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Passing the Mic: Teachers' Conceptions of Student Voice in Urban Classrooms

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In education there have been many reforms over the years that have asked teachers to be self-reflexive about their pedagogical practices as well as to develop their own articulation of the true purpose of education. One such reform has been centered around the term "student voice." While there are many different theoretical interpretations and practical implementations of the term, this study sought to identify how teachers in an urban setting conceive of the term, as well as how they described their own facilitation in practice. This is particularly important for traditionally marginalized students who often feel disempowered in school. Using Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) as an analytical framework, the researcher interviewed three urban high school teachers and found that teachers believed that student voice had a larger purpose beyond the classroom, student voice was essential for authentic student engagement and content mastery, and that there were prerequisites that must exist in order to facilitate student voice. The study revealed that more attention must be given to preparing teachers to engage in the pedagogies that facilitate student voice and conversations on race, gender, and sexuality.

Keywords: Student voice, urban education, critical discourse analysis

*"It's important for them to be heard in a world that they're not necessarily heard."
Alisha, High School Social Studies Teacher*

For the past several decades, many educational practitioners and researchers have advocated for the increased use of "student voice" in classrooms (Lincoln, 1995; Kaba, 2000; Arnot & Reay, 2007; Mitra & Serriere, 2012; Vaughan, 2020). The literature reveals that there are not only different definitions for the term, but also different intended outcomes for its use within individual classrooms and school communities (Fielding, 2004; Gonzalez et al., 2017; Hall, 2017). Cook-Sather (2006) offers a definition that captures the spirit of the term. She posited that student voice "asks us to connect the sound of students speaking not only with those students experiencing meaningful, acknowledged presence, but also with their having the power to influence analyses of, decisions about, and practices in schools" (p. 363). Student voice also involves a dissolution of hierarchical structures where the adults hold all decision-making power about school culture, climate, and curriculum (Cheung et al., 2019).

In leveraging student voice, there are several desired outcomes. Some hope to increase student engagement or build democratic skills, especially for marginalized students, while others encourage its use to inform school policy. Most often, however, schools use student voice only as a data source to glean information that is rarely used for school transformation. The information gathered typically produces no meaningful policy changes and is not used to co-create optimal learning environments most conducive to students' needs (Taines, 2014). There is also an untapped opportunity to use student voice in the classroom to provide students with the necessary language,

leadership, and advocacy skills to deconstruct power relations and oppressive structures in society (Mitra, 2018; Zion, 2020; Holquist & Walls, 2021).

Using Gee's (2010) "Seven Building Tasks" as an analytical framework, a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) was conducted of teacher interview responses to answer the following research questions:

1. How do teachers conceptualize the term "student voice?"
2. How do teachers perceive their own facilitation of student voice in their classrooms?

The purpose of this study was to examine the language that teachers use to describe their understanding of the student behaviors that constitute "student voice" as well as what teacher actions they believe are required to facilitate student voice in the classroom. The study provides a heuristic for teachers to examine their own conception and enactment of student voice, as well as critical action steps that will allow marginalized students to build learning partnerships with teachers that will serve to build their advocacy skills to dismantle oppressive structures.

CONTEXT

Michael Fielding (2004b), described the range of activities that are enveloped in the broad term "student voice."

This includes such developments as peer support arrangements (e.g., buddying systems, peer tutoring, peer teaching, circle time), systems that encourage and enable students to articulate their views and see through appropriate changes (e.g., schools councils, students on governing bodies, students on appointment panels for new staff—including deputy heads and head teachers, 'child-to-child' initiatives, and students-as-researchers) and a small but growing cluster of activities that encourage various forms of overt student leadership (students as lead-learners and student-led learning walks) (p.199).

Over the past several decades, there has been an abundance of research conducted on teacher and administrator conception and enactment of student voice within schools. Gonzalez, Hernandez-Saca, and Artilles (2017) found that between 1990 and 2010 published studies of student voice were focused mostly on school improvement/reform efforts and increasing student academic achievement outcomes. While the educational community at large has pushed for more student voice in schools, there has been uneven application in schools due to some educators objecting to the practices that are required to enact student voice (Taines, 2014). One study found that teachers who welcomed student voice had inherently democratic attitudes toward teaching practice and drew energy and inspiration from students, while other teachers who were "set in their ways" did not do so because they felt uncomfortable (Black & Mayes, 2020). In addition to a lack of comfortability, schools with historically marginalized students tend to allow less student voice due to a hyperfocus on increasing standardized test scores (Sturges, 2015).

Despite the abundance of research on this topic, more attention needs to be devoted to the use of student voice in educational settings for the purpose of equipping historically marginalized students with new vocabularies around race, class, and gender, as well as how the classroom can serve as a mini training ground to build student advocacy skills to dismantle oppressive structures within and beyond schools. This study seeks to illuminate how teachers in an urban setting working with marginalized students conceive of student voice and have been able to operationalize that conception in their classrooms.

METHODOLOGY

The methodology for this qualitative study included an analysis of teachers' conception of the term “student voice,” and their perceptions of their own facilitation of student voice in their classrooms. Semi-structured interviews were coded for themes within the Critical Discourse Analytic framework to answer the research questions.

Analytical Framework

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is the analytical framework used to analyze participant responses. CDA is a qualitative research method that focuses on the production and reproduction of power, dominance, and inequality through the use of language, particularly as it relates to social problems (Amousou, & Allagbe, 2018). CDA not only interprets texts but also offers an explanation of why and how those particular discourses produce power and subjugation.

While there are many prominent CDA scholars (Van Dijk, 1993; Fairclough, 2011; Van Leeuwen, 2008), this study focused on the “Seven Building Tasks” as defined by James Paul Gee (2010). These tasks are tools designed for discourse analysts to discover what social and political *figured world* is being created through text and talk. Gee postulated that the figured world is a simplified world that captures what is accepted as typical or normal in particular sociocultural or sociopolitical contexts. This figured world is so ingrained in people’s way of knowing and being that it often stands in the way of transformative change.

Reforms just do not seem ‘normal’ or ‘right’ or ‘the ways things should be.’ For example, today it is not uncommon that young children can teach adults things about digital technology, but the child teaching and the teacher learning violates our typical story. It also violates the values and structures of authority this typical story incorporates (Gee, 2011, p.43).

Therefore, Gee’s Seven Building Tasks are ways in which reality is constructed or destroyed through language. Those seven tasks include: significance, activities, identities, relationships, politics, connections, and sign systems. Each task involves particular foci for discourse analysts to examine. This study will focus on the Significance, Activities (Practices), and Relationship Building Tasks.

Significance

This Building Task is the way in which people use language to render things both significant and insignificant, but also to signal to others how to view their significance. The discourse analysis question associated with this task is: *How is this piece of language being used to make certain things significant or not and in what ways?* In this task, interview responses were analyzed to determine what student behavior teachers deemed as evidence of student voice in a classroom setting and what student behavior they deemed as desirable.

Activities (Practices)

According to Gee (2010), activities or practices refer to a “socially recognized and institutionally or culturally supported endeavor that usually involves sequencing or combining actions in certain specified ways” (p. 17). The discourse analysis question associated with this task is: *What practice (activity) or practices (activities) is this piece of language being used to enact (i.e., get others to recognize as going on)?* The researcher coded the teacher responses to find the specific activities that students and teachers partake in that teachers perceive as an enactment of student voice.

Relationship Building

The last task that this study focused on was the Relationship Building Task. Gee explained that “We use language to signal what sort of relationship we have, want to have, or are trying to have with our listener(s), reader(s), or other people, groups, or institutions about whom we are communicating” (p.18). The discourse analysis question associated with this task is: *What sort of relationship or relationships is this piece of language seeking to enact with others (present or not)?* The researcher then examined the participant responses to determine what words they used to describe their relationships with students including descriptions of the power dynamics within the classroom.

Data Collection

Participation was solicited via email asking teachers to participate in the interview. Purposive sampling was used to identify educators with at least three years of teaching experience since more experienced teachers generally have a better command of their classroom culture and climate and would be more likely to participate in the study but also to give more insight into their pedagogical practices. Additionally, the chosen participants had a reputation in their schools for having strong classroom management and positive relationships with their students. Teachers were interviewed during the Fall of 2021 using open-ended questions allowing teachers to define student voice and explain in what ways they facilitate student voice in their classrooms. The interviews were recorded on a videoconferencing platform, transcribed, and coded to identify themes from Gee's Seven Building Tasks. Participation was completely voluntary, and participants were not compensated in any way.

Participants

All three participants were public charter school teachers in a large urban city who teach students in grades 9-12 who are predominantly African-American. In addition to their content classes, each teacher also facilitates a thirty-minute class daily where they serve as a mentor for students discussing various topics including college and career readiness, teen issues, and social-emotional health.

Khadeem

Khadeem has taught both middle and high school students in several school districts. His most recent teaching position was teaching chemistry at an art and design high school. He is an African American male in his mid-thirties.

Alisha

Alisha has worked in urban middle and high schools for the past seventeen years, teaching various social studies courses including American History, Government, Economics, and others. Her current teaching position includes teaching a seminary course which serves as a college preparatory writing course, policy debate, and Advanced Placement United States History. Alisha is a woman in her mid-forties and of Indian ancestry whose parents were first generation immigrants.

Danielle

Danielle has taught high school English Language Arts for the past twelve years at various urban and suburban schools. She currently teaches ninth graders and Yearbook, which is a mixed grade elective course. She is an African American woman in her thirties.

Researcher Positionality

Any research endeavor requires that the research acknowledge and reflect upon their own positionality and how it will inevitably impact the work. There are certain assumptions about human nature and agency that each individual researcher carries with them as a part of their world view (Chiseri-Strater, 1996; Bahari, 2010; Marsh, et al. 2017).

Positionality is normally identified by locating the researcher within three areas: (1) the subject under investigation, (2) the research participants, and (3) the research context and process Some aspects of positionality are culturally ascribed or generally regarded as being fixed, for example, gender, race, skin-color, nationality. Others, such as political views, personal life-history, and experiences, are more fluid, subjective, and contextual (Holmes, 2020).

As an African American woman who is employed by the district where this research was conducted, I must acknowledge that I had a vested interest in better understanding how traditionally marginalized students' teachers conceive of those students' role in the classroom and how they attempt to amplify their voice. The purpose of this research then was to not only narrate this phenomenon but to bring awareness to how underserved students can be better equipped to make their own schooling experiences more responsive to their needs, as well as to tackle the oppression that they face outside of the schoolhouse. The participants that were interviewed for this study were teachers within the district, but not those who are directly evaluated or supervised by the researcher.

RESULTS

Using the Critical Discourse Analysis Framework (CDA) two major themes were revealed. Each participant identified the "why" or rationale for student voice being important in schools, as well as key elements they believed were essential for fostering student voice in the classroom. Each participant's audio transcript was reviewed to determine the words and phrases that were

used to render things both significant and insignificant, the language they used to describe the *relationships* they have or want to have with their students, as well as the *activities* they identified as being a part of their own facilitation of student voice.

Significance: The Purpose of Student Voice and Key Elements for Fostering Student Voice in the Classroom

Power and Agency

The data showed that two out of the three teachers specifically stated that they wanted students to have “power” in their classrooms. This goal of empowering students is important as many traditionally marginalized students of color enter schools feeling disempowered about their ability to adhere to the accepted white ways of being and knowing. They are constantly bombarded with narratives about the poor quality of their schools and negative statistics about students of color. To mitigate this, many teachers intentionally create structures and practices that empower students. Prilleltensky, Nelson, and Pierson (2001) described student empowerment as a process by which students gain the power needed to meet their individual needs and to work with others to achieve collective goals. There are some key teacher beliefs that must be present in order to facilitate this process. First, a shift in mindset about the power dynamics that should exist within a school must occur. Educators must believe that power and responsibility for educational practice must be shared with students (Cook & Sather, 2020). Additionally, teachers must believe that students’ opinions are as important as their own opinions, key decisions about the course are made in collaboration with the students, and students have specific roles within the classroom (Kirk et. al, 2017).

Alisha articulated that she wanted her students to have agency and power in her classroom. “[Student voice] gives them some form of agency and [they’re] able to advocate for themselves, they have their own perspectives and their own perceptions.” Khadeem also identified advocacy as an important goal that he had for his students. He explained, “I say [it] is important to advocate for themselves So, if something went wrong between them and another student, speak up, use your voice to advocate for yourself in a way.” Danielle applied her belief that students must learn how to advocate for themselves in the classroom as a goal for her students that extends to society writ large. “Leadership skills are the number one thing that we as teachers are trying to get our students to exude basically so when they get out of high school they’ll be able to, you know, function as a normal status society.”

The belief that classrooms should serve as a training ground to teach students the skills to interact in a democratic society has been articulated as a goal of schools since free public education was instituted. In 1903, educational philosopher John Dewey emphasized the importance of schools in carrying out the democratic principles of the United States. “How can we justify our belief in the democratic principle elsewhere, and then go back entirely upon it when we come to education?” (Dewey, 1903, p. 197). Training students to advocate for themselves and understand the principles of true democracy is important for all students but particularly important for traditionally marginalized students. Revolutionary educator and philosopher, Paulo Freire described how educators of oppressed students must use liberatory educational practices to equip students to free themselves from their subjugated positions.

Problem posing education, as a humanist and liberating praxis, posits as fundamental that the people subjected to domination must fight for their emancipation. To that end, it enables teachers and students to become Subjects of the educational process by overcoming authoritarianism and an alienating intellectualism; it also enables people to overcome their false perception of reality. The world,—no longer something to be described with deceptive words, becomes the object of that transforming action by men and women which results in their humanization. Problem posing education does not and cannot serve the interests of the oppressor. No oppressive order could permit the oppressed to begin to question: Why? (Freire, 1970, p.59).

Alisha even asserted that students should use their voices to articulate to administrators' school-wide changes that they would like to make. "Students should use their voice in every aspect, in the classroom, outside of the classroom, when it comes to their peers, and when it comes to admin." In this regard, Khadeem and Danielle did however identify some limitations for how they believe students should use their voices in school. Khadeem explained that there was a "left way and a right way." Danielle described this limitation.

I believe that student voice is important. They should use it to the best of their ability within good reason, as long as they're respectful and as long as their . . . use of their voice is for the greater good of their education, I feel like they should be able to use it as long as it's like you know if they feel like the teacher is being biased towards them.

Despite teachers placing parameters on how far students should go when using their voice, all three teachers held the fundamental belief that students should hold power within their classrooms and begin to build advocacy skills for themselves which was identified as a significant purpose of maximizing student voice in the classroom.

Requisite for Learning

Another key theme illuminated in the data was the notion that each teacher believed that student voice is a requisite for learning. For example, Danielle explicated her belief that student voice is an integral component for a teacher to leverage to truly assess student learning of content and must be considered when planning a lesson beginning with thinking about the learning outcome for students.

I cannot prepare a lesson without thinking about the outcome for students, not just the outcome of the lesson, not just the outcome of like what if the students don't understand it and they're not able to voice that back to me then there's no point . . . [When I] plan, the goal is for students to not only master the learning target or the standard that is given by the state, but you want them to be able to articulate [their learning]. I have to learn how to create questions that are open -ended for students to answer, instead of closed-ended questions. I have to make sure that there are several opportunities within a block schedule that's a two-hour class for students to speak so they don't fall asleep.

Similarly, Khadeem posited that student voice is necessary for individual student learning not only for the classroom, but also for the real world.

Students must speak up [and] use [their] voice to demonstrate [their] capacity, which you know, and also to invite [their] peers to demonstrate what they know . . . ultimately [I'm] giving students voice by allowing them to talk literally audibly and them doing the research for themselves to understand what that really looks like for themselves, what does that mean for me, what do I want to see, and then position them to do with real life, real world learning.

He continued to argue that not only is dedicated time for student discussion within a lesson a crucial component of learning, but that in his personal research, it is supported by neuroscience. He explained that “there are some great books that explain how the neurobiology of the brain that helps you understand the importance of talk.” The discourse of a future desired state where students engage in this type of talk and advocacy was threaded throughout his responses. Furthermore, Alisha identified the use of the “claim, evidence, reasoning” argumentation structure in her classes to allow students to freely express their feelings on a multitude of topics as long as they can “back it up with evidence and explain how [they] got there.” Ultimately, all three teachers believed that in order to truly assess if their students have mastered the standards and skills required of their subject area, they must audibly hear students articulate those new understandings.

Relationship Building

Yet another theme that was present throughout each teacher’s responses to multiple questions was the idea that building strong positive relationships with students is a prerequisite for not only fostering student voice but learning in general. Participants used words like “relationships,” “trust,” “respect,” and “safe space” to describe their classroom management philosophies and how they wanted their classrooms to feel.

Alisha: I do not come in hard with my goal or not my goal, my rules and whatnot. It is a safe space and answer, how you feel as long as you can back it up with evidence, explain how you got there, it is a very safe space.

Khadeem: Definitely relationships first and what I mean by that is I position myself in my students to build a rapport, like who are you as an individual who has you as a person. We establish a bit of trust, and from that I use that trust as a way to say hey there’s been a break in a relationship. We’ve established like this learning partnership.

Danielle: I use what the students have told me in the past as a way in which to discipline them, like you know I’ve established relationships. It’s like they know that it’s all love.

Activities (Practices)

While teachers described their beliefs about how they would like to interact with their students and the larger rationale for why student voice matters in their classrooms, they also identified specific activities and practices that they use to facilitate student voice. The two prominent discourses used were “student choice” and “student-led discussion.”

Choice in Content and Process

Danielle: I differentiate opportunities for leadership. There are specific roles that students may have to take on, yes I assigned the roles as in what you need to do in the group, but they have the autonomy to choose who's doing what, [and] who's saying what...I've had instances where students are allowed to choose their own text or I've given them options which text would we like to read next or how should we go about it.

Khadeem: Let's say I'm going to assess the students; I try to make sure that I have at least four types of assessments that are formative.

Alisha: [I'm] giving them a voice to because they're allowed to pick you know which angle they want to take on it.

The practices of the teachers in this study have proven to yield positive outcomes for students. Patall, Harris and Wynn (2010) found that students reported feeling more interested in completing their homework when they were given a choice between two assignments of the same difficulty and scored higher on unit tests when given consistent choices within the unit.

Student-Led Discussion

All three teachers identified student-led discussion as a primary component for amplifying student voice in their classrooms.

Khadeem: I consider myself the facilitator...even if it's not in the curriculum I need to bring that to life, so that they feel like the learning experience is worth their time so that's one way.

Danielle: Students are allowed to facilitate our discussions themselves so therefore a lot of students are given leadership roles when it comes to class discussion. I don't control the class or move the discussion; they facilitate it on their own and set it up.

Alisha: And now that we've done all this research and all these readings and whatnot, now they're able to have these discussions on their own, so the groups who have a similar solution to that question are basically facilitating the conversations on their own which is why it's important so they're kind of like just learning off of each other.

When asked for a specific example of how they have facilitated student-led discussions regarding race, gender, and sexuality, each teacher gave an example of allowing students to discuss recent trials regarding extrajudicial killing of Black people or Black Lives Matters supporters.

Khadeem: If there's something going on in the world as it pertains to the racial tension, the current context around [a] trial, the kids will come in and want to talk about those things. I create space for it, and if there is something that we need to focus on academically I say hey we need to pause, but in the last 15 minutes we're going to come back to that.

Danielle: Rittenhouse, yes Rittenhouse, we talked about that and they were very angry and they were very upset and they compared it to others, such as Trayvon Martin.

Alisha: They discuss things that they thought [were] wrong from [the] criminal justice system.

Notably absent from the teachers' responses was any mention of how they have specifically facilitated discussions around gender and sexuality. This is consistent with one study that found that students longed to discuss issues of gender equality and diversity more often at school but were given fewer opportunities to do so (Keisu & Ahlstrom, 2020).

LIMITATIONS

The study is limited in that only high school teachers at one charter school were interviewed. Additionally, all three participants were veteran teachers in a school district where the researcher works. The study could benefit from expanding the participants to include elementary, middle, and novice teachers in different contexts including traditional public, parochial, and independent schools, as well as suburban and rural schools.

IMPLICATIONS

The purpose of this study was to determine how teachers working in an urban setting conceptualize the term "student voice," and how they perceived their own facilitation of student voice in their classrooms. The outcomes show that veteran high school teachers working in an urban environment with a predominantly African American student body believe that student voice should be amplified in classrooms to provide students a chance to become empowered in school, build advocacy skills for the real world, and demonstrate learning of content and skills. A prerequisite to being able to foster student voice is the teacher intentionally building strong relationships with students so that the classroom is a safe space to take intellectual risks and discuss controversial topics. Additionally, teachers conceive of student voice facilitation to include student choice and student-led discussion, both planned and unplanned. While teachers indicated that they had easily facilitated discussions of race, there was no mention of gender and sexuality discussions within the classroom. Many adults tend to feel more comfortable discussing issues of race and less so discussing issues related to the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and non-binary identifying people, even those who are minorities themselves. One major reason for teachers not discussing gender and sexuality in the classroom is because of fear of parental backlash (Sieben, & Wallowitz, 2009; Thein, 2013; Hermann-Wilmarth, & Ryan, 2019). Furthermore, none of the teachers really indicated how students should engage in shared decision making with administrators to change the school system, nor specific projects they might engage in outside of school where those advocacy skills might be utilized in the present, not some distant future. This is indicative of many schools' practice of soliciting student voice for to appear inclusive but in actuality students having little impact on transformational changes within the school (Taines, 2014).

RECOMMENDATIONS

Teachers who are interested in fostering student voice in their classrooms in a meaningful way should do the following: 1) plan lessons that allow student choice in content and in the process for how to complete assignments; 2) during instruction, facilitate both structured and unstructured student-led discussion; 3) intentionally plan for discussions of race, gender, sexuality.

School administrators who would like to foster school-wide student voice should: 1) allow teachers to deviate from the written curriculum and strict standards of pacing to allow teachers to facilitate student-led discussions; 2) ensure that students of all ability levels are at the table when school-wide decisions are being made not solely for input afterward; 3) provide in-service professional development for teachers to learn specific strategies for building relationships with students and facilitating student-led discussions, specifically focused on gender and sexuality.

Higher education institutions should: 1) ensure that coursework includes learning experiences that model the type of power dynamics that is truly indicative of a classroom of shared power among teacher and students; teach ways for pre-service teachers to facilitate discussions on gender and sexuality as well as how to support LGBTQIA students; 2) provide pre-service teachers with more clinical experiences that require them to regularly interact with the student populations they will be serving prior to the end of program internship, and practice the relationship-building strategies they have learned in classes; 3) require lesson planning exercises to include a consideration of student voice.

Educational policy makers should also genuinely consult with students as they draft legislation and policies that will impact young people. These recommendations in their totality will allow educators to feel more comfortable with not only “passing the mic,” but also acting on what their students tell them that they need and want. Additionally, students will be more empowered to advocate for themselves and their communities in a way that will better society as a whole.

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