A Study of the Inclusion of Students’ Perspectives in Ontario School Board Improvement Planning through Student Trustee Representation

By

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Abstract

Students are the largest stakeholders in education and school board improvement plans have a direct impact on their educational experience. This study examined the inclusion of students’ perspectives in improvement planning as represented by student trustees.

Based on an adaptation of Fielding’s (2012) framework for student engagement. The study was guided by the assumption that the nature of student trustee engagement in the improvement planning process related to the ways in which education leaders created the conditions to invite students’ input. Responses to on-line questionnaires completed by a sample of 26 English school board supervisory officers and 28 former student trustees all of whom served in their respective roles prior to September 2014 in English school boards in the province of Ontario provided the primary source of data.

Both supervisory officers and former student trustees indicated a high level of agreement about the importance of including students’ perspectives in improvement planning. However, overall,
across all phases of the board improvement planning process, both supervisory officers and former student trustees indicated that student trustees were not very involved.

The study concluded that both supervisory officers and former student trustees would like to see a more participatory role of student trustees in informing the improvement planning process. To do so would require overcoming the challenges identified by these groups. Articulating an appropriate and meaningful role for student trustees in an improvement planning process will be an important consideration when thinking about modifications to existing practices. Provision should be given for enhanced interaction between student trustees and their fellow peers and between student trustees and school board staff when developing improvement plans.

Education leaders are encouraged to use an expanded framework for student trustee representation to include opportunities for student trustees to co-lead and co-learn with their fellow peers and staff. Student trustees are encouraged to advocate locally within school boards and provincially through student trustee organizations to elevate the importance of including students’ perspectives in the improvement planning process from students themselves in order to achieve a more authentic response to improving student achievement and well-being in Ontario’s publically funded school system.
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To educational leaders, whose passion for and life-long dedication to the success and well-being of each and every student. May you be inspired to empower youth to inform your leadership in new and innovative ways.

To our youth: who are complex, reflective, creative communicators and thinkers; self-directed, responsible, life-long learners; collaborative contributors; competent and capable of taking participatory democracy in educational decision-making to a new level. May you be inspired to provide new insights into the conditions that will contribute to each and every student benefitting from public education.

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Table of Contents

Acknowledgements ........................................................................................................ iv
Table of Contents .......................................................................................................... v
List of Tables ................................................................................................................. viii
List of Appendices ......................................................................................................... ix
Chapter 1 Introduction and Background ....................................................................... 1
  Introduction ............................................................................................................... 1
  Background ............................................................................................................. 2
  Research Rationale ................................................................................................. 9
Chapter 2 Review of Literature and Conceptual Foundations ...................................... 12
  Introduction ............................................................................................................. 12
  School Board Improvement Planning .................................................................... 12
  Student Engagement .............................................................................................. 17
  Collaborative Inquiry ............................................................................................. 22
  Participatory Democracy ......................................................................................... 24
  Conceptual Foundations ......................................................................................... 27
  Research Question .................................................................................................. 34
Chapter 3 Methodology ................................................................................................. 35
  Introduction ............................................................................................................. 35
  Approach to Research ............................................................................................ 35
  Participants .............................................................................................................. 39
  Recruitment and Sample Size ............................................................................... 40
  Research Design ..................................................................................................... 41
  Survey Items .......................................................................................................... 43
  Data Collection ....................................................................................................... 46
  Data Analysis ......................................................................................................... 47
Organizational Structures and Cultures ................................................................. 96
Conclusion ............................................................................................................. 103
Chapter 6 Implications and Recommendations .................................................... 105
  Recommendations for Policy and/or Practice ...................................................... 105
  Recommendations for Future Research ............................................................ 110
  Significance of the Study .................................................................................. 111
References ............................................................................................................. 113
Appendix A: Participant Recruitment and Consent ................................................ 119
Appendix B: Key Informant Survey Questions ....................................................... 121
  Survey Items: Supervisory Officers .................................................................. 121
  Survey Items: Former Student Trustees ............................................................ 127
Appendix C: Sample Open-Ended Responses for Key Informant Groups ............. 132
List of Tables

Table 1  A Conceptual Framework for Examining the Nature of Student Trustee Involvement in School Board Improvement Planning

Table 2  Number of Participants Based on Size of School Board Affiliation

Table 3  Number of Participants Based on School Board Affiliation Geographical Location

Table 4  Number of Participants Based on the Number of Student Trustees Elected Annually

Table 5  Mean Participant Responses to Statements Relating to Perceptions About the Involvement of Student Trustees in the School Board Improvement Planning Process

Table 6  It is Important for Student Trustees to Speak on Behalf of Students at School Board Improvement Discussions and/or Activities

Table 7  Student Trustees have Opportunities to Gather Input from Students in the School Board and Speak on Their Behalf at Board Improvement Planning Discussions and/or Activities

Table 8  Student Trustees Would be Able to Identify a Key Feature of the Improvement Plan that Directly Reflects Student Input

Table 9  Student Trustees are Provided with Support and Opportunities to Share the School Board Improvement Plan with Students in the School Board

Table 10  Mean Participant Responses Related to Student Trustee Involvement in the School Board Improvement Planning Process

Table 11  Student Trustee Involvement in Discussions and/or Activities About what Areas the School Board Should Consider for Improvement

Table 12  Student Trustee Involvement in Discussions and/or Activities About Student Well-Being and Achievement Information

Table 13  Student Trustee Involvement in Discussions and/or Activities About Improvement Strategies

Table 14  Student Trustee Involvement in Discussions and/or Activities to Monitor and Evaluate Progress of the Board Improvement Plan

Table 15  Inclusion of Students’ Perspectives in the Final School Board Improvement Plan
List of Appendices

Appendix A: Participant Recruitment and Consent

Appendix B: Key Informant Survey Questions

Appendix C: Sample Open-Ended Responses from Key Informant Groups
Chapter 1
Introduction and Background

Introduction

Throughout my thirty plus years in education, I have had the distinct privilege and pleasure of serving in a number of roles in education, collaborating with others to nurture and support the conditions that enable children and youth in Ontario public schools to thrive in every aspect of their educational experience and growth. As I reflect on that journey, I note that both experience and life-long professional and scholarly learning opportunities have increasingly expanded my understanding of the profound importance of students’ perceptions of belonging, inclusion and voice in their education. I have observed varying gradations of student involvement at the school board and provincial level, ranging from students being somewhat passive recipients of information to being actively involved contributors and advocates for themselves and their peers. I have been impressed by student trustees who, at a provincial table, confidently brought forward creative, innovative, insightful solutions and yet, I have experienced the student trustee who is reluctant to contribute to the discussion. As I reflect on those experiences I wonder about student trustee involvement in representing students’ perspectives in activities and/or discussions about improvement plans related to student achievement and well-being? What conditions inhibit or support their involvement?

The legal requirement to ensure participation of student trustees on corporate school boards in Ontario was introduced over two decades ago and in my view, there has been sufficient time and opportunity for school board staff to develop the relationships, structures and practices that support the role and engagement of those students who are elected to represent the collective voice of their peers. However, as with any new initiative, everyone involved in implementation of new policies and or practices require time to understand the impact on roles and responsibilities, to develop organizational processes and the leadership capacity of people, and to make connections to current structures and/or practices. Often times, in my experience, implementation of new initiatives or legislative requirements unfold incrementally, rather than all at once. Changes to school board governance in Ontario would be no different for those charged with ensuring inclusion of students’ perspectives through student trustee representation, in that it takes time for practice to catch up to changes in legislation. Notwithstanding the
challenges, if we believe that students’ perspectives should factor into decisions that affect them (in accordance, for example with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child), their input should be sought and considered in the improvement planning process. They do indeed have an important perspective to share about their educational experience and the enabling conditions that support their achievement and well-being.

**Background**

Advanced political, social and democratic societies recognize the importance of education and the relationship that education has to social cohesion, the health and wellness of society’s citizens, a strong work force, a vibrant economy and a bright future for its children. As noted by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (2003), rapid transformation of education systems in recent years, spurred on by an ascent of the knowledge economy, the explosive growth of higher education worldwide, and the increased focus on standardized test scores, has created powerful incentives for people to pursue quality education.

Publicly funded schools in the province of Ontario serve a diverse student population representing a wide range of cultural, ethnic and socio-economic backgrounds. The prevalence of student diversity throughout the province underscores the increased emphasis that the Ontario Ministry of Education has put on active student engagement and the inclusion of students’ perspectives as an important condition to nurturing student well-being, increasing student achievement, striving for equity of outcomes and ensuring public confidence in the education system (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2002, 2008a, 2008b, 2009b). It is my view that in order to reflect the range of diverse learning needs among the student population, educators need to find authentic ways for all students, particularly those susceptible to being marginalized, to authentically contribute to decisions that impact them.

As noted in a report by Dr. Mordechai Rozanski (2002), head of the task force to review the province’s education funding formula, among all education stakeholders in Ontario’s widely varied communities, there is an “intense desire for high quality public education” (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2002, p. 3). Indeed, historically, Ontario’s three main political parties view universal access to public education as a fundamental responsibility of democratic governments and a common value shared by all. Ontario’s Ministry of Education, in setting priorities, particularly in recent years, aspires to reflect provincial, national and global trends
The Ministry of Education’s renewed vision of education in Ontario draws on previous Ministry of Education reports, which provide recommendations for consideration and inform the path forward for improvement. A key guiding principle in Ontario’s student success strategy for example, is the belief that students are more engaged, confident and successful when education responds to their unique interests, strengths, needs and aspirations. One policy document produced by the Ministry of Education for the province, *Creating Pathways to Success: An Education and Career/Life Planning Program for Ontario Schools, Policy and Program Requirements, Kindergarten to Grade 12* (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2013), articulates the importance of putting students at the center of their own learning, giving them voice, empowering them to design and plan their education and life goals by helping them to learn more about themselves, their aspirations, their opportunities and who they want to become from an early age and throughout their school experience.

In Ontario, different entities (e.g., the provincial government, school board trustees, school board administrators, courts and tribunals, parents, teachers – individually and collectively, students, and the broader community) have responsibility for and influence over educational decisions in a variety of ways. Some have legally defined roles with formal responsibilities, whereas others have a less formal role, yet can influence how the system operates, or at least have an interest in how it operates. As articulated in *The Road Ahead II – A Report on the Role of School Boards and Trustees* (Education Improvement Commission, 1997), education in Ontario is a partnership consisting of the province, the school board and the school. The Ministry of Education for the province of Ontario provides province-wide direction, sets the policy framework for elementary, secondary and postsecondary education and is responsible for the administration of the *Education Act* and related regulations for 72 school boards and school authorities comprised of English Language Catholic, French Language Catholic, English Language Public and French Language Public education systems. There are also 134 First Nations communities spread throughout Ontario. Ontario’s *Education Act* delineates the duties and responsibilities of the Minister of Education, corporate school boards, school board staff and various stakeholders. The Ministry of Education for the province is responsible for government policy, funding, curriculum planning and direction in all levels of public education, including elementary and secondary
schools (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2015). The Ministry of Education is also responsible for providing sufficient and equitable funding to achieve the goals the province has articulated for the students of Ontario.

Corporate school boards are a local level of governance established to deliver education on behalf of the province. School board trustees are the members of the corporate school board. Since 1807, Ontario school board trustees have made decisions on behalf of publicly funded schools, serving as system leaders of publicly funded education in their communities and in the province (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2006). Trustees are required to carry out their responsibilities in a manner that assists the board in fulfilling its duties under the Education Act. “A trustee’s role is to maintain a focus on student achievement and well-being and to participate in making decisions that benefit the entire school board while representing the interests of his or her constituents” (Ontario Education Services Corporation, 2014, p. 4). As reflected in ministry documents, trustees are expected to develop policies based on provincial directives, aligned to an articulated vision of education established locally. Trustees are also expected to work collaboratively with their community to shape a vision for the school board that is reflective of the input of parents, students and community members. They are also expected to make an important contribution to public education by providing oversight, setting goals for student achievement, ensuring policies and programs fit the needs of local students, exercising stewardship over resources allocated to the school board by the Ministry of Education in ways that ensure equity of opportunity and ensure accountability, promoting continuous improvement, and representing the local needs of school boards to the provincial government. Most importantly, through their Directors of Education, elected trustees are expected to hold schools within the jurisdiction accountable for student achievement, measured against provincially established standards (Education Improvement Commission, 1997; Ontario Education Services Corporation, 2014).

Directors of Education and other supervisory officers in Ontario provide educational leadership in varied and culturally diverse educational contexts and, along with principals, teachers, support staff, parents/guardians, school councils and other stakeholders, focus on the primary purpose of the Ontario education system: the continuing support of student well-being and achievement (Ontario Education Services Corporation, 2014).
In addition to elected trustees, student trustees, while not members of the corporate board, are representatives as well, and are expected to play a vital role in the education governance process. Student trustees are elected annually by their peers, expected to bring the perspectives of other students in the school board to corporate board tables and assist in keeping the students apprised of decisions that may impact them. Section 55 and Ontario Regulation 7/07 of the Education Statutes and Regulations of Ontario detail provisions relating to student trustees (Government of Ontario, 2014). In a very broad sense, the inclusion of student trustees in the school board governance process, albeit limited in terms of voting rights, was introduced to enable the consideration of students’ perspectives in the decisions of members of the corporate board.

Researchers have found that, through participation as a student trustee, students who serve in these roles can acquire skills, intellectual traits and social opportunities that will enhance their education and personal lives (Althof & Berkowitz, 2006; Armstrong, 2012). However, it is unknown if the perspectives that student trustees bring to the corporate board table reflect the sole view of the individual student trustee or that of his/her peers obtained through a process through which student trustees solicit and report on the views of their peers. At the provincial level, the Ontario Student Trustees’ Association/ l’Association des élèves conseillers et conseillères de l’Ontario (OSTA/AECO) has evolved into an official education stakeholder through which the Ministry of Education consults on a variety of issues. The association also supports the work of student trustees across the province (Ontario Student Trustee Association, 2014).

In recent years, education reforms in the province of Ontario have increasingly focused on achievement results and given rise to increased corporate board accountability. In 2000, the Education Improvement Commission recommended the Ministry of Education introduce a comprehensive accountability framework, a component of which was the requirement that corporate boards establish multi-year improvement plans (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2000). The introduction in 1996 of the Education Quality and Accountability Act (Government of Ontario, 1996), and in 2010 of the Student Achievement and School Board Governance Act (Government of Ontario, 2010), established the accountability framework intended to improve publicly funded education in Ontario.
Perhaps, due in large part to legislative changes and increased accountability, school boards have sought to improve student well-being and achievement in collaboration with representative education stakeholders, a topic that is of interest to this study. The 2009 Student Achievement and School Board Governance Act (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2009a) amended the Education Act of Ontario and was introduced to ensure that elected trustees, through the director of education, hold all schools within the school board accountable for maintaining a focus on student achievement and well-being, core priorities of the government of Ontario. The delineation of accountability as set out in the Education Act requires directors of education to plan explicitly with the corporate board of trustees; work collectively to implement identified goals; and provide the supporting conditions required for student success, within the context of school and board improvement plans and the province of Ontario’s educational priorities. As identified in the report, School Effectiveness Framework - A Support for School Improvement and Student Success (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2013), the improvement planning process is intended to promote a culture of reflection and inquiry, informed by the analyses of evidence of student achievement and well-being; collaborative learning to identify areas of focus and to develop a plan for achieving identified goals; and shared responsibility for continuous improvement through ongoing monitoring of progress toward identified goals. Commencing in 2007, the Ministry of Education began conducting operational reviews of the 72 school boards across the province with a goal of enhancing management capacity within school boards, by encouraging the good stewardship of public resources and by leveraging and sharing best practices. The resulting report, The Road Ahead: A Report on Continuous Improvement in School Board Operations (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2013), provided a summary of the effective and efficient operations of school boards related to governance, human resources, financial and school operations and facilitates management. The requirement to create multi-year and one-year operational plans to improve student achievement and well-being falls under the area of governance. The report identified that, as successive waves of operational reviews were conducted, more school boards have adopted the practice of creating multi-year strategic plans and one year operational plans. For most school boards across the province, the operational review team found that extensive consultation with both internal and external stakeholders was a key component of successful strategic planning. On an annual basis, the Ministry of Education assesses a school board’s progress in relation to Ministry of Education’s established student achievement and well-being benchmarks. The Student Achievement
Division of the Ministry of Education provides direct support to school boards by visiting school boards to provide input to and support of the development of the school board improvement plan, and review progress made in achieving the goals associated with the plan.

It is this author’s belief that the achievement of goals associated with school board improvement plans is likely more attainable when responsibility is shared (i.e., educators, system leaders, trustees, parents, students and the broader community working together in partnership) and a variety of perspectives are considered, particularly the perspectives of those most impacted by plans. As identified in the Ministry of Education’s School Effectiveness Framework document, “To be successful, the district process must be collaborative, collegial, equitable and inclusive and generate respectful interactions” (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2013, p. 8). Ontario’s Ministry of Education recognized that enhanced engagement of stakeholders could bring awareness about a school board’s potential direction prior to finalizing plans and such engagement has become a significant component of the province of Ontario’s whole system reform approach to improving student achievement and well-being as noted by Moursheed, Chijioke, and Barber (2007).

Students represent a significant stakeholder group in the province of Ontario and as such, it is my belief that, given the opportunity, students can bring their experience of schooling to help school board leaders, elected trustees and educators understand student issues. Furthermore, it is my belief that when students are invited into the conversation and their ideas, concerns and needs are listened to, educators and elected trustees may gain a better understanding of how policies, processes and procedures could be developed and implemented to increase student achievement and well-being. The introduction of student trustees in school boards in the province of Ontario (Government of Ontario, 2014) is an example of the Ministry of Education’s desire to include representation of students’ perspectives at the school board table, giving student trustees the opportunity to participate in the democratic process. While a student trustee is not entitled to exercise a binding vote, they are to have the same opportunities for participation at meetings of the corporate board and of its committees as a member, subject to any restrictions in section 55(2) to (5) of the Education Act (Government of Ontario, 2014). Moreover, a student trustee is to have the same status as elected trustees with respect to access to school board resources and opportunities for training. The status afforded student trustees has particular relevance for my research. Processes used to develop school board improvement plans are typically decided upon
locally within each school board and, if so desired by system leaders and elected trustees, student trustees could be included. Furthermore, it is expected that student trustees maintain on-going contact and dialogue with students throughout the school board (e.g., Student Parliaments in secondary schools), and represent the interests of their peers at the corporate board table. Such an expectation was germane to my research since requiring student trustees to maintain on-going contact and dialogue with students throughout the board provided, in my view, at least one compelling argument for why I believe it is important that student trustees engage with, solicit and represent the perspectives of their peers in the school board improvement planning process.

It is the extent to which student trustees are involved in bringing the perspectives of other students in the school board to inform decisions that impact students’ educational experience that was of interest to this study.

To assist in setting the context for the significance of this study, I note that the inclusion of students’ perspectives in decisions that influence their educational experience has been a topic of interest to a number of researchers, who have found that engagement of students to solicit their perspectives and ideas can increase the likelihood that educational initiatives will meet with success and help school board leaders and educators guide implementation, which in turn, can lead to greater student achievement and well-being (Flessa, Gallagher-Mackay & Ciuffetelli-Parker, 2010; Friesen & Milton, 2009; Ruddock, 1999; Watkins, 2009; Willms, 2003). Mitra (2001; 2008) suggests we need to be attentive to the ways in which students are engaged in the decision-making process and the policies and practices that support such engagement and has identified the potential benefits of involving students in decisions that affect them. Cook-Sather (2002) reports limited involvement of students as a result of challenges associated with current practices and attitudes, for example, educational structures and power dynamics, logistical challenges associated with connecting educational contexts, and “… the fact that authority has always been assumed to belong to educational researchers and theorists” (p. 8). Cook-Sather (2002) writes, “Efforts to attend to students’ perspectives cannot remain mere add-ons or polite gestures toward learning (p. 11)”. Furthermore, as noted by Ruddock,

…there is an apprehension about the almost breathless popularity of student voice, with its fashionableness along with the fact that it has become so popular that in a climate of short-termism the interest may burn out before its transformative potential has been understood. (Cited in; Ontario Ministry of Education, 2013, p. 1)
According to Willms (2003), engagement should not be viewed simply to advantage academic achievement, noting that “…students would likely benefit from school policies and practices that increase their sense of belonging and participation (p. 34)”.

Recent attempts in the province of Ontario to solicit students’ perspectives are varied (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2014), the Ministry of Education’s Student Voice Initiative (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2014), the Minister’s Student Advisory Council (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2014), the Education Quality and Accountability Office student survey (Education Quality and Accountability Office, 2014)). Acknowledging that student trustees do not necessarily represent the collective views of students simply because they are students themselves, my own view is that there may be value in actively engaging and empowering student trustees to solicit input from other students in the school board as another way to gain awareness of students’ perspectives and represent those perspectives in the development of school board improvement plans. Therefore, my research worked to understand whether or not student trustees, in their representative role, have the opportunity to engage with their peers in order to bring students’ perspectives to the school board improvement planning process. If so, what is the extent of student trustee involvement in the process? Whose perspectives are represented? Is it the sole perspectives of the student trustee, based on his/her own views/experiences or is it the collective perspectives of students in the school board, sought out by student trustees and represented in the improvement planning process? How do student trustees engage with other students in the school board in order to understand their perspectives and represent them at the decision-making table? I surmised that answers to these questions may provide valuable insight to understanding current practice and possibly inform future practice and policy in this area.

**Research Rationale**

The objective of my research study, as noted previously, was to understand the inclusion of students’ perspectives in school board improvement planning as represented by student trustees. I was interested in looking for evidence that students’ perspectives were included in school board improvement plans as a result of student trustee representation and if student trustees or school board supervisory officers could identify instances where student trustees were influential in
representing the perspectives of their peers, by taking a leadership role in communicating with, gathering information from and representing the students’ perspectives.

Despite the growing attention to students’ perspectives in education reform and the passing of legislation to secure students’ involvement, it was a challenge to find research specifically related to understanding the extent to which students’ perspectives are considered in school board improvement planning as represented by student trustees. Although previous research offers a window into the role of student trustees (Lindeman, 2004; Koller & Schugurensky, 2010), these studies, in my view, are limited in helping others to understand the inclusion of students’ perspectives in school board improvement planning as represented by student trustees, as it was not an explicit focus of either of the two studies. Lindeman (2004) examined the experiences of student trustees in the governing process of Ontario school boards and in so doing referred to some of the authors and research material discussed in this study. Though not entirely different from my own research, Lindeman’s study concentrated on the selection, role and relationships of student trustees, while this study focused specifically on the representative nature of the role of student trustees in bringing the perspectives of their peers to board improvement plans. I hoped, therefore, that the findings from this research would provide new insights. Additionally, others (Fielding 2012; Fielding & Rudduck, 2002; Fletcher, 2011; Raymond, 2001), have broadly written about similar issues to those researched in this study, which may be suggestive of the relevance of the topic in the current educational environment. Fielding (2001) in particular, having identified that student voice and student involvement have become increasingly popular topics, suggests that we remain less clear about what is meant by student engagement than we ought to be and whose purposes are served by its “current valorization” (p. 135). Furthermore, given the importance the Ministry of Education has put on student well-being and achievement, school board accountability, expanded stakeholder involvement and students’ perspectives, it was expected that my research findings would provide some insight to inform future policy and practice.

Rather than being studied solely through the lens and experience of student trustees, this research worked to consider student trustee perspectives and experiences with the views and experiences of school board supervisory officers. The study involved the use of questionnaires designed to solicit participants’ perspectives and experiences relating to the inclusion of students’ perspectives in school board improvement plans through student trustee representation (e.g. the
importance they placed on the inclusion of students’ perspectives, factors inhibiting or facilitating their participation, perceptions of the extent to which they believed student trustees were involved in the process). The results gleaned provided an opportunity to consider current practices associated with the inclusion of students’ perspectives in school board improvement planning through student trustee representation, and identify challenges and enablers associated with such inclusion, in light of the importance that has been placed on students’ perspectives in the educational improvement planning process.
Chapter 2
Review of Literature and Conceptual Foundations

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to come to a current understanding of the nature of student trustee involvement in bringing students’ perspectives to the improvement planning process for inclusion in school board improvement plans. A review of the literature revealed that no specific research relating to the inclusion of students’ perspectives in school board improvement planning through student trustee representation in the province of Ontario has been undertaken. Some studies have explored the role of student trustees in general (Koller & Schugurensky, 2010; Lindeman, 2004; Fletcher, 2011), while others have looked more broadly at the inclusion of students’ perspectives in educational decisions that affect them, predominately at the classroom level (Fielding, 2001; Critchley, 2003; Groundwater-Smith & Downes, 2013). Thus, I surmised undertaking this research study would enhance the body of existing knowledge and perhaps shed new light on the role of student trustees in representing the voice of their peers. The literature review that follows is situated in areas of research and theory relevant to this research study, school board improvement planning, student engagement, collaborative inquiry and participatory democracy.

School Board Improvement Planning

Prior to beginning the research study, relevant sections of the Education Statutes and Regulations of Ontario (Government of Ontario, 2014), and Ontario Ministry of Education reports were reviewed, in order to more fully understand the roles and responsibilities of corporate boards and student trustees as relates to school board improvement planning, one means through which system change occurs.

The Education Statutes and Regulations of Ontario (Government of Ontario, 2014) define the authority and processes for decision-making within publicly funded school boards in the province of Ontario which includes how the education system is organized, how power is allocated, the structures and decision-making processes that are in place, an articulation of formal roles and responsibilities, and a description of the relationship between central and local authorities. Of note to the research study was a provision in legislation that provides student
trustees with the same opportunities afforded elected trustees for participation in meetings of the board. Even though a large part of what shapes students’ educational experiences are the decisions that are made at the provincial, school board and local school levels, it has only been in the last 15 years that students were provided the opportunity to formally participate, albeit as non-voting members, in school board governance along with elected trustees. I hoped that the findings from this research study would add to the existing body of knowledge.

With a desired outcome to identify ways to improve education in Ontario and a mandate to study and report on a “shared vision” for education, The Royal Commission on Learning was established in 1993, the first comprehensive look at public education since the 1968 Hall Dennis report (Gidney, 2002). Its recommendations sought to strike an appropriate balance of power among the various groups and institutions in the education system, keeping in mind the overall goal of increasing student learning (Ontario Ministry of Education, 1994). The appointment of a student commissioner, by then Premier Bob Rae, was an effort to bring voice to issues of children and youth. Since the publication of the report, over the past two decades, education governance in Ontario has undergone a significant transformation in ideas and practices relating to such themes as expenditure reductions, increased accountability for student success, standardized testing and greater parental and public involvement in governance. Among the recommendations outlined in the resulting report entitled, For the Love of Learning, the commission recommended student member representation on all school boards to vote on behalf of students and a greater role for student parliaments in individual secondary schools (Ontario Ministry of Education, 1994). While subsequent changes to legislation afforded student trustees a vote, it is only a non-binding vote. Other amendments to the Education Act of Ontario in 1997, mandated the inclusion of student trustees on corporate school boards, which afforded secondary school students an opportunity to participate in corporate board governance and serve in what is believed to be an important role in public education. Bill 78, the Education Statute Law Amendment Act (Student Performance) 2006, amended the Education Act to provide a number of new laws in relation to student trustees and on January 15, 2007, the government filed Regulation 07/07 - Student Trustees (Government of Ontario, 2014). Both the act and the regulation intended to engender more respect for the role of trustees, greater student engagement as part of the student success agenda, the promotion of character development with students, as well as the attitudes and skills connected with the role of citizens in a democracy.
In recent years, in part due to increased societal expectations and demands on schools and a substantial increase in provincial direction and intervention in the provision of education, the Ministry of Education has taken an increasingly active role in establishing provincial goals, priorities and targets and supporting the achievement of goals through the modernization of school board governance and the provision of expertise and financial resources. A number of scholars have studied the Ontario education system and written about it (Anderson, 2003; Crane, 2001; Fullan, Hill & Crevola, 2006; Fullan, 2008; Fullan, 2010; Fullan, 2013; Hamilton et al., 2009).

Leithwood (2013), in a study commissioned by Ontario’s Institute for Educational Leadership and Council of Ontario Directors of Education, summarized evidence relating to nine key characteristics or conditions associated with school systems, boards or districts that demonstrated success improving the learning of their students. The characteristics or conditions that have particular relevance to this study relate broadly to commonly shared beliefs, stakeholder engagement, the creation of structures that facilitate collaboration and examination of student achievement and well-being evidence, and reciprocal communication. Leithwood found compelling evidence that strong districts have, “…widely-shared beliefs and visions about student learning and well-being that have been transparently developed with the engagement of multiple school and system stakeholders” (Leithwood, 2013, p. 13). He further found that elected trustees from strong districts use the district’s beliefs and vision for student learning and well-being as the foundation for strategic planning and ongoing system evaluation (p. 28).

While, Leithwood did not specifically probe the extent to which students’ perspectives was sought out during the improvement planning process, he did find that strong districts created collaborative structures and opportunities for the interpretation and use of evidence in schools, encouraged coordinated forms of leadership distribution throughout the school board and its schools, and created structures to facilitate reciprocal forms of communication intended to result in deeply interconnected networks of school and system leaders working together on achieving the system’s directions. Leithwood’s findings lend support to this author’s view that students’ perspectives is important to the improvement planning process and the leadership of student trustees can be leveraged for this purpose.

Similarly, Campbell, Fullan and Glaze (2006) examined district-wide strategies intended to raise student achievement in literacy and numeracy, and found that “… effective districts recognized
that improvement must always be a collective effort no matter how significant a role some individuals may play” (p. 3). The project, which involved the participation of eight school boards in Ontario that had demonstrated improvement in literacy and numeracy, evaluated the strategies, actions and outcomes associated with such improvement. While there is no specific reference in the study to the involvement of students’ perspectives in improvement planning processes, the findings did illuminate the positive efforts made on the part of effective school boards to engage other stakeholder groups in shared responsibility for student achievement and the impact such engagement had on a school districts’ “… ability to foster a commitment to working together with a shared focus and responsibility for student achievement” (Campbell, Fullan & Glaze, 2006, p. 29).

Recent efforts by the Ontario Ministry of Education to increase focus and accountability of corporate boards toward improved student achievement efforts is also noteworthy. Prior to 2010, there was no specific reference in the Education Act to a corporate board’s responsibility for student achievement and well-being (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2009a). Passed by the Ontario legislature, November 30, 2009, the government’s Student Achievement and School Board Governance Act, amended the Education Act (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2009a) in order to modernize school board governance and clarify the mandate and duties of corporate boards. In so doing, the amendment placed greater emphasis on the corporate boards’ responsibility for student achievement and well-being. Corporate boards must develop multi-year strategic plans that address curriculum implementation, student achievement and well-being and include goals for improvement in these areas (The Ontario Education Services Corporation, 2014). While ultimately, decisions regarding the multi-year plan are the responsibility of the corporate board of trustees, the plan is developed through a partnership involving the board of trustees, the director of education and staff and the community. Furthermore, an important advocacy role of elected trustees is to promote parent and community engagement as a collaborative process aimed at reaching a shared understanding of preferred solutions to identified problems or key community needs and priorities (Ontario Education Services Corporation, 2014, p. 118). Again, the potential exists for including students and student trustees in this process.

Commencing in 2007, within the context of the new legislation, the Ministry of Education began conducting operational reviews of the 72 school boards across the province that analyzed each
school board’s operations in a number of functional areas, but the area that has relevance to this research study is that of school board governance. The resulting report, *The Road Ahead: A Report on Continuous Improvement in School Board Operations* (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2013), identified key findings related to school board operations and implementation challenges intended to inform Ministry of Education policy directives and further supports for school boards. The review identified six key findings in the area of governance (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2013, p. 4). Of note to this research was the finding that there has been improvement in strategic and annual planning processes by engaging a broader base of stakeholders. The Ministry of Education’s strategy for improving student well-being and achievement predicates on the belief that success on a large scale requires strong leadership, unrelenting commitment, time and contribution at all levels (Government of Ontario, 2004). The strategy states “Realizing this vision for student success must be a shared responsibility requiring all of us - teachers, support staff, parents, principals, school board leaders; students and the broader community to work together in partnership” (Government of Ontario, 2004, p. 4). In recent years, the Ministry of Education has heightened awareness about and support of students’ perspectives as critical to the partnership, and while students’ perspectives refers broadly to engaging students in their own learning, the focus for the discussion that follows examines students’ perspectives as represented by student trustees.

The requirement for school boards to create improvement plans must be understood in order to set the context for the engagement of student trustees as representatives of their peers in a board improvement planning process. Accountability for student well-being and achievement rests with both the director of education and elected trustees within a school board. Guided by the *Ontario Leadership Framework* (Institute for Education Leadership, 2013), school board leadership engage in a cyclical process of using data to establish a broadly shared mission, vision and goals founded on aspirational images of the educated person; provide coherent instructional guidance; build district and school capacities and commitments to make informed decisions; create learning-oriented organizational improvement processes; support job-embedded professional learning; align budgets, time, resources, personnel, policies and procedures with the district mission, vision and goals; and use a comprehensive performance management and monitoring system for school and school board development. In addition to adhering to acts and regulations that govern the operation of school boards, school boards have the latitude to develop
local policies and procedures to suite their local context. The composition of school board improvement planning committees is a local decision. It is this author’s view that such local autonomy affords school boards the opportunity to consider including student trustees in school board improvement planning, empowering them to bring students’ perspectives into the democratic process.

Student Engagement

Student voice and student engagement have become increasingly popular issues in education and actively engaging students to provide their perspectives is increasingly reflected in curriculum documents and support tools for school board leadership in the province of Ontario. As identified in the *School Effectiveness Framework* (2013), “Students can and should participate, not only in the construction of their own learning environments, but as research partners in examining questions of learning and anything else that happens in and around schools (p. 22).

In the years that followed the publication of the report entitled *The Road Ahead – A Report on the Continuous Improvement in School Board Operations* (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2013) and amendments to the *Education Act*, until present day, the Ministry of Education for the province of Ontario has made deliberate attempts to seek out and honour student voice in decisions that affect them through collaboration, consultation and consensus building. Furthermore, the Ministry of Education’s response to the commission’s recommendations is intended to enhance student engagement in order to increase student achievement, efficacy and belonging. The *School Effectiveness Framework* (2013) for example, calls upon educators to provide opportunities for students to be partners in decisions impacting their educational experience. Ontario’s *Student Voice* initiative, another example, has as its goal that all schools in the province have an explicit student voice strategy that seeks and responds to students’ ideas on what engages them in their learning. Three components of the initiative include the Minister of Education’s Student Advisory Council, support of Speak-up Projects and Regional Student Forums (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2008c).

A number of researchers and scholars agree that education systems are a major context for youth engagement and political socialization (Covell & Howe, 2005; Critchley, 2003; Haynes, 2009; Kahne & Westheimer, 2003; Tourney-Purta, Schwille & Amadeo, 1999; Treslan, 1983; Youniss et al., 2002). According to Willms, Friesen and Milton (2009), student engagement is a critically
important outcome in its own right, and may be a more important predictor of success in the workplace than academic achievement. Thus, in my view, representing the voices of students in decisions about education, student trustees can enable the reflection of the interests of the student body in the decision making of the school board and keep their peers apprised about decisions made by the school board that affect them.

Ideally, during their term as student trustees, students gain a better understanding of the processes at the school board level that support student achievement and well-being and make use of communication avenues to share the information with peers. At the same time, school board leadership and elected trustees gain insight and perspectives from student trustees who bring a unique knowledge and experience of how policies and decisions affect the educational experience of their peers. Yet, some researchers and scholars question the motivation for student representation and the resulting impact on the quality of engagement. One would also wonder how many decisions are made by school board staff with the justification that they and they alone know what is in the best interest of students without ever consulting with students to determine if the decisions are indeed ones that students feel would support their achievement and well-being. Saporiti (1994) observes that until children attain adult status, they appear to contribute to society only as, “diligent receivers”. Fielding (2001) reports that deliberately seeking out student perceptions can provide a way in which schools can identify limitations of their current performance and the identification of possible ways of improving the conditions necessary for students to succeed. However, he purports that others (e.g.; teachers, researchers, parents and adults), in general speak too frequently and “presumptuously” on behalf of young adults whose perspectives they often misunderstand and, in many contexts, frequently ignore (Fielding, 2001, p. 1). Fielding has identified that while students’ views are sought out more often and more urgently than ever before, student voice is sought primarily through, “insistent imperatives of accountability rather than enduring commitments to democratic agency” (Fielding, 2001, p. 123). He cautions that in order to avoid ways of involving students that in the end, may be viewed by adults as well-intended and yet, less empowering for students, approaches that have different starting points and intentions must be explored.

With more than a decade working with hundreds of schools across the United States and Canada, Fletcher (2011) found an inherent dilemma in the type of special positioning students on school boards receive. He notes that while an extremely limited number of students get an opportunity
to share their voices with adult decision-makers in the system, this type of “convenient student voice” (Fletcher, 2011, p. 2), generally is conducted at the adults’ convenience and with their approval. He argues that the greatest challenge facing schools today is disconnection from relevance, rigor and relationship and the cure to disconnection is meaningful student involvement where students are actively re-aligned from being the passive recipients of schools to becoming active partners throughout the educational process.

Legislatively, since 2007, school boards in Ontario are required to solicit the perspectives of student trustees who may bring a unique perception about how policies and board decisions affect the educational experience of the students in the school board they represent. School boards across Ontario have the latitude to develop local policies, have varying political cultures, and solicit students’ perspectives in different ways. The flexibility afforded school boards to operate within a provincial legislative framework permits school boards to develop policies and engage in practices that suit their local context. However, such flexibility can also result in the adoption of different practices in school boards across the province. Of interest to this study was an examination of the perceptions that currently exist among former student trustees and supervisory officers across English school boards in Ontario related to the solicitation of students’ perspectives when engaged in the development of the improvement plan and the extent to which practices reflect what Fielding refers to as an accountability imperative or a deeper commitment to student democratic agency. Fielding (2001) calls for more sophisticated ways of involving students (e.g. educators developing improvement plans without engaging in dialogue with students), by considering a transformative approach in which the voices of students, educators and system leaders construct ways of working that are non-restrictive both in process and outcome (Fielding, 2001). The extent to which student trustees were involved in the school board improvement planning process was explored in this study.

Developing an understanding of how school boards govern, decision-making processes and the importance of casting one’s vote are vital to students’ education and to their future roles as engaged citizens. The introduction of student trustees as part of corporate board governance should inspire and engage students’ idealism and enthusiasm in understanding, critically analyzing and practicing the democratic processes and provide opportunities for them to develop competencies and connectedness between themselves and their peers. However, a study conducted by Koller and Schugurensky (2010) brings into question the influence that the role of
student trustees in Ontario education has had. Examining the impact of youth participation in education governance, the co-researchers found that at the time of the study, practice within school boards was that student trustees were not elected to the position by their peers, but instead were nominated to the position by their teachers and principals and had limited contact with the students they purported to represent and were unable to vote on decisions.

An important responsibility of student trustees is to attend corporate board meetings, where they work with elected trustees and senior school board leadership. Such a responsibility provides an opportunity for adults to support and mentor student trustees and to deepen their understanding of the relationship between students and adults within the context of school board governance. Some researchers and scholars have identified the importance of adult mentorship and guidance as integral to supporting youth participation (Groundwater-Smith & Downes, 2013). Fielding (2001), for example, relates the benefits of initiatives in which students themselves identified issues they saw as important in their daily experience of schooling. With the support of staff in facilitating and enabling roles, gathering data, engaging in collaborative inquiry and developing recommendations for change shared with their peers, with staff and the governing body of the school, positive change resulted. Such an approach to student engagement centered the location of power, perspectives and energizing dynamic primarily in the collective control of the students themselves. Moreover, an organizational structure emerged which incorporated students as equal partners in an improvement process (Fielding, 2001). He suggested that structures that have the power to invite and engage students in governing and improvement processes arise from transformative practices that incorporate a much more overt openness and reciprocity indicative of a much more flexible, dialogic form of democratic practice. Raymond (2001) used Fielding’s organizational structure in a Students as Researchers initiative in which different approaches to working with students developed over time. Raymond identifies four stages of student engagement; students as data source, active respondents, co-researchers and researchers. I have chosen to use Fielding’s (2001, 2004, 2012) organizational structure to inform my own research.

The number of studies examining the role and contribution of student trustees in Ontario is very limited; an extensive search of the literature identified two studies. In 2004, Lindeman explored the experiences of student trustees in the governing process of Ontario school boards. She examined school board documents and interviewed district leaders, trustees and former student trustees in an effort to understand the experience of a student trustee and make recommendations
for practice based on her research. Acknowledging that the findings were not intended to be generalized to all Ontario district school boards, Lindeman recommended that school boards consider a formal commitment to acknowledging the specific benefits of students’ direct involvement in governance, because idealistically:

- Involving students in policy development leads to deeply informed decisions and potentially easier implementation and adoption;
- Raising political issues among students results in citizens who are knowledgeable and more likely to become actively involved in political discussions;
- Providing students with a variety of opportunities to assume leadership roles enables the development of students’ dispositions and skills;
- Promoting the value of debate, lobbying and compromise in a democratic society is a key purpose of education; and
- Developing attributes and understanding of the obligations of citizenship strengthens communities (Lindeman, 2004, pp. 256-257).

Lindeman (2004) determined that school boards conceived of students as “adults-in-training” (p. 257), without full rights and responsibilities of citizenship. While one could argue that citizenship is broader than the rights and responsibilities associated with being a student trustee, in Lindeman’s view, a “deficit mentality” (Lindeman, 2004, p. 257) view of student trustees, led trustees and school board leaders in her study to minimize the role of student trustees and to consider it inferior to that of other trustees at the table. Koller and Schugurensky (2010) examined the developmental impact of youth participation in education governance in Ontario and found that many of the activities, relationships and contexts associated with the role of student trustee provided the impetus for transformative learning and personal change. Self-interest no longer characterized student trustee motivations, rather an appreciation of one’s civic responsibilities evolved.

It has been twelve years since the publication of Lindeman’s study and six years since the publication of Koller and Schugurensky’s study of student trustees. Since the introduction of student trustees to the Ontario education milieu, a number of secondary students have had the opportunity to serve in the role. Education stakeholders and their student peers would have had an opportunity to experience the value that these young people bring to participatory governance within a school board and at the provincial level through their inclusion on some advisory
committees. It is an opportune time to once again, study student trustees in Ontario. This study worked to build upon the work of Lindeman and Koller and Schugurensky. Has there been improvement in the nature of engagement and representation of students’ interests, and/or their sense of agency, since 2004?

**Collaborative Inquiry**

In recent years, one improvement process strategy used to support individuals in their efforts to improve the practices that contribute to improved student well-being and achievement has been that of collaborative inquiry, whereby participants co-learn and co-plan together. The notion that individuals engaged in system improvement or change processes, do not do so in isolation, but rather co-create understandings, strategies and practices when engaged in learning with others is relevant to this study. Fullan (2014) refers to such a strategy as “…creating a commonly owned plan for success” (p. 128). The literature on collaborative inquiry provides a context for the significance of building new knowledge together, a process that has become commonly associated with the improvement planning process.

Vygotsky (1978) believed the socio-cultural environment is critical for cognitive development and that social interaction plays an important role in student learning. He conceptualized the human being as interdependent with others, in scaffolding development of understanding, in active use of dialogue and language to construct meaning within the context of culture. Haste (2004) recognized that we cannot understand psychological processes without an appreciation of the cultural infrastructure and how it facilitates development. She argued the importance of viewing the individual as an active being, constructing - and co-constructing with others - explanations and stories that enable him or her to make sense of experience, and to develop an identity in a particular social context. Similarly, as noted in the Ontario Early Years Framework (2013), “Every child should feel that he or she belongs, is a valuable contributor to his or her surroundings, and deserves the opportunity to succeed” (p.7). Achieving the goal of inclusion of students’ perspectives challenges educators and system leaders to elevate the diverse voices of students the educational system in Ontario is intended to serve. It is for this reason that I believe student trustees should be integral to the improvement planning process.

Vygotsky’s work is the basis of understanding the importance of scaffolding (e.g., personalizing the learning experience), and support for student trustees so that they can be engaged in board
improvement planning. While some student trustees may already have had opportunities and supports that nurture dispositions, skills and processes associated with the requirements of the role, others may come to the role requiring varied support, guidance and mentorship. By scaffolding their experiences and supporting them to grow in the role through orientation sessions, ongoing mentorship and inclusion in collaborative learning and/or student-led inquiry projects, school board leaders can create conditions more likely to result in a positive engagement experience and enhance their ability to represent the collective perspectives of students at the corporate board table, an important aspect of the role.

Individuals come to new learning opportunities with well-developed prior knowledge, often referred to as schema. Understanding the prior knowledge that a learner brings to new learning situations is critical for the learner’s schema that may contain misconceptions and/or act as a filter for developing new knowledge. Consequently, when prior learning is not taken into account, challenges in learning can occur. Learning opportunities seen as supporting new learning are those that present an authentic challenge to individuals by causing them to re-examine their existing knowledge and personal representations. Students benefit from being active in their own knowledge construction, authors of their own understanding and assessors of their own learning. Hence, I would assert that the identification of areas the school board wishes to target for improvement and the evidence and strategies that will be put in place to achieve identified improvement goals are more likely to be meaningful for students when they have been actively engaged in the construction of it and their opinions have been sought.

School board improvement planning offers opportunities for those involved to consider each other’s perspectives and create new knowledge together. Fullan (2010) asserts that collective capacity that ultimately counts is one in which groups – school cultures, school board cultures and government cultures – get better conjointly. I include student trustees in the “group”. We build knowledge through engaging in collaborative inquiry with others, anchoring our learning in prior knowledge and adapting new knowledge to our existing schema. Promoting co-construction of knowledge is about enabling collaboration from all those responsible for and impacted by school board improvement plans to work together and learn from each other with a central focus on improved student well-being and achievement. A student trustee’s participation and representative perspectives can be an invaluable contribution to the group of individuals who gather to engage in school board improvement planning, in terms of the student trustees’
individual growth and understanding, growth and understanding of others who contribute to the plan, and the relevance of the plan that results. At its best, processes would be in place enabling student trustees to represent the perspectives of students in the school board not just their own opinions. This research study worked to understand the nature of such representation and the conditions that enabled or challenged the inclusion of students’ perspectives in school board improvement plans.

**Participatory Democracy**

Affording students opportunities to experience the elements of democracy as integral to their educational experience can prepare them for active citizenship. Active participation is important. Creating the conditions for student trustees to represent the collective perspectives of students in the school board improvement planning process provides authentic democratic experiences for them and introduces them to a process through which they can influence change in students’ educational experience. A number of researchers have written about the potential outcomes of serving as a student trustee, providing for a praxis-based opportunity for student engagement and active participation in the decision-making process (Checkoway, Finn & Pothukuchi, 1995; Cheraka and Sears, 2006; Critchley, 2003; Lessard & Brassard, 2009; Sheedy, 2008; Sherrod, Flanagan & Youniss, 2002). The praxis model of student engagement in the democratic process assumes that individuals learn practical and theoretical knowledge, and the motivation to use knowledge, through active engagement with meaningful experiences. The assumption is that knowledge comes from making sense of experience and that knowledge has limited usefulness unless it translates into the individual’s own encounters with relevant opportunities.

Critical pedagogy has been described as an educational movement, guided by passion and principle to help students develop consciousness of freedom, recognize authoritarian tendencies and connect knowledge to power (Giroux, 2010). It focuses on critiques of social injustices and inequities and calls for the empowerment of students “to critically appropriate knowledge existing outside of their immediate experience in order to broaden their understanding of themselves, the world, and the possibilities for transforming the taken-for-granted assumptions about the way we live” (McLaren, 1989, p. 186). Critical pedagogy approaches, built around the students’ educational experience, contribute to a commitment to redistribute power. Fielding (2006) purports, “Students tend to see the world of school differently to the way adults see it and,
even if they identify similar issues as being of particular importance, invariably they will have
different understandings of the nature of their significance” (p. 307). Students’ educational
experiences should afford opportunities for them to practice democracy through participation,
inefluence, consultation and engagement. As noted by Giroux (2010), Paulo Freire was an
important founder of critical pedagogy, viewed education as a political and moral practice that
provides the knowledge, skills and social relations that enable students to explore the
possibilities of what it means to be citizens while expanding and deepening their participation in
the promise of a substantive democracy. Central to the critical pedagogy philosophy is the
importance of transferring the balance from educators to students and making visible the
relationships among knowledge, authority and power. Giroux (2010) notes,

Giving students the opportunity to be problem posers and to engage in a culture of
questioning puts in the foreground the crucial issues of who has control over the conditions
of learning and how specific modes of knowledge, identify and authority are constructed
within particular classroom relations. Under such circumstances, knowledge is not simply
received by students, but actively transformed as they learn how to engage others in critical
dialogue and be held accountable for their own views. (Giroux H. A., 2010, p. 3)

Informed by Paulo Freire’s (Freire, 2005) understanding of the empowering and democratic
potential of education, Giroux (2010) posits that critical pedagogy offers the best, perhaps the
only chance for young people to develop and assert a sense of their rights and responsibilities to
participate in governing, and not simply to be governed.

This research study probed the extent to which student trustees were engaged in the school board
improvement planning process and the extent to which improvement plans reflected students’
perspectives. Furthermore, my research interests focused on understanding whether or not their
experience as a student trustee provided them with an opportunity to practice the representative
nature of a role, which was intended for student trustees to be a voice for other students at the
decision-making table, an important characteristic of democracy.

As noted by some scholars, students learn to be responsible citizens in situations where they are
able to exercise ever-increasing power and in situations where they have very little power and
use both to develop an understanding of citizenship responsibility (Dewey, 1902; Dewey, 1922;
Knight & Pearl, 2000). For student trustees to be effective in their role, this author believes all
should be informed and skilled in the participation process. Fullan (2013) has identified that education for the 21st century should essentially develop in students the ability and desire to act on one’s values and ideas in the context of working with others. To build a functioning participatory democracy, Knight and Pearl (2000) identify important citizenship skills including:

- the ability to engage in civil exchange of ideas with a wide range of others, listen attentively to other people and understand what is being said, develop coherent proposals based on logic and evidence, negotiate differences between proposals that are negotiable and hold one’s ground when differences are not negotiable, learn how to organize a constituency in support of a proposal, and learn how to meld coalitions with others on a particular issue. (Knight & Pearl, 2000, p. 205)

What do we hope to achieve through the involvement of student trustees in the school board improvement planning processes? Is the aim to produce in student trustees, knowledge of the school board improvement process and through that experience students will become efficacious in their understanding? Alternatively, is it to ensure that student trustees are efficacious, which means that training, mentorship and authentic engagement in processes that relate to student well-being and engagement will be critical to their experience and understanding of democracy as relates to school board improvement planning? Or, are student trustees given token status on school boards where their perspectives are marginal or unimportant, rather than being democratically engaged? To become involved requires that one have a sense of ownership of the issue. While individuals can acquire the values of democratic discussion and involvement through institutional practice, children and youth learn values and the sense of agency through active, practical involvement. Knowing that certain experiences and practices may facilitate different kinds of student trustee participation is the first step – this research attempted to understand those supporting conditions and practices.

In order to situate the importance of empowering student trustees to be actively engaged in the democratic process, this literature review has provided a brief overview of recent changes to roles and responsibilities as relates to school board governance in Ontario with specific reference to accountability for student well-being and achievement by means of district improvement plans.
The literature review examined the importance of student engagement in decisions that affect their educational experience. The scholarly work of such authors/researchers as Treslan (1983), Kahne and Westheimer (2003), Willms and Friesen (2009), Fielding (2001), Lindeman (2004), and Fletcher (2011) contributed to a conceptual understanding of the approach that was used in this study. As noted in the Ontario Early Years Framework (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2013), children are competent and capable of complex thinking when they are deeply involved in the process.

One anticipates that an investigation of these connected areas – democratic engagement in system change and the inclusion of students’ perspectives - will serve as a basis for a richer and more profound understanding of the extent to which student trustees represent students in school board improvement plans. It will also be crucial, moreover, to identify the challenges and/or supporting conditions that contribute to or hinder the inclusion of student voice by way of student trustee representation in district improvement planning. The methodology section of this proposal considers these factors in order to define the design of the study.

**Conceptual Foundations**

In order to explain the key factors, constructs or variables that were to be studied and the relationships among them, a conceptual frame was used. The in-depth, rich history associated with pedagogical theory, collaborative inquiry, student engagement and system change, serves as a background to the ideas presented here and framed my study.

The study was based on an adaptation of Fielding’s typology/models (2001; 2012) for student engagement, informed by his own and the work of others with a similar interest in actively engaging students’ perspectives (Barnes, et al (1987); Thiessen (1997); John (1996); and Hart (1992); cited in Fielding 2001). Fielding’s (2006) “students as researchers” model assumes areas of focus for improvement would be identified by the students who are trained in the necessary skills needed for inquiry-based research and supported in their work by educators who have also been trained in the “co-researcher” approach. Student leadership is viewed to be “constitutive and distinctive” (Fielding, 2006, p. 307) and is based on the assumption that students’ perspectives and educators’ perspectives are different and in those differences are opportunities to consider new and different approaches to improvement.
Fielding’s models of student engagement have evolved over time with his most recent thinking reflected in an intellectual typology and practical tool referred to as *Patterns of Partnership*, that outlines six forms of interaction between adults and young people. The typology distinguishes between students as sources of data, students as active respondents, students as co-inquirers, students as knowledge creators, students as joint authors and students as partners in intergenerational learning as lived democracy (Fielding, 2012). In the *students as data sources partnership*, educators are committed to pay attention to relevant data about student progress and use the information from tools such as school climate surveys to inform a course of action. In the *students as active respondents’ partnership*, staff move beyond the analysis of passive data and invite students into a dialogue/discussion that will inform future approaches to designing educational experiences for students. In the *students as co-inquirers partnership*, both educators’ and students’ involvement increases, with students moving from being discussants to being co-inquirers into areas of agreed focus. The *students as knowledge creators’ partnership*, provides opportunities for students to take lead roles in improvement efforts with dynamic support from educators. In the *students as joint authors’ partnership*, a completely collaborative partnership between students and educators exist whereby leadership, planning and engagement in research and the commitment to responsive action, are adopted by both students and educators. The *intergenerational learning as lived democracy approach*, extends the shared and collaborative partnership between educators and students in ways that emphasize a joint commitment to the shared priorities and includes opportunities for an equal sharing of power and responsibility. Fielding (2004) notes that in each of the ways of working together within the model, the power relations differ, potentially enabling or preventing the contributions of one side of the partnership, but also impacting the potential for staff and students to work together whereby adults and students are able to listen to and learn with and from each other. Fielding identifies the important role that adult’s hold, “in providing challenging as well as supportive partnership in young people research work” (2004, p. 302).

Fielding argues for a more dialogic model because he believes when educators and students learn with and from each other, the traditional roles of educator and student become “less firmly fixed, much more malleable, much more explicitly and joyfully independent” (2006, p. 308). It is this dialogic approach to involving student trustees in school board improvement planning that was of great interest to my study. Over the past number of years the educational community has
experienced the potential benefits derived from the creation of learning communities, intended to co-learn, create new knowledge together and work collectively to improve student achievement and well-being through collaborative inquiry. Those involved in learning communities share their beliefs and practice, inviting questioning, feedback and inquiry from others in the group with the intent of reflecting on current practice and identifying ways to improve the conditions that contribute to student achievement and well-being. Learning communities are typically comprised of educators and school board administration at various levels. In my experience, power differentials, whether real or perceived, can potentially exist in these learning communities and strong relationships are paramount to their successful operation because of the potential vulnerability that can result from de-privatizing one’s professional practice, beliefs and understandings. When educators and school board leadership learn together, in what Fielding (2004) refers to as a dialogic relationship, the traditional roles are put aside. Mitchell and Sackney (2009) who explored the conditions that nurture sustainable learning communities, observed that guiding principles such as deep respect, collective responsibility, experimental orientation, appreciation of diversity and positive role modelling, “equipped educators to build capacity with direct relevance to their school contexts and to engage in active and productive processes of capacity building” (pp. 6-7). Since the school board improvement planning process is similar to processes used by those engaged in learning communities, my research looked for evidence that student trustees in English school boards across the province were included in the various stages of the improvement planning process. Additionally, I was interested in determining where, within the categories of involvement identified in this study to gage student trustee involvement, would their participation fall, particularly in relation to Fielding’s conception of a dialogic relationship.

The adapted framework assumed that the nature of student trustee engagement in the school board improvement planning process related to the ways in which educators/system leaders created the conditions to invite student trustee input, situated in a version of participatory democracy. The adapted framework informed the development of the research question, the nature of the literature reviewed, and the specific questions that were asked of participants. I anticipated responses to the survey would inform an understanding of the nature of student trustee engagement, in English school boards across the province of Ontario, across four categories and could be described in relation to a conceptual framework for examining the
inclusion of student voice in school board improvement planning through student trustee representation. Table 1: A Conceptual Framework for Examining the Nature of Student Trustee Involvement in School Board Improvement Planning, is an adaptation of Fielding’s levels of student involvement in school self-review and school improvement (Fielding, 2001, p. 136) and his model of forms of interaction between adults and young people (Fielding, 2012, pp. 49-53).
## Table 1

A Conceptual Framework for Examining the Nature of Student Trustee Involvement in School Board Improvement Planning

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School board improvement planning – nature of student trustee involvement</th>
<th>Student trustees as sources of data</th>
<th>Student trustees as active respondents</th>
<th>Student trustees as co-learners and contributors</th>
<th>Student trustees as initiators, co-learners and contributors</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Student trustee involvement in discussions and/or activities about what areas the school board should consider for improvement.</td>
<td>Student trustees are not provided with the opportunity to participate in discussions and/or activities about student well-being and achievement information used to identify areas for improvement.</td>
<td>Student trustees are provided with the opportunity to contribute their personal perspectives, by participating in discussions and/or activities about student well-being and achievement information used to identify areas for improvement.</td>
<td>Student trustees collaborate with school board staff to communicate with, gather suggestions from, and speak on behalf of students in the school board, at discussions and/or activities about student well-being and achievement information used to identify areas for improvement.</td>
<td>Student trustees are given the opportunity to take a leadership role, communicating with students in the school board, gathering their suggestions and speaking on their behalf at discussions and/or activities about student well-being and achievement information used to identify areas for improvement.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>Student trustees are given the opportunity to take a leadership role, communicating with students in the school board, gathering their suggestions and speaking on their behalf at discussions and/or activities about student well-being and achievement information used to identify areas for improvement.</td>
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<tr>
<td>School board improvement planning – nature of student trustee involvement</td>
<td>Student trustees as sources of data</td>
<td>Student trustees as active respondents</td>
<td>Student trustees as co-learners and contributors</td>
<td>Student trustees as initiators, co-learners and contributors</td>
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<td>Student trustee involvement in discussions and/or activities about improvement strategies.</td>
<td>Student trustees are not provided with the opportunity to give their personal perspectives, by participating in discussions and/or activities about improvement strategies.</td>
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<td>Student trustee involvement in discussions and/or activities to monitor and evaluate progress.</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inclusion of students’ perspectives through student trustee representation in the final school board improvement plan.</td>
<td>The final school board improvement plan does not reflect direct student input.</td>
<td>The final school board improvement plan reflects the inclusion of the sole views of the student trustee.</td>
<td>The final school board improvement plan reflects input from students in the school board, co-gathered and communicated by school board staff and student trustees at discussions and/or activities.</td>
<td>The final school board improvement plan reflects input from students in the school board, gathered and communicated at discussions and/or activities, under the leadership of student trustees.</td>
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Fielding’s (2001; 2012) intellectual framework for student engagement provided a way for me to examine the extent to which student trustees were involved in representing the perspectives of students in the school board improvement planning process. It also provided a way to compare the perspectives of supervisory officers and former student trustees about the extent to which student trustees were involved in the improvement planning process. Table 1 identifies what I believe to be key stages of the school board improvement planning process that forms the basis of considering the nature of student trustee engagement. Set out in four categories, moving from left to right, Table 1 identifies the characteristics of the nature of student trustee involvement that seeks to move the practice of improvement planning toward what Fielding (2001) refers to as a “practice of dialogic democracy” (p. 133) and can increase the likelihood that students’ perspectives are included in school board improvement planning by way of student trustee representation. In each category of student trustee engagement, the power relations are different. In one category, student trustees assume more of an informant role, where information about student achievement and well-being is used by board staff. In another category, as reflected in Fielding’s model, student trustees would represent the collective perspectives of students in the school board, would identify areas for improvement and, with the support of adults, would take a lead in collaborating with peers to analyze evidence, identify strategies for achieving goals, co-learn to make meaning and create new knowledge together, and monitor and assess progress toward goals. Moreover, in one of the categories, the location of power and perspective rests primarily in the collective control of the students themselves. The potential for considering the inclusion of students’ perspectives in school board improvement planning through student trustee representation in this way lies in the recognition of the legitimacy of both the educators and student trustee perspectives and in the necessity of the reciprocity of relationship between them in the improvement planning process.

Students are the largest stakeholders in education and improvement plans have a direct impact on their educational experience. Four assertions guided my study. First, students should have a voice in, and understanding of, the decisions that affect their educational experience. Second, the perspectives of students in a school board, represented by student trustees, can inform board improvement plans and potentially have a positive influence on the outcomes of such plans. Third, in order to authentically represent the voice of their peers, student trustees need to engage in ways to find out what their peers think, which is of particular relevance given the increasingly
diverse student population in Ontario. Fourth, inhibiting and enabling factors can negatively or positively affect the inclusion of student voice in school board improvement plans through student trustee representation, and an understanding of these factors can inform future policy and practice.

Research Question

The following questions guided the development of and research associated with this study:

Are students’ perspectives included in school board improvement plans through representation of student trustees? If so, what is the experience that student trustees and supervisory officers report?

What do supervisory officers and student trustees believe about the inclusion of students’ perspectives in school board improvement plans through student trustee representation?

What do supervisory officers and student trustees report to be the nature of student trustee engagement in representing the inclusion of students’ perspectives in school board improvement plans?

What factors, if any, inhibit or facilitate the inclusion of students’ perspectives in school board improvement plans through student trustee representation from the perspectives of student trustees and supervisory officers?

Can supervisory officers and student trustees provide examples of ways in which school boards support the inclusion of students’ perspectives in school board improvement planning through student trustee representation?

Can supervisory officers and student trustees identify methods used by student trustees to communicate with and gather perspectives from other students in the school board?

Are there significant differences of perspectives among student trustees and supervisory officers as relates to the inclusion of students’ perspectives in school board improvement planning through student trustee representation?
Chapter 3 Methodology

Introduction

This chapter summarizes the approach to research, participants, sampling technique and sample size, surveys, data collection, planned data analysis and ethical considerations. Practical and theoretical considerations that informed and guided the methodology for the study are presented and discussed.

Approach to Research

This research study was conducted to determine the nature of inclusion of students’ perspectives in school board improvement planning as represented by student trustees. While there were a variety of ways to achieve the stated purpose, for this particular research study, the final decision regarding the preferred methodological approach was informed by a series of actions.

Subsequent to identifying the topic and related research question, an environmental scan and review of related documents and scholarly literature was conducted to ascertain the availability of information related to the topic. Once complete, various research methodologies were considered in order to identify a methodology that supported an exploration of the identified topic and reflected the realities of my interests, available resources, abilities, biases, potential participants and the overall purpose of the study. As I reflect back on the process, engaging in the aforementioned actions helped to clarify and phrase the research question and lead to a decision about the type of methodology and guiding framework that would inform the research strategy and help answer the research question. At the conclusion of the process, I elected to engage in descriptive, non-experimental research using questionnaires comprised of open and closed ended items.

I looked to the related work of scholars to inform my research approach. Johnson and Christensen (2012) note that the purpose of descriptive non-experimental research is to “focus on providing an accurate description or picture of the status or characteristics of a situation or phenomenon” (p. 366). Similarly, Butin (2010) writes that “descriptive research is characterized by the deliberate and systematic articulation and analysis of issues presently lacking such clarity” (p. 81). The focus of this research study was to determine the extent to which student trustees were involved in representing students’ perspectives in school board improvement planning and
if there was a difference in perceptions between supervisory officers and former student trustees. I wanted to amass information from supervisory officers and former student trustees from English school boards in Ontario in a relatively short period of time while being attentive to practical considerations. Furthermore, by providing an opportunity for supervisory officers and former student trustees to share their perspectives, I worked to learn more about the experiences of these individuals related to the improvement planning process. I considered the advantages and disadvantages of a number of research methods (e.g., in-person or over the phone interviews). Noting that different survey techniques offer both strengths and weaknesses, I weighed the strengths and weaknesses against the needs of my study. One advantage to using an in-person or over the telephone standardized quantitative interview approach is that this data-gathering technique affords the researcher an opportunity to personally connect with research participants, especially those individuals who may be deterred from participating in less personal data-gathering methods. The personalized approach also provides the research participant the opportunity to seek clarification from the researcher about the questions being asked. One disadvantage associated with conducting personalized interviews, from my perspective, is that a great deal of time would have to be invested in conducting personalized interviews given the number of English school boards in the province, the number of supervisory officers and former student trustees that make up the sample population and the large geographic distribution of school boards across the province. Given that this research study attempted to acquire a current state of practice from supervisory officers and former student trustees from English school boards in the province of Ontario, personalized interviews would present a challenge from a personal practical perspective. I considered the use of an on-line self-report data collection tool that could be filled out by research participants to obtain information about the perceptions and experiences of supervisory officers and former student trustees. The advantage to using a self-report tool, especially one available on-line, is that one can cast a wider net for potential research participants and does not require a large investment of time. Moreover, from a participant’s perspective, some individuals may prefer the flexibility of responding to an on-line, albeit, less personal questionnaire at a time convenient to them. Furthermore, given that it was important to this research study that participants would be given the privilege of anonymity, the use of personal interviews ran the risk of comprising the assurance of anonymity. I surmised, given my position as a supervisory officer in education that the use of personal interviews might comprise anonymity, not in the publication of the results but in the interactions between myself and other
supervisory officers and may dissuade some individuals from agreeing to participate in the study. Since the study involved the use of standardized questions, I was confident that the use of an online questionnaire, albeit less personal, could still provide information to inform the research topic being studied and provided the best solution for me to address issues associated with time, anonymity, the number of supervisory officers and student trustees I hoped to collect and analyze data about, and present the results. I determined that my choice of approach to research could assist in better defining and measuring the significance of something about a larger group of respondents than could be achieved through personal interviews given time limitations and the population they represented. Not wanting to limit the questionnaire items to closed-ended items where I might limit the opportunity for participants to provide their unique insights, I included open-ended questions.

My research was based on an adaptation of Fielding’s (2001; 2012) framework for student engagement. Fielding (2001; 2012) argues for a transformative approach to including student perspective in improvement planning in which the voices of students, educators and other stakeholders involved in the process of education, construct ways of working together that are liberating in both process and outcome. While Fielding’s (2001; 2012) framework focused on the inclusion of student perspective in school improvement planning, my adapted framework intended to replicate Fielding’s work by exploring the inclusion of students’ perspective at a more macro level, in system-wide school board improvement planning. Furthermore, I wanted to explore the representative nature of the role of the student trustee in the process. That is to say, I was interested in understanding if the nature of the inclusion of students’ perspectives in the improvement planning process went beyond the sole inclusion of the student trustee’s perspectives, to reflect the democratic requirement of the role, as articulated in legislation, whereby the student trustee would solicit input from his/her peers and represent their perspectives throughout the process. I assumed that the extent to which student trustees were able to represent students’ perspectives in board improvement plans related to the ways in which student trustees were involved in various phases of the improvement planning process, situated in a version of participatory democracy. Furthermore, the adapted framework informed the development of my research question, the nature of the literature I reviewed, and the specific questions that were asked of the key informant groups. Together, they formed a conceptual framework for examining the inclusion of students’ perspectives in board improvement planning.
through student trustee representation. Table 1, A Conceptual Framework for Examining the Nature of Student Trustee Involvement in School Board Improvement Planning, presented in Chapter Two, offers an adaptation of Fielding’s (2001) “levels of student involvement in school self-review and school improvement” (p. 136). Fielding’s framework for student engagement provided a way in which I could examine the extent to which student trustees were involved during various stages of the board improvement planning process. I wanted to see if there was some relationship between how Fielding viewed the inclusion of students’ perspectives and the reported experiences of former student trustees and supervisory officers in bringing students’ perspectives to the improvement planning process. Table 1 identifies the key stages of the board improvement planning process that formed the basis for considering the nature of student trustee representation of students’ perspectives in the process. Set out in categories, moving from left to right, Table 1 identifies the characteristics of the nature of student trustee involvement that may increase the likelihood that the broader students’ perspectives is being sought out and included through the representation and involvement of the student trustee. The potential for considering the inclusion of students’ perspectives in board improvement planning through student trustee representation in this way lies in the recognition of the leadership support student trustees require, the importance of collaboration between senior board staff and student trustees, and the mechanisms/methods required in order for student trustees to communicate with, gather information and bring the perspectives of the larger student body to the board improvement planning process.

According to Merriam (2009) “Research focused on discovery, insight and understanding from the perspectives of those being studied offers the greatest promise of making a difference in people’s lives” (p. 1). This focus on discovery, insight and understanding was an important goal of my research. Ultimately, I envisioned my research findings would serve the interests of a broad range of stakeholders in education. I wanted my research to help others consider the importance and value of including students’ perspectives in the board improvement planning process and consider the findings of the research in relation to further enabling the conditions that would support such inclusion as identified by the study participants. I wanted the findings to inform the role of school board leaders in considering the inclusion of students’ perspectives in decisions that impact students’ educational experiences when engaged in the improvement planning process. I wanted the findings to inform the way in which student trustees considered
their role in representing the perspectives of other students in the school board. Finally, I wanted the results of my research to inspire others to explore the phenomenon more deeply so that, ultimately as referenced by Knight Abowitz (2013), those in a position of leadership devise ways to hear the input and ideas of others, to seek out diverse viewpoints about strategy and to promote inclusivity. In so doing, I hoped that public education in the province of Ontario would continue to endeavor to be responsive to the input from the very students it is intended to serve.

Participants

In order to collect data related to the research question, I identified the categories of participants who could provide insight into the representative role of student trustees in bringing students’ perspectives to the board improvement planning process. All publicly funded school boards in the province of Ontario are bound by the legislative requirement to elect student trustees (Government of Ontario, 2014) and to develop school board improvement plans (Government of Ontario, 2010). Moreover, the school board improvement planning process is centrally coordinated and supervisory officers would be among the individuals involved in its development, implementation, monitoring and review. In considering the representation of supervisory officers’ perspectives in the study, I made the assumption that regardless of the extent to which supervisory officers were involved in the development of a school board improvement plan, or the specific portfolio of responsibilities they held, all would have awareness of the process used within their school board to develop the plan. School board improvement plans are also shared with the elected trustees at corporate board meetings, the decision-making table that student trustees sit at. Thus, I made the assumption that student trustees would have some level of awareness of the school board improvement plan. With intention, I did not include elected trustees in my study as I made the assumption that predominantly board staff developed the improvement plans and elected trustees would have little to no involvement in the process. Elected trustees, as per legislation, are responsible for the development of multi-year strategic plans (Ontario Education Services Corporation, 2014). The director of education is responsible for developing operational plans to actualize the goals articulated in multi-year strategic plans. Therefore, my focus was on the group of individuals within school boards who have significant responsibility for overseeing and contributing to the development and finalization of improvement plans, those being supervisory officers.
Recruitment and Sample Size

Participants were drawn from the populations of supervisory officers and former student trustees who served in their respective roles prior to September 2014 in English school boards in the province of Ontario. As the study involved personnel and former student trustees from English school boards in Ontario, I apprised the Council of Ontario Directors of Education of the nature of the study. Participant recruitment for supervisory officers involved a couple of approaches. I solicited contact information for supervisory officers first through the Ontario Supervisory Officers’ Associations, and for those boards where I was unable to obtain supervisory officer contact information through the associations, I contacted boards directly. Former student trustee participation was solicited through the Ontario Student Trustees’ Association. I decided to solicit participation from former student trustees since most current student trustees are minors. More importantly, former student trustees would be able to retrospectively reflect on their experience.

In addition to focusing my study on understanding the inclusion of students’ perspectives by way of student trustee representation in school board improvement plans in English school boards in the province, I was also interested in exploring if there were differences in perspectives based on the size, geographical distribution and/or the number of student trustees elected annually across the province.

I solicited information regarding the number of supervisory officers employed in English school boards during the period spanning 2012-2014 from both Ontario Supervisory Officers’ Associations and determined that the total population from which the Supervisory Officer sample for this study was drawn was approximately 522 individuals. Out of 522 supervisory officers who received an invitation to participate in the study 26 (5%) completed the survey. I solicited information regarding the number of student trustees elected annually to English school boards in Ontario for the two years this study focused on from the Ontario Student Trustees’ Association and determined that the total population from which former student trustees were drawn was approximately 341. Out of 341 former student trustees who received an invitation to participate in the study 26 (8%) completed the survey.

In my attempt to include as many individuals from these two groups in the study as possible, through formal communication, I contacted executive directors/presidents of the Provincial
Supervisory Officers’ Associations, the Ontario Student Trustees’ Association and individual school boards by way of email. It was a challenge to solicit participation from all individuals in the population groups. Acknowledging that not every individual who received an invitation to participate in the study would eventually choose to participate, by attempting to reach out to all members of the populations, I ultimately hoped to acquire enough participatory interest from supervisory officers and former student trustees to reflect the populations. I further acknowledge that ideally, virtually the entire population would have had to be sampled in the small populations of supervisory officers and former student trustees to achieve a desirable level of precision. Nonetheless, I had hoped that there was enough interest expressed on the part of potential participants to reflect the populations they represented. I worked to increase the likelihood that results provided a true measure of the perceptions and experiences of these groups and of the practices within the 60 English school boards in Ontario.

Research Design

As previously referenced in this chapter, the study included supervisory officers employed in English school boards in the province of Ontario and former student trustees who served in English school boards prior to 2014. Since the sample population used in this research was geographically dispersed across the province of Ontario, a web-based questionnaire was used to solicit perceptions about the inclusion of students’ perspectives in improvement planning from supervisory officers and former student trustees. I created my own surveys because I was unable to find any suitable measure that would be acceptable to answer my research question.

Two surveys were used in this study. One survey was intended for former student trustees who served in English school boards in the province of Ontario prior to September 2014. A second, similar survey targeted supervisory officers employed in English school boards in the province of Ontario prior to September 2014. Survey items consisted of agreement and rating scale statements and closed and open-ended questions. I used a fully anchored rating scale that consisted of categories of response choices that participants were instructed to use in indicating their responses. All points in the rating scale were anchored with descriptors. Moreover, as advised by scholars such as Johnson and Christensen (2012), I developed the scale so that the words used for adjacent points on the rating scale were an equal distance apart from each other. Participants were invited to respond to a web-based survey, designed to gather information on
their personal perceptions about the extent to which student trustees are engaged in school board improvement planning, representing the perspectives of their fellow peers.

On-line data collection was based on volunteer sampling by way of email recruitment. Researchers have identified advantages and limitations associated with the use of on-line data collection. Mertler (2002) for example, notes that the use of on-line surveys enables the collection of large amounts of data efficiently and economically within a relatively short timeframe and participant responses in email surveys can be more detailed and comprehensive than in paper-pencil surveys. Lafever (2007) writes that web surveys enable respondents to participate at their own convenience and decide when and where to complete the survey. I also note that it is more convenient to send responses through the click of a button or swipe of a screen rather than through posted mail. However, Lafever (2007) cautions that there are limitations associated with the use of on-line surveys. While on-line surveys enable researchers to access large and geographically distributed populations, one needs to be concerned about the possibility of fraudulent responses (i.e. respondents posing as different people). While one could argue that the issue of fraudulent responses could exist in paper pencil surveys as well, Lafever’s advice to incorporate some means of personal identification to gain more control over the response group, such as contacting participants through an email mailing list was heeded in this study. Lafever also identified the need for participants to have access to a computer connected to the internet as a potential limitation to the use of on-line surveys. In my view, given the ubiquity of personal electronic devices with access to the internet in society, I did not foresee lack of access to a computer or personal electronic device such as a smart phone and the internet as a major limitation.

Carbonaro (2002) identifies that on-line data collection can simplify the process for analyzing data, one advantage, among others that influenced my decision to use an on-line data collection tool. The author offers four main considerations that informed how I designed my on-line surveys: (a) attentiveness to designing the survey so that it was simple for participants to complete, (b) ensuring easy access to surveys for all participants, (c) ensuring credibility and anonymity, and (d) ensuring respondents could only complete the questionnaire once by employing a survey tool that generated a unique internet link for each participant invited to participate.
I was also cognizant that the reliability of the survey would be influenced by response rates. Comley (2014) has identified three factors that affect response rates in on-line surveys: (a) style of the first page of the survey, (b) relationship with the website (brand), and (c) respondent interest or relevance of the survey. These factors were taken into consideration in the design of the survey used in this research. In my initial communication to potential participants, I used succinct language to introduce the study, identified the relevance and time commitment associated with participating in the study and encouraged potential participants to read further to gain more information about the study.

I piloted the questionnaires, first with colleagues and friends through the use of cognitive interviews, asking them to note any points of confusion when completing the questionnaire and then piloting them with volunteers from each of the participant groups. The time invested in piloting the questionnaires and conducting cognitive interviews proved to be very helpful as I was able to revise the questionnaires based on volunteer participant feedback prior to distribution to the key informant groups.

Survey Items

One main question, supported by a series of related questions guided the development of survey items. The survey questions (included in Appendices A and B) required supervisory officers and former student trustees to draw on their experiences and share their perspectives about the inclusion of student viewpoint in school board improvement planning through student trustee representation. Butin (2010) suggests being attentive to two key principles when considering the design of survey items: aligning the research question, research literature and survey items; and endeavoring to disaggregate the data based on demographic variables. Thus, I worked to ensure that survey items were purposefully and explicitly connected to answering my research question.

As referenced previously, the development of survey items was also informed by an adapted version of Fielding’s (2001) intellectual framework for student engagement. Questions asked of participants sought to probe the nature of student trustee involvement in representing students’ perspectives during key phases of the school board improvement planning process. With deliberate intention, the same questions were asked of supervisory officers and former student trustees so that I could draw comparisons between the reported experiences/perceptions of these two key informant groups. The intent of the study was to solicit responses from participants that
would inform an understanding of the nature of student trustee involvement in representing students’ perspectives in the school board improvement planning process. Furthermore, in light of the importance that has been placed on the inclusion of students’ perspectives in decisions that affect their educational experience, and the role of student trustees in representing same, I posited that the results would provide a unique opportunity to consider the inclusion of students’ perspectives, represented by student trustees, in school board improvement planning, in relation to the categories of student trustee involvement presented previously in Table 1.

I used a quantitative design for my research, which included a series of Likert-type statements, multiple choice items, and open-ended questions included in a survey. The first set of questions were designed to collect some basic demographic information from survey participants. Both supervisory officers and former student trustees were asked to identify the size of the school board (based on the number of elementary and secondary schools combined) they were affiliated with, choosing from the following options: (a) 50 schools or less, (b) 51-100 schools, (c) 101-150 schools, and (d) 151 or more schools. I wanted to determine if there were differences in how supervisory officers or former student trustees perceived the inclusion of students’ perspectives in school board improvement plans based on the size of the school board. Both supervisory officers and former student trustees were also asked to identify the number of student trustees elected annually, choosing from the following options: (a) one student trustee; (b) two student trustees; and (c) more than two student trustees. Again, I wanted to see if the number of student trustees elected annually made a difference to how the inclusion of students’ perspectives in improvement planning was perceived by research participants.

The school board improvement planning process would be well known to all directors of education, supervisory officers and assistant supervisory officers. I was interested in knowing if there was a difference in perceptions of supervisory officers, assistant supervisory officers or directors of education. In order to distinguish among these three groups, participants were asked to indicate their role in the school board choosing from the following options: (a) director of education; (b) supervisory officer; or (c) assistant supervisory officer.

I was also interested in determining if there was a relationship in the perceptions of supervisory officers and the length of time they had been employed with their board: (a) less than five years, or (b) more than five years; and/or how new they were to the role of supervisory officer, director
of education or assistant supervisory officer: (a) less than two years in the role, or (b) more than two years in the role. I postulated that the longer a supervisory officer was employed within a school board and/or in the role, the more likely they would have a deeper understanding of the improvement planning process and the value of including the perspectives’ of others in the process.

Participants were presented with six rating scale questions intended to measure their beliefs about student trustee involvement in school board improvement planning (e.g., I believe it is important for student trustees to represent the voice of students in the school board improvement planning process). Respondents were instructed to indicate the extent to which they agreed/disagreed with each statement using the following agreement scale: (1) strongly agree; (2) agree; (3) disagree; (4) strongly disagree; and (5) not sure.

The process of developing improvement plans typically involves a number of stages including the identification of school board shared priorities/goals, analysis of various forms of student well-being and achievement evidence, establishment of learning communities to co-learn and build collective capacity, identification of monitoring and evaluating strategies to achieve shared priorities/goals associated with improvement plans, and finalization of improvement plans. The next set of questions in the survey required respondents to choose among the options offered in each item, selecting the one that best described student trustee involvement in various stages of the school board improvement planning process. For each item, respondents could choose from one of four statements designed to determine the extent to which student trustees were involved in each stage of the school board improvement process: (a) no involvement; (b) involvement through the expression of their own views as a student trustee; (c) inclusion of students’ perspective through a consultation process co-lead by the student trustee and school board staff with other students in the school board; and (d) a student trustee led consultation and information gathering process with other students in the school board. For those respondents who were unsure if any of the statements applied, a “not sure” option was provided.

Finally, respondents were presented with a series of open ended questions intended to solicit from participants the identification of: (a) leading practices that they believed supported student trustees’ capacity to communicate with, gather information from and represent their peers in the improvement planning process; (b) factors that are particularly effective in supporting the
inclusion of students’ perspectives in the improvement planning process; (c) challenges associated with the inclusion of students’ perspectives in the improvement plans through student trustee representation; and (d) recommendations that participants believe would facilitate/enhance the inclusion of students’ perspectives in school board improvement planning. With intent, the open-ended questions were similarly worded for both participant groups so that responses could be compared. The open-ended questions presented to both groups were as follows:

What methods, if any, do student trustees use to communicate with other students in the district, gather their suggestions and represent their perspectives in the improvement planning process?

What factors, if any, would you identify as being particularly effective in supporting the inclusion of students’ perspectives in improvement planning through student trustee representation?

What challenges would you associate with the inclusion of students’ perspectives in district improvement planning through student trustee representation?

What recommendations would you offer to facilitate/enhance the inclusion of students’ perspectives in improvement plans through student trustee representation?

The supervisory officers and former student trustee surveys, while personalized to the participant group, (e.g., reference to supervisory officers in the supervisory officers’ survey and reference to student trustees in the former student trustees’ survey), contained the same number of identical items.

Data Collection

The main source of data collection was drawn from responses to on-line questionnaires completed by a small sample of 26 English school Board supervisory officers and 28 former student trustees. Johnson and Christenson (2012) define a questionnaire as a self-report data-collection instrument that each participant fills out as part of the research study. My research was performed during the winter of 2015 through the use of questionnaires put on-line using University of Toronto Survey Wizard, an e-survey system for conducting secure on-line surveys.
The survey was intended for school board supervisory officers and former student trustees, who served in these respective roles prior to September 2014. Survey responses were collected during a one-month period.

Demographic data relating to the school boards was obtained through public websites and with cooperation from the Ontario Student Trustees’ Association/l’Association des élèves conseillers et conseillères de l’Ontario (OSTA/AECO). In order to determine if the participant groups were representative of the populations being studied, I compared their geographic distribution and demographics to the population.

In my introductory communication to potential participants, I provided them with information about the nature of my research and identified myself as an employee of a school board in Ontario. Individuals were invited to contact me by means of telephone or return email if they had any questions regarding the content of the communication and nature of the study. Otherwise, those interested in participating were instructed to proceed directly to the survey by way of the link provided in the communication. Subsequent reminders via e-mail were sent out, as the closing date for the survey approached, in order to increase participation. Cognizant that all prospective participants had to be fully informed about the procedures and risks involved in the research study before they agreed to take part, I was able to use the University of Toronto Survey Wizard online survey system to distribute the informed consent information. In addition to attaching the informed consent letter to the initial email communication, I also inserted the information on the first page of the survey. When participants clicked on the link to the survey, they were presented with the consent information and were advised that by clicking the “save and continue” button, they were voluntarily agreeing to participate.

Data Analysis

Gravetter and Wallnau (2013) write “statistics help the researcher to answer the questions that initiated the research by determining exactly what general conclusions are justified based on the specific results that were obtained” (p. 5). Johnson and Christensen (2012) categorize the analysis of data sets into two broad categories: descriptive statistics, the goal of which is to describe, summarize or make sense of a data set; and inferential statistics, the goal of which is to go beyond the immediate data and infer the characteristics of populations based on samples (pp. 451-452), both of which were important to my research.
The University of Toronto Survey Wizard application was used to gather data from the respondents, with a separate survey for each respondent type. Both surveys included: demographic information; closed-ended, Likert-type-style rating items; and open response items to gather qualitative comments. Data from both surveys were extracted from the University of Toronto Online Survey Wizard. I organized the survey responses into an understandable format so that any patterns in the data could be easily identified and communicated. In order to perform between-group analyses, the two datasets were merged in Microsoft Excel, with sufficient fields provided to accommodate: a new field containing a respondent type (Supervisory Officer or Former Student Trustee) identifier; all variables shared by both surveys; and any variables that were unique to one survey or the other. During the merging process, a small number of respondents with insufficient data for analysis were removed. The resultant merged dataset was imported into the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) for statistical analyses. Once imported into SPSS, all Likert-type-style items and rating descriptors were converted to numeric format for statistical comparisons.

My approach to analysis included both qualitative and quantitative methods. For open-ended question responses, I segmented (i.e. divided the data into meaningful analytical units) and coded (i.e. marked segments of data with descriptive words or category names) participant responses, generated inductively by directly examining the data. In order to strengthen the analysis of my data, I looked for similarities in the responses from open-ended questions to the quantitative data.

According to Gravetter and Wallnau (2013), one of the most common procedures for organizing a set of data is to place the scores in a frequency distribution table, an organized tabulation of the number of responses located in each category on the scale of measurement. By taking a disorganized set of scores and placing them in order from highest to lowest, grouping together individuals who all have the same score I was able to see at a glance the entire set of scores. Moreover, through the use of tables, I was able to illustrate the set of categories that made up the original measurement scale and a record of the frequency response means and standard deviation in each category. The use of a frequency distribution enabled me to provide an overview of the entire group of scores making it easy to see the general response patterns in the data.

A significant portion of my analysis of the data collected from questionnaire responses was organized around four categories relating to the inclusion of students’ perspectives in school.
board improvement planning as represented by student trustees, those being student trustees as data source, discussant, co-contributor or initiator/co-creator, from the perspectives of the two participant groups – former student trustees and English school board supervisory officers. I examined the frequency of responses to questions associated with each category from each participant group with a view to determining if there was variability between the two participant groups in their responses.

I worked to communicate the essential characteristics of the data by analyzing each survey item separately, focused on describing, summarizing and explaining the data in an interpretable form (i.e., generating descriptive tables) and calculating results such as means and measures of spread. I eliminated cases where there were no data and applied the same procedure to both former student trustees’ and supervisory officers’ data sets. For each closed-ended survey item, I calculated and compared means and standard deviations between the perceptions of the two key informant groups. I used the chi-squared test of independence to explore patterns between respondent demographic information and ratings provided on the survey.

I also wanted to explore broader concepts in this study by comparing the overall perceptions of supervisory officers and former student trustees about the beliefs each participant group held about the inclusion of students’ perspectives in the improvement planning process through student trustee representation and the reported involvement of student trustees in the improvement planning process. However, as noted by Dolbier, Webster, McCalister, Mallon & Steinhardt (2005), analysis of single Likert-type-style items to assess complex concepts appears to have limited reliability. Additionally, the appropriateness of using parametric statistics such as the t-test to analyse Likert-type-style items has been debated in the research literature of various disciplines on the basis that the data produced by single Likert-type-style items are not truly interval in nature (Brown, 2011). In order to improve reliability and to reduce issues related to the non-interval nature of Likert-type-style items, I created Likert-type-style scales of survey items to help understand broader concepts.

Scale development was undertaken using principle component analysis (PCA) to uncover any latent constructs in the two sets of Likert-type-style survey items: those with agreement ratings, and those with descriptors for rating levels of involvement of student trustees in the board improvement planning process. Given the different scale descriptors (i.e., agreement versus level
of involvement), the principle component analysis was performed separately for the agreement and involvement scale items.

As referenced earlier, my null hypothesis stated that there was no difference in the overall perceptions of supervisory officers about the nature of student trustee representation of students’ perspectives in the school board improvement planning process as compared to former student trustees. My alternative hypothesize stated that there was a difference in the overall perceptions of supervisory officers about the nature of student trustee representation of students’ perspectives in the school board improvement planning process as compared to former student trustees. In order to test my null hypothesis, comparing supervisory officer and former student trustee respondent groups’ perceptions about beliefs (about student trustee contributions to board improvement planning) and involvement (of student trustees in board improvement planning activities), scale scores were calculated for each respondent for each of the two indices. Index means from the data set were compared using independent t-tests to determine whether or not mean responses from supervisory officers and former student trustees were statistically different from one another (i.e., the test results did not occur by random chance).

I worked to ensure I did not violate the assumptions underlying the use of a t-test, identified by Wallnau (2013), those being: random sampling (each person in the two populations had an equal chance of being selected into the study); independence of observations (participants are not influencing each other in terms of the dependent variable); the dependent variable is measured on an interval ratio scale; normally skewed data and the variance of data is equal within sampling fluctuations. In order to conduct the t-test, I calculated values for each participant group based on the mean, variance and sample size and compared the results. I calculated the degrees of freedom and determined an alpha level of .05 in order to determine the critical t-value and then compared the critical t-value and the calculated t-value. The critical t-value is what I might expect simply by chance up to 5% of the time. If the calculated t-value was greater in size than the critical t-value then I would reject the null hypothesis.

The generalizability of my results depended on the number of survey participants and whether or not the participants in the study reflected the population they represented, based on demographic data collected. At its best, I hoped that the survey responses obtained from participants, and the population they represented would be generalizable to English school boards in the province of
Ontario. However, given the small size of the sample used in this research, I am cautious about any claims to generalizability.

**Ethical Considerations**

As noted by Roberts (2010), ethical considerations must be taken into account in regards to informed consent, confidentiality, methodological principles and procedures that form the foundation of a research design, stating “Sensitivity to ethical issues that arise around decision points in the research process and how one responds to them determines whether or not others question or trust the results from one’s study” (p. 35). Thus, it was important for me to exercise responsibility in the processes I used to conduct my research study. The research study complied with the research procedures established by the University of Toronto. The study presented minimal risk to the key informant groups. There were no anticipated ramifications to participants due to their involvement in the study (e.g., there was no physical, social, psychological or legal risk to participants). Data security measures were consistent with the University of Toronto’s standards. All survey responses were stored in the password protected University of Toronto Survey Wizard application. The data could not be considered to put the reputation of individual participants or English school boards in jeopardy if it were to become known outside of the research. Only Dr. Carol Campbell, my thesis advisor and I had access to the raw survey responses and related notes. Electronic data kept outside of a secure server environment was encrypted and kept in a locked location. Participants were able to withdraw at any point in the process. The data, treated as anonymous, will be maintained for a period of 5 years.

Participants were assured of anonymity through the informed consent letter, which meant that there would be no identifiers that would indicate which individuals or which school boards supplied the data. All participants were informed as to how the data would be used and how results would be disseminated. As required, consent to conduct the research was obtained through participating supervisory officer and student trustee associations and school boards.

**Conclusion**

This research study was designed to generate data that would inform a current understanding of the inclusion of students’ perspectives in school board improvement planning through student
trustee representation. In this chapter I have outlined the research approach, data sources, data collection, data analysis and ethical considerations. Prior to commencing my research, I reviewed research methodology literature as well as scholarly literature relating to planning and conducting research methodology.

In addition to providing valuable insights and perspectives that I believe would benefit scholarship in education, in my view, partaking in this study allowed participants the opportunity to reflect on their personal opinions about student trustee involvement in school board improvement planning. Furthermore, it is my belief that the dissemination and sharing of findings from the study could potentially impact internal school board processes used to develop improvement plans, (especially as relates to the inclusion of students’ perspectives in such a process) and the role of student trustees in representing the perspectives of their fellow peers in school board improvement planning. In the chapter that follows, I present the results.
Chapter 4
Results

Introduction

In this chapter, I discuss findings based on responses obtained from two key informant groups. I begin by providing a description of the sample populations, followed by a presentation of frequency descriptions of participant responses to each closed-ended survey item. Next, I provide an examination of response patterns by sample demographics, followed by a discussion of significant differences between the two samples. Since this study also analyzed participants’ responses to open-ended questions intended to identify factors that enable or constrain the involvement of student trustees in the school board improvement planning process from the perspective of participant groups, I conclude this section with an analysis of responses to open-ended questions, categorizing them according to common themes that emerged from participants’ responses. In my analyses of the data I wanted to determine two outcomes: was there a difference in former student trustees’ beliefs about the importance of student trustee involvement and the reported actual involvement of former student trustees in the various stages of the process, and was there a difference in the perceptions of supervisory officers in how they viewed and experienced student trustee involvement in the improvement planning process compared to former student trustees’ views and experiences.

While review of the survey data indicated that 34 former student trustees and 34 supervisory officers entered the on-line survey site, data cleaning and merging resulted in a data set containing 26 supervisory officers and 28 former student trustees who provided sufficiently complete data for analysis. I conducted a visual inspection of the data to determine if there was any distinct pattern with missing data and concluded that there was no discernable pattern. I believe the key informants provided insightful observations relating to their beliefs about experiences with the involvement of student trustees in bringing students’ perspectives to the school board improvement planning process.
Sample Population Description

At the time of this study, there were 60 English school boards in the province of Ontario which varied in size based on the number of elementary and secondary schools within the jurisdiction of the school board. Using publically available information that provided the combined number of elementary and secondary schools in each of the 60 English school boards (List of School Districts in Ontario, 2015), I categorized respondents based on the size of school board they were affiliated with. I wanted to determine if there was a relationship between participant responses and the size of the school board. Table 2 specifies the number of supervisory officers and former student trustees who responded to the survey based on the size of school board they were affiliated with at the time of the study.

Table 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number of elementary and secondary schools combined</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>25 or fewer</th>
<th>26-50</th>
<th>51-100</th>
<th>101-150</th>
<th>150 or more</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Supervisory Officers</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Former Student Trustees</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Former student trustee participants represented all categories of school boards with most respondents associated with medium-sized school boards. The participation of supervisory officers, according to school board affiliation, reflected a higher number of participants from school boards with 25 or fewer secondary and elementary schools combined and a lower number of participants from school boards with between 26-50 elementary and secondary schools combined.

In addition to board size in terms of numbers of schools, school boards differ in terms of their geographical location. A few school boards across Ontario service vast rural areas, such as those located in northern Ontario. A few school boards serve large metropolitan cities. Most school boards serve a combination of cities with outlying rural communities. In addition to categorizing key informants based on the size of the school board, I compared participant information according to the geographical location of the school board they were affiliated with. I wanted to
determine if perceptions of participants differed based on geographical location. The number of participants based on the geographical location (determined by the number of schools in the district) of the school board is provided in Table 3.

**Table 3**

*Number of Participants Based on School Board Affiliation Geographical Location*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Comparison Groups</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>Urban</th>
<th>Rural</th>
<th>Rural/Urban</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Supervisory Officers</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Former Student Trustees</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In general, the distribution of supervisory officer participants based on the geographical location of the school board they were affiliated with was similar to the distribution of former student trustee participants. However, both key informant groups were predominantly from rural/urban school boards.

I was also interested in determining if there was a relationship between participants’ responses and the number of student trustees elected annually. It is important to note that while legislation requires school boards to elect at least one trustee annually, it does not define a maximum limit. That is to say, regardless of the size or the geographical location of a school board, the number of student trustees elected annually is within the purview of each school board. Table 4 details the number of survey participants based on the number of student trustees elected annually in the school board they were affiliated with.

**Table 4**

*Number of Participants Based on the Number of Student Trustees Elected Annually*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Comparison Groups</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>More than 2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Supervisory Officers</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Former Student Trustees</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
As presented in Table 4, the distribution of the number of student trustees elected annually, as reported by both participant groups was similar. Most participants were affiliated with school boards where two trustees were elected annually.

In addition to the information detailed in Tables 2 through 4, I collected information from supervisory officer participants related to their title, number of years employed with their current school board and the number of years they had been in their current role. I used two categories to determine if supervisory officer participants were either new to the role (less than two years) or experienced in the role (more than two years).

The majority of participants (20) held the title of supervisory officer. The majority of supervisory officers (23) indicated they had been with their school board for more than five years. There was a fairly even distribution of supervisory officers new to the position (less than two years in the role) 12, and experienced in the position (more than two years in the role) 14.

In addition to the demographic information detailed in Tables 2 through 4 for former student trustees, I collected data related to the academic year former student trustee participants served as a student trustee. Three former student trustees served during 2012-2013, and one served during 2013-2014. The majority of former student trustees (24) served five years prior to 2012.

Examination of Response Patterns by Sample Demographics

In order to detect patterns between respondent demographic information and ratings provided on the survey, chi-squared tests of independence were performed on the data. For reference, the closed-ended items are listed below. Each was submitted to a chi-squared test of independence to assess whether or not there were differences related to demographic variables previously presented above.

1. It is important for student trustees to speak on behalf of students at improvement discussions and/or activities.
2. Student trustees have opportunities to gather input from students in the school board and speak on their behalf at improvement planning discussions and/or activities.
3. Student trustees would be able to identify a key feature of the improvement plan that directly reflects student input.
4. Student trustees are provided with support and opportunities to share the improvement plan with students in the school board.

5. Student trustee involvement in discussions and/or activities about what areas the school board should consider for improvement.

6. Student trustee involvement in discussions and/or activities about student well-being and achievement information (e.g., EQAO data, provincial report card data, secondary course credit accumulation, school climate surveys, etc.) used to identify areas for improvement.

7. Student trustee involvement in discussions and/or activities about improvement strategies (e.g., foci of professional learning for staff, changes in school/classroom practice, purchase of new resources, and provision of additional student/parent supports).

8. Student trustee involvement in discussions and/or activities to monitor and evaluate progress of the improvement plan (e.g., anecdotal feedback from staff and students, changes in student achievement/safe schools data, etc.).

9. Student trustee inclusion of students’ perspectives in the final school board improvement plan.

It is important to note that, for all but board size, the samples used to conduct the chi-square test were very small. In particular, demographic items limited to supervisory officers or to former student trustees contain sample sizes below 30 and, as illustrated in Tables 2 through 4 (above) demonstrate unequal distribution of respondents across the item categories. It is possible that this combination of small sample size and over-representation of specific demographic categories (e.g., respondent role or student trustee year of service) represents a limitation to the statistical analyses performed. Review of the chi-squared analyses detected only four significant relationships between some of the variables, as captured in the discussion that follows.

The item, “Student trustees would be able to identify a key feature of the improvement plan that directly reflects student input” was the only item that demonstrated a significant relationship to the size of the board to which a respondent was affiliated, \( X^2 (4, N=52) = 13.688, P=.0008 \). Respondents from smaller boards (less than 50 schools) tended to report lower ratings of this item than did those from larger boards. Similarly, this survey item yielded a significant relationship to the role held by the supervisory officer participants, \( X^2 (2, N=26) = 6.988, p=.03 \). Participants who were currently in the role of supervisory officer when the study took place tended to provide lower ratings of this item than did assistant supervisory officers and directors.
Among former student trustees, the year in which they served as a trustee was found to have a significant relationship with: their response to the item about student trustees being provided with support and opportunities to share the improvement plan with students in the school board, $X^2 (2, N=28) = 6.404, p=.041$, and to the item that they would see evidence of inclusion of student perspectives in the final board plan, $X^2 (2, N=20) = 7.701, p=.011$. Significantly more respondents serving in years other than 2012-2013 and 2013-2014 disagreed that they had received support and opportunities to share the improvement plan with students in their respective school boards. Similarly, respondents serving in years other than 2012-2013 and 2013-2014 tended to provide lower ratings regarding the inclusion of student perspective in final board improvement plans. However, these results need to be interpreted with caution due to sample size and because the large number of tests (each item by each demographic variable) may have increased the family-wise error rate and therefore the possibility of a Type 1 error (i.e., concluding that there is relationship between the year in which former student trustees served as a trustee and their perceptions about their involvement in the improvement planning process).

**Descriptive Statistics for Closed-ended Survey Items: Beliefs about the Involvement of Student Trustees in Board Improvement Planning**

Supervisory officers and former student trustees were asked to respond to a series of statements regarding beliefs about the role of student trustees in the school board improvement planning process. Four items were developed based on a Likert-type agreement scale (i.e., strongly agree, agree, not sure, strongly disagree, and disagree). Numerical values were assigned to each point of the scale (i.e., strongly agree = 5, agree = 4, not sure = 3, disagree = 2, strongly disagree = 1). The statements were designed to solicit the perceptions each group held about student trustees representing students’ perspectives in the school board improvement planning process.

The discussion in this section is limited to the observation of descriptive statistics (i.e., mean; standard deviation) as well as the frequencies observed in ratings provided by respondents. Exploration of between group differences, through significance testing, will be explored in the sections on significance testing, scale development and analysis, and between group comparisons.
The mean responses from supervisory officers and former student trustees to the first set of closed-ended survey items intended to probe participants’ perceptions related to the beliefs they held about the involvement of student trustees in the improvement planning process are presented in Table 5.

Table 5

*Mean Participant Responses to Statements Relating to Perceptions About the Involvement of Student Trustees in the School Board Improvement Planning Process*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Agreement Scale Statements</th>
<th>Former Student Trustees (n=28)</th>
<th>Supervisory Officers (n=26)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>It is important for student trustees to speak on behalf of students at improvement discussions and/or activities.</td>
<td>4.64 (0.49)</td>
<td>4.36 (0.57)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student trustees have opportunities to gather input from students in the school board and speak on their behalf at improvement planning discussions and/or activities.</td>
<td>3.14 (1.24)</td>
<td>3.73 (1.37)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student trustees would be able to identify a key feature of the improvement plan that directly reflects student input.</td>
<td>3.07 (1.3)</td>
<td>3.42 (1.45)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student trustees are provided with support and opportunities to share the improvement plan with students in the school board.</td>
<td>2.57 (1.55)</td>
<td>3.27 (1.37)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Supervisory officers and former student trustees indicated a high level of agreement to a statement about the importance of including students’ perspectives in school board improvement planning through student trustee representation. However, examination of descriptive statistics (means and standard deviations) related to responses from supervisory officers to the statement
“student trustees have opportunities to gather input from students in the school board and speak on their behalf at school board improvement planning discussions and/or activities,” indicated proportionately higher levels of agreement than that of former student trustees. Moreover, as can be seen in Table 6, there was minimal variability in response rating counts from both participant groups.

Table 6

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant Group</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
<th>Not Sure</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Supervisory Officers</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Former Student Trustees</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

When asked to respond to the statement “student trustees have opportunities to gather input from students in the board and speak on their behalf at school board improvement planning discussions and/or activities,” slight differences between the perceptions of supervisory officers and former student trustees were suggested by the descriptive statistics. Eighteen supervisory officers and 15 former student trustees agreed or strongly agreed with the statement, while seven supervisory officers and 11 of former student trustees disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement (see Table 7). Furthermore, the mean response for supervisory officers was 3.73$(SD=1.37)$ and 3.14$(SD=1.24)$ for former student trustees, indicating a larger distribution across the five categories of the agreement scale for both groups, compared to responses to the first statement (see Table 6).
Table 7

*Student Trustees Have Opportunities to Gather Input from Students in the School Board and Speak on Their Behalf at Board Improvement Planning Discussions and/or Activities*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant group</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>Strongly agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly disagree</th>
<th>Not sure</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Supervisory Officers</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Former Student Trustees</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

When asked to indicate their level of agreement to the statement “student trustees would be able to identify a key feature of the school board improvement plan that directly reflects student input,” examination of the descriptive statistics suggested both key informant groups were very similar in their level of agreement, with 15 supervisory officers and 14 former student trustees agreeing or strongly agreeing with the statement. The mean response for supervisory officers was 3.42 (SD=1.45) and 3.07 (SD=1.3) for former student trustees (see Table 6). However, observation of the response frequencies suggested former student trustees exhibited a higher level of disagreement or strong disagreement with the statement, 14 compared to nine supervisory officers, as shown in Table 8. Furthermore, examination of rating frequencies suggested a distinct difference in the levels of agreement/disagreement within the same key informant groups: supervisory officers’ responses indicated a somewhat dichotomous distinction between level of agreement/disagreement, with 15 respondents agreeing or strongly agreeing with the statement, compared to nine disagreeing or strongly disagreeing. By contrast, former student trustees indicated a fairly even distribution of agreement/disagreement to the statement, with 14 former student trustees agreeing/strongly agreeing with the statement and 14 disagreeing/strongly disagreeing (see Table 8).
While examination of the respondent rating frequencies for the series of statements presented in Tables 7 through 8 indicated similar patterns in levels of agreement and or disagreement between supervisory officers and former student trustees, responses to the statement “student trustees are provided with support and opportunities to share the school board improvement plan with students in the school board,” revealed a discrete difference in the intensity of agreement/disagreement between the two participant groups. Supervisory officers’ responses indicated 14 respondents agreeing or strongly agreeing with the statement, compared to 11 disagreeing or strongly disagreeing. By contrast, former student trustees indicated a larger number of respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement, a finding that was opposite to that of supervisory officers’ responses. Ten former student trustees agreed/strongly agreed with the statement and 18 disagreed/strongly disagreed (see Table 9). The mean response for supervisory officers was 3.27\((SD=1.37)\) compared to 2.57\((SD=1.55)\) for former student trustees (see Table 6).

**Table 8**

*Student Trustees Would Be Able to Identify a Key Feature of the Improvement Plan that Directly Reflects Student Input*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant group</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>Strongly agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly disagree</th>
<th>Not sure</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Supervisory Officers</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Former Student Trustees</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 9**

*Student Trustees are Provided with Support and Opportunities to Share the School Board Improvement Plan with Students in the School Board*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant group</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>Strongly agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly disagree</th>
<th>Not sure</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Supervisory Officers</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Former Student Trustees</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Descriptive Statistics or Closed-ended Survey Items: Inclusion of Students’ Perspectives in Improvement Planning through Student Trustee Representation

While the first set of questions in the survey intended to probe participants’ beliefs about whether or not student trustees were involved in the school board improvement planning process, a second set of questions delved deeper into participants’ perceptions about the extent to which student trustees were involved in each distinct phase of the process. Supervisory officers and former student trustees were presented with five statements and asked to select the one statement that best described student trustee actual involvement in discussions and/or activities at various stages of the school board improvement planning process. I wanted to explore more deeply the nature of student trustee involvement in each key phase of the school board improvement planning process (i.e. identifying areas of improvement, analyzing evidence, implementing strategies and monitoring improvement plans). I designed a unique, four-category scale informed by Fielding’s (2001) work, and my experience and knowledge of the school board improvement planning process, so that there were clear Likert-type-style levels of involvement inherent in the scale’s responses. For the purposes of statistical analysis, the four Likert-type-style scale responses were coded from one to four, with one representing minimal student trustee involvement beyond being a source of data, and with four representing full integration of student trustees as co-creators in the board improvement planning process. Since “not sure” is not the middle of the scale, it was not given a score of three out of five. I treated the few “not sure” ratings as missing data resulting in a one through four scale.

Table 10 presents a summary of mean responses for both the supervisory officer and former student trustee participant groups.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Nature of student trustee involvement in distinct stages of the school board improvement planning process</th>
<th>Former Student Trustees $(n=28)$</th>
<th>Supervisory Officers $(n=26)$</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Involvement in discussions and/or activities about what areas the school board should consider for improvement.</td>
<td>2.19 ($1.11$)</td>
<td>2.76 ($1.16$)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Involvement in discussions and/or activities about student well-being and achievement information (e.g., EQAO data, provincial report card data, secondary course credit accumulation, school climate surveys, etc.) used to identify areas for improvement.</td>
<td>2.12 ($1.14$)</td>
<td>2.58 ($1.03$)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Involvement in discussions and/or activities about improvement strategies (e.g., foci of professional learning for staff, changes in school/classroom practice, purchase of new resources, and provision of additional student/parent supports).</td>
<td>1.88 ($0.91$)</td>
<td>2.23 ($1.07$)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Involvement in discussions and/or activities to monitor and evaluate progress of the improvement plan (e.g., anecdotal feedback from staff and students, changes in student achievement/safe schools data, etc.).</td>
<td>1.58 ($0.78$)</td>
<td>2.29 ($1.2$)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inclusion of students’ perspectives in the final school board improvement plan.</td>
<td>1.55 ($0.83$)</td>
<td>2.25 ($1.26$)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Overall, across all distinct phases of the school board improvement planning process, observation of lower mean responses from both supervisory officers and former student trustees suggested that student trustees were not very involved in the improvement planning process. Examination of the mean responses from both participant groups about the inclusion of student trustees in identifying areas for improvement and analyzing evidence indicated a similar level of involvement of student trustees in representing students’ perspectives in the improvement planning process. That is to say, the descriptive statistics suggested that both supervisory officers and former student trustees were similar in their perceptions that student trustees were minimally involved in these two phases of school board improvement planning. However, the variability in responses from both participant groups to the first two statements about identifying areas for improvement and analyzing achievement and well-being evidence suggests that there were limited instances in which student trustees were able to collaborate with school board staff to communicate with, gather suggestions from, and speak on behalf of students in the school board.

Examination of the descriptive statistics suggested variation within the key informant groups and between groups. Approximately one-third of student trustees were provided with the opportunity to contribute their personal perspectives, by participating in discussions or activities about what areas the school board should consider for improvement. However a distinct difference in perceptions emerged in the descriptive between supervisory officers and former student trustees about the nature of student trustee representation in bringing students’ perspectives to the improvement planning process. While nine former student trustees indicated that student trustees were not provided with the opportunity to participate in discussions and/or activities about what areas the school board should consider for improvement, only four supervisory officers reported this. By contrast, ten supervisory officers reported that student trustees were given the opportunity to take a leadership role, communicating with students in the board, gathering their suggestions and speaking on their behalf at discussions and/or activities about what areas the school board should consider for improvement, compared to only five former student trustees’ responses, as presented in Table 11.
Table 11

*Student Trustee Involvement in Discussions and/or Activities About What Areas the School Board Should Consider for Improvement*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Former Student Trustees (n=27)</th>
<th>Supervisory Officers (n=26)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Student trustees are not provided with the opportunity to participate in discussions and/or activities about what areas the school board should consider for improvement.</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student trustees are provided with the opportunity to contribute their personal perspectives, by participating in discussions or activities about what areas the school board should consider for improvement.</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student trustees collaborate with board staff to communicate with, gather suggestions from, and speak on behalf of students in the board, at discussions and/or activities about what areas the school board should consider for improvement.</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student trustees are given the opportunity to take a leadership role, communicating with students in the board, gathering their suggestions and speaking on their behalf at discussions and/or activities about what areas the school board should consider for improvement.</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not sure</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Observation of the descriptive statistics related to student trustee involvement in discussions and/or activities about student well-being and achievement information (e.g., EQAO data, provincial report card data, secondary course credit accumulation, school climate surveys, etc.) used by school boards to identify areas for improvement also revealed differences in perspectives between the two key informant groups. Nine former student trustees perceived that student trustees were not provided with the opportunity to participate in discussions and/or activities...
about student well-being and achievement information used to identify areas for improvement, compared to four supervisory officers. Interestingly, the same number of supervisory officers and former student trustees perceived student trustees were given the opportunity to take a leadership role, communicating with students in the board, gathering their suggestions and speaking on their behalf at discussions and/or activities about student well-being and achievement information used to identify areas for improvement, as illustrated in Table 12.

**Table 12**

*Student Trustee Involvement in Discussions and/or Activities About Student Well-Being and Achievement Information*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Former Student Trustees</th>
<th>Supervisory Officers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>(n=26)</em></td>
<td><em>(n=26)</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student trustees are not provided with the opportunity to participate in discussions and/or activities about student well-being and achievement information used to identify areas for improvement.</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student trustees are provided with the opportunity to contribute their personal perspectives, by participating in discussions and/or activities about student well-being and achievement information used to identify areas for improvement.</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student trustees collaborate with school board staff to communicate with, gather suggestions from, and speak on behalf of students in the board, at discussions and/or activities about student well-being and achievement information used to identify areas for improvement.</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student trustees are given the opportunity to take a leadership role, communicating with students in the school board, gathering their suggestions and speaking on their behalf at discussions and/or activities about student well-being and achievement information used to identify areas for improvement.</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not sure</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In the last three stages of the school board improvement planning process, the mean response for former student trustees indicated either no involvement or lower levels of involvement when compared to the mean responses from supervisory officers (see Table 6). Examination of the means and frequencies in participant responses to statements related to student trustee involvement in discussions and/or activities about improvement strategies (e.g., foci of professional learning for staff, changes in school/classroom practice, purchase of new resources, and provision of additional student/parent supports) revealed different perceptions about the nature of student trustee representation between participant groups. Eight supervisory officers and ten former student trustees perceived that student trustees were not provided with the opportunity to participate in discussions and/or activities about improvement strategies. Four supervisory officers and two former student trustees perceived that student trustees were given the opportunity to take a leadership role, communicating with students in the board, gathering their suggestions and speaking on their behalf at discussions and/or activities about improvement strategies. However, the majority of responses from supervisory officers (14) and former student trustees (14) indicated that students’ perspectives were sought either through the contribution of the individual perspectives of student trustees or through student trustees collaborating with board staff to communicate with, gather suggestions from, and speak on behalf of students in the school board, at discussions and/or activities about improvement strategies, as shown in Table 13.
Table 13

Student Trustee Involvement in Discussions and/or Activities About Improvement Strategies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Former Student Trustees (n=26)</th>
<th>Supervisory Officers (n=26)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Student trustees are not provided with the opportunity to participate in discussions and/or activities about improvement strategies.</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student trustees are provided with the opportunity to give their personal perspectives, by participating in discussions and/or activities about improvement strategies.</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student trustees collaborate with board staff to communicate with, gather suggestions from, and speak on behalf of students in the school board, at discussions and/or activities about improvement strategies.</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student trustees are given the opportunity to take a leadership role, communicating with students in the school board, gathering their suggestions and speaking on their behalf at discussions and/or activities about improvement strategies.</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not sure</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Descriptive statistics related to responses to statements related to student trustee involvement in discussions and/or activities to monitor and evaluate progress of the school board improvement plan also identified a difference in perceptions between former student trustees and supervisory officers. Slightly more than one-half of former student trustees (13) perceived that student trustees were not involved in discussions and/or activities to evaluate progress, compared to nine supervisory officers. Only two former student trustees perceived student trustees engaged in activities or discussions that would enable them to communicate with, gather input from and represent the broader students’ perspectives, compared to 11 supervisory officers (see Table 14). Participant responses to this particular statement, compared to all other statements, highlighted a
distinct difference in perceived experiences regarding student trustee engagement in this phase of the improvement planning process.

Table 14

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student Trustee Involvement in Discussions and/or Activities to Monitor and Evaluate Progress of the Board Improvement Plan</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Former Student Trustees (n=24)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student trustees are not involved in discussions and/or activities to evaluate progress.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student trustees are provided with the opportunity to contribute their personal perspectives, by participating in discussions and/or activities to evaluate progress.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student trustees collaborate with school board staff to communicate with, gather suggestions from, and speak on behalf of students in the board, at discussions and/or activities to evaluate progress.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student trustees are given the opportunity to take a leadership role, communicating with students in the school board, gathering their suggestions and speaking on their behalf at discussions and/or activities to evaluate progress.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not sure</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In response to statements related to the inclusion of students’ perspectives in the final school board improvement plan, a little more than half of former student trustees reported that the final school board improvement plan did not reflect direct student input. Twelve supervisory officers reported that the final school board improvement plan either reflected input from students in the board, co-gathered and communicated by school board staff and student trustees at discussions and/or activities or involved the student trustee in taking the lead, compared to four former student trustees as illustrated in Table 15.
Table 15

*Inclusion of Students’ Perspectives in the Final School Board Improvement Plan*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Former Student Trustees</th>
<th>Supervisory Officers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(n=20)</td>
<td></td>
<td>(n=24)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The final school board improvement plan does not reflect direct student input.</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The final school board improvement plan reflects the inclusion of the sole views of the student trustee.</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The final school board improvement plan reflects input from students in the board, co-gathered and communicated by board staff and student trustees at discussions and/or activities.</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The final school board improvement plan reflects input from students in the board, co-gathered and communicated by board staff and student trustees at discussions and/or activities. Student trustees are given the opportunity to take a leadership role, communicating with students in the board, gathering their suggestions and speaking on their behalf at discussions and/or activities to evaluate progress.</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not sure</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Test of Significant Differences Between Participant Groups**

Although examination of the frequencies and descriptive statistics suggested a number of differences between respondent groups and their beliefs about, and actual experiences with, the involvement of the student trustee in board improvement planning, I endeavored to determine if any of these differences could be confirmed statistically via significance testing. My hypothesis testing allowed me to use data from two independent samples (i.e. supervisory officers and former student trustees) to draw inferences and evaluate the mean difference in perceptions about the involvement of student trustees in the board improvement process between the two populations and evaluate the credibility of my null hypothesis. In order to assess my null hypothesis, I created two indices to facilitate the use of independent sample t-tests to determine if there was indeed a difference between respondent groups in terms of beliefs about the student
trustee role and/or actual involvement of student trustees in board improvement planning. Discussion of the indices and the results from the independent samples tests are presented separately below.

**Scale Development and Analysis**

As noted previously, my survey data contained nine Likert-type-style items exploring beliefs about and actual experience of student trustee involvement in board improvement planning activities. My research focused on comparing between-group perspectives of supervisory officers and former student trustees. However, when performing statistical comparisons, analysis of single Likert-type-style items has questionable reliability in terms of interpreting and understanding more complex constructs (Wanous & Hudy, 2001). Additionally, the nature of the data gathered from single Likert-type-style items is non-interval, which presents a problem for parametric statistical analyses (Sullivan & Artino, 2013).

In order to compare the response patterns of the two participant groups on the Likert-type-style survey items, I used principal component analysis (PCA) to determine how many components were required to summarize the data or how much of the variance in the responses could be summarized by a single component. Given the different scale descriptors within the nine closed-ended survey items (i.e., agreement versus level of involvement), the PCA was performed separately for the agreement and involvement scale items (Williams, Brown & Onsman, 2010).

First, the four survey items rated with the agreement scale were subjected to PCA. Adequacy of the sample (N=54) for factor analysis was confirmed by the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) measure of sampling adequacy, which was .673, and a significant Bartlett’s test of sphericity (X² (6)=50.308, p<.001). Taken together, the four items clustered around a single component that explained 55.6% of the variance in the dataset. Item loadings onto this single extracted component ranged from .507 to .844. As only one factor was extracted, no rotation of the matrix was possible. Based on the content of the four items, the single component identified statistically was deemed to represent “beliefs about student contributions to board improvement planning”, or simply “Beliefs.” Although the resultant Beliefs Scale had only four items, the scale demonstrated acceptable reliability, with a Cronbach’s alpha of .722. This observation may have been related to the fact that there were only four items in the scale. Given the nature of the
Cronbach’s alpha statistic, more items could improve the resultant scale score if these additional items were correlated with the existing ones in the scale.

Next, the other five Likert-type-style survey items were analysed using PCA. Once again, adequacy of the sample (N=52) for factor analysis was confirmed by the KMO measure of sampling adequacy equalling 0.77, and a significant Bartlett’s test of sphericity ($X^2(10)=110.251, p<.001$). A total of 66.6% of the variance in the data from the five items was explained by a single component. The item loadings onto this single extracted component ranged from 0.764 to 0.86. Based on the content of the five items, the single component identified statistically was deemed to represent “actual involvement of student trustees in board improvement planning”, or “Involvement”. Scale reliability for this Involvement Scale was good (Cronbach’s $\alpha=0.874$).

It is important to note that despite statistical confirmation of the sampling adequacy for factor analysis (i.e., KMO and Bartlett’s tests), interpretations should be made with caution as the sample is relatively small in size. Furthermore, despite satisfactory to good Cronbach’s alpha results for the two scales developed, the scales themselves have relatively small numbers of items in them. Scale reliability is a requirement for validity; however, it does not ensure validity (Dolbier, Webster, McCalister, Mallon & Steinhardt, 2005). I do acknowledge that it was very unlikely that I would be able to find more than one component or factor from only four or five items since usually at least three items per component or factor is required. Thus, rather than trying to find the number of components, I was trying to determine the amount of variance that can be accounted for by a single component.

**Between Groups Comparison of Scales**

In order to compare supervisory officer and former student trustee respondent groups’ perceptions about beliefs (student trustee contributions to board improvement planning) and involvement (of student trustees in board improvement planning activities), scale scores were calculated for each respondent for each of the Beliefs and Involvement Scales identified through PCA. There was missing data that was excluded for certain items (i.e., not everyone answered every item). Therefore, the sample size used to determine the Beliefs scale score for each participant group was, supervisory officers (N=25) and former student trustees (N=28). The sample size used to determine the Involvement scale score for each participant group was
supervisory officers (N=24) and former student trustees (N=19). For each participant group, I created a sum across items to arrive at the scale scores. Scale means for each respondent group were compared using independent t-tests. Statistical comparison of Beliefs Scale scores among supervisory officers (M = 14.68, SD = 3.99) compared to former student trustees (M = 13.43, SD = 3.35) yielded a non-significant result (t(51)=1.242, p=.22), d=.39 suggesting maintenance of the null hypothesis that there were no significant differences between the supervisory officer and former student trustee respondent groups for this scale.

In contrast, the t-test yielded a significant result (t(41)=2.336, p=0.024), d=.72 between supervisory officers (M = 12.29, SD = 4.54) compared to former student trustees (M = 9.21, SD = 3.95) scores for the Involvement Scale. This finding supported rejection of the null hypothesis of no difference, indicating that supervisory officer and former student trustee respondent groups did indeed differ in their perceptions of actual student trustee involvement in board improvement planning activities. This difference suggested that supervisory officers tended to provide significantly higher, on average, ratings of actual student trustee involvement in board improvement planning than did former student trustees.

**Reponses to Open-ended Questions**

In order to understand what factors contribute to student trustee involvement in the school board improvement planning process, supervisory officers and former student trustees were invited to respond to open-ended questions intended to probe their perceptions around four areas related to the nature of student trustee involvement in representing students’ perspectives in the school board improvement planning process. The four areas were: ways in which student trustees communicate and represent the perspectives of other students in the school board; factors that help student trustees speak on behalf of other students; factors that make it difficult for student trustees to represent students’ perspectives; and suggested recommendations to enable/improve the inclusion of student trustees in school board improvement planning. These comments are presented and discussed below and sample additional comments from supervisory officers and former student trustees are provided in Appendix C.
Ways in Which Student Trustees Communicate and Represent the Perspectives of Other Students in the Board

Supervisory officers and former student trustees were invited to respond to the open-ended question, “In what ways, if any, do student trustees in your school board communicate with other students in the board, gather their suggestions, and speak on their behalf at school board improvement planning discussions and/or activities.” Some common themes emerged from the key informant groups’ responses and in some cases, unique/innovative practices were shared.

Eighteen supervisory officers and 12 student trustees identified practices that made use of established structures in their school boards to enable student trustees to communicate with, gather information and represent the perspectives of the larger student body (e.g. student council/student parliament). Supervisory officers described the use of existing communication avenues such as regular meetings with school council presidents and student senates, presentations to the corporate board of trustees, and use of social media as ways in which student trustees interfaced with and represented the perspectives of their peers. One supervisory officer described the practice in the school board whereby the student trustee met monthly with student council presidents and information from the council of presidents was shared with senior administration via the student trustee. Another supervisory officer described how student representatives communicated at elementary and secondary student senate meetings, student conferences and school board meetings with students and staff. The student trustees communicated information presented at school board meetings back to the local school student cabinet, including updates on school board improvement planning and progress. In yet another school board, regularly scheduled events where student trustees met with student representatives from other schools within the school board to solicit input took place. Another supervisory officer reported that each student trustee was also a member of their local school council, an established structure that enabled the flow of communication, where student trustees regularly met with the principal to reflect on the input to be presented to the corporate board of trustees. In addition to participating in discussions at meetings, student trustees were given time on every school board meeting agenda to present. They were also supported in implementing initiatives and communicating at the school and at the district levels on behalf of students. In another school board, the student trustee organized and led a student super-council. The super-council provided input on issues that were of concern to them to the senior administration team. Input
from the student super-council might be taken into consideration during the planning process, however, students were not participants at the planning table. Some supervisory officers reported student trustees collected ideas/concerns from student senate representatives, who in turn gathered them from their respective schools. Student trustees had a lead role in the student senate and school government and as such, were able to practice and develop their speaking skills and learn to gather information from other student governments in each school.

Two supervisory officers reported ways in which their school boards were exploring new and innovative ways to support and engage student trustees. One supervisory officer described how staff responded to a perceived need to build student trustees’ comfort and confidence as student leaders by adjusting timelines associated with serving as a student trustee. In this particular school board, student trustees are now elected and attend school board meetings and student trustee conferences as a designate six months before they assume the role, affording them opportunities to develop confidence in taking on more active leadership roles. Another supervisory officer reported how student trustees were actively involved in the ministry of education’s student voice initiatives and attended provincial leadership development conferences.

One supervisory officer commented on the school board staff’s desire to explore the concept of having the student trustee take on more of a leadership role in the school board improvement plan. Currently, student council presidents at the secondary level meet on a monthly basis and staff envision this structure as a good forum for student trustees to solicit and represent input from their peers. In this school board, the student trustee attends the school board meetings and is part of the discussion regarding the school board improvement plan, however, the supervisory officer reports that more emphasis on bringing student voice to the plan is needed.

Similar to responses from supervisory officers, 16 former student trustees also identified the use of student senate meetings, surveys, social media, focus groups, e-mail and visits to schools as ways in which they interacted with other students in the school board. However, in contrast to responses from supervisory officers, three former student trustees were candid in how they perceived their involvement in the school board improvement planning process, reporting discussions at student senate meetings to be limiting. To quote one former student trustee:
My consultation with students was limited to my school board's student senate (which only had representatives from secondary schools). We were able to discuss our opinions at the senate level, but at the school board level, I was not encouraged to participate in discussions (and when I did my, opinion was not seriously considered).

Another reported, “My school board reports on senate meetings were limited to sharing the activities & events occurring at the high schools - more of a glorified newsletter for the trustees.” One former student trustee, reported that although student trustees met monthly with student representatives from secondary schools to focus on school-specific issues and provide a collaborative space for inter-school activities, the individual felt there was no effort made by student trustees to gather suggestions from students. To quote the individual; “… it was a largely ceremonial role. There was no encouragement for outreach, so we didn't really think of doing it since that hadn't been the natural thing to do.” While one former student trustee perceived not doing enough to connect with elementary and middle school students in the school board, another reported not being educated by school board administration on the school board improvement planning process and not having enough background/prior knowledge to guide/facilitate discussions with students to a high degree of quality.

Factors that Help Student Trustees Speak on Behalf of Other Students

Supervisory officers and former student trustees were invited to respond to the question “What factors, if any, help student trustees in your school board to speak on behalf of other students at school board improvement planning discussions and/or activities?” The provision of staff support to student trustees emerged as a common response from three supervisory officers. One supervisory officer commented on the efforts the school board made to enable student trustees to take responsibility and provide leadership on behalf of other students. Another spoke of the deliberate invitations to student trustees, extended by senior staff, to participate in and contribute students’ perspectives at school board improvement planning meetings. Yet another supervisory officer shared the practice of identifying a "go to" person to ensure the student trustee would have someone they could connect with to respond to their issues/questions, support the student trustee to feel comfortable in the role and learn more about the process involved in school board improvement planning.
Three supervisory officers referred to an expressed desire to have student trustees more involved in the school board improvement planning process. One supervisory officer acknowledged that the school board wanted to develop a better process for student trustee involvement and the inclusion of students’ perspectives in the school board improvement planning process.

Commenting that student trustees have taken part in strategic planning for the school board, are in attendance for discussions on school board improvement planning and monitoring, and have an opportunity to speak to the improvement plan, the supervisory officer noted that student trustees didn’t have a formal way of gathering information from other students in the school board. Another supervisory officer noted, “Our student trustees really just listen at the school board meetings and do not thoroughly engage in the development of school board plans or strategic direction.” Yet another relayed, “It is helpful if the student trustees have an opportunity to provide meaningful input throughout the process. Unfortunately, I am uncertain if this opportunity is presented in a discreet manner.”

Regular attendance at student council meetings, formal and informal sessions at the schools, regular meetings with principals, sharing improvement plan reports/presentation at all school board meetings, were other ways in which some supervisory officers identified factors that helped to develop an awareness of the school board improvement plan among student trustees. However, one supervisory officer highlighted the difference between sharing information about the school board improvement plan and actively engaging student trustees in the process as highlighted in the following quote,

> Our school board is certainly interested in students’ perspectives and there are many vehicles by which students can convey their opinions and concerns (e.g., students as researchers, Speak-Up Grants, student super council, student trustee reports at school board meetings). That said, I do not believe these trustees are invited to the planning table.

A sample of supervisory officer comments is provided in Appendix C.

Two former student trustees also identified innovative practices to enhance the representative role of student trustees. One former student trustee reported organizing student input sessions and visiting secondary schools after school to gather student ideas as a student trustee. The sessions were advertised to other students and promoted by the local secondary school student councils. The student trustee presented the results of the input sessions at a school board
meeting. In this former student trustees’ opinion, it was the most effective way for student trustees to gather input from students and allowed students across the school board to reach out to them. The input sessions also had the added benefit of enhancing awareness of the role of student trustees with other students in the school board.

One former student trustee reported touring all secondary schools within the school board as a student trustee, but was only able to do so because of a reduced course load. The purpose was to experience firsthand, from a student's perspective, what issues were facing the schools (e.g., physical facilities, student morale, student/staff relations, funding/support for extra-curricular activities). The student trustee prepared and presented a report at a meeting of the full board of elected trustees, including a list of recommendations intended to respond to the issues students raised. The former student trustee stated, “Elected trustees were happy to have received a new source of information, the response from senior staff could be described as lukewarm at best.”

Factors that make it Difficult for Student Trustees to Represent Students’ Perspectives

Supervisory officers and former student trustees were invited to respond to the question, “What factors, if any, make it difficult for student trustees in your school board to speak on behalf of other students at board improvement planning discussions and/or activities?” One shared theme resulting from a review of supervisory officers’ responses was that of time and scheduling associated with school board improvement planning. Three supervisory officers commented that because improvement planning sessions were held during the school day, it was difficult to have student trustee representation at the planning table. One supervisory officer reported that student trustees were often neglected or omitted from the invitation to participate. However, another supervisory officer noted that even though improvement planning meetings took place during school hours and the student trustee was not included, the school board did endeavor to collect students’ perspectives in other ways, such as school climate survey data. While yet another supervisory officer indicated that the elected trustees felt that they had a better pulse on what happened in a school setting rather than to call upon student trustee voices at the table.

Another identified challenge, related to the collection of student input, resulted from supervisory officer responses. Six supervisory officers reported that there was no formal format or process
for gathering students’ perspectives as part of the improvement planning process. In three school boards, the geographical size of the board presented a distance challenge.

The nature of student representation presented as a shared theme among six supervisory officers. One supervisory officer identified that at times, student trustees have difficulty distinguishing between their point of view and that of the collective.

Twelve former student trustees identified that student trustees were not consulted or provided opportunities to understand the board improvement planning process, making it difficult for them to provide input. In one student trustee’s words, “Plans were already devised by the time I saw them, the board never collaborated with me. By the time I read them they were already being approved. I also did not have a vote at school board meetings.” One former student trustee noted that student trustees were not provided with the knowledge and skills needed to have discussions with students about improvement planning, “I didn’t have a good framework to facilitate a representative student voice. I didn't have the student leadership team to do such an exercise.” Another former student trustee identified that “… by the time a student trustee was able to figure aspects of the process out, and the term was over”.

One former student trustee reported a perception, based on experience, that adults did not view students’ perspectives to be important and valued, as illustrated in the following quote:

> When I did give my opinion it was brushed aside and I often felt patronized. It was explained to me why the board was doing things the way they were, as if I were a child who didn't understand a math problem, rather than anyone engaging in a discussion with me about where and why student opinion and board opinion may differ. While I had access to an involved and intelligent group of students via my board's student senate, the board only ever wanted to hear from them about the events going on at the high schools, newsletter-style. They never actively consulted myself or the senate on any new policies or issues.

While another former student trustee identified it was extremely difficult to collaborate with school board staff to arrange in person meetings with students or student councils to understand students' concerns.

Six former student trustees identified that, in their view, they were not asked to be involved in the school board improvement planning process, nor felt they were encouraged to get involved.
However, one theme that emerged from responses of three former student trustees was the extent to which they were welcomed into their role, provided with support, opportunity and resources and empowered to share their perspectives. One former student trustee noted that student trustees had a very strong supervisory officer liaison who was a strong advocate and presence for them. Another former student trustee noted the positive impact of being welcomed by board members and asked to provide opinions on matters of interest to students at the beginning of the term, as noted in the following quote, “The school board was welcoming and inclusive of my participation. This made it extremely comfortable for me to voice my opinions, which were typically received well by other members.” However, the former student trustee also felt it would have been even better if the student trustee was able to consult and collaborate with students more in preparation for such meetings, in order to bring a more representative perspective of students to the discussions. Yet another former student trustee identified appreciation for the support received through peers and the provincial student trustees’ association as exemplified in the following quote, “The support I received from other student trustees that I met through OSTA-AECO helped me gain more confidence in sharing student opinion at the school board level when it was clear my school board had no interest in gathering student opinion or feedback through me or any other avenue.” One former student trustee discussed the importance of empathy when representing the perspectives of peers, as illustrated in the following quote, “…always trying to think from the perspectives of how the change/plan/strategy would affect my own high school and elementary school, as well as how it would affect those that are shy and not involved in activities within the school.” One former student trustee identified the impact of not being supported by a school board advisor as noted in the following candid quote:

Often, we would attempt to collaborate with student councils and we had some really effective student senators and some less effective ones. I think we would have benefitted from some coaching advice regarding the student councils and senators and how to motivate them to help us help the students. We really rely on them in our non-home schools and at times it was difficult.
Suggested Recommendations to Enable/Improve Inclusion of Student Trustees in School Board Improvement Planning

Supervisory officers and former student trustees were invited to respond to the question, “What recommendations would you offer to enable/improve the inclusion of student trustees in school board improvement planning?” Three supervisory officers made reference to fostering a more inclusive mindset toward the importance of students’ perspectives and appreciation for the value such perspectives brings to the planning process. One supervisory officer commented on the importance of student trustees being part of and invited into the improvement planning process, “…there needs to be an explicit invitation to have student trustee participation in the process.” Another suggested that student input/student voice be a priority at school student council meetings, student senate meetings and school board meetings. Yet another indicated that the school board’s senior administration was currently in the process of considering how to better include student voice in the school board improvement planning process.

Enhancing ways of gathering information from students was another common theme resulting from four supervisory officers’ responses. Suggestions included putting more focus on developing a method for student trustees to gather evidence and information from other students in order for them to have a more active part in the planning process. Regular student representative meetings open for all schools to participate to meet discuss and collect information was also recommended. A couple of supervisory officers suggested improving existing structures that would allow the student trustee to take a leadership role with students in the school board. Creating a student trustee focus group as one of the many focus groups used to inform the improvement plan was another suggestion for gathering information.

One supervisory officer remarked that the school board could certainly be more mindful of informing student trustees in more detail about the school board improvement planning process through existing structures such as the Student Senate even though they would receive the improvement planning presentation at a regular school board meeting along with other trustees. Assigning a supervisory officer in the school board to take the lead on having students’ perspectives clearly represented in the process of improvement planning was also recommended. A supervisory officer identified that the Ministry of Education may be able to provide provincial support for school boards by offering training sessions in this area. A couple of supervisory
officers suggested strengthening accountability measures that would ensure students’ perspectives is more directly referenced and recognized in school board and school improvement plans perhaps through a Ministry of Education created improvement planning process template that identified and required the inclusion of students’ perspectives.

Former student trustees offered a number of suggestions for enabling the inclusion of students’ perspectives in school board improvement planning. These included providing student trustees with the opportunity to talk to students outside of the school day, invitations to be involved and to feel welcome to participate from elected trustees and school board staff, inclusion in professional development activities/briefing sessions about the improvement planning process, identification of a well-defined process for involving student trustees in improvement planning and gathering perspectives from other students, and support from a peer mentor (e.g.; former student trustee).

One former student trustee identified the importance of student trustees being research, policy and advocacy focused, using data to communicate the students’ perspectives to key officials in the school board and the Ministry of Education as illustrated in the following quote:

All school board members need to understand the importance of student input, and seeking student input needs to become a standard part of policy making and program change. Until the idea of student input is seen as not only valuable but essential by all school boards, student trustees will remain symbolic figures instead of active members of boards.

Two former student trustees recommended extending the length of the term, noting that a one year term was two short given the steep learning curve. One former student trustee noted:

Having a student senate with representatives from each high school was a real plus. The conferences put on by OSTA were excellent and provided a lot of resources. Technology can be a great ally, if used correctly and with the full backing and full support of the respective board. Unfortunately, like “regular” trustees, turnaround time available for feedback for Student Trustees is slim to none. In many cases, following your gut instinct based on your perception was your only viable course of action.
One former student trustee identified the need for a thorough understanding of what student voice is, as identified in the following quote:

…a representative student voice is one that is reflective of the diversity-filled population that's being represented. There needs to be an accessible and inclusive framework for facilitating a representative student voice. Student trustees and student leaders need to try extra hard to facilitate all students’ voices and we need to recognize that some students are oppressed in ways that we don't understand, which sometimes makes it difficult for their voice to be heard.

Another former student trustee suggested the creation of an elementary senate as a vehicle by which student trustees can interface with their elementary peers. While another suggested making it mandatory for student trustees to be present during decision making processes at the board table that directly affect students.

Additional Comments

Supervisory officers and former student trustees were invited to respond to the question, “Do you have any further comments you wish to provide?” Some responses from both key informant groups reflected an appreciation for the invitation to take part in the survey as illustrated in the following comments: “It is nice that a survey such as this is sent out to former student trustees - so thank-you for that.” “Glad this survey is being done! Hopefully results will be helpful.”

I just wanted to comment that I love that there is a survey and that this is something that needs to be done incessantly (i.e. every year) by school boards to understand what support they need to provide student trustees with. I hope you hear from many past student trustees!

“The student trustee program is one of the most important and highest potential bodies in Ontario.” “Thanks for making me think about this idea! It's a good one, and perhaps it is done in our school board and I’m simply not aware of it because I am so new to the school board and my position.”
Conclusion

Supervisory officers and former student trustees provided informative responses to the survey questions. While there were similarities in the beliefs reported by the participant groups, a distinct difference emerged between the perceived experiences of former student trustees compared to that of supervisory officers. Overall, supervisory officers reported a higher level of student trustee involvement in the school board improvement planning process. By contrast, former student trustees reported limited involvement in communicating with, gathering suggestions from, and speaking on behalf of students in the school board, at discussions and/or associated with various phases of the improvement planning process. Qualitative comments from/by former student trustees provided some insight into the reasons behind this finding.

Similar to Critchley’s (2003) findings from a study that probed the perceptions of stakeholders on student involvement in educational policy-making, responses from key informant groups in this study demonstrated a favorable regard for student involvement in decisions that impact their educational experience. Some responses also provided evidence of the collective desire of supervisory officers and student trustees to work toward inclusion of students’ perspectives in school board improvement planning. Some members of both key informant groups noted that there were some challenges that need to be overcome if student trustees are going to be more involved in the school board improvement planning process. Critchley’s (2003) and Fielding’s (2001; 2012) recommendations that students and educational administrators receive training necessary to enable them to work together as collaborators applies and was referenced by some participants. Similar to recommendations from scholars such as Fielding (2001; 2012) and Mitra (2008), some responses to this study identified the significance of adult support as integral to enabling student trustees to represent students’ perspectives. Some former student trustees identified their desire to have a stronger sense of agency and to have a greater impact on things that matter to them in school, a belief that is consistent with Fielding’s and Rudduck’s appeal for adults to respond to the “repeated call from students for more responsibility, more opportunities to contribute to the decision-making, more opportunities to dialogue about learning and the conditions for learning” (2002, p. 5). It was evident from participant responses, that former student trustees would like student trustees to be able to voice their views about decisions that impact their educational experience and that supervisory officers shared that view.
Responses from key informant groups have also identified that there are school boards in which a variety of strategies are being used to include student trustees in the improvement planning process and that in some cases a higher level of student trustee involvement in representing the perspectives of their peers is evident (e.g., trustee led efforts to solicit input from their peers).

Some respondents identified factors that either enabled or impeded the inclusion of students’ perspectives in school board improvement planning via student trustee representation. Silva (2001) identified the need to develop more inclusive practices by acknowledging those factors that help and those that hinder student participation:

If schools intend to embrace student voice as a tenet of the decision-making and reform process, it is critical not only to examine the role of the school, but also to explore how students negotiate and define their positions as participants or non-participants in school change efforts (Silva, 2001, p. 95).

Similar to what Koller and Schugurensky (2010) reported, some responses to this study revealed that student trustees have limited contact with students they were elected to represent.

Some supervisory officers and former student trustees identified a desire to reflect on current practices with a view to adopting new ways of bringing student views to the decision-making table. I interpreted this to be a hopeful sign that there is a shared desire for further involvement of student trustees in bringing the perspectives of their peers to the school board improvement process.
Chapter 5
Discussion

The main purpose of this research study was to explore perceptions about the nature of student trustee involvement in representing students’ perspectives in the school board improvement planning process in English-language school boards in Ontario. Relevant literature and Ministry of Education of Ontario’s legislative requirements associated with student trustees and school board improvement planning set the context for exploring the topic. On-line questionnaires designed to capture the perceptions of supervisory officers and former student trustees through their experience were used as a method to come to a current state of understanding. The conceptual framework used in this study was informed by Fielding’s (2001) intellectual typology for student engagement and served as the basis through which research questions were developed, literature was reviewed, and research methodology was determined. Fielding’s framework for youth participation draws distinctions about different ways in which young people and adults work together that pay particular attention to the complexities and specificities of educational environments. For this research study, Fielding’s (2001; 2004; 2006; 2012) work was adapted, categories of student trustee involvement were modified, labels were created and an index for each participant’s perceptions about the nature of student trustee involvement was calculated for comparison purposes. A general picture of the nature of student trustee involvement in representing students’ perspectives in the school board improvement planning process, through the perceptions of supervisory officers and former student trustees resulted. In this chapter I will discuss the similarities and differences associated with data collected from supervisory officers and former student trustees and propose explanations for the results. Since an adaptation of Michael Fielding’s (2001) intellectual typology informed the conceptual framework and was central to this study, I draw considerably on Fielding’s work in my discussion.

The size of key informant group samples and the potential for bias presented possible limitations to this research study. The public school system in the province of Ontario is comprised of 72 school boards (60 English and 12 French). At the time of this study, there were 60 English school boards in the province of Ontario. I limited my study to include individuals who served in the 60 English school boards in Ontario. These school boards vary in the number of
elementary and secondary schools within the jurisdiction of the school board. I obtained information regarding the combined number of elementary and secondary schools in each of the 60 English school boards to categorize the size of the district. Since participants were guaranteed anonymity, I did not collect specific information to ascertain if all 60 English school boards were represented in the key informant participant samples. The school boards also varied in the number of student trustees elected annually and in geographical distribution across the province.

While it is likely that participants in the study did not represent all 60 English school boards in the province of Ontario, the legal requirement to elect student trustees to represent the perspectives of students at the corporate board table and the involvement of supervisory officers in the school board improvement planning process would be similar across all school boards, therefore the findings may be generally true across English school boards in the province. Areas that I believe to be limitations to the study and/or associated with potential bias are identified and discussed below.

The Researcher

As the only researcher associated with this study, I was accountable for all aspects, including the literature review and related analysis, overall design and planning, data collection, analysis and interpretations, and the framing and structure of the final dissertation. My current and previous work and my personal narrative influenced both my perspectives and approach. As a supervisory officer serving in a large greater Toronto area Catholic School Board, and having served at the provincial level as the Chief Assessment Officer for the Education Quality and Accountability Office, I have a pre-existing relationship with some supervisory officers. As a supervisory officer and a parent of three children, all of whom benefitted from Ontario’s publicly funded system of education, I am cognizant that I did not approach this study from an unbiased position. Furthermore, I have had the privilege of interacting with student trustees in various capacities at the provincial and school board level. On a more personal note, having experienced different levels of student involvement, I recognize the inclusion of students’ perspectives as important to the democratic process and children’s educational experience. Furthermore, having served in various roles at the school board and provincial level as a supervisory officer, it was clear to me that my personal investment in this work and my personal conceptions and
experiences would shape and influence my approach to this research. My employment in education was made known to all participants as well as my motivation to conduct research (i.e., the research study was being undertaken to fulfill the requirements of the Doctorate of Education Program). Furthermore, participants were assured of anonymity in the collection of data, data analyses and reporting of the final research results. In preparing to conduct the research, I did wonder if my employment with a school board would dissuade individuals from participating in the study, however, nothing in any reciprocal communication to association contacts/school boards suggested my employment would be a deterrent to participation. While, participants were supervisory officers and former student trustees, I do not believe there was a power differential actual or perceived. My initial solicitation for study participants was through the associations to obtain mass email groups. Supervisory Officers had nothing to gain or lose by volunteering to participate in the study or choosing not to as I would have no influence over them in my current role, thus should not have felt coerced to participate because of the position I hold in education. The same held true for former student trustees. Since participation was voluntary and the information collected through the surveys was anonymous, I would have no idea who chose to participate and who chose not to.

**Participant Characteristics**

With intent, I did not seek certain demographic information (i.e.; gender, age) from key informant groups, as it was my opinion that the information was not critical in order to answer my research question. As the study required former student trustees to retrospectively share their perceptions/experiences, memory recall may have factored into the accuracy of the information shared. I did have to rely on the email contact information compiled by associations/school boards to solicit participation. If former student trustees did not provide contact information, then they would not have been captured in my solicitation.

**Availability of Participants**

One problem with using samples, as identified by Gravetter & Wallnau (2013), is that a sample provides only limited information about the population. Although samples are generally representative of their populations, a sample is not expected to give a perfectly true picture of the entire population. If all former student trustees and supervisory officers in the 60 English school
boards participated in the study, the responses may have been more reflective of the target populations.

**Methodology Used to Collect Data**

The sole use of an on-line survey to collect data may have limited the ability to capture nuances and insights offered by participants through responses to the open-ended items in the survey. Furthermore, it is possible that the use of an on-line survey for this study discouraged individuals from participating, given the impersonal nature of the tool.

While these influences, as described above, may have compromised objectivity and may be seen to be limitations of the study, they did afford a valuable point of view, in that they provided a personal nuance to the development and outcomes of the research study. As researchers, we are never fully detached from our biases; rather we connect them to our research to make our efforts more deeply meaningful and authentic. This ‘harnessing’ of bias is, after all, one of the defining characteristics of research: the intersection between the research and the researcher (Merriam, 2009; Johnson & Christensen, 2012).

As identified by the Canadian Education Association (2009), students have a better educational experience when educators and students actively collaborate in the process of improvement. Other scholars agree. Knight Abowitz (2013), a strong proponent of increased stakeholder involvement in education writes, “It is through the act of discussing our observations and perspectives about schooling and youth with others that we can learn and understand more about the problem, comparing our perspectives and views with those of others.” (p. 96), and as noted by Mitra (2008), youth participation in improvement efforts, reminds educators that students possess unique knowledge and perspectives about their educational experience that adults cannot fully replicate.

Fielding (2001) has identified issues associated with initiatives intended to transform thinking and practices about student engagement three of which, in Fielding’s view, “push hard at the boundaries of our current traditions and practices” (2001, p. 129). The first relates to attitudes and dispositions, the second has to do with organizational cultures and practices, and the third has to do with the possibility and desire for educators and students to engage in what Fielding refers to as radical collegiality” (p. 130). I was particularly struck by two findings that resulted
from this study that were identified by Fielding in his work and represent two critically important factors (i.e. beliefs and practice) that influence the extent to which students’ perspectives is actively sought and represented by student trustees in decisions that impact their educational experience. The first is the shared belief held by both adults and former student trustees in this study, as evidenced by the importance that both key informant groups put on the inclusion of students’ perspectives in decisions that affect their educational experience. Clearly, students’ perspectives are viewed to be valued and necessary. The second is that this study found a difference in perceptions held by supervisory officers and former student trustees about the extent to which student trustees are involved in the improvement planning process. That is to say, in spite of the shared importance both key informant groups in this study put on the inclusion of students’ perspectives in the educational decision making process, the nature of student trustee involvement in the improvement process was viewed differently by supervisory officers as compared to former student trustees. Furthermore, in relation to the categories of involvement used in this study, student trustee involvement was not substantive, nor characteristic of a reciprocal relationship where adults and student trustees conjointly worked to understand and improve the conditions for learning and well-being. These findings will be expanded on in the discussion that follows.

Shared Beliefs

One of the questions I wanted to explore in this study was whether or not supervisory officers and student trustees perceived the inclusion of students’ perspectives in the improvement planning process to be important. The high level of agreement reported by participants from both key informant groups to the statement; it is important for student trustees to speak on behalf of students at school board improvement discussions and/or activities, supports the beliefs inherent in the ever growing body of knowledge that continues to shape perceptions, practices and policies toward supporting the inclusion of students’ perspectives – the inclusion of students’ perspectives in decisions that impact their educational experience is valued. Moreover, the mutually high level of agreement from participants confirms the work of those who have an interest in student engagement (Fielding, 2001, 2012; Cook-Slather 2002, 2006, 2007; Critchley, 2003; Mitra, 2007) and the rationale behind provincial efforts, especially over the last decade, to actively promote and reposition students in educational improvement efforts. As presented in previous chapters, a number of scholars and researchers have studied and written about the
involvement of students and the resulting impact on students’ self-efficacy, educational achievement and overall satisfaction with their educational experiences. Critchley (2003) observed that all participants in his study indicated a very positive regard for student involvement in policy-making and Lindeman (2004) found that directors and chairs of school boards reported “having students at the corporate board table encouraged youth to provide influential adults with specific insight into school experiences from an adolescent’s point of view” (p. 208). Lindeman (2004) also found that the increased desire for students to be included in school board decision-making, and the successful lobbying and leadership activities of the OSTA/AECO has resulted in progressively and increasingly more involvement of student trustees. An important finding by Lindeman (2004) was that directors, chairs and former student trustees from a number of school boards reported that even if there no longer was a legislative requirement to elect student trustees, they believed the position would be retained. These individuals recognized the value the role added to discussion tables, even though some of these same individuals could not articulate specific activities or initiatives that had been influenced by the students. Similar to Lindeman’s study, the findings of this study identify that both adults and students share a common belief that students’ perspectives are necessary and central to educational decisions intended to improve student achievement and well-being.

Since this study drew on the experiences of supervisory officers and former student trustees situated in the Ontario English public school system, I surmise that the reported importance both key informant groups attribute to the inclusion of students’ perspectives in school board improvement planning, may have been significantly shaped by factors that contribute to the Ontario education context such as changes to provincial legislation and school board policies and practices, the proliferation of student engagement/research by the province’s Ministry of Education (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2011), leadership related articles (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2013), advocacy from the Ontario Student Trustee Association, and student engagement initiatives at the provincial level that have raised awareness of the importance of students’ perspectives in educational decisions that affect them across the province. Furthermore, the Ministry of Education’s move toward more inclusionary, collaborative practices (e.g., parent involvement committees, student advisory councils), may have also positively influenced perceptions of supervisory officers and former student trustees about the value of giving voice to a variety of stakeholders in decisions that impact their experience or that
of their children. Perhaps the tide is beginning to turn from a traditional view of students as passive recipients/products of change in educational reform to one in which students are viewed to have agency in change efforts and students’ perspectives are recognized as a necessary ingredient. Cook-Slather (2006) notes that “young people have unique perspectives on learning, teaching and schooling, that their insights warrant not only our attention but also the responses of adults, and that they should be afforded opportunities to actively shape their education” (p. 359). Including the perspectives of students can help to initiate and implement meaningful improvement plans. The intentional solicitation of students’ perspectives is of particular importance for groups of students who may be struggling to achieve success or feel marginalized. In my estimation, this shared belief provides for a solid foundation upon which to build new ways of creative collaboration between student trustees and adults.

Nature of Student Trustee Involvement

This study also worked to determine if there was a difference in perceptions between supervisory officers and student trustees related to the nature of student trustee engagement in representing the inclusion of students’ perspectives in school board improvement plans. Positive perceptions about the importance of students’ perspectives in educational decision-making can serve little purpose unless reflected in actual practice. The evidence garnered from this study reveals a difference between accepted thinking and actual practice. Perceptions about the involvement of student trustees in various stages of school board improvement planning falls at the lower end of Fielding’s (2001) categories of involvement. The extent to which students are engaged as co-learners and co-contributors in discussions and/or activities about student achievement and well-being, indicative of a higher level of engagement, according to Fielding’s (2001) categories, is not perceived equally by supervisory officers and former student trustees. While there was similar agreement about the importance of including students’ perspectives in the improvement planning process, and evidence from this study identified examples of practices and mechanisms currently being used to enable student trustees to provide their perspectives, the practice of engaging student trustees specifically in different phases of school board improvement planning at the higher end of the adapted Fielding (2001) categories was less evident. Both key informant groups reported limited ability for student trustees to identify issues students saw as important in their educational experiences, with the support of school board staff in facilitating and enabling roles, gathering evidence, making meaning together and putting forward suggestions for areas of
improvement and strategies to achieve goals. Moreover, the difference in perceptions between supervisory officers and former student trustees about the nature of student trustee involvement in various stages of the improvement planning process suggests there may be a disconnect between these two groups in what they believe characterizes a high level of involvement.

Similarly, Lindeman (2004) found that, while there was strong support for the concept of student trustees, and that student trustee engagement in initiatives was greater in the last two years of the five year window associated with the study, there were only a few initiatives student trustees were involved in over the five year period the study focused on. Fullan (2001), an author and scholar who has studied change processes in education over the last number of years, also found little evidence of student involvement in educational change. However, more recently, a cross case study by Fullan, Rodway and Rincon-Gallardo (April 2016) into deep learning and new pedagogies reports that by focusing on and developing new learning partnerships with other stakeholders as sources of knowledge and expertise, educators experienced a shift in mindset. Of relevance to this study is the finding that students saw themselves as; “…agents of change within their classrooms, schools and beyond...” (Fullan, Rodway & Rincon-Gallardo, April 2016, p. 13).

This study worked to understand the ways in which student trustees communicate with and gather perspectives from other students in the school board. Both supervisory officers and student trustees identified methods used by student trustees for this purpose, however responses from participants revealed that current structures and processes within school boards used to solicit input are still very much tied to traditional ways of seeking input from young people. That is to say, school boards tend to rely on the sole perceptions of the student trustee or information garnered through student councils. There was minimal evidence that school boards assisted student trustees to leverage technology as a way of reaching out to a broader student audience, or to ensure the variant students’ perspectives were solicited to inform educational decision-making. Similar to Lindeman’s (2004) findings that student trustees reported a higher level of interaction with student councils than did their predecessors, this study also confirms a high level of interaction with student councils. In fact, it as one of the most frequently cited ways in which student trustees interfaced with their peers. However, Lindeman’s (2004) study also found that student trustees had very little involvement in school board activities other than attending school board meetings, and although they did try, they were unsuccessful in having
regular contact with student councils in secondary schools. Twelve years after Lindeman’s (2004) study, evidence from this study would also suggest that while progress has been made in connecting student trustees via student councils with their peers, overall, student trustees perceived little opportunity to communicate with, gather information from and represent the perspectives of their peers.

Generally speaking, former student trustees rated their experiences in the improvement planning process as very low and some reported their involvement to be largely ceremonial, confirming what Cook-Sather (2002) cautions against “Efforts to attend to students’ perspectives cannot remain mere add-ons or polite gestures toward learning” (p. 11). A few former student trustees commented on lack of occasion for input into the improvement planning process, while a couple identified feelings of tokenism, indicative of involvement at the lower end of the categories used in this study, an issue also identified by Fielding (2004) in his work:

Too much contemporary student voice work invites failure and disillusion, either because its methodologies and contextual circumstances reinforce subjugation, or because its valorization pays too little to the extent to which young people are already incorporated by the practices of what is cool or customary (p. 296).

Furthermore, while overall, both supervisory officers and former student trustees indicated involvement at the lower end of the categories, this perception was more pronounced for former student trustees. Involvement at the lower end of the categories is indicative of student trustees not being involved in the process at all or, if they are, they bring their own views to discussions and/or activities, without engaging in a process of gathering the perspectives of their peers. One of the dangers inherent in speaking on behalf of other students without soliciting the viewpoints of the broader student body is that one may not accurately reflect the views of one’s peers. Fielding (2004), who advocates relationships between adults and students that promote speaking with, rather than speaking for, identifies problems associated with speaking for others:

…the central problem of speaking about others lies in our tendency, by default or by design, to mistake or betray the realities and interests of those about whom we speak in favour of our own or those to whom we defer… (p. 299).
While this study did not probe demographic information about student trustees, such as academic stream or gender, Lindeman (2004) found that the majority of student trustees in her study were female and had parents who were employed by the school board. Consequently, Lindeman (2004) recommended “student trustees should be representative of the student body, elected by the students of the school board to address the reality of elite participation” (p. 258). Since Lindeman’s study, legislation has been enacted that requires student trustees to be elected by the students of the board. Even so, if the nature of student trustee involvement in improvement discussions and/or activities is predominantly at the lower end of the categories, as evidenced in this study, then it is more likely that the student trustee is drawing on his/her own educational experiences and reflecting those experiences in the perspectives he/she brings to the discussion, rather than reflecting the perspectives of the collective and diverse student population in the school board. In so doing, the potential exists that some very important insights about practices that enable or challenge student success may be missed, especially as relates to marginalized students. The potential for a skewed perspectives has also been noted by Silva (2001), who questions which students are representing students’ perspectives, wondering “… in the context of reform, can these students who are best served by the current set-up of their school possibly serve the interests of students who are least well-served?” (p. 98). Thus in order to increase the likelihood that school board improvement plans reflect and respond to the diverse learning needs, a broader, consultative approach is called for.

Organizational Structures and Cultures

The study worked to understand factors that, in the view of supervisory officers and former student trustees inhibit or facilitate the inclusion of students’ perspectives in school board improvement plans through student trustee representation. This study did not probe deeply into factors that might attribute to the current state of student trustee involvement and the perceptions held by both key informant groups (e.g.; power differential, organizational culture and structure). However, if school boards are to move to what Fielding (2001) refers to as a radical collegial relationship between adults and student trustees, adults need to see the nature of student trustee involvement in school board improvement planning differently and confront the issues that may be preventing student trustee involvement, particularly at the higher end of the categories. Some may say this is easier said than done. Inviting students’ perspectives, as noted by Toshalis and Nakkula (2012) “is sometimes misunderstood either as pandering to students or as a practice that
makes the teacher irrelevant” (p. 33). Similarly, as noted by Rudduck and Fielding (2006), the idea of students and educators collaborating to discuss their work together can generate a lot of anxiety. However, in their experience working with young people, they found:

…in most settings young people are serious, courteous and constructive in their commentaries on teaching and learning; harsh criticism of school regimes tends only to be triggered by perceptions of the invidiously different ways that different groups are treated, valued and privileged but if schools are to improve, this is the kind of uncomfortable self-knowledge that they need to confront (Rudduck and Fielding, 2006, pp. 225-226).

The process of consultation and participation has greater potential for being perceived as authentic and meaningful to student trustees when they are invited into a collegial relationship with adults. Such a relationship is characterized by students’ active involvement in determining the process that will be used to solicit students’ perspectives, the extent to which adults demonstrate genuine interest in what they have to say, and whether or not suggestions brought to improvement planning activities and discussions, representing students’ perspectives, are acted upon. As Fielding (2001) argues, one of the reasons engaging students as co-researchers in educational reform in a dialogic relationship is critical, is the capacity to help educators and school board leaders identify key issues which may be contributing to lack of progress in student achievement and well-being.

Fielding (2004) notes that students have difficulty finding a place within organizational arrangements and new organizational structures need to emerge to accommodate or further their involvement. While not pervasive across school boards in the province, new approaches to student involvement in educational decision making are being adopted, some of which were referenced in this research study. Lindeman’s (2004) study also found that some school boards consciously made greater effort to support students who wanted to become involved in school board activities, including committees and policy development. However, as referenced previously, these approaches continue to reflect traditional methods that lack the reciprocity of a relationship with students that can enable and enhance the quality of improvement efforts.

As so aptly stated over two decades ago, by Treslan (1983) “It would seem that a major obstacle confronting practitioners is not one of being convinced of the merits of such activity – but, rather, to design and justify an appendage to the governance structure which will realize student
decisional input” (p. 124). Treslan (1983) suggests that a pathway be created within the larger context of improvement planning so that educators and elected trustees might have first-hand experience of the students’ perspectives. Soliciting the perspectives of students in the school board via student trustee representation has implications for ways in which staff support student trustees and the structures required to achieve such a purpose. As illustrated in some of the responses provided by the key informant groups, challenges to deeper student trustee involvement exist, among these are the need to consider enhancing current practices and adopting innovative approaches, time constraints associated with interfacing with other students in the school board to gather their perspectives, and leadership support for student trustees to enable them to engage in the improvement planning process at the higher end of the involvement categories as co-leaders, co-creators and co-learners.

To nurture a more dialogic relationship between adults and students, Fielding (2004) suggests, resisting speaking for students and instead speak with them, using evidence on student-achievement and well-being to view students as agents of conjoint learning rather than objects of professional gaze, and ensuring adult positions of power and personal and professional interests do not blur judgments, shape advocacy or get in the way of deeper understanding (p. 303).

This is where Fielding’s work can be informative to the transformation within school boards from traditional ways of soliciting students’ perspectives to a reciprocal relationship where adults and students are viewed as co-contributors in the shared undertaking of improving the conditions for student achievement and well-being. Fielding (2006) champions the Student as Co-Researcher model, where students and educators work as active partners in the improvement process and students are engaged as fellow researchers, enquiries and makers of meaning. Fielding’s (2001) Students as Researchers project intended to shift the location of power and perspectives to the students themselves, witnessed profound changes in beliefs and processes in secondary schools that were student-led. The project led to “the emergence of new organizational structures which incorporated students as equal partners in the process of curriculum renewal (Fielding; 2001, p. 129). Fielding found that the structural change followed from cultural changes in attitudes to students influenced by the students’ ability to demonstrate that they were competent and capable of identifying and articulating their perspectives about curriculum practices and models in ways that were not being brought forth by the educators. Perhaps a deliberate focus on adopting Fielding’s model as a way of expanding student trustee
involvement in improvement efforts could be considered by school boards with the support of the Ministry of Education and relevant associations/partners in education.

In recent years, deliberate efforts have been made provincially to demonstrate innovative ways in which students can become more involved in educational decision-making. The Ministry of Education for the province of Ontario has supported youth-adult projects intended to increase opportunities for students to contribute to education improvement efforts. The Ministry of Education’s Students as Researchers initiative, for example, focuses on providing opportunities for students to enhance their capacity to be co-learners and co-leaders, working alongside adults in improvement efforts, by engaging them in research projects embedded in students' questions and ideas about what they think might improve their educational experience and that of their school communities (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2015). Informed by the work of Fielding (2001; 2004; 2012) and Fielding and Rudduck (2002), the goal of the Students as Researchers initiative is to support and encourage youth and adults to come together in intergenerational collaborative inquiry, where questions of interest to students support their active engagement. Students work alongside teachers, mobilizing student knowledge. Students become “change agents” who affect school cultures and norms. Students and educators develop a sense of shared responsibility for the quality and conditions of teaching and learning, both within particular classrooms and more generally within the school community. Knight Abowitz (2012) refers to this approach as engaging in creative collaboration where the power differential between educators and stakeholders is flattened and the winning conditions are nurtured to give voice to a variety of stakeholders around shared beliefs and understandings.

The Ministry of Education’s Speak Up initiative is another example of a relatively recent project introduced at the provincial level to bring the importance of student voice to the fore in the educational milieu. Based on input from students across the province, the Ministry of Education identified nine indicators about what students believe contributes to a school that engages students and ensures all voices are heard (Ministry of Education Ontario, 2015). Three of them were explored in this study, empower students to speak their mind, allow students to give feedback on learning experiences and keep students informed.

It is my own view that if we are to move even closer to the goals associated with achieving excellence in student achievement and well-being, then through intentional facilitation and
support, we need to leverage the rich perspectives of the very students for whom educational efforts are focused. More importantly, given the diversity of the student population in the province of Ontario and the underachievement of some groups of students, efforts to increase students’ perspectives in school board improvement planning not only should consider already well-supported students, but the voices of students who are not meeting with success in their educational experience. This is why it is so important that student trustees are empowered and provided with the support and mechanisms to communicate with, gather input from and represent the broader perspectives of students, not just their own perspectives, and why the results of this study about the nature of student trustee involvement should be a call to action for educators.

Lindeman (2004) reviewed policies of school boards in relation to the legislative requirements associated with the purpose of the position and found that all indicated that the student trustee was to present students’ perspectives for discussion and debate, obtain peer input for presentation to the school board, and increase communication between the school board and students in order to provide students’ viewpoints and perspectives about the impact of school board decisions on their education and school life (page 213). Similar to the findings of this study, most former student trustees in Lindeman’s (2004) study indicated that the purposes of the role were not fully actualized and that there was no expectation by adults that students would consult on specific matters. Former student trustee responses to each question associated with the school board improvement planning process in this study would suggest that most indicated they were either not involved in the process or if they were involved, they only brought their individual perspectives to discussions/activities. Former student trustees rarely reported collaborating with school board staff or taking a leadership role to communicate with other students in the school board, gather their suggestions and speak on their behalf at school board improvement planning discussions/activities.

Lindeman (2004) also found that former student trustees expressed concern about their inability to consult widely with all students from all schools in the school board, in part due to distance and the perceived under-recognition by students, teachers, principals, school board administrators and elected trustees (page 213). This is an area that may require more focused attention and effort in the future.
The good news is that there was evidence in this study that there is a desire to see student trustees more involved in the process and, while not explicitly stated by any of the key informant participants, I think the education community might welcome suggestions for how to involve student trustees at the higher end of the involvement categories. To that end, I offer some suggestions for consideration based on my own observations, experiences and reflective thinking. Supervisory officers and educators are looking for innovative ways to overcome challenges.

An important phase in the school board improvement process is to analyze evidence of achievement and well-being to inform the identification of areas of focus, strategy and allocation of resources. This was also an area where distinct differences in perceptions emerged, whereby former student trustees identified a low level of involvement compared to supervisory officers. Such a difference in perception calls upon educators to think about ways in which student trustees can become more involved in the process. Currently, school boards draw on a variety of quantitative and qualitative data sources for this purpose (e.g. provincial assessment results, school climate surveys, locally developed assessment tools). Predominantly, the questions included in school climate surveys or provincial standardized assessments, geared at students, have been developed by educators, informed by research and best practice, and based on what questions educators believe need to be asked of students. However, thinking about new ways of inviting students’ perspectives can assist educators in evaluating their impact, something Hattie (2012) has identified as critical in making a difference in student achievement and well-being. He identifies that so often, adults have a plan and execute it, and that our focus needs to be less on what educators have planned and more on the impact educators are having on students and their learning and well-being. In his view, we achieve this focus by listening to what students are saying and observing what they are doing. Thus, informed by Hattie’s supposition that educators should find ways to “know thy impact”, what if for example, student trustees assumed a more reciprocal and equal role, collaborating with educators to design the questions/surveys that would be asked of their fellow students, gather and analyze results in collaboration with other students and educators, and bring that information to the central improvement planning table? What if educators worked to create opportunities where they could hear what students were saying about their issues. What if educators nurtured environments of trust where students could identify what does and does not work for them, because acknowledging and addressing
student issues and questions is essential. Better yet, what if the questions were the result of focused conversations with other students in the school board, representing diverse learning needs and students themselves decided which questions to submit for consideration in the survey? Would different types of questions result, the responses to which might give educators greater insight into the conditions that students identify will support their achievement and well-being that may not have been made visible through questions solely designed by educators?

What if school boards were to consider creating a student research advisory committee where questionnaires and research topics could be discussed through a co-learning framework to ensure educators are asking the best questions that students will be able to understand (thereby increasing validity of the questions), and providing authentic opportunities for student to learn about and experience aspects of the improvement process?

Another important phase of the school board improvement planning process is the identification and implementation of strategies intended to achieve goals. Involving student trustees in a meaningful way means to work to empower them as partners as inclusive, co-leaders and co-learners of improvement efforts. And while the idea of including students in educational decisions is not new (Dewey, 1902; Fielding, 2001; Giroux, 1989), evidence to support student trustees acting as co-learners and/or co-leaders in representing the perspectives of their peers was minimal in this study. In recent years, many, if not all school boards have adopted the practice of inquiry-based learning teams whereby educators collaborate to identify areas of focus aligned with the school board improvement plan, analyze evidence, develop strategies and monitor progress. Hattie (2012) purports that the most important work educators can engage in is to listen to students, which requires dialogue – adults and students joining together in addressing issues of common concern, considering and evaluating strategies for responding to and learning about issues, exchanging and appreciating each other’s views and collectively resolving issues.

What if student trustees were linked into inquiry-based learning teams or were supported in creating one that included representative students in the school board? Some school boards have participated in the Ministry of Education’s Students as Researchers project, where students and educators collaborate to identify an area of focus, identify an action plan and monitor progress. What if an integral component of the trustee mentorship program was training in the Ministry of Education’s Students as Researchers project? What if student trustees and educators collaborated to identify and conduct student-led inquiries aligned with an area of focus identified
in the school board improvement plan and together, student trustees and educators co-lead an inquiry that would involve representative students across the school board? What if social media, technology and collaboration software were used to break down the barriers to communication between student trustees and their fellow students? Would the more representative and higher level of engagement of students in the process illuminate considerations for the improvement strategy not otherwise thought of?

Involving student trustees in school board improvement planning processes requires intentional efforts on the part of adults, to reimagine the process of improvement planning and student trustees’ role in it. School board leaders are encouraged to use an expanded framework for thinking about student trustee representation to include opportunities to co-lead, co-create and co-learn together. Specifically, involving student trustees at the higher end of the engagement categories will require sufficient time and space for activities to be designed and implemented that are associated with communicating with, gathering input from and representing students’ perspectives. Since all students in the school board cannot be called upon to participate in, or share in the decision making process associated with various aspects of school board improvement planning, empowering student trustees to represent the broader perspectives of their peers through an explicitly articulated process avenue not only honours the legislative requirement of their role to communicate with other students in the Board, but enables the consideration of student data developed by students and on behalf of students to inform plans.

Comments from both supervisory officers and former student trustees garnered through this study suggest that there is a desire for student trustees to be more involved. Critchley (2003) also found that student participants, while acknowledging that their involvement in educational policy making has increased over time, would like to take on a more formal role. In the absence of a more formal role, as referenced by a couple of former student trustees in this study, students feel that they are given token positions in the process and their voices may or may not be listened to.

Conclusion

Learning organizations constantly look for levers that effect change and improvement. When I embarked on this research study, I was in search of a better understanding of the nature of student trustee involvement in the school board improvement planning process. There is
evidence in this study to suggest that student trustees are viewed to have a legitimate role in representing the perspectives of peers in the school board improvement planning process and that school board practices to support this view continue to progress and are changing accordingly. The study sheds light on what is currently happening in school boards in this area and found strong agreement about the importance of student trustee involvement in the school board improvement process but a difference in how each participant group perceived the nature of involvement. Further, this study reveals that the current nature of student trustee engagement in the improvement planning process within the Ontario education context falls at the lower end of the adapted Fielding categories for student engagement.

Engaging student trustees in school board improvement planning, as a collaborative, knowledge-building process is key to understanding how to improvement the educational experience of students. The study provides school boards with an opportunity to continue to explore possible ways in which student trustees can be engaged as co-leaders and co-learners in order to ensure broader representation of the collective students’ perspectives in improvement planning, introducing the potential for student trustees to become more involved in the process. Fielding (2001) offers up some key reflective questions that can be used to evaluate the conditions for student voice:

How do those involved regard each other? To what degree are the principle of equal value felt reciprocally? How do systems enshrining the value and necessity of student voice mesh with or relate to other organizational arrangements? Do the cultural norms and values proclaim the centrality of student voice within the context of education as a shared responsibility and shared achievement? Do the practices, traditions and routine daily encounters demonstrate values supportive of student voice? (2001, p. 134).

Articulating an appropriate and meaningful role for student trustees in school board improvement planning will be an important consideration when thinking about future practice, policy and/or research. To paraphrase Groundwater-Smith and Downs (2013), “if adults are committed to acting with student trustees in partnership, to improve the conditions that support achievement and well-being, future iterations of school board improvement planning calls for a coalition between adults and student trustees, a coalition whose formation will produce an authentic witness to the experiences of students by stepping with them into their places and spaces” (p. 7).
Chapter 6
Implications and Recommendations

This study sought to examine the perceptions held by former student trustees and supervisory officers about the inclusion of students’ perspectives in school board improvement planning through student trustee representation. In so doing, the study worked to understand the nature of student trustee involvement in key phases of the school board improvement planning process and the extent to which student trustees were included in representing the collective perspectives of their fellow peers. Information gleaned through the use of on-line surveys provided a current understanding of the perceptions held by former student trustees and supervisory officers from English public school boards in the province of Ontario and afforded an opportunity to consider student trustee involvement in the improvement planning process in relation to categories of involvement adapted from Fielding’s (2012) framework.

Caution is advised when interpreting the findings from this study because they relate to a small sample of supervisory officers and former student trustees from English public school boards in the province of Ontario. The public education system in Ontario is comprised of four types of school boards; English Public, English Catholic, French Public and French Catholic. Generalizing results across all publicly funded school boards in Ontario is not appropriate. Since this study did not collect data with respect to the specific school board participants were associated with, it is unknown which of the two publicly funded English school boards in Ontario they were from. Therefore, it was not possible to distinguish differences in perceptions between participants from English Catholic or English public school boards. Nor, did this study solicit information from participants regarding who participants were (gender, age, etc.) and consequently, it was not possible to determine if differences in perception had a relationship to specific subject demographics. Nonetheless, based on participant responses to survey items, the results from this study warrant consideration of the recommendations that follow.

Recommendations for Policy and/or Practice

Student trustees are afforded opportunities for high visibility within school boards as a result of the legislative requirement that school boards annually elect student trustees and the position student trustees hold at the corporate board table. Furthermore, the legislative requirement that
student trustees consult with their fellow peers presents an opportunity for school board leaders to consider explicitly involving student trustees in the improvement planning process, representing the perspectives of students in the board. School board leaders are encouraged to leverage the status afforded student trustees among their peers and take measures to ensure that student trustees are given the opportunity to take a representative role in the improvement planning process.

Articulating an appropriate and meaningful role for student trustees in the school board improvement planning process will be an important consideration when thinking about modifications to existing school board practices. Leaders in school boards are encouraged to use an expanded framework for thinking about student trustee representation to include opportunities for student trustees to co-lead and co-learn, not only with their fellow peers, but also with school board staff. Provision should be given for enhanced interaction between student trustees and their fellow peers and between student trustees and school board staff about plans to improve student achievement and well-being. Varied methods of collaboration afforded through technological advancements in social media tools should be explored to address the challenges associated with time and distance identified by some participants in this study.

School boards should not be alone in their efforts to enhance the extent to which student trustees are involved in bringing students’ perspectives to the consciousness of adults tasked with guiding the improvement planning process. The Ministry of Education for the Province of Ontario may want to consider embarking on collaborative projects with student trustee, supervisory officer and director of education associations/councils, to explore how the Fielding’s *Students as Researchers* model could become an integral component of mentoring programs for student trustees, supervisory officers, elected trustees and directors of education.

The findings from this study identified that both supervisory officers and former student trustees were unanimous in the importance they put on the inclusion of students’ perspectives in improvement plans. However, the difference in perceptions between supervisory officers and student trustees may be suggestive of the challenges associated with creating the conditions for student trustees to be co-learners, creators and leaders in inquiry-based improvement planning processes, learning from and with each other. Some of the challenges were identified in this study. The development of training modules that specifically relate to ways in which school
board staff can support student trustees in their role to represent the perspectives of their peers in the improvement planning process may be of benefit to those seeking ways to transform current practice.

The Ministry of Education and school boards are encouraged to consider policies and practices that provide for direct student trustee involvement in the school board improvement planning process (i.e. providing student trustees with a formal statement outlining their role in the school board improvement planning process). This will also require staff within school boards to be more deliberate in providing student trustees with supporting conditions and to clearly articulate the importance of their involvement in local board policy and or practices.

In recent years, the Ministry of Education for the province of Ontario has intensified the focus on expanded stakeholder involvement in educational decisions. The provision of guidelines and policies from the Ministry of Education encourage and/or require boards to engage in expanded stakeholder consultations. The Pupil Accommodation Review Guideline (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2015) and the Community Planning and Partnerships Guideline (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2015), both recent Ministry of Education publications, set out an expectation that school boards engage in community consultation through expanded stakeholder representation on the Accommodation Review Committee and extensive public consultation. In so doing, the Ministry of Education intends to encourage students, parents and community members to get involved in the Accommodation Review Process. School boards are required to take stakeholder input into consideration before finalizing recommendations about school closure to boards of trustees. Through the enactment of expanded consultation processes, the Ministry of Education has demonstrated the importance of consulting with stakeholders who may be impacted by decisions for the broader education sector in Ontario. Recent consultations with parents, students and the public regarding provincial and demonstration schools (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2016) and experiential learning (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2016) are two examples of ways in which the Ministry of Education illustrates the importance of consultation before final decisions are made and plans are enacted. Perhaps the Student Achievement Division for the Ministry of Education may want to consider developing an updated School Board Improvement Planning Guideline that, in addition to articulating leading practice associated with effective improvement planning processes, sets out expectations for school boards’ staff to consult with students, parents and other appropriate partners in the education
sector prior to finalizing improvement plans. Additionally, the Student Achievement Division could request school board staff to provide evidence that students’ perspectives were solicited in school board improvement plans as represented by student trustees during their annual visits to school boards. The solicitation of evidence related to the inclusion of students’ perspectives from school board staff, and the role of student trustees in representing such perspectives, could also be sought during the cyclical operational reviews the Ministry of Education conducts with all school boards in Ontario.

In order to enhance the extent to which student trustees are involved in representing the perspective of their peers in the school board improvement planning process, different administration and practices paradigms will need to be considered. The Ministry of Education may want to consider extending the term for student trustees to two years (without increasing the honorarium) to enable them to experience and contribute to the annual cycle of school board improvement planning, by communicating with, gathering information from and representing the perspectives of their fellow students at activities and/or discussions. In so doing, it will be important to maintain existing mechanisms that encourage and support student trustee participation in the process. Any attempt to introduce new structures to the school board improvement planning process should enhance participation, not limit it.

School board leaders are encouraged to explore ways in which they can enhance the nature of student trustee engagement so that student trustees are supported in representing the various perspectives of students. While this study did not explore the extent to which former student trustees represented the diverse student population in Ontario’s public schools, involving student trustees at the higher end of the involvement continuum whereby student trustees are supported in their intentional solicitation of the perspectives of diverse students, especially those facing disparities in school can increase the likelihood that student trustee input reflects the student population they represent. It is my view that broader student consultant and input beyond that of a single student trustee is essential to ensuring improvement plans respond to the varied needs of all learners so that all can benefit from public education in Ontario.

One difficulty noted by some former student trustees suggests that they may be unsure about their contributions and that they simply feel they do not have the capacity or support to be part of a school board improvement planning team. School board leaders and relevant associations are
encouraged to not only provide direct assistance to student trustees in this regard, but to continue to nurture an organizational culture which supports and enables student trustees to be more engaged. The role of the student trustee must continue to evolve if school board improvement plans are to reflect the perspectives of students. This may mean reviewing current practices. It may also mean that current hierarchical structures in the system be adjusted so that student trustees have the opportunity to participate in the improvement planning process.

Across the province, we need to capture the good practices that are in place at the present time, make them very explicit, and synthesize them the best way we can. In addition, school boards and the Ministry of Education could benefit from understanding leading practices adopted in jurisdictions/countries outside of Ontario intended to include students’ perspectives in decisions that impact on their educational experience through peer representation and the resulting impact on future leadership actions. The Student Achievement Division for the Ministry of Education and relevant associations may want to consider developing resource supports and learning modules that identify ways in which educators and student trustees can work together to ensure students’ perspective is included in school board improvement plans.

Given that improvement planning does not just happen at the system level and students tend to see the world differently to the way adults see it, supervisory officers and school administrators are encouraged to support student-led inquiry projects at the individual classroom and school level, inquiries that students themselves view to be significant, in order to build the capacity of adults and students to work in a reciprocal relationship that nurtures an optimistic and enabling view of the contribution young people can make to improvement efforts. Moreover, educators, and policy makers seeking to engage students in consultation and decision-making are encouraged to adopt practices that promote students as co-inquirers. They are also encouraged to explore new and innovative ways for student trustees to be agents for bringing educational issues to the collective consciousness of those involved in the school board improvement planning process.

Finally, student trustees are encouraged to leverage the various opportunities afforded them in their role to bring forward the recommendations identified above and any others they feel may elevate the inclusion of students’ perspectives in school board improvement planning. There are a variety of tables at which student trustees sit, both within school boards and across the
province. Increasingly, student trustee representation is being sought by organizations such as the Ontario Ministry of Education, the Education Quality and Accountability Office, the Learning Partnership and the provincial elected trustee associations, to name but a few. Student trustees are encouraged to leverage both their voice and influence to highlight the importance of including students’ perspectives in school improvement planning through collaboration with students themselves. Rather than accepting no or limited involvement of student trustees, students themselves are strongly encouraged to seek representation at school improvement planning tables at the beginning and throughout the various phases of the process. The student trustee provincial association is encouraged to take a leadership role by requesting student trustee representation in the school board improvement planning process become a topic of discussion with the Ministry of Education Student Achievement Division. Student trustees can also use their voice at the elected trustee table to request the topic be discussed within local school boards and consideration be given for them to play a more prominent and representative role in determining plans to improve student achievement and well-being. The discussion of potential improvement planning goals, the design of school climate surveys, the review of student evidence to inform the identification of strategies to achieve intended goals and the monitoring and reviewing of progress, can all benefit from the influence of students’ perspectives and provide for a more authentic response to addressing areas requiring improvement.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

Even though the findings from this study are limited and further research needs to be undertaken to improve generalizability, results from this research stand to make a contribution to previous work and the growing body of knowledge related to the inclusion of students’ perspectives in school board improvement planning and more broadly, to the body of knowledge associated with the role of student trustees.

The study revealed a large, flat distribution in standard deviation for supervisory officers with the mean falling in the middle, indicative of perceptions spread across all four levels of the student trustee involvement categories. Future research in this area could probe the large variability in responses perhaps through follow-up interviews with supervisory officers. In so doing, one might be able to gain a more fulsome understanding of the factors that contribute to the variability in perceived student trustee involvement in the improvement planning process.
In spite of multiple attempts to elevate participation in the study, there are limitations to this study, most especially the small sample size. Further research should endeavour to achieve a more representative sample similar to the provincial distribution and broaden participation to include representation from all school boards in Ontario.

Researchers with an interest in students’ perspectives and more specifically the role of student trustees in representing the perspectives of other students, may want to consider exploring case studies of those school boards engaged in innovative practices intended to elevate the role student trustees play in representing the perspectives of their peers in educational decisions intended to improve outcomes for students. Researchers may also want to explore the perceptions of elected trustees about the inclusion of students’ perspectives in the improvement planning process through student trustee representation. Elected trustees are the policy makers within school boards and could play a critical role in supporting student trustees through enacting local policies that clearly articulate the inclusion of student trustees in the improvement planning process and define the nature of such inclusion.

**Significance of the Study**

While, as referenced previously, results from this research stand to make a contribution to previous work and the growing body of knowledge related to the inclusion of students’ perspectives in school board improvement planning, this study is the first of its kind to attempt to probe more deeply the perspectives of school leaders and student trustees in regards to the extent to which students’ perspectives are included in the improvement planning process via student trustee representation. In so doing, it has revealed unification in the importance each of these groups attribute to the inclusion of students’ perspectives in educational decision-making. At the same time, the study has illuminated a difference in perspectives between these two groups when it comes to actual involvement of student trustees. The unique framework used to explore the nature of student trustee involvement in the improvement planning process may be of benefit to others wanting to assess the extent to which student trustees represent the perspectives of their peers.

Finally, the study has identified that both supervisory officers and former student trustees would like to see a more participatory role for student trustees in informing the improvement planning process. To do so would require overcoming the challenges identified by these groups. To those
who aspire to enhance the inclusion of students’ perspectives and are invested in the success and well-being of Ontario’s youth. I end with an encouragement to all, be mindful that success doesn’t just happen. It is the result of hard work, perseverance, learning, sacrifice and most of all, love of what you are doing or what you are attempting to achieve. In my experience I have found that both supervisory officers and student trustees are passionate about the education system in Ontario, careers have been dedicated to serving it and young men and women have committed to representing the voice of their peers to improve outcomes for all students. Persist in finding new and innovate ways to bring students’ perspectives from students themselves into the improvement planning process by maintaining a focus on the positive outcomes that will result. Persist, in spite of difficulty, obstacles or discouragement. Continue steadfastly.
References


Merriam, S. (2009). *Qualitative research: A guide to design and implementation*.


Appendix A: Participant Recruitment and Consent

RECRUITMENT LETTER TO PARTICIPANTS SENT VIA EMAIL

March, 2015

To the participants in this study,

I am employed in a school board in the province of Ontario. As part of a project leading to a Doctoral Dissertation at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education of the University of Toronto, Department of Leadership, Higher and Adult Education, I am currently conducting research with regards to experiences and perceptions of former student trustees and supervisory officers relating to board improvement planning. The study will be conducted under the supervision of Dr. Carol Campbell, Associate Professor, Department of Leadership Higher and Adult Education, Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto.

The purpose of the present study is to determine the nature of inclusion of student perspectives in board improvement planning through student trustee representation. The factors that contribute to the inclusion of student perspective, the challenges associated with including student perspective and the involvement of student trustees in representing the perspectives of other students in board improvement planning discussions and/or activities will be explored. The supervisory officers participating in this study will be solicited from the population of supervisory officers who were employed in English Catholic and Public school boards in Ontario prior to September 2014. The former student trustees participating in this study will be solicited from the population of former student trustees who served in English Public and Catholic school boards prior to September 2014. Outcomes of this study will inform the scholarship on the nature of the inclusion of student perspective in board improvement planning through the engagement of student trustees.

The link to a web-based E-survey is provided below and will take you approximately 20 minutes to complete. Your participation is strictly voluntary and you may refuse to participate, may withdraw at any time, and may decline to answer any survey question – all without negative consequences. However, please be advised that once you click the submit button at the end of the survey, you will not be able to withdraw from the survey. Participants will at no time be judged or evaluated and at no time will be at risk of harm. No value judgments will be placed on your responses. The data collected will be rendered anonymous so that individual participants will not be personally identifiable. Only I, as the researcher and my supervisor, Dr. Carol Campbell, Associate Professor, Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto, Department of Leadership, Higher and Adult Education will have access to the survey data. The survey data will be kept secured and will be retained for a period of 5 years.
Following the survey, data will be analyzed and will serve to inform an understanding of the engagement of student trustees in board improvement planning in English school boards in the province of Ontario. Your (anonymous) responses might also be used in future research projects and/or presentations.

I will provide a link to the summary of research findings to the Ontario English Public and Catholic Supervisory Officers Associations and the Ontario Student Trustee Associations. However, if you would like to receive a copy of the results directly, please forward your contact information to marianne.mazzorato@mail.utoronto.ca

Should you have questions pertaining to this research, please feel free to contact me at 905-878-6960 or at Marianne.mazzorato@mail.utoronto.ca as lead researcher. You may also contact my supervisor, Dr. Carol Campbell at 416 978-1150 or at carol.campbell@mail.utoronto.ca

Finally, if you have any questions related to your rights as a participant in this study or if you have any complaints or concerns about how you have been treated as a research participant, please contact the Office of Research Ethics, ethics.review@utoronto.ca or 416-946-3273.

If you agree to participate in the study, click on

https://surveys.oise.utoronto.ca/surveyviewer2/index.php?surveyID=YVDIV

You will be directed to the web-based survey. The first question of the survey asks you to confirm your consent to participate by clicking on the “save and continue” button. I thank you for your consideration. Please print and save a copy of this letter for your records.

Sincerely,
Marianne Mazzorato
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Appendix B: Key informant Survey Questions

Survey Items: Supervisory Officers

INTRODUCTION

This survey is intended for Supervisory Officers employed prior to September 2014 in English Public and Catholic school boards in the province of Ontario. A similar survey has been developed for former student trustees, who served in English Catholic and Public school boards prior to September 2014. Survey items consist of multiple choice, rating scale statements and open-ended questions. Participants are invited to respond to the survey items, drawing from their experience/perspective. It is hoped that information collected from participant responses will inform a current understanding of student trustee involvement in representing student perspective in the board improvement planning process and inform future policy/practice. The next screen requires you to provide your informed consent to participate in the survey. If you agree to participate, click on the "save and continue" button and you will be directed to the survey.

I volunteer to participate in the research project regarding student trustees and board improvement planning outlined above.

I understand that my decision to participate or not to participate in this research project is completely voluntary and that it will have no adverse consequences on me.

I understand that my responses to the questions that will be posed will be kept completely anonymous and stored in a secure location.

I have read the information above and understand what my participation will entail.

By clicking on the "save and continue" button below, you are consenting to participate and will have access to the survey.

☐ Save and continue
PART 1: BACKGROUND INFORMATION

What is the approximate size of the school board you are affiliated with (based on the number of elementary and secondary schools combined)?

- 50 schools or less
- 51 – 100 schools
- 101-150 schools
- 151 or more schools

How many student trustees are elected annually in the board you are affiliated with?

- 1
- 2
- More than 2

What is your title in your school Board?

- Director
- Superintendent
- Assistant Superintendent

How many years have you been with your current school board?

- Less than five years
- More than five years

How many years have you been in your current role?

- New to the position (less than 2 years)
- Experienced in the position (more than 2 years)

PART 2: RATING SCALE STATEMENTS

Board improvement planning is the process through which school boards set goals for improvement and make decisions about how and when these goals will be achieved. The ultimate objective of the process is to improve student well-being and achievement.

Please indicate the extent to which you agree/disagree with the following statements.

It is important for student trustees to speak on behalf of students at board improvement discussions and/or activities.

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree
Student trustees have opportunities to gather input from students in the board and speak on their behalf at board improvement planning discussions and or activities.

- □ Strongly Agree
- □ Agree
- □ Disagree
- □ Strongly Disagree
- □ Not Sure

Student trustees would be able to identify a key feature of the board plan that directly reflects student input.

- □ Strongly Agree
- □ Agree
- □ Disagree
- □ Strongly Disagree
- □ Not Sure

Student trustees are provided with support and opportunities to share the board improvement plan with students in the board.

- □ Strongly Agree
- □ Agree
- □ Disagree
- □ Strongly Disagree
- □ Not Sure

**PART 3: MULTIPLE CHOICE ITEMS**

From the list of statements provided below, please select one that best describes student trustee involvement in discussions and/or activities about what areas the school board should consider for improvement.

- □ Student trustees are not provided with the opportunity to participate in discussions and/or activities about what areas the school board should consider for improvement.
- □ Student trustees are provided with the opportunity to contribute their personal perspective, by participating in discussions or activities about what areas the school board should consider for improvement.
- □ Student trustees collaborate with board staff to communicate with, gather suggestions from, and speak on behalf of students in the board, at discussions and/or activities about what areas the school board should consider for improvement.
- □ Not sure.
In order to identify areas for improvement, school boards examine various sources of information.

From the list of statements provided below, please select one that best describes student trustee involvement in discussions and/or activities about student wellbeing and achievement information (e.g., EQAO data, provincial report card data, secondary course credit accumulation, school climate surveys, etc.) used to identify areas for improvement.

- Student trustees are not provided with the opportunity to participate in discussions and/or activities about student well-being and achievement information used to identify areas for improvement.
- Student trustees are provided with the opportunity to contribute their personal perspective, by participating in discussions and/or activities about student well-being and achievement information used to identify areas for improvement.
- Student trustees collaborate with board staff to communicate with, gather suggestions from, and speak on behalf of students in the board, at discussions and/or activities about student well-being and achievement information used to identify areas for improvement.
- Student trustees are given the opportunity to take a leadership role, communicating with students in the board, gathering their suggestions and speaking on their behalf at discussions and/or activities about student well-being and achievement information used to identify areas for improvement.
- Not sure.

Once improvement goals have been identified, school boards determine ways in which they will achieve the goals.

From the list of statements provided below, please select one that best describes student trustee involvement in discussions and/or activities about improvement strategies (e.g., foci of professional learning for staff, changes in school/classroom practice, purchase of new resources, and provision of additional student/parent supports).

- Student trustees are not provided with the opportunity to participate in discussions and/or activities about improvement strategies.
- Student trustees are provided with the opportunity to give their personal perspective, by participating in discussions and/or activities about improvement strategies.
- Student trustees collaborate with board staff to communicate with, gather suggestions from, and speak on behalf of students in the board, at discussions and/or activities about improvement strategies.
- Student trustees are given the opportunity to take a leadership role, communicating with students in the board, gathering their suggestions and speaking on their behalf at discussions and/or activities about improvement strategies.
- Not sure.
Once the improvement plan has been put into action, school boards check progress being made toward the achievement of goals.

From the list of statements provided below, please select one that best describes student trustee involvement in discussions and/or activities to monitor and evaluate progress of the board improvement plan (e.g., anecdotal feedback from staff and students, changes in student achievement/safe schools data, etc.)

- Student trustees are not involved in discussions and/or activities to evaluate progress.
- Student trustees are provided with the opportunity to contribute their personal perspective, by participating in discussions and/or activities to evaluate progress.
- Student trustees collaborate with board staff to communicate with, gather suggestions from, and speak on behalf of students in the board, at discussions and/or activities to evaluate progress.
- Student trustees are given the opportunity to take a leadership role, communicating with students in the board, gathering their suggestions and speaking on their behalf at discussions and/or activities to evaluate progress.
- Not sure.

Board improvement plans are developed in collaboration with others and reflect various perspectives.

From the list of statements provided below, please select one that best describes the inclusion of student perspective in the final board improvement plan.

- The final board improvement plan does not reflect direct student input.
- The final board improvement plan reflects the inclusion of the sole views of the student trustee.
- The final board improvement plan reflects input from students in the board, co-gathered and communicated by board staff and student trustees at discussions and/or activities.
- The final board improvement plan reflects input from students in the board, gathered and communicated at discussions and/or activities, under the leadership of student trustees.
- Not sure.

PART 4: OPEN RESPONSE QUESTIONS

1. In what ways, if any, do student trustees in your school board communicate with other students in the board; gather their suggestions; and, speak on their behalf at board improvement planning discussions and/or activities? Open response

2. What factors, if any, help student trustees in your school board to speak on behalf of other students at board improvement planning discussions and/or activities? Open response.

3. What challenges, if any, make it difficult for student trustees in your school board to speak on behalf of other students at board improvement planning discussions and/or activities? Open response
4. What recommendations would you offer to enable/improve the inclusion of student trustees in board improvement planning? *Open response*

5. Do you have any further comments you wish to provide? *Open response*
Survey Items: Former Student Trustees

INTRODUCTION

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this survey. This survey is intended for student trustees who served in English Public and Catholic school boards in the province of Ontario prior to September 2014. A similar survey has been developed for Supervisory Officers who were employed in English Catholic and Public school boards prior to September 2014. Survey items consist of multiply choice, rating scale statements and open-ended questions. Participants are invited to respond to the survey items, drawing from their experience/perspective. It is hoped that information collected from participant responses will inform a current understanding of student trustee involvement in representing student perspective in the board improvement planning process and inform future policy/practice. The next screen requires you to provide your informed consent to participate in the survey. If you agree to participate, click on the "save and continue" button and you will be directed to the survey.

I volunteer to participate in the research project regarding student trustees and board improvement planning as outlined in the introductory letter.

I understand that my decision to participate or not to participate in this research project is completely voluntary and that it will have no adverse consequences on me.

I understand that my responses to the questions that will be posed will be kept completely anonymous and stored in a secure location.

I have read the information above and understand what my participation will entail.

By clicking on the save and continue button below, you are consenting to participate and will have access to the survey.

☐ Save and continue
PART 1

In what academic school year did you serve as a student trustee?

- 2013-2014
- 2012-2013
- Other (please identify)

What is the approximate size of the school board where you served as a student trustee (based on the number of elementary and secondary schools combined)?

- 25 schools or less
- 26 - 50 schools
- 51 – 100 schools
- 101-150 schools
- 151 or more schools

What is the geographical location of the school board where you served as a student trustee?

- Urban
- Rural
- Urban/Rural

How many student trustees were elected annually in the board where you served as a student trustee?

- 1
- 2
- More than 2

PART 2: RATING SCALE STATEMENTS

Board improvement planning is a process through which school boards set goals for improvement, and make decisions about how and when these goals will be achieved. The ultimate objective of the process is to improve student achievement and well-being.

Please indicate the extent to which you agree/disagree with the following statements.

I believe it is important for student trustees to speak on behalf of students at board improvement planning discussions and/or activities.

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree
- Not Sure

In my experience as a student trustee, I had opportunities to gather input from students in the board and speak on their behalf at board improvement planning discussions and/or activities.

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
In my experience as a student trustee, I was able to identify a key feature of the board improvement plan that reflected student input.

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree
- Not Sure

In my experience as a student trustee, I was provided with support and opportunities to communicate the district improvement plan to other students in the district.

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree
- Not Sure

PART 3: MULTIPLE CHOICE STATEMENTS

From the list of statements provided below, please select one that best describes student trustee involvement in discussions and/or activities about what areas the school board should consider for improvement.

- In my experience as a student trustee, I was not provided with the opportunity to participate in discussions and/or activities about what areas the school board should consider for improvement.
- In my experience as a student trustee, I was provided with the opportunity to contribute my personal views, by participating in discussions and/or activities about what areas the school board should consider for improvement.
- In my experience as a student trustee, I collaborated with board staff to communicate with, gather suggestions from, and speak on behalf of students in the board, at discussions and/or activities about what areas the school board should consider for improvement.
- In my experience as a student trustee, I was given the opportunity to take a leadership role, communicating with students in the board, gathering their suggestions and speaking on their behalf at discussions and/or activities about what areas the school board should consider for improvement.
- Not sure.

In order to identify areas for improvement, school boards examine various sources of information.

From the list of statements provided below, please select one that best describes student trustee involvement in discussions and/or activities about student well-being and achievement information (e.g., EQAO data, provincial report card data, secondary course credit accumulation, school climate surveys, etc.) used to identify areas for improvement.

- In my experience as a student trustee, I was not provided with the opportunity to participate in discussions and/or activities about student well-being and achievement information used to identify areas for improvement.
In my experience as a student trustee, I was provided with the opportunity to contribute my personal perspective by participating in discussions and/or activities about student well-being and achievement information used to identify areas for improvement.

In my experience as a student trustee, I collaborated with board staff to communicate with, gather suggestions from, and speak on behalf of students in the board, at discussions and/or activities about student well-being and achievement information used to identify areas for improvement.

In my experience as a student trustee, I was given the opportunity to take a leadership role, communicating with students in the board, gathering their suggestions and speaking on their behalf at discussions and/or activities about student well-being and achievement information used to identify areas for improvement.

Not sure.

Once improvement goals have been identified, school boards determine ways in which they will achieve the goals.

From the list of statements provided below, please select one that best describes student trustee involvement in discussions and/or activities about improvement strategies (e.g., foci of professional learning for staff, changes in school/classroom practice, purchase of new resources, and provision of additional student/parent supports).

In my experience as a student trustee, I was not provided with the opportunity to participate in discussions and/or activities about improvement strategies.

In my experience as a student trustee, I was provided with the opportunity to give my personal point of view by participating in discussions and/or activities about improvement strategies.

In my experience as a student trustee, I collaborated with board staff to communicate with, gather suggestions from, and speak on behalf of students in the board, at discussions and/or activities about improvement strategies.

In my experience as a student trustee, I was given the opportunity to take a leadership role, communicating with students in the board, gathering their suggestions and speaking on their behalf at discussions and/or activities about improvement strategies.

Not sure.

Once the improvement plan has been put into action, school boards check progress being made toward the achievement of improvement goals.

From the list of statements provided below, please select one that best describes student trustee involvement in discussions and/or activities to monitor and evaluate progress of the board improvement plan (e.g., anecdotal feedback from staff and students, changes in student achievement/safe schools data, etc.).

In my experience as a student trustee, I was not involved in discussions and/or activities to evaluate progress.

In my experience as a student trustee, I was provided with the opportunity to contribute my personal point of view by participating in discussions and/or activities to evaluate progress.

In my experience as a student trustee, I collaborated with board staff to communicate with, gather suggestions from, and speak on behalf of students in the board, at discussions and/or activities to evaluate progress.
In my experience as a student trustee, I was given the opportunity to take a leadership role, communicating with students in the board, gathering their suggestions and speaking on their behalf at discussions and/or activities to evaluate progress.

Board improvement plans are developed in collaboration with others and reflect various perspectives. From the list of statements provided below, please select one that best describes the inclusion of student perspective in the final board improvement plan.

- The final board improvement plan did not reflect student input.
- The final board improvement plan reflected input from student trustees representing their own point of view.
- The final board improvement plan reflected input from students in the board, co-gathered and communicated by board staff and student trustees at discussions and/or activities.
- The final board improvement plan reflected input from students in the board, gathered and communicated at discussions and/or activities, under the leadership of student trustees.
- Not sure.

PART 4: OPEN RESPONSE QUESTIONS

1. In what ways, if any, were you able to: communicate with other students in the board; gather their suggestions; and, speak on their behalf at board improvement planning discussions and/or activities? Open response

2. What factors, if any, helped you to speak on behalf of other students at board improvement planning discussions and/or activities? Open response

3. What challenges, if any, made it difficult for you to speak on behalf of other students at board improvement planning discussions and/or activities? Open response

4. What suggestions would you offer to enable/improve student trustees’ ability to speak on behalf of other students at board improvement planning discussions and/or activities? Open response

5. Do you have any further comments you wish to provide? Open response

THANK YOU!
Appendix C: Sample Open-Ended Responses for Key Informant Groups

Table AC-1 Examples of Comments Relating to Ways in Which Student Trustees Communicate and Represent the Perspectives of Other Students in the Board

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Supervisory Officers</th>
<th>Student Trustees</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“The student trustee meets monthly with the Council of Student Council Presidents. Information from the Council of Presidents is shared with Senior Administration via the Student Trustee.”</td>
<td>“We had a student senate for all 22 high schools in the area. Each school attended at least one of the senate meetings. I didn't do enough with middle and elementary students.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Our student trustees attend and present a school report at all board meetings. They also organize and lead a Student Super Council. This group provides to senior administration input on issues that are of concern to them. This input may be taken into consideration during the planning process; however, students are not actually at the table for that process, at least to my knowledge.”</td>
<td>“We had one meeting a month that really only focused on school-specific issues and provided a collaborative place for inter-school activities. There was no effort made to gather suggestions etc. - it was a largely ceremonial role. There was no encouragement for outreach, so we didn’t really think of doing it since that hadn't been the natural thing to do.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Student trustees have taken part in strategic planning for the board, and are in attendance for discussions on board improvement planning and monitoring. They have an opportunity to speak to the improvement planning, but have no formal way of gathering information from students.”</td>
<td>“Social media (Facebook, group conference, constant email reminders), senate meetings, hold information sessions, and school visits.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“They are active at the regular board meetings and speak on behalf of students at every meeting. They also participate in the board meetings where the board improvement plans are discussed.”</td>
<td>“Campus visits, surveys, focus groups, student senate feedback.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Our board is certainly interested in students’ perspectives and there are many vehicles by which students can convey their opinions and concerns (e.g., Students as Researchers, SpeakUp Grants, Student Super Council, Student Trustee reports at board meetings). That said, I do not believe these trustees are invited to the planning table.”</td>
<td>“My consultation with students was limited to my board's student senate (which only had representatives from secondary schools). We were able to discuss our opinions at the senate level, but at the board level I was not encouraged to participate in discussions (and when I did my opinion was not seriously considered). My board reports on senate meetings were limited to sharing the activities &amp; events occurring at the high schools - more of a glorified newsletter for the trustees.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Our student trustees really just listen to the board meetings and do not thoroughly engage in the development of board plans or strategic direction that I am aware of.”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table AC-2 Examples of Comments Related To Factors That Help Student Trustees Represent Students’ Perspectives

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Supervisory Officers</th>
<th>Student Trustees</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“Having a &quot;go to&quot; person allows the student trustee to feel comfortable and he/she knows that they have someone they can go to for anything. Also, the student trustee can be linked to an Assistant Superintendent in order to learn more about the process of board improvement planning and all of its components.”</td>
<td>“The board was welcoming and inclusive of my participation. This made it extremely comfortable for me to voice MY opinions, which were typically received well by other members. HOWEVER, it would have been even better if I consulted and COLLABORATED with students more in preparations for such meetings, bringing a more representative representation of students.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Close relationship with SO advisor, encouraged to contribute at all board meetings.”</td>
<td>“We had a very strong superintendent liaison who was a strong advocate for us amongst principals for other projects (e.g. a board-specific student survey) and made himself available.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Invitation to participate and contribute at BIPSA Committee meetings.”</td>
<td>“Empowerment, resources and opportunity. Need the opportunity before making change The support I received from other student trustees that I met through OSTA-AECO helped me gain more confidence in sharing student opinion at the board level when it was clear my board had.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“They are privy to all reports / presentations regarding the board plan at all board meetings.”</td>
<td>“Always trying to think from the perspectives of how the change/plan/strategy would affect my own high school and elementary school, as well as how it would affect those that are shy and not involved in activities within the school.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Perhaps knowing enough about the board improvement plan and having some background or basis to work with would help the student trustee in this area.”</td>
<td>“Being welcomed by board members and asked for my opinion at the beginning of my term.”</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“To be really candid, doing things and asking for forgiveness later, was really the best practice at my school board. Our board advisor was really unhelpful at best, and most often, my co-trustee and I found the most benefit by referring to the education act and board policies to force other people's hands to allow us to attend committee meetings and other gatherings. Often, we would attempt to collaborate with student councils and we had some really effective student senators and some less effective ones. I think we would have benefitted from some coaching advice regarding the student councils and senators and how to motivate them to help us help the students. We really rely on them in our non-home schools and at times it was difficult.”</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
**Table AC-3 Examples of Comments Related to Factors That Make it Difficult for Student Trustees to Represent Students’ Perspectives**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Supervisory Officers</th>
<th>Student Trustees</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“Sessions are held during school instruction time which make it difficult to have representation at a planning table. At times, students have difficulty distinguishing between their point of view and that of the collective.”</td>
<td>“I’m not a very good speaker.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“An appropriate venue and/or process has not been provided for student input.”</td>
<td>“One of the biggest challenges we faced, as compared to current student trustees, is that we served prior to social media becoming as big as it has become. Therefore reaching out to students and hearing from students was much different from what it is today.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“We do not have the student trustee at the table when BIPSA discussions are taking place. They are during school/class time. Student voice is collected in other ways such as school climate survey data.”</td>
<td>“The role of student trustees within the province was still a fairly new concept. In many cases the phrase you can’t teach old dogs new tricks, certainly applied simply to having the position of student trustee let alone actually being actively involved in long term planning/projects, etc. A fair amount of time was spent determining/debating what was and was not deemed appropriate for what Student Trustees could be involved in.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“The challenges lie in the fact that they are often neglected or omitted from the invitation to participate.”</td>
<td>“I was not invested in by the board with the needed knowledge to have discussions with students on this topic. I didn't have a GOOD framework to facilitate a REPRESENTATIVE student voice. I didn't have the student leadership team to do such an exercise.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“No formal process for students associations to meet, discuss and dialogue.”</td>
<td>“Lack of awareness of board improvement goals, attempts to meet them, and attempts to evaluate progress.”</td>
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<td></td>
<td>“The board rarely consulted students and student trustees with regards to board improvement planning making it hard to provide student input.”</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“While my board’s trustees seemed interested in hearing student opinion, the director &amp; superintendents of education of my board were very unreceptive to student input and discouraged my participation at board meetings. When I did give my opinion it was brushed aside and I often felt patronized. It was explained to me why the board was doing things the way they were, as if I were a child who didn't understand a math problem, rather than anyone engaging in a discussion with me about where and why student opinion and board opinion may differ. While I had access to an involved and intelligent group of students via my board’s student senate, the board only ever wanted to hear from them about the events going on at the high schools, newsletter-style. They never actively consulted myself or the senate on any new policies or issues.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“Plans were already devised by the time I saw them, the board never collaborated with me. By the time I read them they were already being approved. I also did not have a vote at board meetings.”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table AC-4 Examples of Comments Related To Suggested Recommendations to Enable/Improve the Inclusion of Student Trustees in Board Improvement Planning

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Supervisory Officers</th>
<th>Student Trustees</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“They would receive BIPSA presentation at board meetings along with other trustees, but we could certainly be more mindful of informing them in more detail about the process through existing structures such as Student Senate.”</td>
<td>“More than one year at the position but that would greatly affect the student. Having a student senate with representatives from each high school was a real plus. The conferences put on by OSTA were excellent and provided a lot of resources.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Certainly any structure that allows the student trustee to take a real leadership role with his or her peers.”</td>
<td>“Technology can be a great ally, if used correctly and with the full backing and full support of the respective Board.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Some recommendations are for student input/student voice to be a priority at school student council meetings, student senate meetings and board meetings.”</td>
<td>“Unfortunately, like &quot;regular&quot; trustees, turnaround time available for feedback for student trustees is slim to none. In many cases, following your gut instinct based on your perception was your only viable course of action.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“We will need to support them in the gathering of data and information in order for them to have an active part in the planning process.”</td>
<td>“Now that we are well beyond having a decade under our belts in the province with having Student Trustees…..one possible solution/suggestion (though it does come at a price), would be for boards to be required to hire a former student trustee(s), perhaps for a 2-5 year term, or longer. They could work alongside sitting student trustees in an advisory/assistance role. In theory, this would provide a non-partisan mentor to the new student trustees. This would allow for more connectivity (directly and indirectly) between the student trustees and the students within their board, perhaps as well as with other stakeholders such as parents, teachers, etc., while also allowing the student trustees to not jeopardize their own schooling.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Giving them more guidance and points of intersection to be part of the board strategic plan and direction.”</td>
<td>“There needs to be a thorough understanding of what student voice is -- be that what a REPRESENTATIVE student voice is -- one that is reflective of the diversity-filled population that’s being represented. There needs to be an ACCESSIBLE and INCLUSIVE framework for facilitating a representative student voice. Student trustees and student leaders need to try extra hard to facilitate ALL STUDENTS’ voices -- AND we need to recognize that some students are oppressed in ways that we don’t understand, which sometimes makes it difficult for their voice to be heard.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Regular student representative meetings open for all schools to participate to meet discuss and collect information.”</td>
<td>“Listen to the students. Most have intelligent things to say. Just because they are a student does not mean they are educated.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Mandatory briefing sessions so student trustees can understand the context, along with mentors that encourage student outreach.”</td>
<td>“Mandatory briefing sessions so student trustees can understand the context, along with mentors that encourage student outreach.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“All school boards’ members need to understand the importance of student input, and seeking student input needs to become a standard part of policy making and program change. Until the idea of student input is seen as not only valuable but essential by ALL school boards, student trustees will remain symbolic figures instead of active members of boards.”</td>
<td>“All school boards’ members need to understand the importance of student input, and seeking student input needs to become a standard part of policy making and program change. Until the idea of student input is seen as not only valuable but essential by ALL school boards, student trustees will remain symbolic figures instead of active members of boards.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Two year terms - a huge learning curve.”</td>
<td>“Two year terms - a huge learning curve.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Give them a vote and opportunities to talk with students outside the classroom, and to go to other schools.”</td>
<td>“Give them a vote and opportunities to talk with students outside the classroom, and to go to other schools.”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table AC-5 Examples of Comments Related To Additional Comments

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Supervisory Officers</th>
<th>Student Trustees</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“Student trustees provide valuable input not only to the benefit of other students, but also it’s important for other trustees to hear the students’ perspectives.”</td>
<td>“It is nice that a survey such as this is sent out to former student trustees - so thank-you for that. Unfortunately, for a number of years there has been a feeling among a number of former student trustees that our experiences are not appreciated by current student trustees and/or our respective school boards....”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Our board is interested in pursuing a greater link between the BIP and student voice.”</td>
<td>“OSTA-AECO needs to invest in cultivating an understanding of and strategies for facilitating student voice. This needs to be a priority that is looked into EVERY YEAR, by ALL student trustees, with knowledge being passed on during transition of incoming and outgoing student trustees AND new (scholarly/academic) knowledge always being added and refined.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Student trustees provide valuable input not only to the benefit of other students, but also it’s important for other trustees to hear the students’ perspectives.”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>