Listening, Learning and Relationships: An Investigation of How Principals Facilitate Student Voice

by

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A thesis submitted in conformity with the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education
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Abstract

The idea that students should play a greater role in their educational experience has emerged with fervor over the past twenty years. The importance of consulting students about their views of school and learning is not only progressively more accepted, it is becoming inscribed within policies and directives. Student voice is defined as pedagogies in which youth have the opportunity to influence decisions that will shape their lives and those of their peers inside and outside of school settings. The research shows an abundance of benefits that consulting students offers to both the students themselves and to schools. Lacking in the literature is research specifically examining the role of the school administrator in student voice initiatives.

This qualitative study sought to investigate the experiences of elementary administrators who were committed to student voice. Twelve administrators from a variety of school boards in Ontario were interviewed about their experiences facilitating student voice. It was found that participants used similar strategies, and experienced comparable supports and constraints. When examining the external constraints, a richer picture emerged, which led to the examination of the student experience using a spectrum of student voice proposed by Toshalis and Nakkula (2012). Based on this, four participants were examined in further detail because they were the only
administrators who experienced student voice within the classroom domain. The importance of bringing student voice into the classroom domain is discussed. The role relationships play in student voice was highlighted; parents, teachers, administrators, and of course students all impact student voice initiatives. In order for partnerships to happen, various stakeholders need to play a role, and thus suggestions are offered. Recommendations have been made for teaching the necessary skills to students, professional development for staff, parent involvement, suggestions for boards and Ministry and the necessity for developing the climate of the school. When relationships are at their best, it is more likely that student voice will meaningfully occur in both the school and the classroom domains.
Acknowledgments

In the words of Leo Buscaglia, “Change is the end result of all learning” – I am forever changed by this experience.

The adage ‘it takes a village to raise a child’ could equally apply to the scholar’s journey. Many wonderful people helped me and without their support I would not be submitting this work.

My unending gratitude goes to my thesis supervisor Joe Flessa who patiently guided my scattered thinking, helping me to refine my focus and think critically about my topic. He, along with my committee members Carol Campbell and Jim Ryan, have walked with me throughout every step of this journey.

My appreciation also extends to the external examiner, Dana Mitra whose work I have read passionately for the last five years. Her thoughtful questions have inspired me to view my own work differently.

I began this journey as part of a cohort, and I would like to extend my gratitude for the support and camaraderie to this group. My fellow ‘peep’ Donna Kowalchuk was a sounding board and inspiration to “get her done”.

I feel extremely blessed to have interviewed 12 administrators who so willingly opened up and shared their stories with me and in doing so have made this work possible.

My children, Bianca, Olivia, Harry, Robyn, Jason and Brandon have been my personal cheerleaders. Their belief in me was unshakeable.

My friend and colleague Marisa Benakis joined my journey from the day I met her, as I completed my comprehensive exams four years ago. Her enthusiasm for the topic of student voice and her critical eye, exceptional attention to detail and provoking questions led me to view my work in a different way. She played an instrumental role and I am both grateful and very much changed because of her.

To Ron, my enthusiastic and supportive husband who kept me on this path when I wanted to give up. He encouraged me to keep moving forward and he believed in me from day one. I would not be where I am today without him.

And finally this work is dedicated to the first and best teacher I ever had; my mother Dorothy Barnett, who inspired me to always be the best version of me.
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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

All people – and I mean scholars, researchers, and teachers, who in any place have set themselves to study children seriously – have ended up by discovering not so much the limits and weaknesses of children but rather their surprising and extraordinary strengths and capabilities linked with an inexhaustible need for expression and realization. (Malaguzzi, 1998, p.78)

Personal Connection to the Topic

As an elementary teacher at heart, I begin this dissertation with a story: The woman stands upon the embankment adjacent to the sea – the blues and greens a celestial canvas before her. There is the rhythmic echo of restless waves dancing along the shore, they whisper - swish, crash, swish, crash. Repeat. The air is damp, enveloping her in its salty crisp fragrance; she can almost taste the sea and all its wonders. As she shifts her stance, a gentle mist kisses her cheeks and she smiles in quiet delight. As she basks in the beauty of her surroundings, her gaze comes to rest upon a single structure - the lighthouse! Tall and solid, it is a mass of red and white towering into the infinite sky. The lighthouse and its gentle fortitude captivate the woman and she is unable to shift her gaze elsewhere. In all of its magnificence it stands before her, a seemingly resilient force - the woman does not yet know of the journey from which it has come, she is unaware of its story, she has not yet heard its voice. What comes next is of great importance. The woman learns of a story of a group of local students who united in solidarity to rescue an old and forgotten lighthouse – a daunting task indeed! This group of students cut through endless reels of red tape, they scaled insurmountable brick walls and stood tall in the face of much opposition. Their efforts resulted in the restoration of this lighthouse into a grand attraction that has since characterized both a shoreline and a community. The lighthouse was personified by the collective voices of these students and with every passerby that pauses to take in the lighthouse and all its splendor, their voices continue to be heard.
My encounter with this lighthouse was the onset of a journey that I did not yet know I would travel. A journey that inspired me to hear the voices of others, to see the voices of others, to feel the voices of others – a journey that has led me to this research study. A journey that despite how far I have come, will never truly be done. This lighthouse, at Cape Enrage in New Brunswick, had a profound influence on who I am as an educator and as an administrator. When I was at the lighthouse I was impressed by how the students were empowered to take on a cause that was important to them and turn it into something successful that would provide future opportunities for other students that would bolster the community. This was the spark that ignited my interest in student voice.

The lens through which I view student voice has been framed, in part, by my experience with the lighthouse. Freire (1998) talks about experiences framing the way we interpret information. My background as a special education teacher provided me with a sympathetic ear as I worked with students disadvantaged in many ways. It showed me the importance of listening to students about their experiences and their ideas and empowering them to be advocates for themselves and their learning needs. The importance of listening to students carried through to my life as an administrator in an elementary school as well as my life as a doctoral student. As I write my thesis, I am still passionately centered on student voice. However, this passion has an academic component that involves more precise and critical thinking that is not linear in nature. As I look at the interaction of student voice with the role of the principal, I recognize the existence of multiple layers of thinking, influence and ultimately transformational potential.

**Overview**

The idea that students should play a greater role in their educational experience has emerged with some fervor over the past twenty years. The importance of consulting students about their views of school and learning is not only progressively more accepted, it is becoming
inscribed within policies and directives. Increasingly, government and other political agencies are advocating for youth participation in making decisions that impact them directly. Student voice, the idea of inviting students to co-create environments that promote student engagement, is inextricably linked to issues such as power, values and an individual’s philosophy of education and view of the child. Neutrality is nonexistent in this literature; the assumption is made that students can and should have a voice in their education.

**The Benefits of Listening**

A pioneer in the world of student voice research, Jean Rudduck, proposed that listening to the voice of students offers a practical agenda for change at the school and classroom levels; it affords the opportunity to glean insight on teaching and learning from students’ perspectives as well as supporting a shifting viewpoint from students as passive objects to active players in their daily schooling (Rudduck & McIntyre, 2007). In her view, a greater sense of partnership between pupils and teachers will evolve from listening to what students have to say (Rudduck, 2007). Rudduck, Demetriou and Pedder suggest that for students, being heard offers them a sense of membership, respect, self-worth and agency. For teachers it facilitates a sharper awareness of students’ capabilities and provides a practical agenda for improvement (Rudduck, Demetriou, & Pedder, 2003). Lastly, for schools, consulting pupils can result in a stronger sense of school as a learning community and a commitment to enacting authentic citizenship (Rudduck, 2007). Toshalis and Nakkula (2012) examined research on academic motivation, student voice and engagement and highlighted effective practices. They concluded that fostering student voice was one of the most powerful tools to increase learning. They found that promoting student voice was linked to elevated achievement in marginalized students, greater class participation, better self-reflection in struggling students, and decreased behaviour problems. There are benefits for listening to what students have to say about their educational experiences.
Practical Applications

Although the importance of listening to students has gained popularity, the practical application of this can take many different forms. In her many writings on student voice, Dana Mitra (2006) postulated, “Listening to students is insufficient as an endpoint of student voice” (p. 742). How educators respond to students varies widely. Some responses can be begrudgingly adopted, and youth participation can be tokenistic rather than a truly meaningful partnership between school and students. As will be shown later in this study, there are a range of activities that exist in response to student voice.

Educator Responses

The importance of educators cannot be underestimated in response to student voice initiatives. Taines (2014) states, “Educators are a school’s gatekeepers, and they establish what counts as approved student conduct at school” (p. 154). Within the academic literature there are few studies that identify why educators choose to support or resist student voice initiatives. Mitra, Serriere and Stoicovy (2012) note that the role of the adult in student voice initiatives is one of its greatest struggles, and yet this is an area that is largely absent from the student voice literature. Furthermore, the skills of adult advisors are a critical component in successful student voice initiatives (Taines, 2014). Given the central role administrators play in the achievement and climate of the school, raises the question: Why hasn’t the role of the principal in relation to student voice been examined? The tensions principals encounter, barriers they must overcome and supports they receive are vital to understanding their experiences and can provide information on how to advance student voice initiatives. In their literature review, Toshalis and Nakkula (2012) conclude that student voice cannot be sustained without administrators creating space and time for it and therefore their experiences and challenges could potentially inform
research and future student voice projects. This led me to the focus of my research and associated methodology.

**Statement of Research Questions**

I consider myself an administrator who has actively pursued student voice in my schools and as such I have drawn upon my experiences to develop the questions that have guided this research. As I reflected upon my experiences facilitating student voice what came to the forefront of my mind were: the strategies that I used, the people who were involved/impacted, the challenges that I faced and the supports that I received. Therefore, these research questions are rooted in my experiences as an administrator.

**Research Question**

How do elementary principals facilitate student voice?

**Sub Questions**

1. What are the strategies that principals employ in facilitating student voice?
2. How are the audiences/groups/stakeholders impacted by these strategies?
3. What are the challenges/barriers to the facilitation of student voice that principals experience?
4. What are the supports that are helpful to principals in the facilitation of student voice?

**Theoretical Framework**

As I embarked on this research study, my thinking has been informed by critical democratic theory and this has shaped my research questions and methodology. Critical democratic theory places value on questioning the status quo to achieve social justice, with critical research focusing more on context rather than individuals (Kincheloe, 1999). Power dynamics are at the heart of critical research: Who has the power? How is it negotiated? What societal structures reinforce the status quo (Kincheloe, 1999)? Critical democracy as a philosophy, encourages the promotion of self-reflections that result in a change of perspective. It
is a viewpoint guided by passion and principle to help students develop a consciousness of freedom and to connect knowledge to power and the ability to take constructive action. It strives for social justice and focuses on whose interests are being served, who is benefiting and who is marginalized (Kincheloe, 1999). Critical democracy is dedicated to the notion of egalitarianism and the elimination of human suffering and in the process of becoming, students develop individual consciousness and self-reflection strategies that enhance social justice (Kincheloe, 1999). Other characteristics of critical democracy include critical inquiry where critical thinking skills, as well as action are valued; dialogue and discussion that are open to different views and an atmosphere which encourages questioning and public participation and which takes conflict and differences seriously.

At the heart of student voice is the idea that students should have more of a say in what happens to them in their school experiences. Consulting students provides an avenue to develop critical democracy at the school and classroom levels. Consultation values conversations, open dialogue and discussion about what matters to students; what helps and hinders their learning. It invites equity and participation by all and seeks to have students develop creativity and problem solving as they seek to cooperatively solve problems. Robinson and Taylor (2007) postulate four core values of student voice.

1. A conception of communication as dialogue
2. The requirement for participation and democratic inclusivity
3. The recognition that power relations are unequal and problematic
4. The possibility for change and transformation

However, it has been noted that student voice is riddled with questions of power and how decisions are made, who is included or excluded from the conversation and who is advantaged or disadvantaged (Fielding, 2012). Giroux (1999) argues that schools need to construct conditions
in which the lived experience of empowerment is the defining feature of schooling. Robinson and Taylor (2007) state, “Thus, if schools are to listen to the whole student body there should not be situations where schools favour those with a language and culture similar to that of the adults within the school” (p.11). If student voice begins with the recognition that power is present in all social communication and that groups have differential access to forms of communication and institutional power, then we are on the path to what Giroux sees as necessary: “That educators need to assert a politics that makes the relationship among authority, ethics, and power central to a pedagogy that expands rather than closes down the possibilities of a radical democratic society” (Giroux, 1994, p. 303). Following this, the goal of student voice is to challenge the processes that limit equality of voice for all in the school. Freire (1968) proposes education that develops critical thinking so students may become transformers of their world. In this conceptualization, power is located in the communication between teachers and students and from this a possibility of ‘building a new culture’ flows. Furthermore, Mitra et al. (2012) note that student voice has the potential to reframe traditional hierarchical relationships between teacher and student as well as among pupils and, therefore, as previously mentioned I have theoretically located my research in the critical domain, while being cognizant that this has informed both my research question and my methodology.

**Significance of the Work**

There exists a lot of research around student voice; what students say they want to have input into, and how their views, when considered seriously, positively benefit themselves and their school (Rudduck, 2007; Rudduck & Dimetriou, 2003; Flutter & Rudduck, 2004). Given the important role of the principal and the positive impact they have on the school community, it is important to know what they experience, and what they need in order to facilitate student voice. Such research is not easily found in the academic literature; a few studies are ethnographies of a
particular school or principal (Damiani, 2012; Brasof, 2015) and there were two that used a mixed method approach with multiple stakeholders (Meliksetyan, 2015; Taines, 2014). It is anticipated that in describing what principals experience when advocating for student voice, the strategies they use and the constraints and supports they experience, may lead to a greater understanding of the way in which policies and initiatives can assist administrators in this important work.

Structure of the Thesis

Chapter One provides a brief introduction to student voice, offers an overview of its history and then seeks to situate the research question and sub questions. The theoretical underpinnings of this study are then examined concluding with the significance and potential benefits of the research.

Chapter Two situates the historical rise of student voice and offers benefits for students and schools. The perils of student voice are discussed along with various ways to conceptualize student voice. It concludes with the conceptual framework that initially guided this research. A critical examination of how student voice is conceptualized is examined through the lens of many different authors, with the selection and justification for one typology.

Chapter Three reviews the methodology of this research. A qualitative approach was taken in order to acquire a full and rich description of principals’ experiences. The way participants were selected, along with instrumentation and collection of data are described. The multiple steps used in the data analysis are outlined and the legitimacy and scope of the study are addressed.

Chapter Four provides an overview of each of the twelve participants. Such an overview will assist the reader in establishing a context for the findings of this study.
Chapter Five discusses the findings of the research. The first section describes strategies that the participants used, followed by an examination of the supports and constraints the principals identified. Subsequently, the student experience will be examined more closely using a framework that was described in Chapter Two. From this analysis, the experiences of four of the principals will be described as they endeavoured to bring student voice into the classroom.

In Chapter Six, the key findings of this study are discussed, a new conceptual framework that evolved out of the research is described and key recommendations are offered. Future research is identified and concluding remarks are given.
CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

"What would happen if we treated the student as someone whose opinion mattered in the introduction and implementation of reform in schools” (Fullan, 2007, p. 148).

Introduction

A literature review seeks to “help focus the direction of your research” (Butin, 2010, p. 69). This chapter will provide an overview of the research as it relates to student voice, both broadly as well as in relation to the role of the administrator. Furthermore, a rationale will be provided of the relevancy of my specific research question: *How do principals facilitate student voice?* In order to move forward in discussing principals’ specific roles within this area, a foundation is provided on the relevancy of student voice as a whole.

A Case for Consulting Students

An overview, including an operational definition of student voice, as well as the case for consulting students and its benefits will act as an anchor for the discussion, thus demonstrating why examining student voice is relevant and important. Without an understanding of the impact of consulting students, there would be no justification for administrators to incorporate facilitating student voice within their role.

The term student voice has become the ‘clarion call’ for change in how we understand, respond to and work with students (Thiessen, 2006). However, as with many educational terms, there is no simple definition of the concept of student voice. In fact, many terms are used synonymously with student voice, such as student engagement, student citizenship, student knowledge, student empowerment and student council. Intricately linked with the concept of student voice are the values that underlie it as well as the approaches taken to support it. Advocates generally agree that student voice is an important element in understanding teaching and schooling, but how that understanding is achieved and what is done in response vary significantly (Cook-Sather, 2002). The operational definition of student voice activities that will
be used in this dissertation refer to pedagogies in which youth have the opportunity to influence decisions that will shape their lives and those of their peers either inside or outside of the school setting (Mitra, 2009).

**Background**

In the late 1960s to mid 1970s, there was a movement, referred to as ‘student power’ in which students advocated for the right to be involved in decision making that concerned their educational future (Levin, 2000; Manefield, Collins, Moore, Mahar, & Warne, 2007). This movement centering on democratic principles and rights was mainly targeted at the postsecondary level, and led to some lasting changes at that level (Levin, 2000). Subsequently, there was a retreat away from student voice to an increasing view of students as passive recipients of their education (Levin, 2000; Wisby, 2011). In the early 1990s a number of educational and social critics noted the omission of student voices in conversations about learning and teaching and called for a rethinking of such exclusions (Kozol, 1991; Levin, 1994). However, the focus of this increased interest in student involvement was no longer on political participation but on efficacy; it was believed that for reforms to be more successful, student voice needed to be considered (Rudduck & McIntyre, 2007; Mockler & Groundwater-Smith, 2015). In this recent wave of student voice, Wisby (2011) identifies three main drivers: the children’s rights movement, active citizenship and life skills and school improvement. I will examine each below.

**Children’s Rights Movement**

In 1989, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child stated that young people have the right to express their views on all matters that concern them and their views would be given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child. This was the most widely ratified human rights instrument in history with 194 of 196 members ratifying the
This driver gave legitimacy to consulting children and triggered governments to develop related policies (Mockler & Groundwater-Smith, 2015; Rudduck & McIntyre, 2007). There are movements in most countries to give children a say in matters that concern them. For example, some of the countries that have policies which require students to be involved in educational discussions and on school boards are: Denmark, Germany, Netherlands and Sweden. As an illustration of how this translated into policies and mandates, the U.K. publication Every Child Matters (2003) highlighted the importance of young people participating in decision making, both within the school and their community (Rudduck & McIntyre, 2007). In 2004, the United Kingdom established a Children’s Commissioner that backed the idea of a Youth Parliament. In Canada, the province of Ontario included in the Ontario Education Act, a regulation that stated that student trustees from the secondary panel (minimum of one, maximum of three) are to sit on the Board of Education, and are to be elected by students or student representative bodies, such as student councils. Furthermore, this commitment to give children a voice is consistent with new social studies of childhood which see children as competent agents in, rather than passive recipients of, social and cultural change (Lodge, 2005; Wisby, 2011). This view sees children as fully formed beings with their own ideas and interests (Bragg, 2010). The idea that children lack the ability to play an active role in shaping their own experiences is being disputed as they demonstrate an understanding of issues, both moral and social (Lodge, 2005; Wisby, 2011). The Children’s Rights Movement as a driver played an influence in some policies and practices of both governments and school boards, as well as aligning with the philosophical representation of children as competent social agents.

**Active Citizenship and Life Skills**

The need for schools to become democratic institutions with students at the center has been an increasingly adopted view in the last ten years (Lodge, 2005; Thomson, 2007). The U.K.
government, concerned about political apathy among young voters and low voter turnout, created a citizenship curriculum to counter this lack of political participation (Lodge, 2005; Thomson, 2007). This is a mandatory subject, where students learn about their rights, responsibilities, duties, freedom, law, justice and democracy. It has been argued, however, that students don’t just learn through the curriculum, but that schools need to become places where students have first-hand experience with democracy by being involved in their educational decisions (Levin, 2000). There needs to be an emphasis on students developing participation skills in schools and communities which will foster their “skills of cooperation which are necessary in order to achieve a more cohesive and democratic society” (Bragg, 2010, p. 20). The role that student voice can play in the creation of democratic schools offers potential for favourable outcomes but is ripe with pitfalls.

**School Improvement**

A persistent theme in school improvement is that it is important to listen to the views of young people, since they are the ‘expert witnesses’ with something to tell us about their experiences (Lodge, 2005; Flutter & Rudduck, 2004). To further extend this idea, arguments have been made that in order to sustain meaningful change, students need to be involved and have a voice (Levin, 2000). Cook-Sather states that by having a voice in their school, students “not only feel more engaged but are also inclined to take more responsibility for their education because it is no longer something being done to them but rather something they do” (Cook-Sather, 2002, p.11). Policymakers are interested in the potential for student voice to improve schools; the assumption is that giving students a sense of being listened to, trusted and having a stake in their school will help improve behaviour and engagement in learning and thus increase achievement (Mitra, 2004; Manefield, Collins, Moore, Mahar & Warne, 2007). However, it has been pointed out that “much of the enactment of student voice policies have been directed to
school improvement around the performance dominated climate and that student’s contributions
have been coopted to produce compliance” (Taylor & Robinson, 2007, p. 163).

**The Benefits of Student Voice**

Despite policies created to improve their academic experiences, students have rarely been consulted in school reform:

> Decades of calls for educational reform have not succeeded in making schools places where all young people want to and are able to learn. It is time to invite students to join the conversations about how we might accomplish that. (Cook-Sather, 2002, p. 9)

When students are involved in the process of school change, when they can effectively work with their teachers to improve curriculum, instruction and school procedures and policies, the research shows a number of benefits, to both students and to the school (Brasof, 2015; Rudduck, 2007; Thomson, 2007).

Based on years of research across many projects, Rudduck and Dimetriou (2003) suggest that “being able to talk about your experiences of learning in school and having your account taken seriously offers students four things” (p. 278). First, it offers a stronger sense of membership so students feel more positive about their school (the organizational dimension). Second, students will develop a stronger sense of respect and self-worth so they feel better about themselves (the personal dimension). Third, students will experience a stronger sense of self as a learner (the pedagogic dimension) so they can better manage their own progress in learning. Fourth, students will gain a stronger sense of agency (the political dimension) as they realize they can have input into and impact on things that matter to them in school. Furthermore, student voice has been shown to increase the involvement of those students who are most historically disengaged and underachieving (Brasof, 2015). In fact, Elias (2010) noted that activities that enhance student voice were among the most powerful tools to reduce dropout rates and close
academic gaps. Smyth cites 30-40% of students are not completing high school, “they are actively exercising their right to resist- making choices to not learn” (Smyth, 2006).

Rudduck et al. (2003) also identify the benefits of listening to students for teachers and for schools. For teachers, student voice activities offer two gains. The first, a sharper awareness of young people’s capabilities, occurs when teachers, who are the gatekeepers of change, perceive students differently. The ‘ideology of immaturity’ is still quite common in schools, wherein students are seen as too young to express an opinion (Levin, 2000; Rudduck & McIntyre, 2007). Student voice helps teachers to see their students differently because they are able to see the students from a different angle and they have the opportunity to actually respond to students’ insights on their teaching and learning (Rudduck & McIntyre, 2007). It also benefits teachers by providing a practical agenda for improvement and an increased confidence in partnering with students for meaningful change (Wisby, 2011). For schools, student voice contributes to a stronger sense of school as an inclusive learning community and it can also promote citizenship, social inclusion and social responsibility (Rudduck et al., 2003).

The Perils of Student Voice

There are problems with the conceptual understanding of student voice and with the way in which it is implemented, which include: singularity, purpose, embodiment, authenticity, and etiquette (Thomson, 2007). These will be examined below.

The singular use of the noun, student voice, implies that student voices are a singular and unified view. As with any other social grouping, children are not a homogenous group and it is unrealistic to think that all children have the same view or beliefs. Differences among children need to be recognized and encouraged, and not lumped together into one category (Thomson, 2007). Another concern is around purpose because students are asked or exercise voice for different reasons. Children don’t talk about the same things, any more than adults do, so voice
shouldn’t be elicited for a single purpose. Adults may seek the voices of students for a variety of reasons, and the purpose and context will produce different kinds of responses. Embodiment is a concern because in our digital world where communication often involves disembodied conversations, we may be missing some important information that is transmitted by nonverbal methods, such as body language, including gestures and expressions (Thomson, 2007). Bodily communication also includes adornment such as piercings, tattoos, or wearing certain types of clothing intended to represent identity or attitudes of the wearer, and therefore such nonverbal communication should also be viewed as voice (Thomson, 2007). Authenticity is a concern if voice is seen as consistent and pure. Voice is neither a one-off event, nor is it a pure truth. As Bragg points out, “It is naïve to think that children can be given or find their voice, as if it is a pathway to some kind of authentic core being” (Bragg, 2010, p. 31). A final conceptual concern is around etiquette; voice must be exercised in particular ways at specified times. Children do not always express themselves in ways that are socially appropriate or acceptable, and it is easy to dismiss this as bad behaviour rather than something that requires attention or serious consideration (Thomson, 2007).

There are also many practical issues involved in the application of student voice. Student representation may be tokenistic and a demeaning experience if students do not have an authentic role, but are gathered as if they were “Christmas tree decorations on an already pre-determined reform for their own good” (Cook-Sather, 2006, p. 368). One of the biggest issues in student voice is who is allowed to speak, and whether the practice of listening to students reinforces hierarchy and privilege among students (Fielding, 2012; Bahou, 2011). Postmodern and poststructuralist feminists caution against using student voice as a central element of empowerment because they feel these relationships tend to further entrench power relations that exist among students (Cook-Sather, 2002). It has been argued that only selected students are
chosen to represent their peers, and these students are often seen by staff as being good, or gifted, or safe; difficult students are often omitted from student voice activities (Mockler & Groundwater-Smith, 2015; Bahou, 2011). Other examples of practical issues that plague student voice include discussion topics being limited and students not being prepared, in the sense that they aren’t given the information, background or parameters around the issues being addressed (Manefield et al., 2007). Focus on issues within the school domain dominates the purview of student voice with young people rarely involved in conversations about classroom learning and pedagogy. Thomson (2007) relates these concerns to processes used in schools with weak forms of democracy. “Weak forms of voice generally support the status quo or aim for modest reforms” (Thomson, 2007, p. 25). Although having a stronger form of student democratic involvement is possible, it requires asking substantive questions with participatory processes and structures (Thomson, 2007). While possible, these approaches are challenging to implement.

**Conceptualizing Student Voice**

The following discussion will provide various perspectives pertaining to how student voice is enacted, which I feel is integral in demonstrating the need for my specific area of research. As stated by Butin (2010), “Your dissertation would thus describe and analyze existing research and note that there is a very specific gap in the literature which, you hope, your dissertation research will address” (p. 64). The conceptual frameworks described in this section offer insights into how student voice is enacted by students and teachers. However, my study addresses what I believe is a missing perspective in the literature, which is that of the principal. Over the past twenty years, how youth are included in their education has been, and continues to involve a broad spectrum of experiences. The concept of student voice is very general, and therefore, unpacking what researchers and practitioners mean by the term is of key importance. The idea of student voice implies a commitment to facilitating agency and the
creation of practices, policies and programs that revolve around student interests and needs (Tosholis & Nakkula, 2012). However, moving from the conceptual to the practical is challenging because student voice embodies theoretical underpinnings such as the view of the child, the nature of learning, and the philosophical outlook of the teacher which are embedded in power relations. I will address a few of the major conceptual frameworks that have been proposed in the field of student voice in order to depict the complexity of the landscape in which these initiatives reside. By defining roles and activities that students participate in, these typologies concretize student voice for the reader, along with practitioners and researchers.

**Roger Hart’s Ladder of Participation**

In response to the call from the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child to include children’s voices, Roger Hart offered a very influential schema to characterize the ways in which children participate in their community (Hart, 1992).

**Roger Hart’s Ladder of Young People’s Participation**

Rung 8: Young people & adults share decision-making

Rung 7: Young people lead & initiate action

Rung 6: Adult-initiated, shared decisions with young people

Rung 5: Young people consulted and informed

Rung 4: Young people assigned and informed

Rung 3: Young people tokenized*

Rung 2: Young people are decoration*

Rung 1: Young people are manipulated*

Note: Hart explains that the last three rungs are non-participation


*Figure 1: Roger Hart’s Ladder of Young People’s Participation*
At the lower rungs of a ladder, student involvement was tokenistic and an upward progression represented more authentic and empowering ways of involving students. *Manipulation*, the lowest rung, involves children being told what to do or say without giving them any real understanding of the issues. *Decoration* is when students are involved in an event, again without any real understanding of the issues. *Tokenism* entails asking for student opinions on an issue in a very limited way. These bottom three rungs represent non participation. In *assigned but informed*, students understand the project and adults respect their views. However, the project and the role of the child are determined by the adult. In *consulted and informed*, children are consulted but the project is designed and run by adults. The views of the student are, however, taken seriously and students have a full understanding of the process. *Adult initiated, shared decisions with children* occur when adults have the initial idea and students are involved in all planning and implementation stages. The views of the child are considered in the process of shared decision-making. *Child initiated and directed* occurs when students have the initial idea for the project and design and adults assist but do not take charge. In the top rung, *child initiated, shared decisions with adults*, children have the ideas, set up the project, and invite adults to join them in decision-making.

Hart’s conceptual framework was used for many years as an evaluative tool for student involvement (Shier, 2001). In a recent article, however, Hart lamented the interpretation of the ladder, citing that instead of being a measurement tool it should be used as a reflective instrument for adults (Hart, 2008). The suggestion that the upper rungs represent participatory engagement or degrees of agency suggests that they are superior and Hart felt that the ladder should be used as a scale of competence and not performance; although competent to engage in ways representative across the ladder, students should not be compelled to act in these ways at all times (Hart, 2008). The issue of power is embedded in the schema; it was often interpreted
that at the top rungs, students were in charge. However, according to the author, this was not meant to denote that students have the last word, but rather that they have the fullest participation at the highest possible level (Hart, 2008). Finding problems, both conceptually and practically with the interpretation of the ladder, Hart posed the need for more schemas in the area of youth participation (Hart, 2008).

A useful and practical application of the ladder was the identification of the levels of non-participation. Many practitioners have found that the description of false types of participation useful in helping them recognize and try to eliminate these practices (Shier, 2001). “Ironically, the greatest practical benefit of Hart’s work may be his exposure of these false types of participation, as much as his classification of the more positive types” (Shier, 2001, p. 110).

**Shier’s Pathways to Participation**

The focus of Harry Shier’s conceptualization is on the modes of interaction between adults and children. It offers a tool for practitioners exploring different aspects of the participation process and provides a series of questions for consideration at each level (Shier, 2001). The model is based on five levels of participation. The model recognizes that at each of these levels there may be varying degrees of commitment and it seeks to clarify these through the identification of three stages of commitment: openings, opportunities and obligations (Shier, 2001).

In Level 1, children are listened to. This requires that adults listen to children if and when they take it upon themselves to express an opinion. No effort is made to solicit their views on key decisions and the absence of any type of opinion is acceptable. There are three stages in this level. In stage one the requirement is merely that the adult is ready to listen, in stage two they work in ways that enable them to listen. In stage three listening becomes the stated policy.
thereby invoking obligations on the part of staff to listen to the students, should they want to voice their ideas.

In Level 2, children are supported in expressing their view. In this phase, it is recognized that in order for children to be able to express themselves they need support and assistance to overcome barriers. As opposed to level one, the ideas of children are solicited with a commitment to support children in expressing their views. The first stage of this level requires that adults be ready to take action to help children express themselves. In the second stage opportunities are provided including age appropriate techniques for consulting students, which may create a need for specific training for staff. At the final stage this way of consulting is established as policy.

In Level 3, children’s views are taken into account. This stage represents a shift beyond tokenism and ensures that children’s views will be considered, but it does not imply that every decision will be made in accordance with their ideas or that all their suggestions are implemented. The opening stage occurs when the staff members are ready to take children’s views into account. Stage two is when opportunities arise and a decision making process is in place that enables children’s views to be taken into account, and stage three formalizes this with a policy.

In Level 4, children are involved in decision making processes. This level represents a transition from consultation to active participation in decision making because it is at this stage that children are directly involved in the decision making process. Although children are involved in the decision making process, they may lack any real power over the decisions. In this level, stage one is when the organization is open to having students involved, stage two is when the institution establishes a procedure for involving children, and stage three formalizes the process with a policy stating that children must be involved in decision making.
In Level 5, children share power and responsibility for decision making. At the highest level, adults are willing to share their power with children. The responsibility for making decisions is a shared one, with the opening occurring when the organization is ready to share decision making with students; opportunities are created when there is a procedure in place for this and an obligation is created when an organization formalizes a policy wherein children and adults share responsibility and power in certain areas of decision making.

Figure 2: Shier’s Pathways to Participation
According to Shier, an important difference between this model and Hart’s ladder is the absence of the lowest three rungs of the ladder representing non-participation (Shier, 2001). However, it could be argued that at Shier’s first level, merely listening to what students say, without implications for further action could be construed as non-participation. Another difference between this and the ladder of participation is the absence of a level where children make decisions independently of adults; because the model is based on modes of interactions between adults and children, both parties are required and one does not exist without the other (Shier, 2001).

**Rudduck’s Consultation: A Communal Venturing Forth**

Jean Rudduck, a pioneer in the field of student voice research, co-authored a book where she argued that what students have to say about teaching and learning is worth listening to and can provide crucial information to inform school improvement (Rudduck, 2007). Rudduck expressed the need to create new experiences and relations for students in the current school system (Rudduck, 2007). In 2007, Jean Rudduck partnered with Donald McIntyre to oversee a major research endeavour where they documented the testimony of teachers and pupils involved in a number of independently managed research projects. The authors identified two strategies important to student voice: participation and consultation (Rudduck & McIntyre, 2007). Participation was described as involving students in their educational experiences at a more superficial level, such as students on committees that focused on events and problems (Rudduck & McIntyre, 2007). Consultation, however, involved a purposeful form of student voice undertaken in partnership with teachers wherein students were involved in discussions about classroom practices, evaluating school policies and seeking advice on new initiatives (Rudduck & McIntyre, 2007). The process of being consulted was considered to imply participation whereas the authors felt that participation could exist without consultation. The authors
hypothesized that being consulted can positively affect student learning in two ways: firstly, their comments can provide a practical agenda for reform and secondly, that being consulted builds self-respect and perceived respect which can strengthen commitment to learning. This enhanced commitment to school and learning is sustained by the transformation of the teachers’ knowledge of students and their needs, which in turn leads to positive changes in pedagogy and teacher student relationships (Rudduck & McIntyre, 2007).

\[ \text{Student consultation} \]

- yields a practical agenda
- strengthens student self-esteem

which leads to
enhanced commitment to learning and to school

which is sustained by
transformation of teachers’ knowledge of students
(greater awareness of students’ insight and capacity for constructive analysis)

which in turn leads to positive changes in

- pedagogy
- teacher-student relationships

Figure 3: Rudduck’s Consultation Process

In its most ideal form, Rudduck and McIntyre idealized a school in which consultation was the norm. The school would be engaged in constructing frameworks that respect pupil
capabilities, where students contribute to planning and governance procedures and where students felt they were valued members of the school and actively pursue their role. All pupils would be involved, not just an elite few, and teachers and pupils would see themselves as partners in learning. Teachers would act as mentors providing constructive guidance to individuals in order to improve their work and they would be transformed by their greater awareness of students’ insight and capacity for constructive analysis (Rudduck & McIntyre, 2007).

As an early conceptual framework for student voice, this was a promising theory but the translation to practice was nebulous. Their work, however, gave rise to the schema and the need to differentiate between participation and consultation and the more authentic ways of encouraging student voice. Similar to Hart’s ladder, consultation is seen as the higher and more authentic rendering of student voice; a communal venturing forth of teachers and students together (Rudduck, 2007). In her work, Rudduck addresses the issue of power imbalances among students and points to the possibility of consultation, affording the opportunity for teachers to engage in authentic dialogue and experiences with students that will empower the voices of all students (Rudduck, 2007).

Fielding’s Patterns of Partnership

The typology proposed by Fielding, designed to define and explore participatory democracy can be used across contexts but pays particular attention to the complexities of the school environment (Fielding, 2012). The underlying assumption is that the teacher student relationship is a partnership, with a focus on how adults listen to and learn with students. Fielding proposed six forms of interactions between adults and students that vary in the type and degree of power relations. He illustrated each of these six forms at three levels: the classroom, the school and the department. In students as data sources, staff use information about student
progress and well-being and there is a commitment on the part of the teachers to pay attention to student voice through the practical reality of the work being done. In students as active respondents, student dialogue and discussion are encouraged and staff move beyond the accumulation of passive data and actually listen to what students have to say about their own experience in lessons. Students are actively involved in the education process; they are discussants rather than beneficiaries of the lesson approach. In students as co-enquirers, the teacher-student roles are shifting and although not equal, students move from being discussants to co-enquirers. The teacher is responsible for the focus and the limits of the exploration, but student input into what is significant is essential. In students as knowledge creators, pupils take on a leadership role in identifying concerns, initiating and even leading projects. Students move from a responsive role to a leadership role within the same co-enquiry approach. In students as joint authors, the approach is more of a joint author model, where there is a shared partnership between staff and students, who are mutually responsible for planning and conducting research. Although the students are taking the lead, staff play a crucial role in supporting and working with them. In the last level, intergenerational learning as lived democracy, there is an equal and shared commitment to and responsibility for the common good where relationships are truly collaborative and there is an equal sharing of power and responsibility. The concept of radical collegiality “wherein teachers learn with and from their students and students embrace a genuinely shared responsibility for learning and teaching” (Fielding & Bragg, 2003, p. 55) is embodied in this last level.
1. **Students as Data Sources**

Staff utilize information about student progress and well-being

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Classroom</th>
<th>Unit/Team/Department</th>
<th>School</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lesson planning takes account of student test scores and other data</td>
<td>Samples of student work shared across staff group</td>
<td>Student attitude survey</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

2. **Students as Active Respondents**

Staff invite student dialogue and discussion to deepen learning/professional decisions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Classroom</th>
<th>Unit/Team/Department</th>
<th>School</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Engaging with and adapting explicit assessment criteria</td>
<td>Team agenda based on students views/evaluations</td>
<td>Students on staff appointment panels</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3. **Students as Co-Enquirers**

Staff take lead role with high-profile, active student support

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Classroom</th>
<th>Unit/Team/Department</th>
<th>School</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>How can we develop more independence in learning?</td>
<td>Student evaluation of e.g., a history unit of work</td>
<td>Joint evaluation of current system of reports</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

4. **Students as Knowledge Creators**

Students take lead role with active staff support

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Classroom</th>
<th>Unit/Team/Department</th>
<th>School</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Development of student led reviews</td>
<td>Is the playground buddying system working?</td>
<td>What is the cause of low level bullying in class?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
5. **Students as Joint Authors**

Students and staff decide on a joint course of action together

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Classroom</th>
<th>Unit/Team/Department</th>
<th>School</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Co-construct e.g., a math lesson</td>
<td>Develop a research lesson for the department</td>
<td>Joint student and staff learning walk</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

6. **Intergenerational Learning as Lived Democracy**

Shared commitment to/responsibility for the common good

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Classroom</th>
<th>Unit/Team/Department</th>
<th>School</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Students and staff plan lesson for younger students</td>
<td>Classes as critical friends in thematic conference</td>
<td>Whole school meeting to decide a key issue</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Figure 4: Fielding’s Patterns of Partnership*

In each of these ways of working the power relations are different which influenced the ways they worked and the synergy which affected the outcome (Fielding, 2012). Comparable to other models, the focus is on how to work with adults, but similar to Rudduck, Fielding’s conceptualization doesn’t involve creating practices and procedures. On the other hand, Shier includes this more formalized aspect of creating institutional obligations in his conceptualization.

**Toshalis and Nakkula: A Spectrum of Student Voice**

Toshalis and Nakkula examined research on academic motivation, school engagement and student voice, highlighted effective practices and concluded that the more teachers give students choice, control and opportunities for collaboration, the more motivation and engagement are likely to raise (Toshalis & Nakkula, 2012). Noting that the concept of student voice is more general than specific, they categorized the range of experiences that make up the spectrum of student voice activities as a continuum, where student influence, responsibility and decision making roles increase as you move to the right (Toshalis & Nakkula, 2012).
On the left side, student voice is conceived as youth speaking their minds, whereas on the right, students are more involved in directing collective actions. In the expression stage, students are seen as sources of data and are given opportunities to express themselves, with public outlets for their viewpoints. As they move to consultation, they are asked for their opinion or are invited to provide feedback for consideration. These two stages are examples of student voice because students are given an opportunity to state their opinion and hope that it will be considered in the decision making process. Although these stages represent a departure from ‘normal’ operating procedures, students are reliant on the goodwill of adults; they are not part of the decision making process and therefore lack any real power.

Figure 5: Toshalis and Nakkula’s Spectrum of Student Voice

Participation and partnership are situated in the middle of the spectrum and highlight forms of student voice involving pupils as collaborators with school staff. Participation is when students are involved in generating questions about issues or they are present when decisions are
being made. Student voice activities become partnerships when pupils work collaboratively with adults. These partnerships require the adults to guide and coach the students with the view that they are integral rather than peripheral to the process. Both participation and partnership involve students as vested stakeholders in their education and their individual schools. In the activism component, students are agents of change rather than merely sources of information; this stage embodies the need for students to recognize and communicate issues of relevance to their school or community and work with adults, both at school and within the community to initiate change. On the far right of the spectrum, students are understood as leaders; they convene, lead meetings, and take charge of the decision making process. This is not to say that adults are not involved in student voice activities at this stage, they continue their role as coaches and mentors as in other stages. The difference here is that the students become the change leaders who are directing the activities, research, and events (Toshalis & Nakkula, 2012).

In this framework, it is more valuable for students to act as leaders of change and comparable to Roger Hart’s ladder, an evaluative component is embedded in this spectrum; it is assumed that the right side is where we want student voice to reside (Toshalis & Nakkula, 2012). However, in my view, and similar to Hart’s earlier comments, this can be looked at as a spectrum of competency, with each type of activity providing value to students and teachers. For example, students functioning as sources of information, can provide information to teachers in situations where having students directing activities or acting as leaders of change is not necessarily appropriate or desirable. The concepts of participation and consultation embedded in this typology represent a departure from Rudduck’s schema. In this case, consultation is when students are involved as mere data points, and participation is at a more developed level, for example when students are involved in research or decisions. In contrast, Rudduck’s views are
the opposite; consultation is seen as a higher form of student voice, than participation, which can be reduced to window-dressing and puppeteering.

For the purposes of this research, I have anchored a portion of my findings in Toshalis and Nakkula’s conceptualization of student voice. Using the technique of reflexivity, I reflected on my own experiences as an administrator and found a good match between this conceptualization and what I see happening in the schools. The spectrum is fluid, avoiding standardization and leaving room for contextual influences. It has been noted that “student voice is located within a complex web of school structures and cultures that are shaped by policymakers, school leaders, teachers, researchers and students themselves” (Bahou, 2011, p. 2). I feel that this spectrum embodies these elements.

**The Role of the Principal**

This study is an investigation into school leadership around student voice. As such it is important to identify the context in which the participants reside. A brief overview of the role of the principal as outlined in the Ontario Leadership Framework (OLF) is included in order to understand the landscape in which these participants execute their daily tasks, and to understand where facilitating student voice fits within the broader role of the principal.

“Research suggests that leadership is second only to teaching in its impact on student outcomes. Principals and vice-principals play a critical role as school leaders to achieve this impact” (Ontario Leadership Framework, 2013, p. 4). The role of the principal is vital and it is important to recognize that it is also complex, demanding and hectic. In fact, this complexity has increased dramatically over the past ten years (Queen & Schumacher, 2006). The effectiveness of a leader depends on many interwoven variables and success often relies on the principal’s skill or experience choosing which strategy to employ in any given situation: “It can be a challenge for the principal to ascertain which strategy or skill is required at that moment” (Edwards, 2012,
p.1). Contextual factors compound the situation, because a strategy that works in one situation can be completely wrong in another. Looking to historical best practices is not helpful because the role of the principal has changed dramatically over the past fifty years and therefore effective skills may no longer be appropriate. The desire for public accountability in education has led to an increased focus on principal evaluation, and in response to the increased expectations of principals, the Ontario government launched a number of leadership initiatives. The Ontario Leadership Strategy was established in 2008 and included two key components: The Ontario Leadership Framework (OLF) and the Principal Performance Appraisal (PPA). The OLF provides a clear picture of what the Ontario Ministry of Education believes effective leadership should look like and describes the personal leadership characteristics of effective leaders. Five core capacities are identified that span across five domains of leadership: setting goals, aligning resources with priorities, promoting collaborative learning cultures, using data and engaging in courageous conversations. These five domains contain practices, actions and attitudes that describe the vision of effective leadership. The OLF clearly articulates the expected competencies that principals should have in the following domains:

1. Setting directions: School leaders build a shared vision, identify specific goals, create high expectations and communicate the vision or goals.

2. Building relationships and developing people: Leaders provide support for staff members, stimulate professional growth of the staff, model the school’s values and practice, building trusting relationships among stakeholders.

3. Developing the Organization to Support Desired Practices: The principal builds a collaborative culture and distributes leadership while allocating resources to support the school goals.
4. Improving the Instructional Program: The principal is an instruction leader providing support to staff, monitoring progress in student learning and school improvement.

5. Securing Accountability: The school leader builds a sense of internal accountability along with meeting the demands for external accountability.

The Principal Performance Appraisal was designed to be a conversation between the principal and their superintendent. The focus of the conversation was on the components of the Ontario Leadership Framework, goals set in relation to the OLF, and the performance of the administrator in meeting those goals. In theory, the OLF and its components are woven into the appraisal process so that the process is transparent and leads to professional growth.

The OLF governs the way the work of the principal is framed and evaluated in Ontario, and, therefore, has a direct impact for the participants in this study. The lens through which the principals see their role, and set goals for professional growth and school improvement is influenced by this leadership document. How they are evaluated is also tied to components of the OLF. Consequently, the lens principals use to view student voice and issues around implementation will also be framed by this overarching document.

There has been minimal research into the OLF and how principals experience this framework. In his study exploring experiences and challenges of Catholic principals and vice principals with the OLF in one school board in Ontario, Montanari (2014) found administrators identified that they used the OLF as a tool for performance appraisals, references for job interviews and a source of a common language around leadership. However, he also noted that both principals and vice principals pointed out aspects of their work that were not reflected in the framework. Furthermore, despite the intention for the OLF to embed core competencies and leadership practices into professional learning, the participants in his study used the framework to complete only two administrative tasks. Pollock and Hauseman (2015) examined the approach
principals took to their work, how they spent their time and the motivation factors that influenced their decisions. A key finding was that principals had a favourable perception of the OLF and almost half used it to plan and guide their professional learning and daily work. Many reported that the OLF matched day to day activities, but that the checklist approach was a limitation along with practicality issues. In her doctoral dissertation, Kowalchuk (2016) found that the OLF did not support social justice leadership and that principals needed to employ resistance and resilience to engage the OLF to enact social justice leadership.

The way principals view and talk about their work is shaped by their lived experiences coupled with the leadership context in which they are accountable. As a principal in Ontario I am governed by the OLF, this in conjunction with my own lived experiences has shaped my understanding of what questions I chose to ask the participants of this study as I sought to investigate what principals do in relation to student voice. Similarly, the participants of this study have been influenced by their own lived experiences and leadership contexts which, in turn, have shaped their responses to the questions of this study.

**Principals’ Role in Facilitating Student Voice**

The landscape of the research on the principal’s role in the facilitation of student voice is described. This overview provides insight into what other researchers have discovered and recommended and influenced my initial conceptual framework. The research in this area is limited and further demonstrates the need for additional studies within the specific area of student voice and school leadership.

Principals play a key role as the gatekeepers of initiatives in their schools (Taines, 2014). How do these administrators experience student voice? What are their roles in these initiatives? In looking at the research only five studies were found that specifically examined principals’ roles and perceptions of student voice. These will be examined respectively.
Meliksetyan (2014) described examples of successful student voice projects across the province of Ontario that were funded by a Ministry of Education student voice initiative. Using a mixed method approach with focus groups and one-on-one interviews with students, teachers and principals in 12 elementary and secondary schools, the researcher noted that “Principals must play a key role in honouring student voice and developing a school culture that promotes it” (p. 6). She found that typically a student voice initiative begins with a principal connecting with a key champion teacher who is passionate about student voice and is willing to lead the initiative, or a teacher sharing an opportunity with the administrator. A framework for the role of principal, teacher and student was proposed. The role of the principal was constructed as that of soundboard and support to both teachers and students.

In a case study published in 2012, Mitra et al. explored the role leadership played in enabling student voice in an elementary school in rural United States. They conducted interviews, observations and focus groups during a multiyear project in cooperation with the principal of a school that was committed to increasing student voice. The principal’s vision of a ‘caring community of learners connecting classrooms to the world outside’ was the driving force behind democratic student forums and classroom pedagogies focusing on inquiry learning (Mitra et al., 2012). Through formal interviews and observations, the researchers were able to gain insights into how the school adopted or resisted the student voice movement and how an administrator navigated her staff through this initiative by creating space and time for voices to be heard while encouraging a culture of participation. They concluded that, “Leadership with a clear vision must balance teacher voice and buy-in with maintaining the integrity of the vision of the school” and recommended that future research should seek to understand how leadership practices can influence student voice in schools (Mitra et al., 2012, p.109).
Taines (2014) analyzed educators’ ideas about the use of student voice by interviewing principals, teachers, community organizers and students from schools in the United States who were involved in a community-based program that encouraged student activism in school reform. With a purpose of identifying strategies that would provide student entry into school policy deliberations, Taine’s examined educators’ perceptions about the proper use of student voice within three urban high schools (Taines, 2014). She found that when both administrators and teachers discussed student voice they looked first to student government as the ‘purveyor of the student perspective’ and were distrustful of youth activism (Taines, 2014). Theoretically, principals endorsed the idea of students being involved in decision making but in practice the areas were mainly of a recreational and social nature rather than academic issues (Taines, 2014). She concluded that the conceptions held by educators are critical because they hold the “institutional authority to encode them as school practice. What role students’ play and the spaces available for students to voice their input are strongly shaped by the room educators make” (Taines, 2014, p. 178). She concluded that principals play a key role because they are able to put institutional support into place and these are required to sustain and grow student voice initiatives (Taines, 2014).

In a multi-site ethnography, Damiani investigated the principal’s role as instructional leader as seen through the eyes of the elementary student (Damiani, 2012). He wanted to describe how principals use student voice to create more responsive schools and how this affected their professional practice. He asked students to describe their biggest school challenge and how the administrator assisted them in these areas. He interviewed principals about their approaches to leadership and how they worked with students, and then he spoke to the students about the principals and observed interactions in four schools. His findings indicated that when principals looked to solve problems internally, more authentic and transformational approaches
were possible. He noted that principals are in “a unique position to show a larger population of students that they can or cannot have a voice based on the work that they do” (Damiani, 2012, p. 36). Such a position also influenced how teachers ran their classrooms and interacted with students. He noted, however, a large discrepancy between the verbalized and actual practice of the administrators; there was limited evidence to suggest that these leaders used student voice in an effort to address school issues (Damiani, 2012). He did conclude, however, that:

> Principals who increase student responsibility and use student voice to drive their instructional leadership have empowered students as learners which resulted in better behaviour, increased engagement in the instructional program and the development of a more shared set of goals. (Damiani, 2012, p. 45)

Brasof (2015) conducted an ethnographic study over eight years at Madison High, a small public high school that was focused on civic learning. Their school was structured around a democratic governance model where students were involved in decision making. The school structure was comprised of executive, legislative and judicial branches and Brasof examined the relationship between student voice, distributed leadership and organizational learning. Brasof portrayed administrators as having real and symbolic power who played a critical role in enabling student voice. He concluded that school leaders need to show they value student partnerships, create institutional structures that allow a shared leadership model, and also create spaces where dialogue and trust can occur. Brasof (2015) noted the need for intentional instruction on how to participate in decision making for the students, as they may not have the knowledge, skill or disposition necessary. In terms of leadership, principals can help by “distributing responsibility and authority that model the learning process and facilitate discourse” (Brasof, 2015, p.132). Furthermore, the principal in the study “espoused the virtue of student leadership by publicly emphasizing the need and importance of collaborating with students as a way to help improve the school” (Brasof, 2015, p. 136). This case study uncovered a school governance model that “successfully wove together people, materials and organizational
structures” (Brasof, 2015, p. 17) and confirmed adult student partnerships are more effective when adults are trained in how to facilitate student voice. He concluded that the principal needs to recognize the importance of, and be a guide in, the distributed leadership process.

Upon examining the aforementioned studies related to principals and student voice, I was able to discern some key themes that shaped my understanding upon entering into my own conceptualization of student voice. Meliksetyan (2014) addresses the importance of relationships and a school culture that promotes student voice. In this study, the principal is conceptualized as a support for student voice initiatives rather than having an active role. Mitra et al. (2012) highlights the notion of balancing teacher voice with student voice in relation to the culture of the school. The principal’s vision was the driving force behind the student voice initiative. Taines (2014) discusses the notion of power in relation to where student voice takes place (i.e., often in recreational capacities). The principal’s role is conceived as integral in providing time and space for student voice initiatives. Damiani (2012) provides the student perspective in his study. Principals are influential in effecting student voice practices among teachers and students. Brasof (2015) discusses distributed leadership in which the principal’s role is shared with other stakeholders.

**Conceptual Framework**

As an educator with 31 years of experience, eleven of those as an administrator, I drew on my varied experiences to create the conceptual framework depicted below. I situate myself as a principal who is committed to hearing the voices of my elementary aged students. As a starting point I reflected upon my experiences in trying to facilitate student voice within the three schools I have been at as an administrator. My reflective process led me to consider four things: What were the strategies I used? What helped me? What hindered me? Who was involved? These questions became the circular domains within my conceptual framework.
The research addressed in the previous section depicts the role of the principal in student voice initiatives in various capacities: active, passive, supportive, etc. Such a variety of roles left me unsure as to how leadership should be portrayed in relation to student voice. I, therefore, chose to conceptualize principals as one component in the process of student voice initiatives, no different than the others listed (strategies, audience/groups/stakeholder, barrier/challenges/supports/successes) because I was uncertain at that point what role principals played in facilitating student voice.

Based on my aforementioned experience, along with the literature I have read and reviewed, I created a conceptual framework that outlines how principals facilitate student voice with staff, students, and the school board (audience/groups/stakeholders). This conceptual framework seeks to investigate the relationship between each of these domains while taking into account the challenges, barriers, successes and supports that principals encounter along the way. I have chosen to interlink the circles in my conceptual framework diagram in order to depict the interconnectedness of all aspects pertaining to how principals facilitate student voice, who is involved and what happens as a result.

Initially I perceived that with any student voice initiative, principals would employ various strategies which in turn would involve or impact various audience, groups or stakeholders. Throughout the process barriers, challenges, supports and/or successes could arise and the principal would have to address and respond to these outcomes. This was the initial conceptual framework that informed this research study. However, upon undergoing the interview process, as participants shared their experiences, I realized that this conceptual framework was not an accurate representation of how principal’s facilitate student voice. I have provided a revised conceptual framework and subsequent discussion in Chapter 6.
Chapter Two Summary

This chapter has provided an examination of the literature as it relates to the role of administrators in facilitating student voice and outlined the conceptual framework that guided this research study.

The term student voice has multiple meanings, from student engagement, to student empowerment to student council and so on. The operational definition that will be used for the purposes of this research is adapted from Mitra (2009) who states that student voice refers to pedagogies in which youth have the opportunity to influence decisions that will shape their lives and those of their peers either inside or outside of the school setting.

There are a number of drivers that have had a direct influence on the student voice movement. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child had a huge impact influencing attitudes and setting policies around the rights of children. Governments responded by creating policies and guidelines to give children a say in matters that concern them. The view of children as being fully formed beings and competent agents further supported the movement
to listen to children. Another driver in the student voice movement was the need for schools to become democratic institutions that model and encourage children to be active citizens. A final driver considered was the potential for listening to students to assist in school improvement: young people are the expert witnesses in their lived educational experiences and thus can provide key information on how to improve said experiences. Listening to students can help students feel invested and engaged in their school.

The benefits of student voice were outlined, which include benefits to the students in terms of how they see themselves as individuals, as learners and as citizens with enhanced agency. Benefits were also noted for the teachers along with schools. The perils of student voice were described which include problems with a monolithic view of children’s voice, the purposes for which voice is solicited, embodiment, authenticity and etiquette. Practical issues in the application of student voice were outlined, including having an inauthentic purpose and equity issues in who is allowed to speak and who is silenced. What students are allowed to speak about is a further constraint, with issues more commonly addressing the school domain rather than involving pedagogy and curriculum.

How student voice is conceptualized is integral in demonstrating the need for this research. Over the years, how students are included in their education involves a broad spectrum of experiences, and thus unpacking what researchers and practitioners mean by the term is key. Major conceptual frameworks were depicted uncovering the complexity of the landscape. These frameworks include: Roger Hart’s Ladder of Participation, Shier’s Pathways to Participation, Rudduck’s Consultation: A Communal Venturing Forth, Fielding’s Patterns of Partnership and finally Toshalis and Nakkula’s Spectrum of Student Voice.

The Ontario Leadership Framework was outlined in order to understand how facilitating student voice fits within the broader role of the principal. Then research on the role of the
principal facilitating student voice was presented in five different studies. Engaging Student Voices described examples of student voice projects and concluded that the role of the principal was that of a soundboard and support to both teachers and students. Mitra, Serriere and Stoicovy explored the role leadership played enabling student voice in an elementary school and concluded that principals needed to have a clear vision and balance teacher voice and buy in within the greater context of the school. Taines analyzed the principals’ ideas about the use of student voice in secondary schools and found that administrators play a key role in supporting these initiatives as they are able to insert institutional support to sustain such initiatives. Damiani investigated the role of the principal as seen through the elementary student and found there was a large discrepancy between reported and actual practices and concluded that empowered students were better behaved and more engaged in their instructional program. Finally, an ethnographic study was presented in which a high school, focused on civic learning, was described. Brasof concluded that the principal needs to recognize the importance of, and be a guide in, the distributed leadership process.

Finally, the conceptual framework that guided this research study was presented which depicted interconnected circles with student voice at the heart of the framework.

Chapter Three will explain the methodology used to answer the research questions presented in Chapter One. It also outlines the process used to select participants and the data analysis procedures.
CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

“Qualitative researchers are interested in understanding the meaning people have constructed, that is, how people make sense of their world and the experiences they have in the world” (Merriam, 2009, p. 13).

Introduction

The role of the principal is complex. They have a school to manage and are constantly putting out fires. They juggle many stakeholders and make decisions about priorities and goals. Resting at the heart of all that principals are responsible for are the students, and because of the integral role student voice plays in student engagement, school improvement and in overall student development, it behooves us to ask the question of what do principals need to do to ensure that students are listened to and that their ideas are considered and acted upon. The principal plays a key role in the school culture and, therefore, my research question is How do elementary principals facilitate student voice? The sub questions that help to answer this question and guide the research process are as follows:

1. What are the strategies that principals employ in facilitating student voice?
2. Who are the audiences/groups/stakeholders impacted by these strategies?
3. What are the challenges/barriers to the facilitation of student voice that principals experience?
4. What are the supports that are helpful to principals in the facilitation of student voice?

This chapter discusses the methodology used in this study. The rationale for choosing a qualitative paradigm with semi structured interviews will be explained along with how participants were selected and how the data was analyzed.

Research Design

A qualitative methodology was used in order to gain insight into the experiences of administrators who are committed to student voice activities. I chose qualitative research because
my intent was to discover the experiences, trials and tribulations of administrators who enact student voice, rather than testing a hypothesis.

In categorizing research purposes, Butin delineates the following four categories: exploration, description, evaluation or explanation (Butin, 2010). An exploratory design is most appropriate when a phenomenon is either unexamined or not well understood in the literature (Butin, 2010). According to Butin an exploratory design is, “best suited to qualitative research methods that allow for in-depth analysis of complex and layered issues and flexible enough to account for highly open-ended research questions, data collection protocols and analyses” (Butin, 2010, p. 80). I have classified my research as exploratory because the role of the principal in student voice initiatives is largely unexamined in the research and it also involves complicated and interwoven issues that require open-ended questions in order to unfold and understand the many layers involved.

In order to be responsive to the evolving data and to allow the focus of the research to be amended to account for new findings, the design was also emergent in nature. The methodology was informed by grounded theory, wherein the goal is to move beyond description of the phenomena to the generation of a theory grounded in the views of either the researcher or the participants (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012). I hope to use the data provided by the various principals, coupled with my own experience as an administrator to develop an understanding of how the arenas depicted in my conceptual framework interact. Such a conceptualization involving principals is absent in the literature and may hold value for practitioners as well as academic researchers. Robinson and Taylor (2007) point out that there is an “urgent need for a theoretical consideration of student voice work” (p. 7) and see theory as a method of understanding practices more deeply and reflexively.
Given the qualitative methodology described, interviews were the chosen instrumentation. This afforded me the ability to ask open ended questions structured around the research question, and discern the rich landscape of experience of each administrator.

**Selection of Participants**

A purposeful sample of twelve administrators was used for this study. Merriam (2009) states that, “Purposeful sampling is based on the assumption that the investigator wants to discover, understand, and gain insight and, therefore, must select a sample from which the most can be learned” (p. 77). Additionally, I used a snowball technique in order to seek out principals who were committed to, and currently facilitating, student voice activities. Merriam identifies the snowball, chain or network sampling strategy as a common form wherein a few key participants are located who meet the inclusion criteria, and these are then asked for reference to other participants. I started within my local network: I interviewed two principals from my own school board whom I knew to be passionate about student voice, and asked them for referrals located outside the board. I also used connections I had made through the Supervisory Officer Qualification Program (delivered by The Catholic Community Delivery Organization) along with colleagues from the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education. I sent emails out to potential contacts, describing the study, asking for their participation and outlining the time commitment. All of the participants were administrators, two were vice principals. All but one were from elementary schools, however, the configuration of these schools varied: some were kindergarten to grade 8, some were middle schools with grade six to eight, or grade seven to eight, some were kindergarten to grade four or five, and one was a principal at a unique secondary school that ranged from grade seven to ten. The participants were also from a number of different school boards which was deliberately planned in order to rule out experiences based on the policies or
procedures of a particular board. The administrators were from five different boards (most were close to a major urban city) along with two participants from independent schools.

**Interview Procedures**

As previously mentioned, initial emails were sent to referred individuals. When I received reply emails, I further described the study, sent the interview protocol and the consent forms. If I got a response, we collaborated on the timing of the interview: I made myself available around their schedules; some were in the evening while others were during the day. One participant decided, after looking at the questions, that he would not have anything to offer and rescinded his permission.

The interviews were semi-structured in nature with open ended questions (see Appendix B), which allowed me to gather specific information from each participant, but also to be flexible in responding to their answer and to explore their thinking process and experiences (Merriam, 2009). Of the twelve interviews, five were held face to face, while seven were conducted over the phone. All of the face to face interviews were conducted at the participant's school at their request. Notably, there are advantages to conducting interviews in person, which include being able to perceive nonverbal cues including body language. During the interviews I made notes to assist with follow up or clarification questions. Interviews were approximately forty to forty-five minutes in length. All interviews were audibly recorded and transcribed. These transcripts were sent to the participants for verification and input; three of the administrators replied with two noting minor grammatical issues in the transcript.

The protocol was piloted initially with a university colleague in order to determine the suitability of the questions. According to Merriam (2009), “Pilot interviews are crucial for trying out your question” (p. 95). I found that some of my initial questions were not worded in a way that would generate rich discussion so significant revisions were made. Subsequently, I vetted
the revised protocol with two colleagues from my board, whom I felt would be comfortable in such a situation. After these interviews, I examined my guiding research questions and matched them to the answers from the respondents, and the protocol was tweaked for the remaining ten interviews. Each participant was sent the protocol in advance of the interview, in order to review and reflect on their experiences. Not all of the participants reviewed the questions, and this poses a limitation for the study because their answers may have been less thorough than possible had they fully prepared by examining their practices and clarifying their experiences prior to discussion. In the initial pilot interview with a principal from my board, I did not send the protocol, and she constantly referred to how helpful that would have been in responding to the prompts, leading me to believe that preparation was important.

Data Analysis

Upon completion of the interview process, all recordings were transcribed and sent to each respective participant for review. Only three of the twelve participants responded, with only one adding some minor clarifications. Once this member check had been completed and I was confident the interview process had fully concluded, I then began to analyze the data using a constant comparative method (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012). I read the transcripts multiple times, jotting notes in the margins; open to anything that struck me as being relevant or interesting. Merriam (2009) describes this process of open coding as “being open to anything possible at this point” (p. 178). Within this initial stage of data analysis, I approached the data with a wide lens.

In the next stage of analysis, I used what Merriam (2009) describes as analytical coding, “which goes beyond descriptive coding; it is coding that comes from interpretation and reflection on meaning” (p.190). I used a color-coded method to highlight the following categories in the transcripts: supports, constraints, quotes, conceptual understandings and recurring themes. Once I had established a solid level of familiarity with each transcript I created charts for each
participant, which summarized their data in the areas of conceptual understanding of student voice, experiences as they related to my interview protocol (student consultation, student decision-making, student organization and implementation of activities and professional development), implicating factors (supports and constraints), recommendations and themes. Under each of these headings I included notes and direct quotations from the transcripts. This process assisted me to synthesize the data from each participant; organizing it in a manner that was easy to review and refer back to.

Once I had a clear depiction of the data of each participant, I used a similar method to synthesize, compare and contrast the data across all participants. The first step in this process involved compiling all the themes from each participant chart into one large chart, checking off which participants each theme applied to. One side of the chart listed themes such as inclusion, empowerment, relationships, etc., while the top of the chart listed each participant by name. By doing this I realized that examining and grouping themes was not offering any deep insights into the data or my specific research questions. According to Merriam (2009), categories constructed should be responsive to the purpose of the research, therefore, I shifted my focus back to my research questions and examined the area of strategies used by administrators. I created a chart listing all of the strategies identified by the participants on one side and once again listed the names of each participant across the top; checking off which participants utilized which strategies. Merriam (2009) notes that, “Categories should be mutually exclusive. A particular unit of data should fit into only one category” (p. 185). Consequently, I began a process of combining similar and overlapping strategies, for example communicating the vision and mapping priorities were merged into one category. I also began eliminating strategies that offered minimal data or insight. Although this provided an overview of who used what strategy, I realized that some participants used the same strategy in different ways; for example, one
principal may have used listening in relation to students, while another employed this strategy with teachers. Therefore, in order to continue my analysis, I needed specific details regarding each participant's unique experiences. I created a large master chart outlining more specific details related to each respective strategy across all participants; in the process further combining similar strategies and eliminating those that offered minimal data or insight. Finally, I created a table for each individual strategy and outlined very specific details about how each participant who utilized that strategy did so. For example, the chart pertaining to the strategy of listening would provide further description of how the listening occurred for each participant who identified this strategy. These strategy-specific charts provided details such as context, stakeholders involved and direct quotations exemplifying the participants experience utilizing that strategy.

I followed this same three-tiered process in examining the supports and constraints identified by participants as well. It was through this very detailed analysis of individual strategies, supports and constraints that I was really able to discern consistencies across participants and significant anomalies in the data, which were examined more closely. The creation of these detail specific charts uncovered and made transparent the key findings of this study, to be discussed in Chapter Five.

**Legitimacy and Scope of the Study**

When looking at research, how does the reader know that the results are trustworthy? How does the reader know there has been sufficient rigor in carrying out the study? In quantitative research, the terms validity and reliability are utilized to measure the trustworthiness of the results. Validity refers to accuracy, that is, that the study measures what it claims to measure. Reliability refers to the consistency of the study, that is, the likelihood of replication. Quantitative studies investigate phenomena in an empirical sense where hypotheses are tested to
prove or disprove a phenomenon. Qualitative research, however, is based on different assumptions about reality and a diverse worldview and, therefore, consideration of validity and reliability should be congruent with the philosophical underpinnings of the research methodology (Merriam, 2009). How do we know that qualitative research is trustworthy and that there has been rigor in carrying out the study? In this section, I will outline the components of credibility, neutrality, and relatability as they pertain to this qualitative study.

Edmonston and Irby (2008) share techniques for making a qualitative study more trustworthy and therefore give credibility to the research. In their words, “Credibility is everything in every way for the qualitative researcher” (p. 79). They identify components of trustworthiness that can help improve the dependability of the qualitative study which include truth value and neutrality. I will consider these in relation to this research.

Truth value is the confidence in the trustworthiness of the findings for the respondents and the context of the study (Edmonston & Irby, 2008). Truth value can be enhanced using the following strategies: Reflexivity, wherein the researcher reflects on their influence in the study and provides their own perceptions (Cresswell, 2014). This involves reflecting critically as a researcher on my own biases and dispositions along with identifying my assumptions around the data. Member checking, where feedback was solicited on the emerging findings from the participants in order to avoid misinterpretation and ensure that participants’ perspectives were honoured (Edmonston & Irby, 2008; Cresswell, 2014). All participants of this study were given transcripts of their interview and were offered a follow up discussion. Peer examination, where data is discussed with experienced committee members was utilized. My thesis supervisor was consulted about the data and offered suggestions and input.

Neutrality about whether the data or data collection is biased, was addressed at the outset of the current study. As a result of my relationship with the context, I cannot claim to be
unbiased, but I need to confirm neutrality of the data collection along with the data itself, a process which has been termed ‘confirmability’ of the data (Edmonston & Irby, 2008). Having a thesis supervisor that assisted in overseeing data collection and the technique of reflexivity was used to allay these problems.

In qualitative research, a purposeful sample is chosen because we want to understand depth rather than finding out what is true for many and, therefore, we cannot generalize in a statistical sense. However, as Merriam (2009) notes, “The general lies in the particular; that is, what we learn in a particular situation we can transfer or generalize to similar situations subsequently encountered” (p. 225). Thus, the reader can decide if findings are relevant to their experiences or not. As Merriam points out, the researcher has the obligation to provide enough detailed description of the context of the study to enable readers to compare it with their own personal experience. It is the role of the reader to determine if the study is generalizable to their context. She further states that two strategies can be used in order to enhance transferring to other settings: rich descriptions and maximum variation. Both will be examined.

The idea of rich descriptions refers to a “highly descriptive, detailed presentation of the setting and in particular, the findings of a study …. [with] adequate evidence presented in the form of quotes from participant interviews, field notes and documents” (Merriam, 2009, p. 227). Throughout the findings section I have included quotes from the participants to highlight their thoughts or experiences in order to paint a vivid picture for the reader. I have also given a description of the context of each of the participants and have described their involvement with student voice initiatives in the findings section in order to paint a picture of how their school practiced student voice.

The other strategy for increasing transferability is to pay particular attention to the participants selected, and to select variation or diversity in the sample. This “allows for the
possibility of a greater range of application of the findings by readers or consumers of the research” (Merriam, 2009, p. 229). I have attempted to meet these criteria by inviting participants from a variety of school boards and school sizes with an assortment of grade and age levels. These participants also come from differing administrative teams (e.g., some principals, some vice-principals and with varying combinations at their schools). I did not deselect any volunteers for this study.

The concept of relatability, as identified by Dzakiria (2012) refers to how a study or results are related to the reader’s interests, circumstances, context or own research. When a research finding is related to these things, the reader would transfer and generalize the study. The theory of relatability resolves issues of whether findings are transferable because it leaves the act of making generalizations up to the readers or other researchers. The job of the researcher is to describe the situation, i.e., participants, places, happenings, or events in adequate detail so that the readers can discern applicability of the experience to the population with whom they are concerned. “The concept of relatability entails the degree of relatedness on whether knowledge gained from one context is relevant to, or applicable for other contexts, or the same context in another time frame. It assumes a role similar to generalization” (Dzakiria, 2012, p. 46). The theory of relatability can resolve the issue of whether findings are transferable and focus on the research, leaving the reader to choose whether or not to generalize. The theory argues that if a finding is relative to the reader’s interests, issue, or phenomenon, then it is the reader or researcher that could transfer those findings or knowledge to a larger population. In this manner, research knowledge can be transformed into the arena of professional discourse: “The concept of relatability is an approach to transforming research knowledge into a form which can readily enter the professional discourse through which educators, researchers, practitioners “may” enhance their craft knowledge of teaching and so improve the learning of their learners”
(Dzakiria, 2012, p. 56). I have made every effort as a researcher to relay the context in which each participant came from and to present my findings in a descriptive manner. I have also included many direct quotations from the participants in order to provide the reader with sufficient information to draw their own understandings and conclusions regarding the data. I have presented all aspects of this study in a way that enables the reader, should they so choose, to derive meaning that is transferable to their own contexts and experiences.

By outlining the above processes and measures taken throughout the data collection and analysis processes, trustworthiness of the data itself, along with trustworthiness of my conclusions has been addressed.

**Ethical Considerations**

The Research Ethics Board of the University of Toronto approved this study prior to soliciting potential references from my initial familiar contacts. There is the remote risk with interviews, that participants may feel uncomfortable or upset, and in order to minimize this risk, participants were well informed about the nature of the study and their participation. Before the interview began, I reviewed with the participants the following from the ethics submission: their participation was voluntary, and they could choose to not be audiotaped, to not answer any questions and to withdraw from the study at any time and without consequence. The participants were also advised that at no time would value judgments be placed on their responses, and that their information would be anonymous and their names and the names of their schools and board would not be used in the study. Participants were also told that if at any time they felt uncomfortable I would turn off the recording device and move on to another question. After the interview, as outlined in the ‘Invitation to Participate in a Research Study’ participants were advised that if they chose to withdraw from the study their data would be destroyed without consequence. Participants were also informed that they would be sent a copy of their transcribed
interview for feedback or revisions as per the letter of consent, and that once the data were analyzed, they would not be able to withdraw from the study.

After the interviews were transcribed, all identifying information including when, where and with whom the interview was conducted was replaced with identifying codes to protect confidentiality of the participants. All participants were given a pseudonym when transcribing the data and the code was stored on my personal password protected computer at my home. Names and other identifying information about the participants and their organization was systematically changed. Identifying codes that could connect the participant or their organization with the changed names was stored on my personal password protected computer. When the participants named specific institutions in the interview, they were given a pseudonym in the transcription and not mentioned by name or title in this dissertation. Participants were offered the option of being informed of the results of the study, and in this case their contact information was kept separate from the data.

The raw data, that is the recorded interview, was stored on a password protected computer, and the printed materials were stored in a locked file cabinet in my home office. All data will be destroyed in five years from the completion of this project.

**Chapter Three Summary**

Chapter Three described how the research was designed and the rationale for employing a qualitative study using semi structured interviews. Participant selection was discussed along with ethical considerations. Finally, how the data were analyzed was described along with the scope and transferability of the study.
CHAPTER FOUR: PARTICIPANT PROFILES

“Principals play a key role in sharing the willingness of a school to give students a real voice” (Pekrul & Levin, 2007, p. 725).

The following participant profiles have been included in order to provide context to the later discussion regarding how principals facilitate student voice. The details regarding the various schools each of these participants works within, as well as the unique stakeholders (students, staff and parent communities) each respective principal works with, provides a lens through which to further understand the strategies they employed and the experiences (challenges and supports) that they faced.

Jackie

Jackie is the principal of a small school, approximately 140 students, in a very remote and rural setting. It is a public school, comprised of kindergarten to grade six students and has no vice-principal. Jackie is in her second year as principal at this school, but had spent three years as a teacher at this school before moving to a high school position. Her administrative experiences, including vice principalship, total fifteen years. Her high school experiences include serving as a guidance counsellor, which she recalled enabled her to establish deep relationships with students.

Jackie has ten staff members, all of whom are familiar with the families and demographics because the school is located in a small town. She feels her staff are open minded and child centered, noting that she recently had a couple of people retire that were not so inclined. The school council is very small, and Jackie remarks that is it difficult to engage the parent community. Jackie identifies that her school is very isolated and, therefore, they try to find things that the entire school can be engaged in.

Connie

With over 28 years of employment with a publicly funded school board and 13 years of administrative experience, Connie now leads a large school within what she describes as a very
affluent community. This school has kindergarten to grade eight students, and is part of a very large urban board and also has a vice principal. Connie has been at this school for three years, and knows the parent community very well. As part of a large Catholic board, the staff are governed by collective agreements. Connie describes the students at the school as very vocal and entitled, they speak their minds readily and often will confront teachers:

Yeah, so very, quite evident here and almost to the point where some kids don’t have a sense of respect for authority, you know, there is a bit of a snobbish kind of attitude, that no I don’t have to listen to you.

According to Connie, the parent council is active and quite aggressive in pursuing what they wish to see in the school. They have a strong connection with the local church which is located near the school. Connie reports that her staff really care about the students and although they work in an affluent and vocal community, she reports that they are not afraid of the parents.

**Margaret**

This participant serves as a vice principal for approximately 650 grade six to eight students in a middle school. The school board is a very large one, located in a suburban area. This is Margaret’s first year at this school that she identifies as being located in an upper middle class neighbourhood. The administration team consist of herself as a full time vice principal and her principal who has been at the school for a number of years. Prior to this Margaret had served for four years as a vice principal for another board in a large urban setting, where she was employed for twenty years. Margaret reports the school has a positive school culture and that the staff are eager to volunteer for things. Teachers are passionate with regards to social justice and promote this with students.

**Natalie**

As a current administrator on secondment to the Ministry of Education, Natalie spoke of her most recent school placement, which she identified as an inner city school within a major
urban school board. Prior to this school, she had been a principal at another elementary school located in a very challenging neighbourhood in terms of crime and socio economic status. Her most recent school held students from kindergarten to grade five and had approximately 515 students and Natalie was the principal there for five years. The school was a model school and as such was partnered with a large local university. The staff were unionized, and Natalie identifies them as being generally supportive. As part of the model school, parent engagement was a big focus and the building also contained a parent centre, with whom the school worked closely. In the school itself, Natalie also created a room off the library with parent resources, a book bank, a toy library, a meeting space and a computer for parents. They had parent ambassadors from different language groups who acted as liaisons between the school and parents. Although English would have been the first language, Natalie identifies approximately 30 languages spoken within the various homes of families.

George

George is in his second year as the principal of a large school within a major school board in a large urban city. He has a vice principal to assist him with the approximately 620 students which range from kindergarten to grade four. The previous administrator was at that school for fifteen years, and George was told he had “big shoes to fill.” According to George, there are few teachers on staff that are inclusive minded.

George came to Canada from India when he was in grade one. He was heavily influenced by his own experiences as an immigrant, where he was picked on and felt alienated from his educational experience. As a teacher, he would go out of his way to connect with the students and community groups in order to become a change agent for the education system. At his current school, the demographics include a large number of immigrant families:
I work in a school now where 90 percent are from Bangladesh. It isn’t your typical school where you see a smattering of groups and that makes it unique because I have a staff that look nothing like the community.

According to George, parents are reluctant to get involved due to cultural knowledge.

**Esther**

Esther is the sole administrator in a medium sized publicly funded Catholic school. She has approximately 300 students who range in age from junior kindergarten to grade eight. Her school is located in a suburban region and is unique in that it offers the French Immersion program to her students from grades one to eight. Esther has been at the school for six years and was a vice principal prior to this assignment. She has acted as an equity consultant at the board level and has a total of twenty-five years of experience with the board. As part of the public system, her staff are unionized under local agreements. Esther reports that the parent community at this school is extremely involved and vocal in all aspects of the school. They financially support many of the school’s events and encourage and fund student initiatives. Esther feels the staff are collegial and really believe in their children.

**Elizabeth**

Elizabeth is a vice principal at a large all girls independent school in a major urban city. The school has students from kindergarten to grade six and is linked to the senior school which is on the same property. Elizabeth has been at this school for 22 years, serving various roles such as teacher, curriculum consultant and Director of Admissions. She has been in the vice principal role for 7 years. Elizabeth identifies the school and surrounding neighbourhood as highly affluent and parents pay tuition in order for their children to attend this exclusive school. Most students are from the local area, but there is also a residency component which draws both nationally and internationally. The school subscribes to one overarching philosophy; the Reggio Emilia Approach, and is known as a leader in providing professional development to other educators. As
an independent school, the staff are not unionized and are required to attend weekly faculty meetings. There are ample opportunities for professional development and the expanded leadership team are actively involved in this area. The school is very consultative; alumni and parents are asked to provide input and are very involved in decision making. Elizabeth says that the parent group are quite vocal and involved in all aspects of the school.

Mae

Mae is the founder of an independent school in a large suburban area. The school was formed in 2002 although Mae states that she has been thinking about it since childhood and 16 years ago began formulating and creating in her mind what it would look like. The school subscribes to one overarching philosophy; the Reggio Emilia Approach, and Mae recounted her passion for seeing students as capable and confident. She recalled being in the childcare center in Reggio Emilia and being enlightened:

You get a whole different perspective. To be able to see three year olds in a school making decisions with the teacher. Walking down a set of stairs to go outdoors, and the teacher trusting that child, and that child arriving as they would. So to see that level of trust and respect.

This experience touched her soul and provided the inspiration and guiding principles for her school.

Currently the 150 students range from kindergarten to grade six with an expansion to middle school planned for the upcoming year. In this non-unionized environment, teachers attend weekly collaborative time after school led by a professional development coordinator. The staff are currently working with an outside consultant on a collaborative inquiry around how materials impact teacher practice and student work. Mae feels that the staff are respectful to the students, “It is a very respectful environment, and I think children feel very safe and very secure here because they know that they are respected and honoured.” In this tuition-based school, Mae claims that the parent community is very involved. The school holds two annual information
meetings and parents are surveyed for planning purposes, as well as being engaged as experts to share their knowledge and experiences with staff and students.

**Ellen**

Ellen is the principal of a middle school, grades six to eight. She is in her third year at this school which is located in a large urban setting. The school is relatively small, with 265 students and no vice principal. This is her first school as an administrator; prior to this she was a teacher for 25 years, working in various schools across this large urban board. Ellen reports that her school is extremely diverse and multicultural. As part of a major school board, the staff are unionized, and Ellen identifies that they are generally supportive. She believes in empowering her staff and ensuring they have a voice, and that some of her “teacher leaders who are right on board are the ones who remind me to keep moving this forward.”

**Leona**

Leona is a principal of a mid-sized school, with 400 kindergarten to grade eight students located in what she identifies as an upper middle class suburban neighbourhood. This is her second school as principal and she is quite well established, as this is her fifth year at this school. Prior to being an administrator, Leona was a teacher, serving for many years as a special education teacher. Leona identified the importance of recognizing students’ passions and interests from a young age in order for students to maximize their learning in elementary and secondary schools. She feels this will enable students to be able to have successful and fulfilling pathways in life.

As part of a large publicly funded Catholic board, her staff are unionized, and Leona believes that some of the staff are very federation oriented. All staff members are TRIBES certified; a program in which a group process is used to develop a positive environment that promotes human growth and learning. It requires learning how to build community through three
stages of group development using four agreements. The parent community, as reported by Leona, are quite engaged in the school and provide support financially for initiatives.

**Lynn**

Lynn has been in administration for eight years, six of those as a vice principal. Her first position as a principal was within what she deems a highly unionized school in a very multicultural area. She identifies this as a very negative experience. Her current school is in a suburban community within a major school board and her school has 350 students from kindergarten to grade eight. As the sole administrator at her school, Lynn knows the staff well, and feels the staff are committed and like a family. “They would do anything over and beyond for kids.” Lynn has been involved in doing research with a local university for over ten years in the area of building curriculum connections to life experiences. She is passionate about social justice and helping students see themselves as literate and empowered.

**Andrew**

Although this research study focuses on the role of the elementary administrator, I have included this next principal because his secondary school is comprised of students who are aged 12 to 16, which roughly translates to grades 7 through 10. The student population at his school is quite unique in that it is comprised of approximately 97 children, all of whom have been diagnosed with a learning profile of mild intellectual disability. These students have come from self-contained, congregated programs where they’ve been with the same group of students over multiple years. Part of the school program is to provide an intensive support program for these students in order to bridge the gap between their elementary and secondary experiences.

Andrew reports that academically the students are performing anywhere between pre-primary to grade four levels. There are other barriers to learning, in that some students have mental health needs, physical and medical issues and emotional conditions:
...the students that I have, have been very marginalized within their education system. They have not been able to participate in the life of the school community because of their needs...they are also then marginalized because for many of them, their needs are hidden by a veneer of normality.

Andrew has been at this school, both as a vice principal and principal for approximately sixteen years. Although it is relatively small for a secondary school, Andrew does have a full time vice principal and a leadership team comprised of curriculum leaders and assistant curriculum leaders. As part of a major school board, the school consists of unionized personnel, both teachers and support staff. The parent community at Andrew’s school are difficult to engage: “I’ve got a lot of single parents, a lot of parents that hold multiple jobs, parents working shift work, new to the country, don’t have post-secondary education and don’t have any family supports.” Due to the unique and specialized nature of the school, they draw from a large geographical catchment area, and thus busing is a key component of their school culture. Fifteen buses in the morning and again after school transport these students to many parts of the city, making co-curricular activities impossible to hold outside of the school day.
Table 1

**Summary of Participants**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Experience as an Administrator</th>
<th>Role at the School</th>
<th>School Information</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Jackie</td>
<td>15 years of experience</td>
<td>Principal</td>
<td>JK to 6 140 students Public school Rural setting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td></td>
<td>No VP</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Connie</td>
<td>13 years of experience</td>
<td>Principal</td>
<td>JK to 8 Catholic school Affluent suburban setting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td></td>
<td>with VP</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Margaret</td>
<td>5 years of experience</td>
<td>Vice-Principal</td>
<td>6 to 8 650 students Public school Suburban setting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Natalie</td>
<td>7 years of experience</td>
<td>Former Principal</td>
<td>JK to 5 515 students Public school Urban setting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td></td>
<td>Currently at Ministry</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>George</td>
<td>2 years of experience</td>
<td>Principal</td>
<td>JK to 4 620 students Public school Urban setting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td></td>
<td>with VP</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Esther</td>
<td>8 years of experience</td>
<td>Principal</td>
<td>JK to 8 300 students Catholic school French Immersion Suburban setting</td>
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<tr>
<td>Female</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elizabeth</td>
<td>7 years of experience</td>
<td>Vice-Principal</td>
<td>JK to 6 Independent school All girls Urban setting</td>
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<tr>
<td>Female</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mae</td>
<td>14 years of experience</td>
<td>Founder/Principal</td>
<td>JK to 6 150 students Independent school Suburban setting</td>
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<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant</td>
<td>Experience as an Administrator</td>
<td>Role at the School</td>
<td>School Information</td>
</tr>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ellen</td>
<td>3 years of experience (as Principal)</td>
<td>Principal</td>
<td>6 to 8&lt;br&gt;265 students&lt;br&gt;Public school&lt;br&gt;Urban setting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leona</td>
<td>10 years of experience</td>
<td>Principal</td>
<td>JK to 8&lt;br&gt;400 students&lt;br&gt;Catholic school&lt;br&gt;Suburban setting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lynn</td>
<td>8 years of experience</td>
<td>Principal</td>
<td>JK to 8&lt;br&gt;350 students&lt;br&gt;Public school&lt;br&gt;Suburban setting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Andrew</td>
<td>16 years of experience</td>
<td>Principal with VP</td>
<td>7 to 10&lt;br&gt;97 students&lt;br&gt;Public school&lt;br&gt;Specialized population&lt;br&gt;Urban setting</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER 5: FINDINGS

The pupil voice movement represents a new departure because it is based on the premise that schools should reflect the democratic structures in society at large. Under this conception the school becomes a community of participants engaged in the common endeavour of learning. (Flutter & Rudduck, 2004, p. 135)

This chapter discusses the findings of this study. I will examine the data in three broad categories: strategies used by administrators, supports for student voice and the constraints that were identified. I look at these three themes across participants, providing descriptions and direct quotes where appropriate. I then switch the lens from what the principals experienced to a focus on the student experience, using the framework of Toshalis and Nakkula, to examine where the student experiences fall on this continuum. The purpose of doing this is to uncover how the principals listened; the response to student voice is key as identified in the literature review, “Students might feel that merely eliciting their views and the often inadequate adult follow up have betrayed their interests and hope for genuine change” (Bahou, 2011, p. 4). Finally, I will look at the individual portraits of four administrators who used a different approach and achieved a level of student voice that was unlike the other participants. This shift from a theme focused analysis to a participant focused analysis is deliberate as it demonstrates a deeper understanding of how the unique outcomes of these four administrators were achieved.

Strategies Used by Administrators

The strategies that the administrators used to facilitate student voice in this study are not unique to student voice, but rather are strategies that principals would use to implement other types of initiatives as well. Referring back to the Ontario Leadership Framework, these strategies can be identified as falling into the categories of Setting Directions, Building Relationships and Developing People, Developing the Organization to Support Desired Practices and Improving the Instructional Program. Although the participants identified numerous strategies, reported below are those that were consistent over a number of participants and/or offered unique insights
into the principals’ experiences. The following strategies will be examined: listening, collecting data, communicating the vision, providing and sharing resources, connecting to curriculum, providing time and space, and balancing teacher voice with student voice.

**Listening**

“Listening is, in many ways, characterized by what happens next- a change in the current status quo or a clear acknowledgement that students have been heard” (Quaglia & Corso, 2014, p.3). In order to facilitate student voice, it is my position that we need to listen to what students have to say. Not surprisingly, all of the twelve participants identified listening as a strategy used to cultivate student voice. The word listening implies both an active and passive role, and how these administrators listened can be further broken down into initiated listening, listening as a response to students, using formal structures to listen and using informal methods for listening.

**Initiated Listening**

One of the ways administrators ensured student voice was occurring was by initiating the interaction themselves. For example, when Elizabeth was planning for leadership development, she went to the students to find out what they were interested in and what their goals were:

I started a task force with a colleague of mine in senior school and one of the first steps that we took was to basically interview our students and just say, in terms of leadership what kinds of things are you looking for?

Jackie initiated listening through consulting with students when planning school wide activities such as school presentations and holiday events such as the Christmas bazaar and brunch. When his school board was going to enhance the schoolyard, George initiated listening by asking his students what they wanted in their schoolyard. On a larger scale, Natalie initiated listening by facilitating a research study involving parents, teachers and students in partnership with a local university. Natalie’s experience will be further described in the Collecting Data section of this
chapter. The participants of this study who initiated listening, did so in matters pertaining to the whole school or large groups within the school.

**Responsive Listening**

Many participants described situations where they listened to the students who initiated the interaction. In this section I describe what happens when the principal is approached by students wanting to express their opinions and ideas. Although this is a more passive support of student voice, is it nonetheless important, as merely listening to the students and not acting on their ideas can be worse than not listening at all.

In her independent school, Elizabeth was approached by students with concerns about the environment and in particular about the modes of transportation for arriving at and leaving school. She responded by sitting down with the group as they articulated what the immediate concerns were and then brainstormed possible resources for assistance within that initiative. She connected the students with mentors from the senior school and then formulated a junior school environmental council that worked in conjunction with the senior school council. After that, Elizabeth took on a facilitating role:

Mapping out for them the different stages of this experience for them and then being able to mirror that back, so that they could realize, you know, where they started, what it looks like while they were in the midst of it and then what were the end results.

In her Catholic school, Esther was approached by a group of students who informed her that the school wasn’t doing enough around Catholicity. She responded by utilizing a committee structure set from the board known as the Luke 4:18 Committee; a group focused on raising awareness for social justice issues and who are involved with charitable organizations. Esther gave control of this committee to the students, allowing them to choose how the school would support social justice initiatives within the community.
In the context of his special education focused school, Andrew had students who wanted opportunities to be in a typical school. His response to these students was comprehensive and time intensive. Andrew created a student focus group of six students who talked about their needs and goals and developed a plan for a nine-week program. These students identified that in order to go to a typical school they would need to “write better” and so they investigated evidence of what data schools use to evaluate student writing. Through this process, it was discovered that most of them had not written the standard assessment required by the Ontario government in grades three, six and nine through the Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO). Andrew provided an opportunity for them to try writing a practice test and then met with each student individually and provided descriptive feedback. The students requested an instructional leader in literacy to work with them and Andrew provided them with this resource. This is a rich example of a very thorough and committed response to student voice. This strategy proved effective because as a result, Andrew identified that there was a shift in the attitudes and behaviour of these students.

Many of the participants identified that it is equally important to listen to the voices of the teachers along with students. George and Leona listen to teachers by creating time and space for dialogue during staff meetings. Natalie listened to staff regarding complaints around an eco-initiative. Students were ticketing classes that left their lights on during recess and teachers were resentful of this practice. Rather than shut down either group (teachers or students), Natalie took the time to listen to both groups and supported them in understanding each other’s perspective:

So I guess my role in facilitating was, first of all, to encourage them to persist through struggle, to kind of direct them to resources that might be helpful, such as data and also to create space on the staff meeting agenda so they [students] could address the staff and have a conversation about it...They came to a staff meeting and they explained to the teachers what the energy consumption had been, what it was now, that it seems to be tied to the ticketing, and asked for their permission to continue.
As a result, both teachers and students came to the decision to continue the ticketing program. As demonstrated within this section, the participants in this study exercised responsive listening with both students and staff around student voice within their schools.

**Formal Structures**

The time and space to listen is facilitated through structures that exist in schools. In her independent school, Elizabeth described structured listening through what she identifies as school wide protocols:

We basically do a brainstorming exercise where we identify what is happening currently from the student perspective. Then we identify what we’d like it to look like in the future, so in five years’ time, and then the last stage of that protocol is for the girls to describe what happened to get from current to future. And so in taking the students through that process, we were able to identify what they were looking for and then we mimicked that same, or duplicated that same process with our faculty, with our parent community and our alumni.

This formal structure for listening was developed by Elizabeth’s particular school.

Many administrators (Margaret, Natalie, Connie, Leona) facilitate listening through their student government structures. Although these governing structures operate under many names (e.g., student parliament, student council, etc.), they function much the same; they lead various school initiatives and events. The degree to which these groups act as a voice for the larger student body varies from school to school. Natalie, Connie and Leona are designated members of their student government structures; attending meetings regularly to discuss upcoming initiatives and brainstorm solutions to any issues. Margaret, although not an official member of her student government, is invited to attend meetings to learn about upcoming initiatives the students would like to implement. Lynn describes the student government structure at her school, however, she does not relate their role to her own facilitation of student voice. Based on this study, as well as my own experiences, student governments are typically representative of the upper grades within the school and processes used to elect or appointment members vary considerably.
Some participants listen to student voice through structures such as letters written to them by students and proposals for initiatives or events drafted by students. Cathy uses school assemblies as a forum to collect input and listen to student voice:

At one of my assemblies, I challenged all students from kindergarten up to grade eight to describe what a good recess looks like and sounds like. We had to come up with success criteria for that and we got it all compiled, all their input...we’re going to provide it for each class of teachers.

The purpose of this listening exercise was to collect and compile information to support the students in the implementation of their own ideas and visions. Jackie used a graffiti structure to listen to students: “I do a graffiti board at the school. I just have a big pad of chart paper. Every week I ask a different question. There are markers there and the kids reply. That gets posted in the hallway.” Ellen wanted to update the school dress code and formed a committee in order to ensure that she was hearing the voices of both staff and students. As a result, “we arrived at a dress code that everybody could be happy with.” Elizabeth and Mae listen via the pedagogical documentation process. This involves documenting learning through notes, slides, photographs and more in order to gain insight into student learning and pedagogical practice, as well as for the purpose of making learning [and thus student voice] visible (Ministry of Education Monograph, 2015). Pedagogical documentation is the only example of structured listening that took place within classroom learning.

**Informal Listening**

Not all listening occurs within formal structures. Administrators listen to students using informal methods, such as going into the schoolyard or the classrooms and engaging with students. Mae listens through informal dialogue with students: “For me, it is constant dialogue with kids because I will often say to my teachers, have you asked the kids what they think because they are going to know far more than we do.” Natalie elicits parents as a conduit of informal listening: “We were very intentional about bringing parents into the conversation of the
school... I guess the parents were a way for us to find out more about what our students needed.” Leona gets staff to collect input for her in order to facilitate listening. When trying decide about schoolyard boundaries, she asked the teachers to pose questions to their students in order to gather their input on the matter.

An interesting observation was made by Esther who posed the question, who are we listening to? This raises further questions around the issue of equity when it comes to student voice: Whose voice is included and whose are excluded?

**Collecting Data**

Seven of the twelve participants identified using information collected from students (i.e., data) as a method for facilitating student voice. How was that data collected and what type of data is being used? Some administrators used formal data gathering processes, often located outside of the school, for valuable information about student voice. A common practice in many Ontario schools is the use of surveys to gather information on the climate of the school. These surveys are developed by school boards or other agencies located outside of the school. Often these surveys target specific groups or grades of students, rather than the whole student body. Connie uses this school climate data which is collected on a board level and targets certain students in grades four, six and seven. Such data includes student perceptions about how they feel at school and if they feel it is an inclusive environment. Tell Them from Me is an online survey used by Jackie to measure school climate and student views and perceptions. When she received her results, Jackie had some queries about the findings because the grade five results were very different from those of grades four and six. She shared the data with the staff and school council and then set up a method for collecting additional data by grouping students and using a table rotation to answer six questions that were developed by staff and the school’s
parent council. These six question charts were then posted publically in the hall and used to anchor discussions around school climate and safety with students.

Another avenue for collecting data is by having the students themselves create surveys for a specific purpose within the school. Lynn for example, reveals that her student council surveys students about what they want to see in their school, and then this information is shared with staff to lead and plan future initiatives. Leona uses her student government structure to collect input via class representatives from grades one to eight. These class representatives bring their data back to the student government to inform decisions.

A rather unique approach is seen at Elizabeth’s school where the school wide protocol system previously discussed gathers data from parents, students and alumni to inform future projects. According to Elizabeth, such a process offers a threefold support: asking is a proactive measure, feedback informs decisions, and the process builds positive relationships. Furthermore, pedagogical documentation is used to help the process be both transparent and reflective.

Another example of how data is collected is seen in Jackie’s technique of having a graffiti board in the school, where there is a weekly question posted in the hallway and a pad of chart paper and markers available for students to use. This information is then shared with students for planning purposes. Having staff members collect data is another strategy used by principals. As previously noted, Leona asked teachers to collect student input regarding the schoolyard and issues therein.

Natalie was the only participant who collected data via a research project involving parents, teachers and students. In this participatory action research, information was solicited from students, parents and teachers who identified a social justice issue to be addressed. In her interview, Natalie identifies the importance of data and the transformational role it can play when facilitating student voice initiatives. “Sometimes the right piece of data, in the right
moment, could really disrupt the way people were thinking about a particular group of kids or a community within a community.”

**Communicating the Vision**

Ten of the participants reported that communicating the vision is important when facilitating student voice. The vision refers to the principal’s vision or intentions for the school as it relates to student voice and how it is enacted. The way that the vision was communicated varied across contexts and administrators. In the two independent schools, both Elizabeth and Mae’s visions for their schools are anchored in the Reggio Emilia Approach, in which children are viewed as strong, capable, resourceful, protagonists of their learning (Malaguzzi, 1998). These schoolwide approaches and protocols ensured the view of the child was communicated and supported by all members of the school community (staff, parents, students, etc.). In Natalie’s public school, the teachers, students and parents all participated in action research as previously described in the Collecting Data section. This project was set in motion as a result of the principal’s vision for the school: “I approached a local university saying, what can we do together because my vision was that we would be kind of a lighthouse in terms of inner city schooling.”

Six of the participants (Natalie, Lynn, Ellen, Andrew, George and Leona) reference that they model how to involve students in change as a method of communicating the importance of their vision for student voice. “They [staff] may think who is this idealistic crazy man, but the thing is I model it [the expectations I have]. I model it for them, I model it for the families.”

Many of the participants note that they include and refer to students when making decisions such as what extra-curricular groups to bring into the school or changes in school structures such as uniform, schoolyard parameters, and even budget allocations.
So the way we run clubs, the way we run assemblies, the way we make schoolwide decisions, are we including student voice? And those kinds of things, again, can be a way of sending a message that student voice is really important.

Professional development around student voice is another way of communicating the vision. For some this is formalized, such as with Jackie who involves staff in discussions and goal setting around student voice. Ellen relayed her vision of the importance of student voice by using current topics and working backwards to connect them to student voice via YouTube clips, articles and videos. “So a lot of the PD has been around what are the skills that the students are going to need and then sort of working backwards to talk about what does that mean for student voice.” At her staff meetings, Margaret models authentic learning that staff could replicate with students, ensuring that the importance of student centered learning is at the forefront.

Three of the participants specifically mention communicating the vision in their recommendations for principals who are implementing student voice. Leona feels that communicating the vision constantly is essential to getting the message through to staff. “You have to keep the conversation going, this is our focus, and this is what we are working on.” Ellen echoes this sentiment by pointing out that it is key to ensure that staff understand why this is important and why this is a priority for the school. Natalie recommended that principals be explicit about the priorities of the school with their staff.

**Providing and Sharing Resources**

A central component to any initiative or school directive revolves around the school budget and how priorities are aligned with resources. Eight of the study administrators discussed how they provided and shared resources around student voice.

One way of providing resources is through the human resource element. George coordinated a community contact to organize cricket sessions at lunch in response to students’ interests:
I asked the kids what they wanted to see. They told me they come here on the weekend with their families to play cricket. So that is something so obvious the kids value but wasn’t even on the radar of anyone in the school. So I said, that’s a program we should have in the school. For me that was easy to coordinate between community contacts and a couple weeks later they are running it and there are fifty kids in the program.

As mentioned, Natalie formed a partnership with a local university as part of an action research project at her school. Mae brings in people to consult and work collaboratively with staff around student centered learning: “Right now we have a consultant who is working with us on collaborative inquiry and embedded in that is student voice.” Andrew provided an instructional leader in literacy to work with a student focus group based on student feedback as previously outlined.

Other administrators provided funding when needed. For example, in response to student reports regarding the cost of the grade eight overnight trip, Lynn subsidized a hundred dollars for every grade 8 student attending the trip. She also collaborated with the librarian to purchase more resources based on what students wanted to see in their library. Esther provided money for mobility balls in one classroom based on students’ requests to their teacher and she allocated funds for recess equipment, again based on student data:

I have a wonderful teacher advisor and we spoke to the kids about what they want to see. Then we went to the Catholic School Council [parent council] and we established things like the Play Program and more equipment at recess.

In a unique situation, Ellen allocated a portion of the budget to students and to staff respectively. Each group was able to spend the money based on their needs:

So I have a budget committee of teachers, which is long standing. And then I took the budget to the student council and shared it with them. My budget is roughly fifty thousand, give or take. So we had a meeting about the budget and what does that money cover. And then I asked them to go back to their classes and set some budget priorities and I gave a section of the budget completely over to them [student council] to allocate.

Lynn used the Ministry Speak Up Grants (grants offered to support student voice initiatives) and partnered students and teachers to access these funds. She also provided release time to support
partnerships between students and teachers: “If I know teachers are working with kids or they need time to do things I find release time from anywhere I can.”

Another way of sharing resources was seen in the act of sharing professional articles around student voice and engagement. Many of the principals, such as Lynn, George, Ellen and Mae, put various professional articles or Ministry monographs (publications) in teacher mailboxes or would share them electronically. The administrators of the independent schools were able to assign readings and reflections for staff PD sessions. George would use Ministry monographs to reflect on learning at staff meetings and professional learning communities:

At every staff meeting, I use the Ministry monographs to faceplate professional learning with the teachers. I shared the Ministry monograph on student voice and tied it to parent engagement. How are these two connected? Because they are our stakeholders.

As previously noted, Ellen would take current topics and work backwards to connect them to student voice via YouTube, videos, etc.

**Connecting to the Curriculum**

An identified strategy for facilitating student voice is to make connections between student voice practices and the curriculum. Eight of the participants mentioned connections between student voice and some form of curriculum. Ellen had two teachers approach her and argue that the curriculum wasn’t engaging the students. She responded by supporting their efforts to revamp units of study to increase student engagement: “So my team, primarily led by two people, designed an entirely new unit of study that they felt would be more engaging to the students.” Natalie speaks of a focus on Culturally Responsive Pedagogy:

It made sense to me that if we were going to be effective with students who have traditionally been underserved by the school system, that we were going to need to learn from them the things that matter to them and how to incorporate their experiences into what we were doing.

This led to a study on radical math through a social justice lens. In this project, the data management strand was delivered through participatory action research with staff, students and
parents as previously described. Lynn uses the curriculum to guide the instructional practice of teachers. She uses the Four Rules of a Literate Learner Framework with staff as an entry point into student voice. Within this framework, students are moved from being text decoders to text deconstructors which involves the students asking whose voices are represented, whose are missing, how they see themselves represented in the text and how they can speak back to text. In fact, Lynn recommends that student voice be embedded in the curriculum, and therefore additional time isn’t necessary to allow for student voice.

Leona was involved in a Ministry initiative where her Catholic school was partnered with a neighbouring public school and through meetings and school visits, both sets of teachers and principals focused on professional learning and practices together. Through this project, Leona was able to increase dialogue and reflection around how and if student voice was embedded in current practices with her staff. It is interesting to note that for the duration of the yearlong project, Leona saw a change in practice and beliefs around student voice among her staff, however, once the partnership ended, the practices were not sustained. Leona continues to create dialogue around questioning and practice, and recommends principals be visible in classrooms and that they use teacher leaders to monitor school improvement goals.

The two independent schools in this study have a school wide subscription to the Reggio Emilia Approach to education. All learning is done through inquiry where students are directing their learning and monitoring their progress. The curriculum is mapped out by the students and their interests, thereby embedding student voice in academic processes. Both Elizabeth and Mae make this connection between their school philosophy and student voice within the curriculum.

Andrew’s actions around listening to his students’ desires to improve their writing skills, as previously described, resulted in him connecting his students with an instructional leader in literacy who would work directly with them to improve these skills.
In her middle school, Margaret and her principal model a hands-off approach to professional development in order to foster leadership and teacher direction:

The hardest part for us [administrators] has been to shut up, stop talking, stop leading. We will be in a room around everybody and if someone asks a question, they all [staff] look to us. And so we said, we are actually not going to be answering these questions. You guys are all leaders here, speak up, tell us what you think, we are going to back you...so we are modeling authentic problem solving in order for them to start doing that with students.

This role modeling is done in order for teachers to replicate it in their own classrooms, allowing students to lead their own learning.

**Providing Time and Space**

Ten of the participants cited that they actively created time and space for student voice. When examining administrators’ responses, they can be subdivided into three levels: Indirect; the principal providing time and/or space for student voice, direct; with the principal involved with students, and direct; with the principal involved with staff. Each will be examined in turn.

**Indirect - Principal Provides Time and/or Space**

When providing time and space for student voice, this often took the form of allotting time at meetings for the students to take the lead in presenting or discussing relevant issues. For example, Lynn provides time at school council meetings for students to present to parents what they are working on within the school. Similarly, Natalie provided time and space at staff advisory meetings for students to speak about their proposal around increasing supervision on the schoolyard. Some administrators provided release time for their teachers to meet with students. This was a common practice for Lynn who stated: “My advice is to listen to kids and find forums, town hall or council meeting, or build a structure within a day when you’re periodically meeting with grade groupings or intermediate kids or have students lead those discussions.” Andrew provides time every month for Club Dates, where traditional classes are cancelled and activities planned by students take place in lieu of their classes. Elizabeth provides
time by sending teachers to visit other schools to investigate their practices and bring these back to her school. In a very unique approach, Jackie posted a graffiti board to collect student data and then extended this by having classroom teachers talk to their students about what they wrote on the board. George found that students wanted to play cricket, an extracurricular activity that they did not offer, and he created time at lunch for students to be involved with a third party agency.

**Direct - Principals and Students**

Most of the participants who identified they provided time and space were directly involved with students. Many of them meet with their student councils or student governments monthly and often during non-instructional time. Both Natalie and Margaret identify that they meet with their councils regularly during recess and lunchtimes, whereas Lynn releases her student council members twice a week, in addition to supervising student meetings at recess. Andrew created a student focus group and released students to meet during instructional time over a nine-week timespan. Ellen created a student budget committee and met with them regularly. Mae also met with her students around a new uniform initiative. The students were consulted about their ideal uniform and “then went off on their own. We did not ask them. They came back with designs. Colours of the Polo shirts that they wanted and why they wanted them this colour, because of the way they work.” The principal and her students continued to meet, along with the uniform supplier, in order to bring the students’ designs into fruition. Elizabeth had a taskforce with a colleague to invite dialogue with students about what they wanted in terms of student leadership. She also met with students and documented around environmental concerns as previously described. Jackie invites a cohort of students to meet regularly in the library at recess time to discuss any issues in the school.
Direct - Principals and Staff

Teachers play an important role in being the front line for students, and as such, many principals facilitated time and space in order to dialogue and collect information about student input and ideas. Jackie was concerned about the earlier mentioned Tell Them from Me survey results and provided time to discuss them with the staff. Some principals, such as Leona, direct staff to provide time for student government class representatives to collect input and share information.

A repeated practice is to use scheduled staff meetings to examine student voice practices. For example, Elizabeth’s school has weekly Monday meetings and PD weeks at the beginning and end of the year to examine pedagogy and practices. Leona and George both provide time at staff meetings to dialogue, question and reflect on practice. George extends this by asking teachers to reflect on student voice in grade level teams. In her independent school, Mae listens to teachers share documentation and data around classroom inquiry and sets aside time on Wednesdays after school for teachers to collaborate.

Balancing Student Voice with Teacher Voice

Ellen spoke explicitly about the need for a balance between teacher voice and student voice: “Teachers sometimes feel that as a student’s voice gets louder, their voice gets softer.” In order to balance these voices, Ellen devotes time to actively listening to students and teachers, often together. For example, when Ellen felt the dress code should be revised she facilitated the conversation between both teachers and students. She also created two separate budget committees, one for teachers and one for students and she shared what each committee was doing with the other one. Ellen is very deliberate about balancing teacher voice and student voice. “As a principal, you need to make sure that you are increasing teacher voice at the same time that you are increasing student voice.” She mentions that teachers’ feeling that they lose
control and power can be a major barrier to student voice, and therefore she actively pursues balancing voices and thereby balancing power. In everything that she did, Ellen calculated explicitly a teacher and a student component.

Other participants refer indirectly to the balance between teacher voice and student voice. Natalie, noting that in general the idea of student voice is positive, identifies that the sharing of power can be an issue. “I think that the extent to which people are willing to share their power with students varies.” Although she didn’t explicitly state balancing student and teacher voice, she did in fact use a balance of voices from teachers, students and parents when engaging in the action research project the school undertook. Other examples where teacher voice and student voice were balanced come from Lynn who partnered teachers and students for Ministry grants and Andrew who created a committee to address the school code of behaviour: “The group had students on it, staff on it, EAs [Educational Assistants], administration and a parent on it. And they came up with something new that they called the Charter of Rights and Responsibilities.”

Elizabeth spoke of hearing all voices, as a part of what they do at her school. She doesn’t refer to power but she talks about community. She provided some experiences which were solely based in student voice, such as the environmental example discussed, and some which were a combination of student voice and teacher voice along with the voice of alumni, highlighted within their schoolwide protocols. A deliberate part of what they value at Elizabeth’s school are the voices in the community:

... and so I guess what we’re trying to model is that everybody’s voice within the community matters, right and so it’s in the collecting and hearing of everyone’s voice that we can really identify what’s at the core of what we value the most.

Among a number of participants, a combination of solely student voice initiatives with a combination of teacher and student voice initiatives were identified. At his school, sometimes Andrew relies solely on student voice, as exemplified in his student focus group. He also uses a
combination, such as in his creation of a committee for students and teachers around the school code of behaviour. Sometimes the situation may call for student voice only, at times it may call for a combination of voices.

**Summary**

The strategies that the participants used to facilitate student voice in their schools were described and the examples often overlapped among strategies. Furthermore, principals used similar strategies in a variety of different ways, often connected to their particular circumstances or context. Ultimately, the strategies used by administrators were interesting, but they did not provide rich insights into the success of student voice initiatives within their schools.

**Supports Identified by Administrators**

When facilitating student voice, the participants described a number of supports which assisted them in their efforts. These supports can be described as both active and passive and either supported the collective or were personal supports for the principal. The idea of support pushes the principals forward in facilitating student voice. The following discussion elaborates on those identified supports which were either most recurrent or were anomalies that offered greater insight into student voice and include: Participants’ personal beliefs and experiences, school size, technology and social media, external partnerships, school structures, and teacher/staff attitudes and perceptions.

**Participants’ Personal Beliefs and Experiences**

Ten of the twelve participants identified some form of personal belief and/or experience as playing a role in their motivation for engaging in student voice. This was by far the greatest support for the administrators. Some of the administrators looked to their own personal and family history to cite reasons why they believed in student voice. George described his experiences as an immigrant from India when he was in grade one as being quite negative, he
was in a predominately white school and he and his siblings were picked on and had few peers. Going through the education system in such a manner, led George to become a teacher who went out of his way to connect with students: “So that is where that need to validate voice, the need to engage them, the need to give them a platform [came from].” This led George to actively seek out the voices of the students that are in his school, along with their families: “It is like the positive connected experience that my parents and I never had with the system. I have to provide that for the families I work for.” Margaret cited that her own mother and father listened to her aspirations rather than telling her what she needed to do; she was very grateful they didn’t push her into a profession they wanted for her and she extends this philosophy to her own students.

Experience with their own children was also cited as a reason why these administrators engaged in student voice. Leona for example, talked about her own children having experiences where their voices were not heard and they were not engaged in their own learning. This affected their pathways in life in a negative manner:

My son wouldn’t have been in the hallway up until grade three, my daughter would have known what she was doing, if the school hadn’t said they expected a hundred percent to go to university, she wouldn’t have gone and flunked out...we needed to realize her interests and passion from the beginning.

Mae also speaks about experiences raising her own children. Natalie spoke of her history as a high school student where she was given the opportunity to shape her own learning; she was part of an independent learning project where she was able to substitute parts of the curriculum for projects of interest to her. “I was lucky enough to have kind of visionary teachers who saw students as capable and competent and value their voices….and gave lots of choice.”

Professional experiences also informed and supported administrators’ passion for student voice. Leona’s school partnership with a Ministry of Education initiative provided context and learning for her around student engagement and empowerment. Lynn recounted her ten years of research in partnership with a major university about how students and identity are represented in
the curriculum and literature. Mae spoke of visiting Reggio Emilia, Italy and seeing their approach in action. “Having visited the first time was really an enlightenment for me. It touches your soul, and when you come from that place, everything seems different. You get a whole different perspective.” Both Mae and Elizabeth cite their schoolwide philosophy of the Reggio Emilia Approach where student voice is embedded in the image of the child and blanketed across everything that they do. Elizabeth was a teacher and is now an administrator at her independent school that subscribes to this overarching belief system.

Other professional experiences that supported these administrators’ passions for student voice were their prior teaching roles. Both Jackie and Margaret mentioned their roles as guidance counsellors as a factor in their beliefs in student voice. Leona spoke about her experiences as a beginning teacher many years ago as forming her ideas and beliefs in student voice. “I think from personal experiences, when we started we were focused on student learning at the center of what we did. Having this basis as my background, this is how I taught. We wrote our own curriculum and we wrote student specific report cards. I am glad we have this background.”

Finally, deep personal beliefs were cited as reasons why these administrators engaged in student voice. Jackie believes in the importance of relationships with students: “I really truly have always believed in the relationship side of things that there has to be a relationship. There has to be trust. There has to be an atmosphere where kids are willing to explore.” Lynn referred to her teaching days and about the need to be critical about how we engage students: “…being critical about how we engage students and particular students, you know on the peripheries, on the margins.” Leona and Natalie both identify their beliefs and passion for student voice as a support. Natalie says, “The principal needs to feel a certain moral imperative that guides decision making.” Esther revealed a passion for equity in both her personal and her professional life. She questions the equity piece in student voice:
You get a certain selection of people involved. I don’t know if that represents the big picture of everyone. When you talk about age, and gender, and different demographics. Do we have a good representation of student voice here or are we just looking at certain ones?

Andrew found support within the students themselves. He feels that students with special needs are capable of having input. “... recognizing that students with special needs are quite capable of having input, having a voice, and that can be in all areas of school program.” Andrew stated, “My strength comes from the students. They’re amazing.”

Participants took time to share their personal beliefs and experiences and this is identified as the greatest support across all participants; identified by ten out of twelve. This explains why they dedicate so much time and energy to student voice; it is rooted in something deeply personal for them.

**School Size**

Only one administrator identified having a small school as a support in facilitating student voice. Jackie felt that her small school was an advantage to facilitating student voice. “Being small you are able to move that [school goal] forward much faster than if you are a big, big school.” No other participating administrator factored in the size of the school in a negative or positive way therefore the administrators in this study felt that school size was a non-factor in their facilitation of student voice.

**Technology and Social Media**

Despite the extensive popularity of technology and social media, only one administrator mentioned that they used this as an advantage in facilitating student voice. Ellen stated that she used social media as a way for students to communicate with the principal more comfortably. She uses Twitter and a lot of her students follow her and she is able to communicate with them through this tool. During assemblies she runs a Twitter feed behind her when she is talking to the students.
So differentiation on how each student's voice is important, so that you are meeting the different types of students in your building, their different needs and for example social media is one where if a student doesn’t feel comfortable walking up to the principal and speaking to them, they can do so through social media.

It is somewhat surprising to me that more administrators are not taking advantage of technology in relation to student voice, given that social media is a teaching tool used in education and a personal tool so often used by students in their everyday lives.

**Partnerships**

Various external partnerships were used as a support for student voice activities. For example, George recognized the value for students in playing cricket and he coordinated a community contact to facilitate cricket during lunch in the gym. Jackie plans on using community liaisons to facilitate electives based on student requests, although this has not occurred yet. Esther brought in a speaker as a response to a student led initiative wherein the students went online, researched the Save the Panda organization and the school brought them in. Leona had a unique experience with a Ministry initiative between the public and Catholic school boards where they had opportunities to visit each other and collaborate over the course of a year. Overall, she noted they brought back some ideas, but the changes in her staff didn’t sustain.

One administrator, however, took partnership to a different level. Natalie put partnership in motion and it spiraled into opportunities for student voice on many levels. She had a vision for her school and she approached a local university and partnered with them to create a participatory action research project. They utilized the math curriculum through a social justice lens and students, teachers and parents were to identify a big problem to work with via research methodology. The group solicited information from students, parents and teachers and identified the problem as behaviour on the field outside. They then researched the problem and collected data to understand the issues more deeply:
The teachers, the kids and some parents researched the problem, they looked at data that already existed and they collected data. They used the data to interpret the problem more deeply and to share the problem more deeply. And then they came up with potential action plans. So the littler kids did it in the form of a letter to me [principal] with suggestions and the older kids actually created action plans.

They worked hand in hand with the university and its staff including math professors. The students presented their data to the staff and requested that more supervision be assigned to lunch recesses. Given the collective agreement for teachers with a cap on minutes for supervision, the research group brainstormed alternatives and felt that more activities at lunch recess would prevent problems on the yard. They formed a partnership with an external business, called the Right to Play who came in and worked with students, parents and lunchtime supervisors on cooperative learning and leadership. Natalie also utilized a Community Support Worker to assist in getting parents involved in the school; she used parents as a resource to learn more about the students. They eventually organized a brunch with the principal. The partnerships that Natalie formed with external agencies were rich and varied and they lead to many opportunities for student voice to be heard and enhanced; in this way partnership was a vehicle for student voice, rather than a resource to support it. In most of the examples, with the exception of the Save the Panda speaker, it was teachers or administrators who initiated these partnerships and not the students themselves.

**School Structures**

Five administrators identified having some form of student government that supported them in their facilitation of student voice. In their kindergarten to grade 8 schools, Lynn, Leona and Connie have a student government with various committees responsible for certain aspects of school life, such as environmental concerns and athletics. Both Leona and Connie have class representatives who are the liaison between the classroom and the formal student government, which allows for input from the greater student body. Lynn’s student government is made up of a
Prime Minister, Deputy and nine executives who have the opportunity to operate during class time: “There’s a lot of opportunity there, especially if you release them [from class].” In her kindergarten to grade five school, Natalie also has a student council that meets monthly to discuss issues that come up in the school and to discuss solutions. In her middle school of grade 7 and 8 students, Margaret has a hierarchical (various levels of responsibility) student council with leaders they call prefects. The students vote for prefects, who then become the voice for the student body. Prefects meet with administration during lunch to discuss concerns and work together to solve issues. Prefects are also responsible for communication via newsletter and for making announcements. This support required some work from the administration, to ensure rules and roles were clear for the prefects, and the greater student body understood the requirements for voting based on merit and not popularity.

An example of student committees, outside of the formal student government structure is seen with Ellen who decided to update the school dress code; she created a committee of teachers and students, with student representatives from each class. The conversation between staff and students was facilitated by the principal. Ellen also expanded her long standing teacher budget committee by creating a student component. During this process, the principal explained the budget and allocated a portion of the budget to each committee, who was required to prioritize the spending of their portion. These committees were specifically created to elicit student voice regarding specific matters.

Club dates is a monthly opportunity at Andrew’s school where classes are cancelled and a day is dedicated to elective activities. Initially teachers determined which clubs would be offered, based on their own interests. However, students did not always want to attend those clubs and so the principal allowed students to identify what clubs they wanted and the students designed new Club Day activities:
We allowed students to identify what clubs they wanted, within reason. So we talked to them and it took a lot of work to get them to understand what it was we could offer...so the kids actually designed it and then we had students able to sign up for things.

Students can also be a support for the school in an individual capacity. For example, Ellen involves the students in engaging stakeholders by answering questions at open houses and writing newsletters for parents. Andrew has a Student Ambassador’s Program where two staff members lead workshops with students on leadership and once the student has been part of the school for a year they can apply to be an ambassador. These ambassadors are the front line greeters at the school; they welcome visitors, take them on school tours and give them a description of the school and all its happenings. At her elementary school, Esther uses student representatives on various pre-existing board required committees, such as the Healthy Schools Committee.

It is important to note that such school structures can be problematic by the very nature of who is involved in them. In many of the school structures listed above, the older students of the school are the voices that are being heard and this can lead to an inaccurate perception and representation of students’ voices within the school. This, once again, raises the question of equity and student voice. In addition, by very nature of their traditional roles, student voice embedded in the student government structures is often solely extra-curricular in nature and not embedded in curriculum or classroom learning. Although not perfect, these school structures provide a point of reference for principals; it’s a place to start.

**Teacher/Staff Attitudes and Perceptions**

Interestingly, this category of support is also identified as a constraint in facilitating student voice and this will be discussed in the Constraints section of this chapter. The attitude of the staff was the second largest factor identified as a support and the largest constraint; it is the biggest external factor on either side. When teachers are on board the impact is exponential.
Having an open mind was identified by Jackie as being essential, along with having a staff that were very child centered:

I just recently happily had a couple of people retire that weren’t centered and the difference that it makes in your staff meetings, in PD, any discussion around students when it is about the kids and not about me all the time, about the teacher.

A few participants referred to staff attitudes that were specifically helpful as a support to the school. For example, Ellen described a situation where two teachers approached her about the curriculum not being authentic and with her blessing, they created a unit of study that was more student centered and this spread to other teachers. In this example, the support was for the school as a collective, and the principal took a back seat. Margaret identifies that when she came to her middle school, staff were eager to volunteer for things, and were very interested and passionate about undertaking social justice issues with students.

Some scenarios described by the participants can be classified as being a support to the administrator personally. Leona talks about teachers on board who are passionate about student voice as a support to her personally. “I’m passionate about it...classrooms where it is being done. The teachers are thrilled and this keeps you going.” Esther is heartened by teachers that believe in students and who always encourage them: “And it’s helped student learning a lot. She [one teacher] is a beacon of engaging kids...there are certain teachers, that you know, always listen to them [students].” Connie is encouraged by her staff that really care about academics and socio emotional aspects of the students: “I really tap into their expertise, they really know the community and they know what works and what doesn’t work. So I really rely on them to help guide my decisions.”

Elizabeth and Mae are in unique situations in that they have a school wide subscription to one particular approach that has a shared image of the child and sees the role of the teacher as a co-learner and facilitator (Malaguzzi, 1998). Elizabeth speaks of pedagogy at the school in
collective terms, often using phrases such as ‘our understanding’ and ‘we believe.’ Mae feels that her teachers are good at listening to student voice, and although they are all at different stages, all have created a respectful environment for students to feel safe to express their voices.

**Summary**

Although there are many supports for school administrators facilitating student voice and for student voice initiatives in general, these supports are not all created equal in that some weigh heavier than others, both by the number of respondents identifying them along with how much they help to move the facilitation of student voice forward. The most pervasive support was an internal one, that came from the personal beliefs of the administrators.

**Constraints Identified by Administrators**

The participants were asked what constraints they experienced when they were facilitating student voice and the list was extensive. Below I highlight the key findings and trends in the following areas: Finances, time, school boards, parents, students, pedagogy and curriculum, professional development, and teacher/staff attitudes and perceptions.

**Finances**

As much as finances seem to be a commonly identified barrier for many school initiatives, only four of the participants cited this specifically as a constraint when facilitating student voice. Both Connie and Esther identified finances and budgets as barriers, however, they did not elaborate on the specific implications of this constraint. Natalie identified that her teachers concerns about budget acted as a constraint in them not wanting to participate in the successful action research project for a second year. Due to budget constraints, the teachers would not be able to receive a half day per month of release time to collaborate with the university. This ultimately led to the perception by teachers that the project would be more work in the second year: “Even though everybody agreed it was a very powerful learning experience,
people did not choose to repeat it the next year.” Margaret simply pointed out the lack of board support and funding for student voice initiatives and for professional development. Although these four administrators noted the limitations around finances, only Natalie mentioned not being able to engage in a specific student voice initiative due to financial barriers.

**Time**

Time is a very common constraint cited by administrators and seven of the twelve participants mentioned this in conjunction with student voice. For those that did mention time, this category can be further subdivided into the administrator’s own time, and teachers’ time.

Although principal workload is a commonly lamented problem, only Esther mentioned it in relation to student voice. She stated, “I find there’s so much thrown at us all the time. It’s continual. How do you organize this? How do you get it to everybody?” Elizabeth talks about the time it takes to listen to students: “I think that it’s time consuming. So it takes time to listen to students to give them time to share their voice. I think it is harder than just dictating when and how that will happen, but I think our experience would be that the pros far outweigh the cons and in fact that will help us in the long run.”

Other administrators referred to the time teachers themselves need to devote to student voice. George mentioned his staff’s unwillingness to go beyond school hours. “I have a staff that look nothing like the community and who are great teachers but who are from a totally different part of the social realm and don’t see the need to go beyond 8:30 and 3:15 and I am trying to push them on that.” Connie also mentioned she experienced a lack of volunteers for various student voice activities. Lynn listed teacher time commitments as a constraint, and Natalie found that when teachers didn’t want to continue a successful project for the second year, they listed time as one of the issues, “…they perceived it being more work... It was more work, but now they think it’s debatable that it was a different type of work.” In her school, Leona asks the teachers
to provide time for the student government representatives to collect input, and she noted that very often she will have to remind teachers, often over the announcements to give that time to the students. “You’ll get students who come back and say my teacher didn’t give me time to share this. And you make an announcement there will be a student government meeting, teachers please allow time. And you go over it with the teachers and the teachers won't make time.”

Just over half the participants identify time as a constraint to student voice, and yet classroom time is not recognized as a place where student voice can occur and have a role. Most of the student voice initiatives shared were extra-curricular in nature; existing within the school domain rather than the classroom domain, which begs the question why are educators not using academic time as a place where student voice can reside?

**School Board**

Half of the participants identified their school board as a constraint to their facilitation of student voice. This finding can be broken down into the policies of the board, funding and interest/conversations.

Two participants noted that policies of their school boards were problematic for student voice. Esther said that the practices and policies of her board prohibited what students want: “We are bound by practices and policies. We can’t just go out on a limb and go with some idea.” Jackie mentioned that her board policy of having only two fundraisers per year constrained what the students wanted to do. George also noted policies as restrictive: “There are some parts of school governance and school protocol that yes of course student’s won’t have a part in such as board policies.”

Also identified, was a lack of interest and supportive conversations on the part of board personnel. Ellen noted that board personnel were not interested in student voice initiatives at her school. George stated that not enough supervisory officers and colleagues were talking about
student voice and pushing for it. In Leona’s board she identified a management rather than curriculum focus which was more quantitative rather than qualitative. She also spoke of there being not enough talk about student learning and student voice. The culture of the board was too focused on management and not open to new ideas. “We don’t have courageous conversations at the school board level; it is just shut right down.” Finally, one participant noted the lack of funding support at the board level. Margaret felt that the board was not supportive in terms of funding student voice initiatives or professional development around student voice.

In summary, some participants identified that their board was a constraint to their facilitation of student voice and it is my position that this speaks to a lack of relationship between board and school personnel. However, principals do foster supportive relationships with their own staff when enacting student voice, regardless of whether or not they are receiving support from their own superiors.

Parents

Five participants mentioned parents as a barrier when facilitating student voice. Some found that getting parents involved was difficult. For example, Jackie noted that engaging parents was problematic due to the rural and secluded location of her school. Andrew echoed this sentiment, noting that due to his large geographical area, getting parents to be present was difficult. He noted further constraints of single parent families and new immigrants.

On the other hand, some administrators have parent involvement but in a negative manner. Leona noted the disconnect between the parent council and the school improvement plan. The council was set on doing things the way they always did them, without questioning of why they were doing the things they did. It was difficult for her to move them forward. In her independent school, Elizabeth found that parents were too tied to recognition and did not see the
value in allowing children the opportunity for failure and the subsequent learning that comes from that. This parent attitude impacted the way in which her faculty interacted with students.

The people who work with the students are very hesitant to let them fail and so this notion of making mistakes and learning from your mistakes is actually being able to articulate what went wrong, why did it go wrong and how would you do it differently.

In her kindergarten to grade 8 school, Connie found the parents were involved, but were encouraging their children’s voices in negative ways. For example, when the students were unhappy with one teacher, they created a petition before they even spoke to anyone in administration. Connie notes that in her demanding, entitled and vocal parent community this was seen as mirroring everyday life. “The parent encouraged their child to start this petition because in the corporate world that’s what they do.”

Student voice can be viewed as a skill that can be cultivated, and as major stakeholders, parents play a role in this. Although the parents described above were not a massive constraint, they can be seen as a wasted support. Parents can be harnessed as a support in cultivating student voice at home by modeling it, having conversations about it and valuing their children’s voices at home. In order to accomplish this, I feel that we need to educate parents and explain why student voice is important and how they can support this at home.

**Students**

The students themselves were identified by five participants as a constraint when facilitating student voice. This constraint can be broken down into the individual/personal abilities of students, students’ perceptions and attitudes and variables relating to how receptive students are to coaching and mentoring.

In terms of personal abilities, Andrew identified the complex profiles and needs among the student body at his school for students with a Mild Intellectual Disability as a challenge. I’m thinking about the students that I have, [they] have been very marginalized within their education system. They have not been able to participate in the life in the school
community because of their needs... They can’t participate in classes because they don’t understand all of those things. They can’t participate in social interactions with other kids, because they can’t read cues. They can’t understand how you use the language. They are also then marginalized because their needs are hidden by a veneer of normality.

Other personal attributes include the age of the students. Jackie talked about the age of the students as a barrier: “When you go to the youngest of your children, like in third grade, it’s difficult for them to sometimes articulate what it is they think they need, or do they know what they need?” Shyness was also identified by Jackie as a barrier.

Andrew identified that the students’ own perceptions of themselves was the biggest barrier. Possibly due to their lived experiences in both school and the greater community, these students lack self-understanding:

I would say the biggest barrier is students’ own perception of themselves. Whether that perception is like I can’t do anything and this is who I am and this is my life, to I don’t belong here and there is nothing wrong with me.

Their experiences have also affected their attitudes towards their school, and in the case of Andrew’s students, they have become withdrawn. Connie, however, has a community which she perceives to be very self-entitled, where the students don’t have a sense of respect for authority. In contrast, her students are very vocal and confrontational with an attitude of entitlement.

A large group of student constraints falls under coaching; by the very nature of their inexperience, students will require help to understand and enact their voices. Margaret had to ensure that when selecting prefects for her student council, students weren’t voting based on popularity. She also cited issues with students’ organization and communication. For example, when students were making announcements there was a lot of giggling from the students over the PA system, creating unclear communication. She instructed the students to write scripts and be deliberate in following them verbatim. Andrew noted that students required a great deal of direction when planning their Club Days: “The fair [to select club elective] didn’t work all that
well, because again our kids just need way too much direction on how to do that and they couldn’t manage their little sign up cards.”

Other areas of need include keeping students focused, whether it be on a task or on a goal, and helping them understand the parameters of their task. Ellen identified facilitating risk taking skills as a key area of concern: “So it’s all fun and good to give voice to the students who have a lot to say, everyone has a lot to say. It’s fine and good to give voice to students who have the confidence to say what they are thinking, but you have to really develop student voice in those students who don’t feel they have any voice.” Group dynamics plays a role in this, as mentioned by Jackie, who felt that when facilitating groups of students, that students may not initially be very open until they feel comfortable to take risks. “The group dynamics can be challenging because they [students] may not be as open, but I find that if one students starts to talk about something, then they’ll get right on it.”

**Pedagogy and Curriculum**

The relationship between student voice and curriculum, or rather the absence of a relationship, was noted as a constraint by three participants. Lynn described the disconnect between the curriculum and the life experiences of the children in her school. She feels that the curriculum privileges certain students with certain experiences and was passionate about having all children feel represented in the books that they read and the curriculum they engage with. “And trying to reconcile this disconnect between what the curriculum wants them to know and what the kids’ life experiences were.” Lynn moved beyond talking about student voice to implementing it in classrooms through pedagogy and curriculum. This will be further examined later in this chapter.

Natalie believes that there is a connection between student centered approaches to learning and student voice in curriculum. Natalie feels that there are many inhibitors to student
centered approaches including age grouping, class size, student advancement, learning at different rates, standardized testing and teacher discomfort with Individual Education Plans. Teachers need to be, “Pretty brave to step outside of the traditional way of doing things.” Natalie believes that there are methods to combat this issue:

I guess one is to create time in the week for teachers to meet and learn together. Be explicit with teachers about what the priorities of the school are in terms of the curriculum. Really encourage teachers to focus on the overall expectations of the curriculum and not worry so much about the specific expectations.

In his secondary school, Andrew notes that differentiation and giving students a voice is not as easily implemented as he feels it is in the elementary panel:

Elementary schools are much better at allowing – giving students a choice, especially when it comes to curriculum and learning in the classroom. Secondary schools are still very very old school. We decide for them what the content is, we decide for them what the curriculum is, the Ministry sets expectations and we’re delivering those...and when you get into this [his MID school] population everything gets worse.

Andrew suggests that in terms of differentiation, secondary teachers needs to have richer conversations on the topic: “So it’s something that is seemingly obvious as leveled reading, like give the students a choice in the reading material and have multiple levels and that is a hard concept for secondary teachers to get their heads into.”

An interesting observation is that the three participants who identify pedagogy and curriculum as a constraint in facilitating student voice, are actually three of the four who do bring student voice into the classroom domain. These four cases will be discussed later within this chapter.

**Professional Development**

In terms of professional development, half of the administrators in this study noted constraints in this area and their responses can be categorized as the ability to create lasting change, a lack of resources or structures for professional development, and a lack of understanding of what is required.
Attending PD sessions is only the first step in creating change, and Mae identified issues with staff infusing their everyday practice with their new learning. She notes barriers in staff understanding that PD needs to be brought back to daily practice: “That is the challenge there, is how do we bring it back into our daily practice? And you do not have to bring back all of it. Pick something that resonates with you and bring that back and start implementation.” In the partnership between the public and Catholic schools, Leona found that the opportunities to visit and collaborate allowed teachers exposure to new ideas, and although they engaged in some of these new practices, teacher learning was not sustained after the initiative ended. Similarly, Natalie participated in a successful project with the local university but the teachers did not want to participate in subsequent years, stating concerns with time, space, budget and the perception of more work.

Other participants cited lack of resources and structures for professional development around student voice as a constraint. George spoke of a lack of resources around student voice on the part of the Ministry as making it difficult to conduct professional development around student voice. He also reported that staff meetings have been more about informational items than PD and teachers are used to this structure. Margaret cited lack of knowledge around Ministry initiatives around student voice and lack of board support and funding for initiatives and professional development as a constraint.

Andrew found that his teachers lacked the understanding of differentiation, a practice that he felt was key to enabling student voice at the classroom level. He notes that given the level of modifications his students require; teachers’ lack of knowledge in this area was highly problematic.

When it comes to professional development, will the efforts make a difference if teachers don’t believe in student voice? We will look at teacher attitude in the next section.
Teacher/Staff Attitudes and Perceptions

Almost all of the participants identified teacher/staff attitudes and perceptions as a constraint and it is interesting to note that this appeared in the support side as well. The findings in this category can be subdivided into constraints around mindsets and the view of the child.

Mindsets

The work of student voice represents a shift in the status quo and teachers can fear a loss of control. Leona identified that her teachers were resistant to change and new ways of doing things and were afraid to lose control. “It goes back to the teachers. This is how we do it. This is how we have always done it and they are stuck. Any challenges or barriers are those teachers.” For example, when her student government representatives needed time in class to discuss issues and initiatives, Leona would have teachers that would not provide time for the students to collect the necessary input and she would have to prompt the teachers. Her staff were resistant to change and to new ways of doing things. Ellen talked about teacher fear of change and their feeling of losing control. Teacher apprehension was a huge factor “…teachers sometimes feel that as the students’ voice gets louder, their voice gets softer.” Ellen made it very clear that she vocalized to the staff that student voice would not replace staff voice. Natalie also identified that teachers felt nervous about changing the status quo. She mentioned,

Well I think people like the idea in theory. And you know I think [teachers] generally agree that student voice is a good idea. I think that the extent to which people are willing to share their power with students varies.

Mae spoke about challenges around mindsets and change.

When you are having to shift a mindset, or you have worked in a particular way for a very long time, being open to change. They may see the value of it, it is just changing one’s practice and just being open to it.

She further talked about professional development around this:

Once a teacher is in that mind frame and has had the proper professional development and support throughout, and then it becomes their day to day. It is a practice. It is
changing habits. It is changing an attitude, mindset, and then once you decide to make that change you can change your behaviour, your practice.

Similar to Ellen, George identified the discomfort that teachers have with student run activities because students would potentially have greater input:

A big challenge is the ongoing dialogue of trying to explain to them this is why it is important. It is not that the students are going to take over the school and teachers don’t have any voice. But sometimes they want it that way. We are the teachers and we make all the decisions about prep time and this and that. It is letting them know we all have a voice. It's not that the students have the biggest voice but they have a voice.

The very structure of schooling and elements therein were identified as constraints.

Natalie mentioned the power struggle between teachers and students, and the systemic structure of report cards as reinforcing that barrier.

I mean there is a little piece on the report card where kids can write about their goals. What generally report cards seem to be a big stressor for teachers and their feeling of accountability toward reporting, really inhibits their willingness to change up the structure of the classroom I think.

The very structure of the school also constrains change:

I mean school is a very old structure that kind of sustains itself. And so trying to work creatively within that structure, or even challenging the boundaries of the structure…feels very scary and uncomfortable for people so I think you have to create a learning environment where it's safe to take risks so it's very clear there isn’t going to be punishment if something doesn’t go as expected, and where people feel safe to do things in a different way.

Tied into the notion of change is the feeling of competency of teachers to facilitate student voice. Elizabeth identified that her staff were hesitant to let students fail as they felt, “If the student doesn't have the voice to see an initiative through it is reflective of their [teachers] ability to guide them.” Some teachers struggled with their competency in facilitating conversations related to student voice activities. Esther identified that teachers were less inclined to receive student input regarding classroom instruction as they were with whole school initiatives. Margaret identified staff apathy regarding leadership roles and so the administration team deliberately planned a PD session where they did not have all the answers and, in fact, left
much of the dialogue in the hands of the staff. This led to frustration among staff and pushed them to take on more leadership roles going forward.

**View of the Child**

Some principals spoke of staff perceptions of student attitudes as a barrier to student voice. Lynn spoke of her teachers’ perceptions of students’ maturity levels as a problem. She specifically notes that the perception of teens in general directly impacts what teachers think her intermediate (grades seven and eight) students are capable of. George also cited teachers’ perceptions of students’ capabilities, stating,

> My school is unique as it is K to 4, which is very unique, there are only a few others, so the teachers don't do the so called student leadership because they feel the kids are so young, and we can't ask them to take on all these things.

Natalie identified a deficit based view of the child along with staff perception of children’s behaviour. “...So sometimes I found it difficult with people who kind of have this more rigid view of how children should behave and the rights adults should have compared to the rights children should have.” In Andrew’s school of MID students, he felt that teachers perceived that students couldn’t work independently and felt that it was important that staff “recognize that students with special needs are capable of having a voice.” Ellen identifies the difficulty with students’ abilities to engage in risk taking skills.

> So it's all fun and good to give voice to the students who have a lot to say, and everyone has a lot to say, it's fine and good to give voice to students who have the confidence to say what they are thinking, but you have to really develop student voice in those students who don’t feel that have any voice.

The equity in this statement is resounding. If we only listen to those who are able (for whatever reason) to articulate their views, are we marginalizing a large percentage of the student population?
Overall, when looking at the role of teacher and staff attitudes in student voice initiatives, it becomes apparent that when teachers function as a support it has some impact. However, when teacher and staff attitudes function as a constraint the negative impact is exponentially larger.

**Summary**

When looking at how principals facilitate student voice, similar and overlapping strategies were utilized. In terms of supports that the principals identified, there were no extrinsic supports that made student voice happen, it was the intrinsic motivation of the administrators, sometimes coupled with the support of a teacher or student that fueled student voice initiatives. When the participants spoke about their support structures, they identified these in a rather simple manner; none of the supports they experienced were crucial to the outcomes of their endeavours related to student voice. These supports were more of a welcome addition, rather than a necessary component.

In unpacking the constraints, a fuller and richer picture of the elements that impact the facilitation of student voice emerges. The constraints are really what drives the initiative to succeed or fail, or even begin in the first place. Additionally, constraints almost never work alone. Multiple constraints are tied together, making overcoming these obstacles multi-layered. It is never as simple, for example, as throwing money at a situation. The constraints endure, they do not go away, and principals need to work to break them down. Although there are common constraints, each of the participants in this study had their own unique cluster of constraints which manifested differently as a result of their individual school contexts. Administrators need to work to break down constraints, which, in turn, becomes the very support that they need. The question is, how do they do this?

The structure of the discussion about the strategies principals use to facilitate student voice and the related supports and constraints highlights the principals’ experiences. Students,
while benefitting from this experience, were left out of this discussion. I will now shift to a focus on the most integral stakeholder at the center of student voice: the students themselves. In order to examine the experiences of students, I will refer to the work of Toshalis and Nakkula who developed a spectrum of student voice as outlined in Chapter Two, and see how the data intersect with this conceptualization.

**Rationale for Selected Framework**

The framework proposed by Toshalis and Nakkula is used to anchor the analysis of student voice experiences across participants for a number of reasons. Firstly, it is formatted as a continuum and as such allows for a more flexible perspective. Student voice can involve fluid processes and this spectrum ensures that a ‘box type’ approach is prevented. The second reason is that student voice as a concept is more general than specific and in looking at my data of the experiences of these students and their principals, this framework supported the findings gathered.

**Student Experiences on the Spectrum**

I examined each individual example of student voice provided by the participants and aligned them with the various sections described by Toshalis and Nakkula; placing them accordingly along the spectrum. The intention was to get an idea of the types of student voice activities occurring in these schools. This process uncovered some interesting findings. Some student voice experiences in the school fell more on one end of the spectrum and some were all over and very diverse across it. Overall, there was far less activity on the right end of the spectrum, with no experiences in the leadership category. The majority of activities fell within the consultation category, with participation as the next highest. In some cases, the examples were not solely in one category, and so the spectrum was used as a continuum, with categories that were not rigidly defined, but rather overlapping.
As well as laying the activities out on the spectrum, I examined the role of each principal in each activity. I categorized the principal’s role as follows: principals having direct involvement, principals playing a supporting role, or simply an experience that happened in a principal’s school. Within this categorization, it was noted that in most of the initiatives, the principals were directly involved. In a few cases, the administrator was a support to the staff and students who were engaged in the experiences. In only two cases were principals not involved, and the activities were simply happening at the school, and these cases fell into the expression and consultation categories on the spectrum.

When examining the experiences of the students in relation to this spectrum, I noticed that many administrators employed similar strategies with different results. This led me to conclude that it is not the strategy that impacts where students fall on the spectrum but rather, other variables; the constraints that the principal has to work against have a huge impact on how students experience student voice.

Based on the principals’ descriptions, some students had more entry points along the spectrum than others and some of these experiences were largely in one section. What stood out, were four administrators who had multiple entry points across the spectrum, demonstrating a more diverse range of student voice experiences. More specific details about these four administrators and their experiences are outlined below. Although some of these experiences have already been discussed, they are intentionally reexamined below so as to highlight their relationship to both the Spectrum of Student Voice and the principal’s specific roles within them.

**Student Experiences: Andrew**

Andrew had four experiences on the spectrum at various entry points. In the area of expression, he had the Student Ambassadors’ Program, where two staff led workshops with students on leadership. Once the student had been part of the school for a year they were able to
apply to be an ambassador. There is an application/interview/training process and new ambassadors are paired with senior ambassadors. In this example, Andrew’s role was merely to identify that it was happening in his school; he didn’t play a formal role in facilitating this program.

In terms of Consultation, Andrew had two examples. The first one which was slightly farther on the spectrum were Club Dates, wherein once a month they would cancel classes and dedicate a day to clubs. Teachers initially determined clubs based on their own interests, but students did not always want to attend those clubs and in response they then allowed students to identify what clubs they wanted and students designed these new clubs. Andrew identified that he was aware that this was happening but had no direct involvement facilitating these club dates. Another example falling within Consultation where Andrew directly facilitated was when the staff leadership team wanted to change the Code of Behaviour and created a group of staff, students, parents and administration to oversee the process. They collectively came up with a Charter of Rights and Responsibilities which was shared with each class for input. Through discussion of various items for the charter, students developed a greater understanding and became more active in the community.

In the Participation category, Andrew’s students expressed that they wanted opportunities to be in a typical school and as a result they expressed this through negative behaviour. In response, the principal and one teacher created a student focus group and they sat down and talked about goals and developed a plan. They then identified topics that they were going to talk about and deal with and over a nine-week program, these six students were withdrawn from classes once a week. They identified that in order to go to a typical school they needed to improve their writing, and so they investigated evidence of what data schools use (e.g., EQAO, IEP, other assessments, etc.). Andrew uncovered that most of the students had not written the
EQAO due to exemptions. The principal provided an opportunity for them to actually try writing the test and then met with each student individually and provided descriptive feedback regarding their test (i.e., strengths and weaknesses). Andrew then responded to students request to get an instructional leader in literacy to come and work with them. As an end result, the students’ behaviour improved. In this example, Andrew was intensively involved with the students over a number of weeks.

**Student Experiences: Elizabeth**

Elizabeth’s range of experiences with student voice extend from Consultation to Participation/Partnership to Activism. In the Consultation area, Elizabeth’s administration team asked students what they wanted to see in terms of opportunity for leadership development. They used school wide protocols, a structured conversation, to gather student perspectives and thus drive future initiatives.

... and so it was engaging our students and all of the constituents in the process that basically gave us data to be able to go back and say, this is what we heard and as a result this is what we’re proposing moving forward.

In this example, the administrative team was directly involved in facilitating student voice.

The Model of Advisory is when small groups of students within their grade level meet twice a week with a teacher advisor who is not their homeroom teacher. In this strategy, the administration team is supporting the student voice initiative and being proactive in their approach to what students need and want. These meetings would focus on building capacity around healthy relationships, empathy and inclusivity, identifying social and emotional challenges and developing strategies using a growth mindset. In her role, Elizabeth documented the entire process. In this example, student voice is involving pupils as collaborators with school staff and falls somewhere between Participation and Partnership. It is Participation because the students are involved in generating questions about issues and it is Partnership because they are
working collaboratively with adults, although these adults were not necessarily trained in how to
work collaboratively with youth partners. Although involved in supporting the initiative,
Elizabeth wasn’t directly involved in creating the program.

An example of Activism is when Elizabeth had students approach her with concerns
about the environment, and she sat down with them as they articulated their concerns. She
brainstormed with them possible resources for assistance, and then connected them with mentors
from the senior school. Once the partnerships were established, Elizabeth assumed the role of
documenter,

And so the facilitating role that I took on was really about documenting the process so
again back to our pedagogy. Mapping out for them the different stages of this experience
for them and then being able to mirror that back, so that they could realize you know
where they started, what it looks like while they were in the midst of it and then what
were the end results.

As an administrator, Elizabeth’s role was directly involved in the facilitation of this student voice
initiative.

**Student Experiences: Natalie**

The student experiences Natalie described ranged from Consultation to
Partnership/Activism. In the category of Consultation, she provided an example where an
educational assistant working with students as part of the school Green Team, initiated a
ticketing program to encourage classes to turn off lights. This staff member approached the
principal regarding teacher complaints about the ticketing program, and the principal supported
the group by encouraging and guiding them towards examining existing data. The Green Team
then researched the impact of their efforts and the principal created time and space for them to
present their data at a staff meeting. The staff responded by recognizing the value of the ticket
approach and shared suggestions and support for the program. This scenario highlights the role
of this administrator as a support for student voice; although she was involved in supporting the
endeavours she was not in direct control of the initiative.

In the Partnership realm, Natalie has a student council that meets monthly to discuss
issues that come up in the school and work on solutions. In this situation, the administrator is
directly involved in facilitating this strategy.

Natalie was involved in a very rich example of Partnership/Activism where she had a
vision of what she wanted the school to become and approached a local university to partner with
in an action research project. They examined math through a social justice lens where teachers,
students and parents acted as co-researchers in participatory action research. They solicited
information from students, parents and teachers and identified a problem as behaviour on the
field outside. The group then researched and collected data to understand the issue more deeply.
They shared this information and asked for suggestions. The younger students wrote letters to the
principal with suggestions and older students created action plans and presented these to the
principal, who critiqued them in terms of the connection to data management and guided them to
the appropriate audience for communication about the issues. The students felt that the issues
with the yard could be resolved with more adult supervision. When the students then presented
the data, a teacher explained to them about the constraints of the collective agreement regarding
yard supervision, and they used this information to recreate their proposal to work within those
constraints. The Staff Advisory Committee agreed to change the yard duty schedule. The
existing student council was also part of the participatory action research. They felt that more
activities at lunch recess would prevent problems on the yard, and thus formed a partnership with
an external agency that came in and worked with students, parents and lunchtime supervisors on
cooperative learning and leadership. As a result, disciplinary issues decreased in number and in
nature (less physical and more verbal). As an administrator, Natalie was directly involved in all aspects of this project.

**Student Experiences: Lynn**

Lynn recounted student voice activities that ranged from Partnership to Activism. In the Partnership area, Lynn’s student council facilitated a reading club survey regarding books for the library. The result was the students felt there were too many fiction books and not enough graphic novels. The council collaborated with the librarian to purchase more resources based on what students wanted to see. In this example, student voice activities are happening at the school, but Lynn wasn’t directly involved in them, nor did she directly support them. They were existing in her building, and while she was aware of them, she wasn’t directly involved in their execution.

In another scenario, Lynn was directly involved in a democratic process to establish a student government and she linked each committee to a school improvement plan theme (e.g., literacy). She also enacted change around student voice by having the student council survey students about what they wanted to see happen in their school. The surveys critiqued the school and teaching. The data was brought back to a staff meeting to lead and change future initiatives, however, the teachers took the critique personally and pulled support for student council and their initiatives. The principal, determined to have student voice heard, responded by releasing students for two periods a week to work on the “job”, and she considered them part of the staff. These students would also meet at recess in a conference room where the principal would supervise. “So when you create spaces in the school for students to work, it tells teachers they matter. To have them involved in the decisions that we are making.” The student council also presented at each month’s school council meeting in order to keep parents informed.

In the Activism category, Lynn’s students polled the student body regarding what school trips were too expensive for families. Based on the results, the grade 8 trip ranked highest and
the school’s response to the data was to subsidize a hundred dollars for every grade eight student. In this scenario, Lynn played a supportive role rather than being directly involved in the initiative.

**Summary of Student Experiences**

In summary, when compared to the rest of the participants, these four administrators had multiple entry points on various areas across the spectrum of student voice. Furthermore, their student activities also fell the furthest to the right side of that spectrum. This leads to the question, what was different with these administrators? All of the participants in this study facilitated student voice using similar strategies. The supports and constraints they experienced were not hugely different from one another. What stands out as most impactful between the four aforementioned administrators and the rest of the participants is that these principals actively married student voice with classroom and learning experiences. The connection between Andrew’s focus group of students and their concerns with their schooling and academics translated into literacy and learning in the classroom. Natalie’s experience with participatory action research related to math and social justice was the catalyst for additional student voice activities in the school. When looking at Elizabeth and Lynn’s larger contexts, the same connection between student voice and the classroom and learning was also evident. In Elizabeth’s independent school, the overarching Reggio Emilia philosophy, in which inquiry, emergent curriculum and student voice are heavily embedded, stems across the curriculum and pedagogy within all classrooms. Lynn has similarly worked to adopt a school wide approach to analyzing text through the Literate Learner Framework lens. This framework involves students making connections between the curriculum and their own lived experiences, further enabling them to engage with texts with more autonomy and voice by repositioning themselves within the curriculum.
These four administrators actively sought to create a place for student voice beyond the extra-curricular and this opened up entry points for their students on the spectrum where other participants did not. By including student voice within the classroom, these four administrators also worked to combat some of the previously identified constraints such as time, space and finances, teacher and staff attitudes and pedagogy and curriculum. Therefore, one way to breakdown constraints that has proven successful by these participants is by embedding student voice within the classroom and learning contexts. In doing so, these four administrators created a very impactful, and potentially sustainable, support in facilitating student voice initiatives.

**Chapter Five Summary**

In this chapter the findings of the study were presented and analyzed. The strategies employed by administrators to facilitate student voice include: Listening, collecting data, responding to students, communicating the vision, providing and sharing resources, connecting to the curriculum, providing time and space and balancing teacher voice with student voice. The administrators that utilized any of these respective strategies did so in accordance with their unique experiences and circumstances, therefore, some of the strategies were further explored based on the way in which they were utilized or employed. The strategies identified by the participants did not reveal any insights into the degree to which student voice was prevalent in their experiences and schools; more strategies did not necessarily translate into more student voice initiatives. The strategies employed by the principals are also interwoven into their role as outlined in the Ontario Leadership Framework.

An examination of the supports identified by administrators in their facilitation of student voice initiatives was also presented and analyzed within the chapter. These supports included: Participants beliefs and experiences, school size, technology and social media, external partnerships, school structures and teacher/staff attitudes and perceptions. What was revealed
was that the biggest support to administrators was intrinsic in nature, deriving from their own personal belief systems. Although the remaining, external supports were helpful, none of them were integral to the success of a student voice experience or initiative.

The constraints identified by administrators and examined within the chapter were more revealing. These constraints included: Finances, time, school boards, parents, students, pedagogy and curriculum, professional development and teacher/staff attitudes and perceptions. What was revealed was that, unlike the supports, the constraints did impact whether a student voice experience or initiative succeeded or failed. Furthermore, the constraints were more complex in nature; often being coupled with other constraints making it them more difficult to overcome. An interesting finding was that teacher/staff attitudes and perceptions were listed as the largest constraint and the most impactful external support to administrators when facilitating student voice.

The chapter deliberately shifted from a focus on principals’ experiences to those of their students. These student experiences were examined through the lens of Toshalis and Nakkula’s Spectrum of Student Voice. In undergoing this examination, four principals’ students had multiple entry points across the spectrum and this further revealed that the same four principals were able to bring student voice beyond just the school domain but into the classroom domain as well.
Table 2

Findings Across Participants

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<th>Constraints</th>
<th>Spectrum Categories</th>
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<td>School board Parents Students Staff attitudes</td>
<td>Consultation (x2) Participation</td>
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<td>Margaret</td>
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CHAPTER 6: DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

“The road less traveled in education is the road where students and teachers are learners together, where there is a partnership, where adults do things with students, not at, to or for them” (Quaglia & Corso, 2014, p. 176).

Introduction

This study investigated how principals facilitate student voice; a topic that is lacking in the literature as discussed in Chapter 2. This study reported on strategies principals use to facilitate student voice and the supports and constraints that they identified in relation to student voice and/or their facilitation of it have been examined. The themes of strategies, supports and constraints were derived from the research questions which were created based on my own experiences as an administrator who has facilitated student voice within my schools. As exemplified in Chapter 5, a shift in focus from the principal experience to the student experience, as it relates to the principal’s facilitation of student voice was provided. Toshalis and Nakkula’s (2012) Spectrum of Student Voice was used to anchor the student experiences in order to discern the impact of the principals’ roles in these initiatives. In this chapter the key findings and implications of this study will be reviewed. A revised conceptual framework that emerged out of the data analysis will be shared and discussed. Finally, based on the twelve participants of this study and their shared experiences, recommendations are offered to various stakeholders.

Research Questions

As identified in Chapter 1, the central research question is How do elementary principals facilitate student voice? The four sub questions are:

1. What are the strategies that principals employ in facilitating student voice?
2. How are the audience/groups/stakeholders impacted by these strategies?
3. What are the challenges/barriers to the facilitation of student voice that principals experience?
4. What are the supports that are helpful to principals in the facilitation of student voice?

**Discussion of Key Findings**

**Research Question 1: What are the strategies that principals employ in facilitating student voice?**

As outlined in Chapter 5, there are a number of strategies that participants used when facilitating student voice. All of the administrators identified listening as a strategy, and this occurred when the participants initiated the listening, or listened as a response to students and/or staff. Some administrators used formal structures to listen and others used informal methods. Seven participants collected data about students; some did this through formal surveys, and some through various techniques outlined such as protocols and graffiti. Administrators identified communicating the vision as important, and how this was done varied across contexts. Eight participants discussed how they provided and shared resources around student voice initiatives, whether it was in the form of allocating money or sharing professional resources. Connecting student voice to the curriculum was recognized by eight participants in an effort to connect student voice to classroom pedagogy. Providing time and space was used by ten administrators in a variety of ways. Some principals played an indirect role, such as allowing for time at meetings whereas some played a direct role wherein they would meet with students and/or staff around student voice initiatives. Balancing teacher voice with student voice was a strategy identified by five of the participants to ensure that all parties felt valued and included.

The strategies used by the principals often overlapped and similar strategies were used in various ways that were dependent upon the particular context and circumstance of the school or the initiative. When examining the strategies used by these participants to facilitate student voice, it is apparent that these are not unique to the implementation of student voice, and in fact are strategies that administrators would use to facilitate other initiatives in their schools. In
examining the experiences shared by these twelve administrators, there was no specific strategy identified or combination of strategies used that offered a formula for the successful implementation of student voice. The strategies used by administrators to facilitate student voice are heavily rooted in the context and culture of the school, which in turn influenced their effectiveness. The role of the principal in facilitating these strategies varied and required many ‘hats’: principal as listener, principal as supervisor, principal as gatekeeper to resources, principals as empowering staff, etc.

**Research Question 2: How are the audience/groups/stakeholders impacted by these strategies?**

The interview protocol was designed to gather the experiences of principals who facilitate student voice as related to decision making, organization and implementation of learning activities, consultation and professional development. The interview protocol did not include this question directly, but rather the answer was intended to be woven into their description of participants experiences facilitating student voice. As a result, the evidence that directly connects to the question of how the audience/groups/stakeholders are impacted by the principal’s strategies can be inferred from the impact of the various student voice initiatives described by the principals. In retrospect, this question should have been directly asked as data pertaining to this specific information was not always addressed in the description of experiences from the participants. Therefore, I have chosen not to discuss this question in my findings as it would be solely based on my own inferences as a researcher.

**Research Question 3: What are the challenges/barriers to the facilitation of student voice that principals experience?**

Participants identified constraints to the facilitation of student voice initiatives in a number of areas. Finances was identified by only four of the principals as a constraint, however
time was a constraint identified by over half of the participants. Time referred to both time
needed by the administrator or time teachers would need to implement student voice activities.
The school board was seen as a constraint by half of the administrators, and this category
included policies that were prohibitive, lack of funding and a paucity of interest around
discussing student voice. Students themselves were a constraint in terms of both their ability
levels and receptivity to coaching and mentoring. Three administrators felt that curriculum and
pedagogy were prohibitive to student voice. These three administrators were actually among the
four who did bring student voice into the classroom domain in some way. Professional
development in terms of being able to effect lasting change, lack of resources and a lack of
understanding were cited by half of the participants. Finally, teacher/staff attitude was the biggest
constraint identified in this study, which included mindsets that were closed to change, teacher
apprehension about change, perceived threats to power, and embedded structures prohibiting
student voice, such as report cards, and a view of the child that stems from a deficit position.

The constraints described by the principals paint a rich picture of the barriers that can
prevent a student initiative from succeeding, or from even beginning at all. These constraints are
often complex, multi-layered and overlapping, and principals needed to work to break them
down. Each participant had their own unique cluster of constraints that worked in conjunction
with their context and school culture to create barriers to student voice.

**Research Question 4: What are the supports that are helpful to principals in the facilitation
of student voice?**

The supports identified by the twelve participants either worked in favour of the whole
school or were personal supports for the principal. The participants’ personal beliefs and
experiences was the greatest support for the principals in this study. Many of the principals had
an internal drive or belief system that gave them the raison d’etre for engaging in student voice.
Digging deeper, some administrators felt this came from their personal and family history, while for others it was born out of professional experiences. School size was identified as a support by only one administrator, as was using technology and social media. Engaging external partnerships was recognized as a support, as was using school structures, such as student councils. Teacher/staff attitudes and perceptions, also identified as a barrier, was the second largest support identified, and the biggest external factor on either side of support/barrier. Some participants identified staff attitudes were a support to the school, and some classified them as a support to the administrator personally.

The supports that the principals encountered when facilitating student voice were diverse and were not equally weighted, as some helped to move the initiatives along more than others. The biggest support was the internal belief of the principal which fueled their desire to facilitate student voice. There was no one external support that acted to ensure that the facilitation of student would be successful. As previously noted, these supports were more of a welcome addition rather than a necessary component.

**Student Experiences on the Spectrum**

In examining the student experience in relation the Toshalis and Nakkula’s (2012) Spectrum of Student Voice, four participants were identified as having multiple entry points that spanned various categories of the spectrum. This analytical process revealed that these administrators were able to actively unite student voice with classroom and learning experiences and in doing so they were able to work through certain constraints such as time, space, finances, teacher/staff attitudes and pedagogy and curriculum.

**The Significance of Relationships**

The three overarching findings of this study are: the significant role of personal beliefs and experiences of principals in supporting their facilitation of student voice, the significance of
teacher/staff attitudes as both a support and constraint to the facilitation of student voice, and the effectiveness of bringing student voice into the classroom and learning context in dismantling constraints. It is my position that these overarching findings exemplify the integral role that relationships play for principals facilitating student voice and each will be discussed in turn.

The principal’s personal relationship with student voice acted as the foundation on which their endeavours were built and the catalyst for their efforts in facilitating student voice each and every day. Ten out of the twelve principals identified that their personal beliefs and experiences support them in their efforts around student voice. These personal beliefs involve their family/childhood histories, their professional experiences and their deep personal belief systems. According to these principals, these factors cultivated their personal relationships with student voice and motivated them to enact student voice in their schools. Given the amount of constraints involved in the facilitation of student voice initiatives, I wonder if without such a personal relationship with student voice, these principals would sustain their efforts to promote it or would they simply give up?

When it comes to teacher/staff attitudes, there are many relationships at play. Eleven of the participants within this study identified teacher/staff attitudes as a constraint in facilitating student voice. When unpacking this constraint, many of the issues centered upon teacher/staff mindsets and fears regarding loss of power, as well as teacher/staff perceptions about children’s capabilities. Based on my interpretation of their experiences, these attitudes impacted the relationships that these teachers and staff members had with students and consequently impacted students’ opportunities to have a voice. Additionally, the relationships that these teachers and staff members have with their colleagues (including their principals) would be affected by their position regarding students and student voice. Eight of the participants within this study identified teacher/staff attitudes as a support in facilitating student voice. When functioning in a
supportive capacity, the teachers and staff members who valued student voice and worked to promote it held strong relationships with their principals and were often cited as being a personal support for the principal and the school as a whole. It is my observation that when teachers and staff members have a positive relationship with student voice, it fosters positive relationships with likeminded principals as well as other stakeholders (i.e., colleagues, students). Seven out of twelve participants identified teacher/staff attitudes as both a support and constraint when facilitating student voice. This points to the existence of complex relationships among any group of educators and it would be unrealistic to label the relationships between stakeholders as being singular and fixed.

For those who have successfully brought student voice into the classroom domain, this speaks to the multitude of relationships that exist and are fortified between: principals and student voice, principals and teachers. Teachers and student voice, teachers and students themselves and students and student voice. Furthermore, because bringing student voice into the classroom worked to combat certain constraints as previously described, it strengthened the relationship between student voice and the school as a whole (including all stakeholders).

I conclude that the stronger the relationship between all stakeholders and student voice, the further the breadth and depth across multiple school domains (i.e., extra-curricular and classroom learning) and the potential for sustainability is optimized.

Revised Conceptual Framework

At the onset of this study, my conceptual framework was centered around what I believed impacted principals in facilitating student voice. Initially I was uncertain about the role of the principal in facilitating student voice and as a result, my initial conceptual framework took the form of interconnected circles; student voice being at the center and being impacted by principals, strategies, barriers/ challenges, supports/successes and audience/groups/stakeholders.
Upon completion of the data analysis, my understanding of how principals facilitate student voice shifted and as a result, so has my conceptual framework (see figure below).

Figure 7: Revised Conceptual Framework

Principals and their facilitation of student voice are the central focus of this study and, therefore, I have placed them at the top of this revised conceptual framework. Student voice can be enacted, facilitated and supported by various groups including principals, teachers/staff, students and parents/community, however, the principal is always involved in some capacity (whether active, passive, supportive, etc.). Once set into motion, student voice initiatives and activities take place within one or both domains; the school and/or the classroom. Ultimately, these initiatives and activities have the potential to impact any of the same groups of actors: principals, teachers/staff, students and parents/community. What the data has demonstrated is
that the principal’s role in facilitating student voice can take on different forms: active, passive, direct, indirect or supportive. In addition, the principal is not the sole actor in this process; partnerships with other stakeholders work to optimize student voice initiatives. Furthermore, the data also demonstrated that most of the student voice initiatives and activities that take place reside within the school domain rather than in the classroom. The four aforementioned principals who were able to take student voice into the classroom domain, did so by working in partnership with at least one other stakeholder. In my previous conceptual framework, principals and their actions and experiences were isolated within their own circles; the data has now driven me to partner principals and what they do with the other stakeholders involved because these partnerships provide more opportunities for impact into both school and classroom domains. In the original conceptual framework, the strategies, supports and constraints that were in their own circle are now embedded in the actors themselves; in people working together, in relationships. This change was made because the data shows that sometimes the audience (staff, students, parents) was a barrier, or sometimes a support, and the biggest external support and constraint (i.e. teacher/staff attitudes and perceptions) is now embedded in the new framework, as working together to enact student voice.

Given this new conceptual framework, what supports do administrators need when promoting and facilitating student voice in their schools? The findings demonstrate the role of the various stakeholders (i.e., principals, students, parents, staff) as supports and/or constraints to the success of student voice initiatives, therefore, I will make recommendations for a number of stakeholders. The recommendations are offered as a result of the insights gained by the experiences shared by the twelve participants of this study. These suggestions are grounded in the Ontario Leadership Framework, thereby constituting the work that leaders are already doing in their schools rather than being an additional task or responsibility.
Recommendation #1: Teach Students the Necessary Skills

If student voice is viewed as a skill, then it follows that this skill needs to be taught and requires time to be developed, cultivated and practiced from an early age. Similar to other skills we teach, this thought process and expression develop over time and should be integral to the learning process. In this study, five participants identified students as a constraint in facilitating student voice. Jackie mentioned the difficulty that younger students have articulating their needs and George shared that his teachers do not really foster leadership opportunities among students because he is at a school with younger students (kindergarten to grade 4). Most of the student voice experiences shared by the participants of this study have, in fact, involved students within the upper grades. In order to cultivate student voice in younger children, these skills must be taught and practiced within the early grades and continue to be refined across grade levels consistently. Research has found that training is required to build skills, knowledge and dispositions around student voice (McIntyre, Pedder, & Rudduck, 2005; Mitra, 2007). Specifically, Mitra (2007) found that students needed training on youth rights, parliamentary procedure, interacting with adults, setting goals, facilitating meetings, communicating expectations and developing a work plan. Fielding (2001) questions whether the skills involved are encouraged and supported through training and if they are understood, developed and practiced within the context of democratic values and dispositions. This raises the issue of context, in order for students to develop these skills, the environment in which they exist must be supportive to this philosophy, and I will address context in a subsequent recommendation.

Quaglia and Corso (2014) state that, “If collaboration between adults and students in a school is to be genuine, communication is necessary” (p.164). Such communication involves skills of being able to listen to others, to be heard and to express yourself, and requires opportunity and practice. Interestingly, they note that “communication is not just about speaking,
but also about listening… But listening is a skill that is rarely formally taught in schools” (Quaglia & Corso, 2014, p. 164). They go on to point out that the other three communication skills of reading, writing and speaking are all formally taught and evaluated, but listening is not. In order to recognize the potential of students having a voice in their education, we need to provide the opportunity to develop the specific skills required. It is naïve to think that students will be able to express themselves, particularly in acceptable ways, about what they think about complex educational issues if they are not provided with the tools to navigate the issues and complexities.

The concept of teaching students how to have a voice will also deal with an equity issue; are the students who are seen as capable and as leaders the ones who are called on to offer an opinion or idea? This issue was raised within the findings when Esther raised the question of whose voice we listen to. Quite often “student voice, is at best, something a small number of other students, often not like them, do with a small number of teachers, often not like other teachers, to no good effect” (Fielding, 2001, p. 105). Teaching children how to vocalize their ideas and needs in a structured school setting may help to minimize this inequality by giving them the required skills.

**Recommendation #2: Parent Education**

Mockler and Groundwater-Smith (2015) identify lack of parental engagement as an obstacle to approaches that seek to maximize student voice. Five participants identified parents as a barrier to facilitating student voice due to lack of involvement or negative encouragement. Building on Recommendation #1, if we view student voice as a skill, similar to literacy or numeracy, that needs to be cultivated, then as major stakeholders, parents can and should be harnessed as a support. Parents need to be educated to understand the significance and impact of student voice, and need to mirror this in the home by nurturing this skill and supporting their
children in the development of this. Parents may not expect student voice in the school or classroom because they probably did not have this experience in their schooling, therefore, educating them on the significance of student voice and how they can support this at home is necessary. Although, as this study noted, not having parental partnerships around student voice is not a massive constraint, it can, however, be a strong support if parents model it, have conversations about it and value their children’s voices at home.

**Recommendation #3: Professional Development**

The findings from this study show that teacher attitude was the biggest factor as either a constraint or a support and, therefore, this is a group that weighs heavily on how student voice is implemented. The data also indicates that the principals who guided student voice broadly across the spectrum were the ones who connected it to the curriculum in the classroom. In this recommendation I will discuss how teachers can use pedagogic voice to bring student voice into curriculum, and subsequent recommendations will address teacher attitudes and the culture of the school.

Nelson (2014) identifies that students are rarely involved in substantive and ongoing classroom conversations about pedagogy and knowledge. Furthermore, Elias (2010) stated, “The consensus of evidence is that the most powerful determinants of engagement appear to be instructional and pedagogical processes and the overall climate of the school” (p. 23). Given current demands around curriculum and standards testing, how can students have influence over the context and content in their learning? Baroutsis, McGregor and Mills (2016) propose a: 

Combined understanding of ‘voice’, ‘pedagogy’ and ‘engagement’, conceiving of it as ‘pedagogic voice’ to identify a space within the literature where we are able to discuss young people’s active engagement, participation and voice in the areas of teaching, learning and the curriculum. (p. 125)

In their study, they drew on interview data from an alternative high school that employed the principles of democratic schooling through student voice in curriculum and pedagogy. They
outlined two key areas of student voice: community membership that aligned with ownership of practices and decision making around learning and encouraging choice and interests within their learning environment. They found that although their students were deemed unteachable, through their application of pedagogic voice, students were engaged in their own learning and they also supported the learning of others. This points to the importance of students being at the center of their learning and curriculum. Pedagogies such as the Reggio Emilia Approach that view students as capable and competent creators of knowledge need to be explored in the school system so that we can facilitate student voice not only on governance issues, but on how the students are taught and learn. This connects to prior research that found multiple ways students want to have a say in what they learn and how they are taught (Rudduck, 2007).

Whereas most curriculum and pedagogy strive to change the student in some way, student voice initiatives position students as the agents of change; it begins and ends with the students themselves. Therefore, student voice is deeply student centered (Toshalis and Nakkula, 2012). Smyth (2006) outlines a scaffolding around how to construct “spaces of leadership from which young people can speak back regarding what they consider to be important and valuable about their learning” (p. 282). This includes giving students significant ownership of their learning in other than tokenistic ways; supporting teachers and schools in giving up some control and handing it over to students; pursuing a curriculum that is relevant and that connects to young lives; endorsing forms of reporting and assessment that are authentic to learning and promoting flexible pedagogy that understand the complexity of students’ lives. Mockler and Groundwater-Smith (2015) outline approaches to curriculum, pedagogy and assessment that align with student voice practices that involve students playing an active role in what will be learned and how, and require them to have been “supported to develop capacities to make wise and sensible choices about their learning” (p. 143). Additionally, attention should be paid to the students’ learning
needs, prior and background knowledge, interests, cultural knowledge and their life outside the school. As one principal in another study noted, “It requires teachers to become educational archeologists in order to understand each student’s story and to validate respect and build on their interests, experiences and needs” (Baroutsis et al., 2016). If we are to meet students where they are at, schools need to invest time and effort into getting to know what makes the students ‘tick’.

There are a variety of existing pedagogies that embody the philosophy and spirit of student voice, which would include the Reggio Emilia approach, inquiry based learning, project based learning, and the Full-Day Early Learning Program, which is currently implemented in kindergarten classrooms in Ontario. Such programs should be explored with teachers within professional development sessions, specifically locating the role of student voice therein.

**Recommendation #4: Developing the Culture of the School**

Although all humans want their voices to matter, Quaglia and Corso (2014) note, “The fact of the matter is that student voice is not yet a reality in most classrooms and schools” (p. 2). Student voice can be seen as a privilege; as a gift we generously give to students (Mocker & Groundwater-Smith, 2015). Contrary to this view, is the idea that student voice is not the ‘cherry on top’ but rather a basic staple in any school. If student voice is viewed as being at the heart of the school, then it becomes integral in everything happens and all stakeholders need to be invested. The findings of this study have demonstrated that students, staff and parents can act as constraints to student voice, however, if we invest in building their understanding of the importance and benefits of student voice, they will in turn be invested and these constraints then become supports. Manefield et al. (2007) concluded their literature review stating that “student voice initiatives need the support of the whole school with the whole school culture supporting the processes and follow up around student voice” (p. 38). The Ontario study concluded that the
principal must play a key role in honouring student voice and developing a school culture that promotes it. This will inevitably mean challenging the current power structure that underpins the structure of the relationship along with questioning the view of the child and the purpose of schooling. Bragg (2010) stated that to be meaningful and effective in producing change, student voice needs to be embedded in relationships and ways of working “thereby developing what is referred to as a culture of participation” (p. 11). Jean Rudduck’s work emphasizes the importance of developing a whole school approach to student voice. It is important that the “principles and values of pupil voice and participation are threaded through the daily interactions and communication of school life and reflect a coherent and widely supported set of values and principals” (Flutter & Rudduck, 2004, p. 125). Quaglia and Corso (2014) question the attitude that schools take towards students and ask:

What would schools look like if they started from a position of trusting kids? What would school rules look like if the fundamental stance of the system was that most of the time, most of the students do the right thing? What if, inevitably, when a student made a poor choice, we held that student accountable, rather than tried to prevent the inevitable with blanket rules that made every student feel like a suspect? (p. 18)

Having teachers that understand and support the repositioning of their students is a mammoth challenge at both a school and board level, but it is one that is vital. Ultimately, the process starts with a trusting view of the child; in their behaviour and accountability in both the school and the classroom domains. It would be beneficial to enlighten stakeholders about the documented advantages of having students involved in their schooling; as we have seen there is an abundance of evidence to suggest that students want to be consulted and this results in advantages both for the school and the students. (Rudduck, 1996; Flutter & Rudduck, 2004; Rudduck et al., 2003). Sharing personal stories of how student voice has impacted pupils, such as documented case studies of disengaged youth who were positively impacted by student voice initiatives, may persuade and enlighten teachers and principals to adopt such practices.
Building a culture in the school requires the participation of all stakeholders, including staff, parents and students, and as such highlights the interconnectedness among these suggestions. In order to build the culture of the school with students that have a voice in their education, requires them to have been taught the skills to articulate themselves so that everyone has a voice and no one is excluded. It is supported by parents who understand the importance of student voice, who nurture it at home and expect it at their children’s school. Conversely, in having students who have the understanding, skills and the expectation that they will have a voice in their schooling and then not providing a supportive culture would be disheartening and counterproductive.

**Recommendation #5: Ministry of Education**

Currently the Ontario Ministry of Education has a Student Voice Initiative that encourages students to get involved in four ways:

1. Minister’s Student Advisory Council: 60 students (grade 7-12) from across the province will be chosen to meet with the Minister of Education to share their ideas and perspectives.

2. SpeakUp Projects: Grants are available to students in grades 7 to 12 with projects they design and implement in their own learning community.

3. Students as Researchers: Students from grades 7 to 12 work together to identify and research an issue impacting the student experience.

4. SpeakUp in a Box: A do it yourself kit to run a student-led forum for 30 participants at the school. The goal is to have students share ideas about what can help them be more engaged in learning and school life.

Although this four-fold strategy is helpful, it excludes a huge group of students, those under grade 7. Furthermore, what the students tend to focus on as researchers and in the forums lie
mainly in the school realm, not in classroom pedagogy and curriculum practices. Engaging Student Voices reported on Ministry funded student voice projects and concluded that “they [students] saw themselves as agents initiating change in their schools through projects focused on broader social issues such as environmental sustainability, youth mental health and identity formation, and women in STEM” (Meliksetyan, 2015, p. 4). Although these are noble areas in and of themselves, these projects do not address fundamental issues of pedagogy and curriculum and involved a group of students who were already perceived as leaders in the school, calling into question issues of equity among students.

The Ontario School Effectiveness Framework (2013) is a document to support school improvement and student success. The framework identifies evidence based indicators of successful practice in effective schools. Indicator #3 involves student engagement:

3.1 The teaching and learning environment is inclusive and reflects individual student strengths, needs and learning preferences.

3.2 Students’ priorities are embedded in School Improvement Plans

3.3 Students are partners in dialogue and discussion to inform program activities in the classroom and school that represent diversity, needs and interests of the students.

3.4 Students demonstrate a wide range of skills such as teamwork, advocacy and leadership.

This framework brings student voice more into the classroom realm and doesn’t exclude any group of students based on age. It is interesting to note that in the 2010 document, Indicator #3 was termed student voice; the current use of the term student engagement is problematic because it suppresses the large body of work done around student voice and the power relations that are embedded in it.

Although the School Effectiveness Framework (SEF) focuses on the importance of student voice it is questionable as to how well referenced it is by teachers and administrators. In
my study, and in my professional life, I have found that many administrators are unaware about the available funds for student voice initiatives, or even that the Ministry has a strategy around student voice. The framework also lacks the necessary element of accountability; there needs to be some culpability on the part of teachers, schools and school boards. Finally, the SEF does not go deep enough in developing a vision for student voice. Much like literacy and numeracy, the skills and dispositions needed for student voice need to be outlined by the Ministry in order for teachers to have a general guideline for where they should be heading. It is my recommendation that the Ministry create a document, solely dedicated to the conceptualization and implementation of student voice. Multiple participants within this study have identified a lack of Ministry resources related to student voice. A student voice document could be in two sections, one designed for schools and the other written in student friendly language directly for the pupil. This document would serve three purposes: Firstly, it would demonstrate a commitment to and prioritize student voice as a provincial focus. Secondly, it would educate stakeholders in the many complexities of student voice and how this could look in the classroom and school. Including a conceptualization of student voice, along with examples would concretize the practice for teachers and principals. Thirdly, the section for students would provide an exemplary model for schools of ‘practicing what you preach’.

**Recommendation #6: Boards of Education**

Half of the participants within this study identified their board of education as a constraint in their facilitation of student voice. When Ministry initiatives are passed down to school boards, such as the current Renewed Math Strategy in Ontario, they are often accompanied by resources and financial support. The school board is then required to determine how they will implement this initiative given the culture and climate of their board and the schools therein. Student voice needs to have such a plan at the board level, and all staff need to
be able to recognize what it is and why it is important. Student voice should be discussed at team meetings for principals and consultants, and be included in any Board Improvement Plan for Student Achievement using specific strategies and outcomes. A current practice of having one or two students serve as trustees on the board is not sufficient, and can be perceived as tokenism. Student voice needs to be integral to board programs and thus may have some transferability to schools.

In addition to making student voice a focus, school boards need to provide support and education to their administrators to ensure their understanding and commitment to student voice. Principals need to have this support to feel comfortable enacting student voice initiatives at a novice level. Principals who are more experienced in facilitating student voice also need such supports from the school board in order to feel validated in their endeavours and to persevere through any difficulties.

Additionally, if the board is to successfully foster partnerships, professional development where all the stakeholders are at the same table needs to occur. The traditional hierarchical and linear model where the Ministry of Education imparts memorandum to the board, who then in turn dictates to principals, who then inform teachers needs to be disrupted. We need to develop a model where all stakeholders, including students, are at the table giving input into how to facilitate student voice initiatives. School boards are in the position to be able to facilitate such a discussion.

**Implications for Future Research**

There is a large body of research on student voice that shows benefits to schools and students when students are consulted about their ideas with regard to their education, however, there is only an implied connection between improved student achievement and student voice practices. Future research that explores more directly the link between the use of student voice in
pedagogy, curriculum and assessment and improved student achievement is required and will help to embed student voice into mainstream practices and ultimately into the culture of the school.

This study examined the experiences and the role of the principal in facilitating student voice amidst a paucity of literature in this area. Future studies that describe such experiences would be helpful in corroborating these findings. In particular future studies should focus on the distinction between the school and the classroom domains and examine whether the strategies, supports and barriers look any different between the two domains. Additionally, this study focused on elementary principals, and it would be helpful to examine the secondary principal or vice principal, since their experience can look very different from their elementary counterparts.

In conjunction with the above recommendation, it would be informative to examine equity in how administrators facilitate student voice. A common caution and complaint around student voice is that it privileges certain students (Fielding, 2012). Future research that teases out the equity piece in what principals do would potentially uncover such bias and/or ways these effects are mitigated. Such a critical study that marries social justice and student voice would be a thought-provoking and informative critical piece of research.

Finally, this study examined the principals’ experiences that were reported during one interview; another layer to be examined would be a longitudinal study which could look at the principal experience over different stages of their position at a particular school. Does the principal experience facilitating student voice differently depending on the number of years they are at a school? This would help to uncover factors that could impede student voice initiatives that involve the timing of the principal placement. Does it make a difference if the principal has been there for one year or five? Were administrators successful in implementing student voice in their first year of an appointment to a school? Does it matter how many years of experience they
have overall as an administrator? Are the supports and constraints the same in year one at a school as year two or three?

**Limitations of the Study**

This was a qualitative study, and as with any qualitative research, the sample size is fairly small. Furthermore, this sample was taken from the context of the elementary schools in the province of Ontario; given that in Ontario the Ministry of Education oversees policies and procedures of the education system, other provinces and countries may have a different experience around student voice. Furthermore, of the five school boards and two independent schools represented, most were located around a major urban center, with only one principal being from a rural and remote school. Experiences gathered from a more diverse range of schools could potentially offer insights into geographical factors.

In terms of limitations around data collection, only principals that were willing to share their experiences were included, and it was their memories of their experiences that were examined; data may have been intentionally left out, or missed if they were not prepared for the interview. The interview was conducted at one time, with the opportunity for participants to examine their transcript and add or delete information. Although this member check process was helpful, having a ‘snapshot’ in time approach is inherently limiting; the opportunity to revisit these participants over the course of the year might have provided another layer of data.

This study looked at how the participants facilitated student voice, but their descriptions of the landscape of the type of things they did and how the students were involved omitted an important piece: equity. It was beyond the scope of this study to delve deeper into the types of students who were involved in various projects. This is a limitation in the sense that it is assumed that there is equity in the initiatives undertaken and the students involved, but this is a naïve
assumption given the research that shows it is often those who are most at risk of saying what we
don’t want to hear that are left out of the conversation (Manefield et al., 2007).

**Unique Contribution**

There is ample research on student voice from the pupil point of view. This study was
designed to look at how principals experience student voice in their quest to bring it into their
schools. Prior research on the role of the principal in facilitating student voice, and the
challenges, barriers and supports they experience on a number of different levels, is minimal and
primarily focused on case studies, ethnographies and mixed methods. My research is unique in
that it looks at 12 administrators across the province and compares and contrasts their
experiences, ultimately revealing that in their situations, the strategies they used and the supports
they encountered weighted less important than the constraints they confronted.

**Summary and Conclusions**

This study sought to investigate the experiences of elementary principals in their quest to
facilitate student voice at their schools. It was found that participants used similar strategies, and
experienced comparable supports and constraints. When examining the external constraints, a
richer picture emerged, which led to the examination of the student experience using a spectrum
of student voice proposed by Toshalis and Nakkula. Based on this, four of the participants were
examined, because they were the only administrators who experienced student voice within the
classroom domain. The importance of bringing student voice into the classroom domain was
discussed. The role partnerships play in student voice was highlighted; parents, teachers,
administrators, and of course students all impact student voice initiatives. In order for
partnerships to happen, various stakeholders need to play a role, and thus recommendations were
given in order to make this happen. Recommendations were made for teaching the necessary
skills to students, professional development for staff, parent involvement, suggestions for boards
and Ministry and the necessity for developing the climate of the school. When partnerships are at their best, there is a better chance that student voice will meaningfully occur in both the school and the classroom domains.

**Cape Enrage Revisited**

The principals in this study sought to change the world by empowering their students and staff to take a role in their education. This repositioning led them to a number of different experiences, both positive and negative. A glaring commonality among all these administrators was their personal belief in the students and their right to have a say in what happens to them. They experienced politics and resistance, just as the students at Cape Enrage did, and they persevered. They were the change, and through their enactment of their personal beliefs, relationships were formed and students were heard.

I believe in the transformative potential of student voice, and I believe the symbol of the lighthouse serves as a beacon of possibility for our educational system. If all partners work together to ensure the light is on, then student voice serves as the destination for all the stakeholders that have a vested interest in how schooling plays out for the next generation of learners. In this way, “a communal venturing forth will prevail carving a new order of experience” (Fielding, 2007, p. 323).
REFERENCES


Appendix A

Informed Consent Letter

The Ontario Institute for Studies in Education
of the University of Toronto
252 Bloor Street West, Toronto, Ontario M5S 1V6
Tel No. (416) 923-6641
Fax No. (416) 926-4741

Department of Leadership, Adult and Higher Education

Invitation to Participate in a Research Study

Dear Participant:

Thank you for considering participating in this study. The purpose of this study is to examine the experiences of Principals as they respond to the voices of students in their elementary schools. Ten to fifteen principals will participate in this study and will be selected based on their experience as an administrator who actively facilitates student voice initiatives.

This research is being conducted for the purposes of an EdD thesis under the supervision of Dr. Joseph Flessa, Department of Leadership, Higher and Adult Education, the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education/University of Toronto. The data being collected may also be used for subsequent research articles in scholarly journals as well as practitioner magazines and participation in this study may validate your work with student voice along with developing a sense of pride in your accomplishments.

The study involves semi-structured face-to-face interviews of approximately one hour in duration. Prior to the interview, you will receive the interview questions which will provide you an opportunity to reflect.

As the interview proceeds, I may ask questions for clarification, but mainly I will listen to you convey your experiences and opinions associated with how you listen to the voices of your elementary students. You may, during the interview, choose to decline any question. This is completely acceptable and you should not feel any pressure to answer any questions that you are not comfortable with.

Your participation is completely voluntary and you are free to withdraw at any time without consequence. I assure you that no value judgments will be placed on you or your responses nor are you at risk of harm. It is the intention that each interview will be audiotapes, however, you have a choice to decline. All information will be reported in such a way (i.e. pseudonyms) that participants, schools, school boards and communities cannot be identified.

Once the interview has been transcribed and the transcription, cleaning and verification processes have been completed, the audiotape will be destroyed. Transcripts will be encrypted and stored on my personal password protected computer at my home: 5258 Line 8 North, Moonstone, ON. Any paper date will be secured in a locked file cabinet at my home address.
Your transcript will be sent to you to read in order for you to add information or correct misinterpretations that could result. In addition, you may request that any information you have given be eliminated from the study, however, once the data has been analyzed you will not be able to withdraw from the study. Data from the interviews will be kept in strict confidence and stored at the address below. All raw data (i.e. transcripts, field notes) will be destroyed five years after the completion of the study. Only myself and supervisor Dr. Flessa will have access to the data.

If you have any questions, please contact me at 905 868 2662 or michele.reaume@umail.utoronto.ca. You may also contact my supervisor, Dr. Joseph Flessa at (416) 978-1187 or joseph.flessa@utoronto.ca. If you have questions about your rights as a participant, or if you have complaints or concerns about how you have been treated as a research participant, please contact the Office of Research Ethics at 426-946-3273 or ethics.review@utoronto.ca.

Thank you in advance for your participation.

Michele Reaume, EdD candidate
Educational Leadership and Policy
Dept. of Leadership, Adult & Higher Education OISE/UT
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Dr. Joseph Flessa, Professor
Dept. of Leadership, Adult & Higher Education
OIST/University of Toronto
252 Bloor St. W., Toronto, ON M5S 1V6
Informed Consent: To Be Completed by the Participants

Thank you for considering this research project: How do Elementary Principals Facilitate Student Voice?

By signing below, you are indicating that you have read and received a copy of the Invitation to Participate in a Research Study letter; that you understand the nature and limitations of the research and what is being asked along with its accompanying conditions and promises, and that you are willing to participate in the study.

I give my consent to have the interview audiotaped. __________

I agree to participate in the ways described. ________________

If I am making any exceptions or stipulations, these are:

______________________(Signature) ____________________________(Printed Name)
______________________(email address) _________________________(Date)

You will have access to the final report, which will be located in the OISE/UT thesis collection and which can be access electronically in the University of Toronto Research Repository at https://tspace.library.utoronto.ca/handle/1807/9944.

If you would like a summary of the results of the study, please check here_____

Please initial if you agree to have your interview audio taped: _____

Please keep a copy of this letter and informed consent for your records.
Appendix B
Interview Protocol

Demographic of participant.

What is your understanding of student voice?

What initially prompted you to engage in student voice?

Share an experience when you facilitated students in decision making within your school (in both academic and/or non-academic matters)?
  ● How did this experience come to begin?
  ● What was your role throughout this experience (beginning, middle and end)?
  ● What were the successes?
  ● What were the challenges/barriers? How did you get around these challenges?
  ● Are there any other experiences in this area that you can share?

Share an experience when you facilitated students in the organization and implementation of learning/activities within your school?
  ● How did this experience come to begin?
  ● What was your role throughout the experience (beginning, middle and end)?
  ● What were the successes?
  ● What were the challenges/barriers? How did you get around these challenges?
  ● Are there any other experiences in this area that you can share?

Share an experience when you facilitated students in consultation, sharing their opinions and enacting change within your school (in both academic and/or non-academic matters)?
  ● How did this experience come to begin?
  ● What was your role throughout the experience (beginning, middle and end)?
  ● What were the successes?
  ● What were the challenges/barriers? How did you get around these challenges?
  ● Are there any other experiences in this area that you can share?

What are the leadership practices you engage in to facilitate professional development around student voice within your school?
  ● What were the successes?
  ● What were the challenges/barriers? How did you get around these challenges?
How do you engage the various stakeholders in student voice within your school (teachers/staff, parents/community, board personnel)?

Overall, what do you consider to be the major barriers to facilitating student voice in your school and in your school board?

Based on your experience, what are your recommendations for other principals who are facilitating student voice initiatives?

In your experience, what or who supports your facilitation of student voice practices? How do you sustain your commitment to student voice practices?