheduled advisory after IRB approval.         Focus Group Questions and Topics (35 minutes):       4/13, 4/20, 4/27         Tell about your experience so far in 9 <sup>th</sup> grade?       How has this year been different from last year (8 <sup>th</sup> grade)?         Describe a typical day for you in school.       Focus Group Questions and Topics (35 minutes):         What would you tell the kids coming to high school next year to expect?	Schedule of Stu	dent Activities	
Image: construction of the structureImage: constructureImage: constructureImage: constructureallow time for parental information and consent to go out and be returned. Also, allow time for the student consent to be obtained.April 2017Freshman take the Quaglia School Voice Survey during the January scheduled advisory after IRB approval.4/13, 4/20, 4/27April 2017Freshman take the Quaglia School Voice Survey during the January scheduled advisory after IRB approval.4/13, 4/20, 4/27Focus Group Questions and Topics (35 minutes): Tell about your experience so far in 9th grade?How has this year been different from last year (8th grade)?Describe a typical day for you in school.Focus Group Questions and Topics (35 minutes): What would you tell the kids coming to high school next year to expect?			Plainfield High School Advisory Dates 2017
<ul> <li>Voice Survey during the January scheduled advisory after IRB approval.</li> <li><u>Focus Group Questions and Topics (35 minutes)</u>: Tell about your experience so far in 9<sup>th</sup> grade?</li> <li>How has this year been different from last year (8<sup>th</sup> grade)?</li> <li>Describe a typical day for you in school.</li> <li><u>Focus Group Questions and Topics (35 minutes)</u>: What would you tell the kids coming to high school next year to expect?</li> </ul>		recruitment script to all freshman during a freshman class meeting. Then, allow time for parental information and consent to go out and be returned. Also, allow time for the student consent to be obtained.	
<ul> <li>What are some of the best things about high school?</li> <li>What are some of the worst things?</li> <li><u>Focus Group Questions and Topics (35 minutes):</u></li> <li>What would you do if you had the power to change anything you wanted</li> </ul>	April 2017	<ul> <li>Freshman take the Quaglia School Voice Survey during the January scheduled advisory after IRB approval.</li> <li><u>Focus Group Questions and Topics (35</u> <u>minutes):</u> Tell about your experience so far in 9<sup>th</sup> grade?</li> <li>How has this year been different from last year (8<sup>th</sup> grade)?</li> <li>Describe a typical day for you in school.</li> <li><u>Focus Group Questions and Topics (35</u> <u>minutes):</u> What would you tell the kids coming to high school next year to expect?</li> <li>What are some of the best things about high school?</li> <li><u>Focus Group Questions and Topics (35</u> <u>minutes):</u> What are some of the worst things?</li> <li><u>Focus Group Questions and Topics (35</u> <u>minutes):</u> What are some of the worst things?</li> <li><u>Focus Group Questions and Topics (35</u> <u>minutes):</u> What would you do if you had the</li> </ul>	4/13, 4/20, 4/27

# Appendix A. Schedule of Student Activities

	you?	
	How do you imagine yourself as a senior?	
May 2017	Focus Group Questions and Topics (35 minutes): Where do you see yourself after high school?	5/4, 5/18, 5/25
	How would you describe yourself (as a student)?	
	What skills do you think students need to be successful here? What is the most important skill?	
	Focus Group Questions and Topics (35 minutes): What do you think teachers and administrators need to understand about their students?	
	Do you think that students have input (voice) into how things happen at school? Explain.	
	<u>Focus Group Activity</u> During the remaining Advisory blocks, I will review the students' answers with them ( <i>member checking</i> ) to see if their answers have changed. Then, we will begin working together to codify their feedback into a document that outlines their suggestions on how to improve the freshman year for future students.	
June 2017	If we need more time to work on the 9 <sup>th</sup> grade improvement plan, we will use the first two advisory blocks. If not, I will move the 2 <sup>nd</sup> survey round forward.	6/1, 6/15

## **Appendix B. Request to Conduct Research**

## **Plainfield Public Schools**

Request to Conduct Research Form

**Title of Study:** The ninth grade Experience: Examining the Role of Student Voice in the School Reform Process.

Name of Principal Researcher: Christopher Bitgood

Address: P.O. Box 313State: CT.Postal code: 06332City: Central VillageState: CT.Postal code: 06332

Home Phone: 860-564-1845 Office Phone: 860-564-6422 Email: Bitgoodc@Plainfieldschools.org

Title/Position of Applicant: Assistant Principal/Researcher

Name/Title/Address of sponsor regarding this research project (e.g., Director of Agency, Student's Advisor, etc.): C. David Brell PhD, Rhode Island College

**Short Topic of Study:** A systematic investigation of how ninth grade students perceive their freshman year and what they say about improving it.

**Purpose of Study:** To use data gathered from students reported experience of the ninth grade to drive program improvement.

**Description of Methodology:** Mixed methods (quantitative survey, qualitative focus group questions)

Specific data-gathering instrument(s) to be used (please attach) and description of reliability and validity evidence to be obtained:

<b>Study Time Frames:</b>	1/1/17 - 6/1/17
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Proposed Start Date: 1/15/17

**Proposed Completion Date:** 6/16/17

Number of Students/Participants				
Grade Level/Age	# Of Students Required	<b>Relevant Characteristics</b>		
9 <sup>th</sup> / 13-15	10-15	1 <sup>st</sup> year HS Freshman		

**Estimated time required of each student/participant:** 40 mins per week during school advisory

**Do you propose use of existing instruction time?** No **If not during instructional time, when is the study to be carried out?** During the scheduled school advisory block.

Is access to school records required? No

#### **Describe measures to insure:**

**Confidentiality of responses:** Electronic survey is confidential and anonymous. Focus group questions responses are anonymous, and student participants will receive a study I.D. number kept separate from any demographic data.

Please state the nature of any possible risk(s) to participants, psychological or otherwise, that might arise: None

Please state the nature of any benefit(s) to participants (school/student) that might result during this study: The participants receive no direct benefit. The school district will receive climate and program improvement data.

#### Date the District will receive results/conclusions of this study: 6/16/17

<u>Please Note</u>: In addition to Research Review Board approval, parental consent must be obtained before beginning any research activity.

Signature of principal researcher: Date: 9/12/16 Signature of District Chief Research Officer/Superintendent of Schools: Date:

Questions regarding requests for research may be answered by:

Plainfield Public Schools Superintendent's Office 651 Norwich Rd Plainfield, CT. 06374

### **Appendix C. Student Recruitment Script**

#### Student Recruitment Script (IRB approved)

Hi, my name is Mr. Bitgood, and I am an assistant principal here at Plainfield High School. I am also a graduate student in the joint PhD in Education program at Rhode Island College and the University of Rhode Island, and I am doing a study to learn about how ninth grade students experience high school. I would like to use your ideas on how to improve freshman year in that study.

This school year, Plainfield High School is making an effort to improve the ninthgrade experience. In your advisory block, you will be asked to take an *electronic survey*, answer questions about school, and give ideas on how to make it better. The advisory block *meets every week throughout the year*.

Your participation in the study is completely voluntary, and your parents must give their permission for you to participate in the study. If you choose to be in the study, *then you may be asked to participate in a focus group that meets throughout the school year. Only a small number of participants who complete the survey will go on to the focus group.* If you are asked to participate in the *focus group*, then during your school advisory you will meet with me and other students so that I can ask you what your freshman year is like. I will also ask you how you think we can make it better for future students. A *focus group* is simply a place for you to talk to your classmates about your experience of high school. Together, we will develop a plan to make things better and present it to the school board so that they can help put your ideas into practice for next year's freshman.

Students who volunteer for the study will receive a \$10 school gift card as a thank you for their help at the last focus group meeting. The gift card is redeemable at the school bookstore, the school cafeteria, as well as several businesses in town. Any student that participates in at least three focus group meetings is eligible to receive the gift card, even if they choose to drop out of the study before the last meeting.

If you have any questions about the study, or you would you like to be part of the study, please contact me for details.

Chris Bitgood, Assistant Principal Plainfield High School, Main Office Graduate student in the joint PhD in Education program at Rhode Island College and the University of Rhode Island Bitgoodc@Plainfieldschools.org 860-564-6422 Ext. 3111

Major Professor: C. David Brell Rhode Island College cbrell@ric.edu

#### **Appendix D. Child Assent Form Focus Group**



Rhode Island College Institutional Review Board Approval #: <u>1617-1364</u> Expiration date: <u>12/12/17</u>

Participant's Initials: \_\_\_\_\_ Document version: \_\_\_\_\_ Page 1 of 2

Child Assent Form Focus Group The Ninth Grade Experience

My name is Chris Bitgood, and I am an assistant principal here at Plainfield High School. I am also a graduate student in the joint PhD in Education program at Rhode Island College and the University of Rhode Island. I am doing a study to learn about your experiences in your freshman year of high school, and I hope to use your valuable feedback to improve the experience of the freshman year for future students.

This year, Plainfield High School is working with all ninth grade students to improve the experience of the freshman year. During your *weekly advisory block*, all ninth grade students will answer questions about your high school experience, and give their ideas on how to improve it.

I am asking for *volunteers* to be in one specific focus group where I document your ideas for a research study on what it is like to be a freshman in high school. This *assent is specifically for you to participate in that on-going focus group*. I am just asking permission to use the focus group feedback to inform a research study that I am conducting about improving the freshman experience.

If you choose to be in the study, then you may be asked to participate in an **on-going focus group** during your school advisory block to talk with myself, and other freshman students about what your freshman year is like, and how do you think we can make it better for future students. A *focus group* is simply a place for you to have a conversation with your classmates about your high school experience.

#### If you volunteer, you will be asked to:

Talk about your experience of ninth grade throughout the year
Talk about challenges that you faced and offer their ideas for possible solutions to those challenges.
Work with myself and other students to put your ideas into a plan to make things better
Present your plan to the school board at the end of the year
The focus group work will be on-going throughout the year. The focus group will only meet during the regular school advisory block.

Students that volunteer for the study will receive a \$10 school gift card as a thank you for their help at the last focus group meeting. The gift card is redeemable at the school bookstore, the school cafeteria, as well as several businesses in town. Any student that participates in at least three focus group meetings is eligible to receive the gift card, even if they choose to drop out of the study before the last meeting.

We already told your parents about the study, and they said you can be in the study if you want to. If you don't want to be in the study, you can say "No" and nobody will be upset at you and nothing bad will happen. Also you can change your mind at any time and nobody will be upset and nothing bad will happen.

If you think you were treated badly or have any problems with this study, you should tell your parents and they will know what to do.

You need to know that your name and what you tell me or what you do will not be told to any other adults. There is only one thing that I would have to share with someone else, and that is if I think you are

### **Appendix E. Child Assent Form Survey**



Rhode Island College Institutional Review Board Approval #: <u>1617-1364</u> Expiration date: <u>12/12/17</u>

Participant's Initials: \_\_\_\_\_ Document version: \_\_\_\_\_ Page 1 of 2

Child Assent Form Survey The Ninth Grade Experience

My name is Chris Bitgood, and I am an assistant principal here at Plainfield High School. I am also a graduate student in the joint PhD in Education program at Rhode Island College and the University of Rhode Island. I am doing a study to learn about your experiences in your freshman year of high school, and I hope to use your valuable feedback to improve the experience of the freshman year for future students.

If you choose to be in the study, then you may be asked to take a **brief electronic survey two times**. The survey will ask questions about what your freshman year is like, and how do you think we can make it better for future students.

We already told your parents about the study, and they said you can be in the study if you want to. Parental permission is required to be part of the study. If you don't want to be in the study, you can say "No" and nobody will be upset at you and nothing bad will happen. Also, you can change your mind at any time and nobody will be upset and nothing bad will happen.

If you think you were treated badly or have any problems with this study, you should tell your parents and they will know what to do.

You need to know that your name and what you tell me or what you do will not be told to any other adults. There is only one thing that I would have to share with someone else, and that is if I think you are in danger for any reason or if I see you hurt yourself or someone else on purpose. I will talk with you first before I talk to anyone else so that we can talk about what I thought happened and who I need to share the information with. I wanted to let you know that this might happen if you tell me that kind of information. Do you understand that?

Do you have any questions about the study?

Would you like to do it?

#### Statement of Assent

I have read and understand the information about this study, and I agree to participate in it. It's my choice to be in the study, and I can change my mind at any time.

Print Name of Participant:

Signature of Participant:

Date:

Name of researcher obtaining assent:

## **Appendix F. Parent Recruitment Letter**

## Parent Recruitment Letter

My name is Chris Bitgood. I am an assistant principal at Plainfield High School. I am also a graduate student in the joint PhD in Education program at Rhode Island College and the University of Rhode Island. I am conducting a study to learn about your child's experiences in their freshman year of high school. I hope to use their valuable feedback to improve the experience of the ninth grade for future students.

This school year, Plainfield High School is trying to improve the ninth-grade experience. As part of those efforts, students will be asked to take an *electronic school climate survey* about the experience of ninth grade. The results of the survey are *anonymous*. The survey will be administered during your *student's normal advisory block.* It should take between 20-30 minutes to complete.

Besides the *electronic survey*, I will be asking for ninth grade *volunteers* for *one focus group*. The purpose of the focus group is to ask students questions about their freshman experience. If your child is selected, *this focus group would continue to meet throughout the year. The focus group will meet during the normal school advisory period.* The activities in the focus group are like the activities that the students would be doing in their normal advisory. *Your child will not miss any normal advisory activities because of taking part in this study*. However, in this focus group, I will ask to document the students' feedback and ideas for my research study. A *focus group* is simply a place where ninth grade students can talk about their experiences of high school.

*Please note that* all ninth-grade students will be asked to take both the survey and participate in an advisory as part of regular school activities. I am just asking permission to use the survey and focus group data to inform a research study that I am conducting about improving the freshman experience. *I will send you separate permission forms for both the survey and the focus group. I will also attach a copy of the survey and focus group questions for your review.* 

Please contact me if you have any questions about the study or would like more information.

Chris Bitgood, Assistant Principal Plainfield High School Graduate student in the joint PhD in Education program at Rhode Island College and the University of Rhode Island Bitgoodc@Plainfieldschools.org 860-564-6422 Ext. 3111

Major Professor: C. David Brell Rhode Island College cbrell@ric.edu

## **Permission Statement**

By signing below I/we are stating that I/we understand the information and give permission for my/our child to be in this study. Both parents/guardians must give their permission unless one parent is deceased, unknown, incompetent, or not reasonably available, or when only one parent has legal responsibility for the care and custody of the child. I/we are over 18 years of age, and either the parent or legal guardian of the child named below.

Child's name:

Print name	Signature	Date
Print name	Signature	Date
Name of researcher obta	aining permission:	

### **Appendix G. Parent Permission Focus Group**

Rhode Island College Institutional Review Board #: 1617-1364 Expiration Date: 12/12/17

#### PARENT PERMISSION FOCUS GROUP

#### Dear parent or legal guardian:

My name is Chris Bitgood, and I am an assistant principal here at Plainfield High School. I am also a graduate student in the joint PhD in Education program at Rhode Island College and the University of Rhode Island. I am asking permission for your child, or the child in your legal care, to be in a research study that I am conducting. I am asking because your child is a freshman here at Plainfield High School. *Parental permission is required, and your child will only be asked to participate with parental permission.* Please read this document and ask any questions you may have before deciding whether to permit your child to be in this study.

#### Why this Study is Being Done (Purpose)

Plainfield High School is working with its ninth grade students this year to improve the experience of their freshman year. During their *weekly advisory block*, all ninth grade students will answer questions about their high school experience, and give their ideas on how to improve it. I am asking for volunteers to be in one specific advisory where I will record the student's ideas for a research study that I am doing this study to learn about how freshman students at Plainfield High School talk about their first year experience of high school. I hope to work with students to listen to their ideas about improving the freshman year of high school, and develop a plan with them to present to the board of education.

#### What will be done (Procedures)

If you allow your child to be in this study, here is what will happen:

- Your child may be asked to volunteer for an on-going focus group that will meet all year during their regular school advisory block. The advisory block meets once per week for 35 minutes. A focus group is simply a place where ninth grade student get together to have conversations about their freshman year. You child will not miss any regular advisory activities because of volunteering for this focus group. The other ninth grade advisories will be similar. I am just asking to document the feedback of this focus group to inform a research study.
- Talk about challenges that they faced and offer their ideas for possible solutions to those challenges.
- Work with myself to put their ideas into a school improvement plan
- Have their plan presented to the school board at an end of the year meeting.

#### <u>Students Will Be Paid</u>

Student participants that volunteer for the study will receive a \$10 school gift card as a thank you for their help at the last focus group meeting. The gift card is redeemable at the school bookstore, the school cafeteria, as well as several businesses in town. Any student that participates in at least three focus group meetings is eligible to receive the gift card, even if they choose to drop out of the study before the last meeting.

### **Appendix H. Parent Permission Survey**

Rhode Island College Institutional Review Board #1617-1364 Expiration Date: 12/12/17

#### PARENT PERMISSION SURVEY

#### Dear parent or legal guardian:

My name is Chris Bitgood, and I am an assistant principal here at Plainfield High School. I am also a graduate student in the joint PhD in Education program at Rhode Island College and the University of Rhode Island. I am asking permission for your child, or the child in your legal care, to be in a research study that I am conducting. I am asking because your child is a freshman here at Plainfield High School. *Parental permission is required, and your child will only be asked to participate with parental permission.* Please read this document and ask any questions you may have before deciding whether to permit your child to be in this study.

#### Why this Survey is being done (Purpose)

Plainfield High School is giving an *electronic survey* to all ninth grade students during the school year in an effort to improve the experience of freshman year. The survey provides Plainfield High School with a measure of school climate. The survey is *anonymous*. I am asking to use the results of this electronic survey as part of a research study on how ninth grade students experience their freshman year. I have attached a printed copy of the survey for your review.

#### What will be done (Procedures)

If you allow your child to be in this study, here is what will happen:

• Your 9<sup>th</sup> grade student will take an anonymous survey <u>twice</u> during their freshman year that asks questions about their high school experience, and if they feel welcome at school. By giving this survey twice, we can measure both how your child experiences high school, and how we are doing as school leaders.

#### **Risks or discomfort**

The risks of being in this study are minimal, your child will not be pulled from any classes for the purpose of this study, and the focus group will be held during the regular school advisory time block so there will be no interruption to their daily schedule. If, however at any time your student feels uncomfortable in the study, or would like to discontinue taking part, they may drop at any time without any consequences.

#### Benefits of being in the study

Being in this study will benefit you or your child directly other than the gift card compensation.

#### Deciding whether to be in the study

Nobody can force your child to be in this study. The decision is up to you and your child. Your child will be asked separately whether he or she wants to participate, and his/her wishes will be followed. Both you and your child can choose not to be in the study, and nobody will hold it against you. You or your child can change your mind and stop the study at any time, and you do not have to give a reason. If you decide to quit later, nobody will hold it against you.

#### How your information will be protected

Because this is a research study, results will be summarized across all participants and shared in reports that we publish and presentations that we give. Your child's name will not be used in any

### **Appendix I. High School Reimagined Project**

The High School Reimagined Project a regional grant sponsored by the Connecticut Association of Schools (CAS), The Connecticut Association of School Superintendents (CAPSS), The Connecticut Department of Education (CSDE), and the Nellie Mae Foundation. The High School Reimagined Project tasks school communities to work as a democratic group to redesign high school education programs to be more effective for students. Specifically, the purpose of the High School Reimagined Project is to engage school district communities through research and community discussion, to bring student voice into the discussion of high school redesign and educational reform efforts, and to use that voice to provide input to local and state policy makers in the process of high school transformation. This is an opportunity for students to have their ideas about school heard by state-level superintendents and policy makers, published, and potentially placed into action. Source: http://www.capss.org/page.cfm?p=8

## Appendix J. Quaglia School Voice Survey Results



## Demographics

The demographic data are presented both as counts and as percentages.<sup>1</sup>

#### Total number of respondents: 65

Gender of Students								
Gender	Count	Percent						
Male	29	44.6%						
Female	36	55.4%						

Students Planning on Going to College							
College	Count	Percent					
Yes	50	76.9%					
No	2	3.1%					
Undecided	13	20.0%					

Grade of Students							
Grade	Count	Percent					
6th	0	0.0%					
7th	0	0.0%					
8th	0	0.0%					
9th	65	100.0%					
10th	0	0.0%					
11th	0	0.0%					
12th	0	0.0%					

Participants in Co-Curricular Activities <sup>2</sup>							
Co-Curricular	Count	Percent					
Music	24	36.9%					
Theater	11	16.9%					
Sports	33	50.8%					
Academic Clubs	4	6.2%					
Student Council	2	3.1%					
Other	8	12.3%					
Not involved in activities	13	20.0%					

Age of Students		
Age	Count	Percent
9	0	0.0%
10	0	0.0%
11	0	0.0%
12	0	0.0%
13	1	1.5%
14	39	60.0%
15	24	36.9%
16	1	1.5%
17	0	0.0%
18	0	0.0%
19	0	0.0%
Other	0	0.0%

Racial Heritage of Students <sup>2</sup>							
Racial Heritage	Count	Percent					
White	61	93.8%					
Black or African American	2	3.1%					
Hispanic, Latino	5	7.7%					
Asian	2	3.1%					
Native Hawaiian	0	0.0%					
American Indian or Alaska Native	3	4.6%					
Other Pacific Islander	1	1.5%					
Other	1	1.5%					

Language Selected by Respondent for Survey							
Language	Count	Percent					
English	65	100.0%					
Spanish	0	0.0%					

<sup>1</sup> Count totals for specific demographics may not equal the total survey count, as not all respondents report demographic information. Total percentages may not equal one hundred due to rounding.
<sup>2</sup> In this table, the percentages may total more than 100% since respondents were instructed to select all that apply.

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## Belonging

The Condition of Belonging means that a student is a valued member of a community while still maintaining his or her uniqueness. It is a relationship between two or more persons characterized by a sense of connection and support. A sense of Belonging is an important condition for a student's feeling of well-being, social engagement, and competence. The Condition of Belonging increases intrinsic motivation, for it fosters self-confidence and investment in the community. Teachers have the opportunity to establish a culture of Belonging in their classrooms, one that promotes their students' sense of well-being, connection, and self-belief.

Question	Total in Gender		Grade							
	Agreement	Male	Female	6th	7th	8th	9th	10th	11th	12th
1. School is a welcoming and friendly place.	61.5%	58.6%	63.9%	N/A*	N/A*	N/A*	61.5%	N/A*	N/A*	N/A*
2. I feel accepted for who I am at school.	47.7%	51.7%	44.4%	N/A*	N/A*	N/A*	47.7%	N/A*	N/A*	N/A*
3. Teachers make an effort to get to know me	35.9%	39.3%	33.3%	N/A*	N/A*	N/A*	35.9%	N/A*	N/A*	N/A*
4. I have difficulty fitting in at school.	26.6%	35.7%	19.4%	N/A*	N/A*	N/A*	26.6%	N/A*	N/A*	N/A*
5. Teachers care about my problems and feelings.	27.9%	23.1%	31.4%	N/A*	N/A*	N/A*	27.9%	N/A*	N/A*	N/A*
6. I am proud of my school.	38.7%	48.1%	31.4%	N/A*	N/A*	N/A*	38.7%	N/A*	N/A*	N/A*
7. I am a valued member of my school community.	33.9%	32.0%	35.3%	N/A*	N/A*	N/A*	33.9%	N/A*	N/A*	N/A*
8. I think bullying is a problem at my school.	53.3%	46.2%	58.8%	N/A*	N/A*	N/A*	53.3%	N/A*	N/A*	N/A*

## Heroes

Heroes are the everyday people -- teachers, friends, family -- in students' lives who inspire them to excel and to make positive changes in attitude and lifestyle. Heroes are the people students can connect with, who have a positive influence on them, and who listen to and value their ideas. Heroes build trust in others and belief in oneself. Teachers can be heroes to their students. Students can look up to teachers as people to learn from and communicate with about many things. Building relationships with students through support, guidance, and encouragement enables them to become more confident in their academic, personal, and social growth.

Question	Total in			Grade						
	Agreement	Male	Female	6th	7th	8th	9th	10th	11th	12th
9. Students respect teachers.	43.1%	48.3%	38.9%	N/A*	N/A*	N/A*	43.1%	N/A*	N/A*	N/A*
10. My parents care about my education.	98.5%	96.6%	100.0%	N/A*	N/A*	N/A*	98.5%	N/A*	N/A*	N/A*
11. I have a teacher who is a positive role model for me.	78.1%	72.4%	82.9%	N/A*	N/A*	N/A*	78.1%	N/A*	N/A*	N/A*
12. Teachers care about me as an individual.	37.5%	42.9%	33.3%	N/A*	N/A*	N/A*	37.5%	N/A*	N/A*	N/A*
13. Teachers care if I am absent from school.	37.7%	30.8%	42.9%	N/A*	N/A*	N/A*	37.7%	N/A*	N/A*	N/A*
14. If I have a problem, I have a teacher with whom I can talk.	43.5%	33.3%	51.4%	N/A*	N/A*	N/A*	43.5%	N/A*	N/A*	N/A*
15. Teachers respect students.	49.2%	56.0%	44.1%	N/A*	N/A*	N/A*	49.2%	N/A*	N/A*	N/A*
16. Students respect each other.	28.3%	38.5%	20.6%	N/A*	N/A*	N/A*	28.3%	N/A*	N/A*	N/A*
17. Adults at this school listen to students' suggestions.	37.7%	40.7%	35.3%	N/A*	N/A*	N/A*	37.7%	N/A*	N/A*	N/A*



## Sense of Accomplishment

The Condition of Sense of Accomplishment recognizes effort, perseverance, and citizenship as signs of a student's success. Educators have traditionally used a narrow view of accomplishment that refers to academic achievement, innate ability, or who is "best in the class." Sense of Accomplishment, however, is viewed in terms of personal growth and effort, not just through measurable outcomes and countable successes. Teachers have the opportunity to celebrate their students' accomplishments in visible ways. Taking time to recognize and support students' efforts can help motivate them to persevere through difficult tasks, creating an appreciation for hard work and dedication.

Question	Total in	Ger	Gender		Grade					
	Agreement	Male	Female	6th	7th	8th	9th	10th	11th	12th
18. I am encouraged to practice good citizenship at school.	77.8%	77.8%	77.8%	N/A*	N/A*	N/A*	77.8%	N/A*	N/A*	N/A*
19. Teachers recognize students who are kind and helpful.	60.9%	62.1%	60.0%	N/A*	N/A*	N/A*	60.9%	N/A*	N/A*	N/A*
20. I have never been recognized for something positive at school.	35.5%	42.3%	30.6%	N/A*	N/A*	N/A*	35.5%	N/A*	N/A*	N/A*
21. I give up when schoolwork is difficult.	24.6%	38.5%	14.3%	N/A*	N/A*	N/A*	24.6%	N/A*	N/A*	N/A*
22. Teachers recognize me when I try my best.	40.3%	48.1%	34.3%	N/A*	N/A*	N/A*	40.3%	N/A*	N/A*	N/A*
23. Teachers let my parents know what I do well.	45.9%	46.2%	45.7%	N/A*	N/A*	N/A*	45.9%	N/A*	N/A*	N/A*
24. I put forth my best effort at school.	71.2%	64.0%	76.5%	N/A*	N/A*	N/A*	71.2%	N/A*	N/A*	N/A*
25. Getting good grades is important to me.	90.0%	80.8%	97.1%	N/A*	N/A*	N/A*	90.0%	N/A*	N/A*	N/A*
26. Adults and students work together to make our school better.	39.3%	44.4%	35.3%	N/A*	N/A*	N/A*	39.3%	N/A*	N/A*	N/A*

## Fun & Excitement

The Condition of Fun & Excitement is characterized by students being inspired. They are actively engaged and emotionally involved in their schoolwork. Students who exhibit Fun & Excitement are usually self-confident, curious, and prepared; they are willing to meet the challenges of the day. Teachers who foster Fun & Excitement provide new opportunities, initiate challenges, and respect individual interests. The first three Conditions -- Belonging, Heroes, and Sense of Accomplishment -- help establish a learning environment in which students can feel safe to have fun together in learning.

Question Total in		Gender		Grade						
	Agreement	Male	Female	6th	7th	8th	9th	10th	11th	12th
27. I enjoy being at school.	32.8%	32.1%	33.3%	N/A*	N/A*	N/A*	32.8%	N/A*	N/A*	N/A*
28. Teachers enjoy working with students.	45.3%	41.4%	48.6%	N/A*	N/A*	N/A*	45.3%	N/A*	N/A*	N/A*
29. Teachers make school an exciting place to learn.	23.0%	34.6%	14.3%	N/A*	N/A*	N/A*	23.0%	N/A*	N/A*	N/A*
30. School is boring.	54.1%	55.6%	52.9%	N/A*	N/A*	N/A*	54.1%	N/A*	N/A*	N/A*
31. I enjoy participating in my classes.	43.5%	37.0%	48.6%	N/A*	N/A*	N/A*	43.5%	N/A*	N/A*	N/A*
32. Teachers have fun at school.	32.2%	36.0%	29.4%	N/A*	N/A*	N/A*	32.2%	N/A*	N/A*	N/A*
33. Learning can be fun.	73.3%	65.4%	79.4%	N/A*	N/A*	N/A*	73.3%	N/A*	N/A*	N/A*



## **Curiosity & Creativity**

The Condition of Curiosity & Creativity is characterized by inquisitiveness, a strong desire to learn new or interesting things, and an eagerness to satisfy the mind with new discoveries. Curiosity triggers students to ask "Why?" while creativity gives them the initiative to ask "Why not?" The intensity of Curiosity & Creativity tends to diminish over time due to the habituating effects of the environment. Teachers can devote extra attention to creating a classroom environment that promotes questioning and creative exploration in order to maintain student motivation.

Question	Total in Agreement	Ger	nder	der Grade								
	Agreement	Male	Female	6th	7th	8th	9th	10th	11th	12th		
34. I feel comfortable asking questions in class.	50.8%	62.1%	41.7%	N/A*	N/A*	N/A*	50.8%	N/A*	N/A*	N/A*		
35. My teachers present lessons in different ways.	73.4%	72.4%	74.3%	N/A*	N/A*	N/A*	73.4%	N/A*	N/A*	N/A*		
36. At school I am encouraged to be creative.	51.6%	46.2%	55.6%	N/A*	N/A*	N/A*	51.6%	N/A*	N/A*	N/A*		
37. I enjoy working on projects with other students.	47.5%	53.8%	42.9%	N/A*	N/A*	N/A*	47.5%	N/A*	N/A*	N/A*		
38. My classes help me understand what is happening in my everyday life.	34.4%	37.0%	32.4%	N/A*	N/A*	N/A*	34.4%	N/A*	N/A*	N/A*		
39. School inspires me to learn.	43.5%	48.1%	40.0%	N/A*	N/A*	N/A*	43.5%	N/A*	N/A*	N/A*		
40. I enjoy learning new things.	74.2%	70.4%	77.1%	N/A*	N/A*	N/A*	74.2%	N/A*	N/A*	N/A*		
41. Hearn new things that are interesting to me at school.	54.2%	44.0%	61.8%	N/A*	N/A*	N/A*	54.2%	N/A*	N/A*	N/A*		
42. What I learn in school will benefit my future.	53.3%	46.2%	58.8%	N/A*	N/A*	N/A*	53.3%	N/A*	N/A*	N/A*		
43. Students work with adults to find solutions to school problems.	34.4%	40.7%	29.4%	N/A*	N/A*	N/A*	34.4%	N/A*	N/A*	N/A*		

## Spirit of Adventure

The Spirit of Adventure is characterized by a student's ability to take on positive, healthy challenges at school and home, with family and friends. Students experience the Spirit of Adventure when they tackle something new without the fear of failure or success. Teachers can encourage and support students' Spirit of Adventure by urging them to explore new things. When teachers create an atmosphere that allows for healthy decision making and risk taking, students can become more confident and resilient. Students with the Spirit of Adventure see life as full of opportunities worth exploring for their own sake.

Question	Total in	Gei	nder	Grade								
	Agreement	Male	Female	6th	7th	8th	9th	10th	11th	12th		
44. Hike challenging assignments.	42.2%	41.4%	42.9%	N/A*	N/A*	N/A*	42.2%	N/A*	N/A*	N/A*		
45. I push myself to do better academically.	73.4%	69.0%	77.1%	N/A*	N/A*	N/A*	73.4%	N/A*	N/A*	N/A*		
46. Students are supportive of each other.	25.8%	38.5%	16.7%	N/A*	N/A*	N/A*	25.8%	N/A*	N/A*	N/A*		
47. I am afraid to try something if I think I may fail.	41.0%	29.6%	50.0%	N/A*	N/A*	N/A*	41.0%	N/A*	N/A*	N/A*		
48. Teachers help me learn from my mistakes.	38.7%	40.7%	37.1%	N/A*	N/A*	N/A*	38.7%	N/A*	N/A*	N/A*		
49. I want to do my best at school.	85.2%	77.8%	91.2%	N/A*	N/A*	N/A*	85.2%	N/A*	N/A*	N/A*		
50. I am excited to tell my friends when I get good grades.	62.3%	48.1%	73.5%	N/A*	N/A*	N/A*	62.3%	N/A*	N/A*	N/A*		



## Leadership & Responsibility

The Condition of Leadership & Responsibility means students are able to express their ideas and are willing to accept consequences for their actions. It cultivates accountability for the classroom environment and school community. Fostering leadership empowers students to make just and appropriate decisions and to take pride in their actions. Teachers who promote this Condition teach and expect their students to be good decision makers. They provide legitimate decision making opportunities, seek student input, and expect students to be accountable for their actions and words. Students are trusted to make the right decisions and are recognized for doing so.

Question	Total in	Ger	nder	Grade							
	Agreement	Male	Female	6th	7th	8th	9th	10th	11th	12th	
51. Students have a voice in decision making at school.	29.2%	27.6%	30.6%	N/A*	N/A*	N/A*	29.2%	N/A*	N/A*	N/A*	
52. I see myself as a leader.	54.7%	46.4%	61.1%	N/A*	N/A*	N/A*	54.7%	N/A*	N/A*	N/A*	
53. Other students see me as a leader.	29.0%	23.1%	33.3%	N/A*	N/A*	N/A*	29.0%	N/A*	N/A*	N/A*	
54. Teachers encourage students to make decisions.	41.0%	48.1%	35.3%	N/A*	N/A*	N/A*	41.0%	N/A*	N/A*	N/A*	
55. Teachers are willing to learn from students.	37.7%	37.0%	38.2%	N/A*	N/A*	N/A*	37.7%	N/A*	N/A*	N/A*	
56. I am a good decision maker.	54.1%	55.6%	52.9%	N/A*	N/A*	N/A*	54.1%	N/A*	N/A*	N/A*	
57. I know the goals my school is working on this year.	29.5%	37.0%	23.5%	N/A*	N/A*	N/A*	29.5%	N/A*	N/A*	N/A*	

## Confidence to Take Action

Confidence to Take Action is the extent to which students believe in themselves. It encourages them to dream about their future while being motivated to set goals in the present. This Condition is at the heart of what educators ultimately strive for: instilling in their students a confidence in and expectation of success. Confidence to Take Action is characterized by a positive and healthy outlook on life and by looking inward rather than outward for approval. Teachers have the ability to help build their students' Confidence to Take Action by providing support, celebrating diversity, and encouraging independent thinking. By enhancing the quality of academic and personal growth, teachers empower their students to become active and involved members of their learning environments.

Question	Total in	Gei	nder	Grade							
	Agreement	Male	Female	6th	7th	8th	9th	10th	11th	12th	
58. I believe I can be successful.	84.6%	72.4%	94.4%	N/A*	N/A*	N/A*	84.6%	N/A*	N/A*	N/A*	
59. I believe I can make a difference in this world.	51.6%	46.4%	55.6%	N/A*	N/A*	N/A*	51.6%	N/A*	N/A*	N/A*	
60. Teachers believe in me and expect me to be successful.	61.7%	53.8%	67.6%	N/A*	N/A*	N/A*	61.7%	N/A*	N/A*	N/A*	
61. Going to college is important for my future.	77.0%	74.1%	79.4%	N/A*	N/A*	N/A*	77.0%	N/A*	N/A*	N/A*	
62. I work hard to reach my goals.	78.7%	73.1%	82.9%	N/A*	N/A*	N/A*	78.7%	N/A*	N/A*	N/A*	
63. I am excited about my future.	65.6%	59.3%	70.6%	N/A*	N/A*	N/A*	65.6%	N/A*	N/A*	N/A*	
64. I think it is important to set high goals.	73.3%	55.6%	87.9%	N/A*	N/A*	N/A*	73.3%	N/A*	N/A*	N/A*	
65. I know the kind of person I want to become.	59.0%	51.9%	64.7%	N/A*	N/A*	N/A*	59.0%	N/A*	N/A*	N/A*	
66. School is preparing me well for my future.	47.5%	51.9%	44.1%	N/A*	N/A*	N/A*	47.5%	N/A*	N/A*	N/A*	
67. Students develop programs that improve the whole school.	31.1%	37.0%	26.5%	N/A*	N/A*	N/A*	31.1%	N/A*	N/A*	N/A*	



## **Student Voice**

The five statements in the table below appear in other tables throughout this report as they relate to particular Conditions. Student Voice, however, not only gives us access to what students think about school through the lens of the 8 Conditions, it is also a construct in itself. As such, this table provides insight into what students believe about adult openness to and partnership with their ideas and suggestions.

Question	Total in Agreement	Ger	nder	Grade							
	Agreement	Male	Female	6th	7th	8th	9th	10th	11th	12th	
17. Adults at this school listen to students' suggestions.	37.7%	40.7%	35.3%	N/A*	N/A*	N/A*	37.7%	N/A*	N/A*	N/A*	
26. Adults and students work together to make our school better.	39.3%	44.4%	35.3%	N/A*	N/A*	N/A*	39.3%	N/A*	N/A*	N/A*	
43. Students work with adults to find solutions to school problems.	34.4%	40.7%	29.4%	N/A*	N/A*	N/A*	34.4%	N/A*	N/A*	N/A*	
51. Students have a voice in decision making at school.	29.2%	27.6%	30.6%	N/A*	N/A*	N/A*	29.2%	N/A*	N/A*	N/A*	
67. Students develop programs that improve the whole school.	31.1%	37.0%	26.5%	N/A*	N/A*	N/A*	31.1%	N/A*	N/A*	N/A*	

To preserve anonymity, results will only be produced when there is data for ten or more respondents.

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## All Results

Category	Question	Total in Agreement	Strongly Agree	Agree	Undecided	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Did Not Answer
Belonging	1. School is a welcoming and friendly place.	61.5%	9.2%	52.3%	29.2%	9.2%	0.0%	0.0%
Belonging	2. I feel accepted for who I am at school.	47.7%	20.0%	27.7%	35.4%	12.3%	4.6%	0.0%
Belonging	3. Teachers make an effort to get to know me.	35.9%	9.4%	26.6%	31.2%	28.1%	4.7%	1.5%
Belonging	4. I have difficulty fitting in at school.	26.6%	9.4%	17.2%	17.2%	34.4%	21.9%	1.5%
Belonging	5. Teachers care about my problems and feelings.	27.9%	8.2%	19.7%	41.0%	18.0%	13.1%	6.2%
Belonging	6. I am proud of my school.	38.7%	14.5%	24.2%	38.7%	14.5%	8.1%	4.6%
Belonging	7. I am a valued member of my school community.	33.9%	6.8%	27.1%	37.3%	15.3%	13.6%	9.2%
Belonging	8. I think bullying is a problem at my school.	53.3%	28.3%	25.0%	21.7%	15.0%	10.0%	7.7%
Heroes	9. Students respect teachers.	43.1%	3.1%	40.0%	29.2%	24.6%	3.1%	0.0%
Heroes	10. My parents care about my education.	98.5%	72.3%	26.2%	1.5%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
Heroes	11. I have a teacher who is a positive role model for me.	78.1%	35.9%	42.2%	10.9%	6.2%	4.7%	1.5%
Heroes	12. Teachers care about me as an individual.	37.5%	10.9%	26.6%	42.2%	14.1%	6.2%	1.5%
Heroes	13. Teachers care if I am absent from school.	37.7%	9.8%	27.9%	29.5%	18.0%	14.8%	6.2%
Heroes	14. If I have a problem, I have a teacher with whom I can talk.	43.5%	24.2%	19.4%	35.5%	9.7%	11.3%	4.6%
Heroes	15. Teachers respect students.	49.2%	6.8%	42.4%	32.2%	13.6%	5.1%	9.2%
Heroes	16. Students respect each other.	28.3%	6.7%	21.7%	40.0%	23.3%	8.3%	7.7%
Heroes	17. Adults at this school listen to students' suggestions.	37.7%	8.2%	29.5%	23.0%	27.9%	11.5%	6.2%
Sense of Accomplishment	18. I am encouraged to practice good citizenship at school.	77.8%	17.5%	60.3%	14.3%	7.9%	0.0%	3.1%
Sense of Accomplishment	19. Teachers recognize students who are kind and helpful.	60.9%	14.1%	46.9%	21.9%	10.9%	6.2%	1.5%
Sense of Accomplishment	20. I have never been recognized for something positive at school.	35.5%	16.1%	19.4%	21.0%	30.6%	12.9%	4.6%
Sense of Accomplishment	21. I give up when schoolwork is difficult.	24.6%	9.8%	14.8%	13.1%	36.1%	26.2%	6.2%
Sense of Accomplishment	22. Teachers recognize me when I try my best.	40.3%	11.3%	29.0%	27.4%	22.6%	9.7%	4.6%

\*Percentages for Strongly Agree through Strongly Disagree are calculated based on the number of students who responded to that particular survey item; percentages for Did Not Answer are calculated based on the total number of students who took the survey.

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## All Results (cont.)

Category	Question	Total in Agreement	Strongly Agree	Agree	Undecided	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Did Not Answer
Sense of Accomplishment	23. Teachers let my parents know what I do well.	45.9%	13.1%	32.8%	11.5%	21.3%	21.3%	6.2%
Sense of Accomplishment	24. I put forth my best effort at school.	71.2%	22.0%	49.2%	20.3%	6.8%	1.7%	9.2%
Sense of Accomplishment	25. Getting good grades is important to me	90.0%	51.7%	38.3%	10.0%	0.0%	0.0%	7.7%
Sense of Accomplishment	26. Adults and students work together to make our school better.	39.3%	8.2%	31.1%	36.1%	11.5%	13.1%	6.2%
Fun & Excitement	27. I enjoy being at school.	32.8%	7.8%	25.0%	35.9%	15.6%	15.6%	1.5%
Fun & Excitement	28. Teachers enjoy working with students.	45.3%	14.1%	31.2%	42.2%	7.8%	4.7%	1.5%
Fun & Excitement	29. Teachers make school an exciting place to learn.	23.0%	4.9%	18.0%	45.9%	18.0%	13.1%	6.2%
Fun & Excitement	30. School is boring.	54.1%	29.5%	24.6%	26.2%	14.8%	4.9%	6.2%
Fun & Excitement	31. I enjoy participating in my classes.	43.5%	11.3%	32.3%	38.7%	6.5%	11.3%	4.6%
Fun & Excitement	32. Teachers have fun at school.	32.2%	10.2%	22.0%	40.7%	18.6%	8.5%	9.2%
Fun & Excitement	33. Learning can be fun.	73.3%	21.7%	51.7%	13.3%	5.0%	8.3%	7.7%
Curiosity & Creativity	34. I feel comfortable asking questions in class.	50.8%	16.9%	33.8%	27.7%	15.4%	6.2%	0.0%
Curiosity & Creativity	35. My teachers present lessons in different ways	73.4%	23.4%	50.0%	17.2%	7.8%	1.6%	1.5%
Curiosity & Creativity	36. At school I am encouraged to be creative.	51.6%	8.1%	43.5%	27.4%	14.5%	6.5%	4.6%
Curiosity & Creativity	37. I enjoy working on projects with other students.	47.5%	13.1%	34.4%	18.0%	19.7%	14.8%	6.2%
Curiosity & Creativity	38. My classes help me understand what is happening in my everyday life.	34.4%	4.9%	29.5%	31.1%	24.6%	9.8%	6.2%
Curiosity & Creativity	39. School inspires me to learn.	43.5%	11.3%	32.3%	29.0%	16.1%	11.3%	4.6%
Curiosity & Creativity	40. I enjoy learning new things.	74.2%	24.2%	50.0%	14.5%	6.5%	4.8%	4.6%
Curiosity & Creativity	41. I learn new things that are interesting to me at school.	54.2%	11.9%	42.4%	22.0%	11.9%	11.9%	9.2%
Curiosity & Creativity	42. What I learn in school will benefit my future.	53.3%	21.7%	31.7%	30.0%	8.3%	8.3%	7.7%
Curiosity & Creativity	43. Students work with adults to find solutions to school problems.	34.4%	6.6%	27.9%	39.3%	13.1%	13.1%	6.2%
Spirit of Adventure	44. I like challenging assignments.	42.2%	3.1%	39.1%	21.9%	20.3%	15.6%	1.5%

\*Percentages for Strongly Agree through Strongly Disagree are calculated based on the number of students who responded to that particular survey item; percentages for Did Not Answer are calculated based on the total number of students who took the survey.

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## All Results (cont.)

Category	Question	Total in Agreement	Strongly Agree	Agree	Undecided	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Did Not Answer
Spirit of Adventure	45. I push myself to do better academically.	73.4%	29.7%	43.8%	20.3%	6.2%	0.0%	1.5%
Spirit of Adventure	46. Students are supportive of each other.	25.8%	9.7%	16.1%	48.4%	17.7%	8.1%	4.6%
Spirit of Adventure	47. I am afraid to try something if I think I may fail.	41.0%	11.5%	29.5%	26.2%	16.4%	16.4%	6.2%
Spirit of Adventure	48. Teachers help me learn from my mistakes.	38.7%	6.5%	32.3%	41.9%	11.3%	8.1%	4.6%
Spirit of Adventure	49. I want to do my best at school.	85.2%	45.9%	39.3%	9.8%	1.6%	3.3%	6.2%
Spirit of Adventure	50. I am excited to tell my friends when I get good grades.	62.3%	18.0%	44.3%	21.3%	11.5%	4.9%	6.2%
Leadership & Responsibility	51. Students have a voice in decision making at school.	29.2%	4.6%	24.6%	33.8%	21.5%	15.4%	0.0%
Leadership & Responsibility	52. I see myself as a leader.	54.7%	12.5%	42.2%	26.6%	12.5%	6.2%	1.5%
Leadership & Responsibility	53. Other students see me as a leader.	29.0%	8.1%	21.0%	32.3%	21.0%	17.7%	4.6%
Leadership & Responsibility	54. Teachers encourage students to make decisions.	41.0%	9.8%	31.1%	42.6%	9.8%	6.6%	6.2%
Leadership & Responsibility	55. Teachers are willing to learn from students.	37.7%	4.9%	32.8%	26.2%	27.9%	8.2%	6.2%
Leadership & Responsibility	56. I am a good decision maker.	54.1%	11.5%	42.6%	21.3%	11.5%	13.1%	6.2%
Leadership & Responsibility	57. I know the goals my school is working on this year.	29.5%	6.6%	23.0%	32.8%	24.6%	13.1%	6.2%
Confidence to Take Action	58. I believe I can be successful.	84.6%	30.8%	53.8%	9.2%	6.2%	0.0%	0.0%
Confidence to Take Action	59. I believe I can make a difference in this world.	51.6%	18.8%	32.8%	35.9%	7.8%	4.7%	1.5%
Confidence to Take Action	60. Teachers believe in me and expect me to be successful.	61.7%	16.7%	45.0%	21.7%	5.0%	11.7%	7.7%
Confidence to Take Action	61. Going to college is important for my future.	77.0%	57.4%	19.7%	16.4%	1.6%	4.9%	6.2%
Confidence to Take Action	62. I work hard to reach my goals.	78.7%	24.6%	54.1%	16.4%	1.6%	3.3%	6.2%
Confidence to Take Action	63. I am excited about my future.	65.6%	34.4%	31.1%	26.2%	3.3%	4.9%	6.2%
Confidence to Take Action	64. I think it is important to set high goals.	73.3%	35.0%	38.3%	18.3%	5.0%	3.3%	7.7%
Confidence to Take Action	65. I know the kind of person I want to become.	59.0%	32.8%	26.2%	31.1%	3.3%	6.6%	6.2%
Confidence to Take Action	66. School is preparing me well for my future.	47.5%	9.8%	37.7%	31.1%	13.1%	8.2%	6.2%

\*Percentages for Strongly Agree through Strongly Disagree are calculated based on the number of students who responded to that particular survey item; percentages for Did Not Answer are calculated based on the total number of students who took the survey.

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## All Results (cont.)

Category	Question	Total in Agreement	Strongly Agree	Agree	Undecided	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Did Not Answer
Confidence to Take Action	67. Students develop programs that improve the whole school.	31.1%	6.6%	24.6%	42.6%	18.0%	8.2%	6.2%

\*Percentages for Strongly Agree through Strongly Disagree are calculated based on the number of students who responded to that particular survey item; percentages for Did Not Answer are calculated based on the total number of students who took the survey.

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## **Appendix K. Focus Group Questions**

## Focus Group Questions about the Experience of Ninth Grade Initial Open-ended Questions

- 1. Tell about your experience so for in ninth grade?
- 2. How has this year been different from last year (8<sup>th</sup> grade)?
- 3. Describe a typical day for you in school.
- 4. What would you tell the kids coming to high school next year to expect?
- 5. What are some of the best things about high school?
- 6. What are some of the worst things?
- 7. What would you do if you had the power to change anything you wanted about the freshman academy?
- 8. Do you think that teachers listen to you?
- 9. How do you imagine yourself as a senior?
- 10. Where do you see yourself after high school?
- 11. How would you describe yourself? (as a student).
- 12. What skills do you think students need to be successful here? (what is the most important skill)?
- 13. What do you think that teachers (and administrators) need to understand about their students?
- 14. Do you think that student have input (voice) into how things happen at school? (explain)
- 15. Who do you go to if you have a problem in school? (parent, friend, teacher)

## **Appendix L. Freshman Improvement Plan**

# <u>Freshman Improvement Plan (things that you guys would like to see happen next</u> <u>year)</u>

- More Freedom in choosing classes.
- More Social Activities (dances, fieldtrips)
- More choice in classes that we can take as freshman (and more extracurricular)
- Pep rally in the spring
- More/better student leadership
- More opportunities to organize events
- More sleep (later start time)
- More voice into how classes are run
- Different ways to do assignments and rewards (like Starbursts)
- More choices for gym (yoga) and sports (tennis)
- Less study halls
- More clubs (like guitar)
- Classes for job preparation (like to be a nurse)
- Things for preparation for real life (like how to fill out taxes)
- More out of town trips and experiences
- Choice of different books in English class
- Teachers who listen to kid's opinions
- More discussion in class
- A school council with different grades in it
- A way for kids to fix problems in the school
- A tour given to incoming freshman by last year's freshman

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