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## Creating a Shared Ownership for Learning: Instructionally focused Partnerships

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**Abstract:** This qualitative study was designed to examine the creation and facilitation of adult-student collaborations at one urban high school. Building on a growing literature on student voice in school reform, the study explored how, if at all, adult-student collaborations reshaped instruction and what effects these collaborations had on teacher and student behavior and outlooks. Data for this two-year investigation consisted of document collection, observations of collaborative practices, and semi-structured interviews with 12 students and 15 adults. The findings suggest that a university-school partnership aided in building capacity for adult-student collaborations

and that the collaborations had some influence on adult and student behaviors, outlooks, and classroom practice. The model of intermediary organizational partnership and adult-student collaboration at this school contributes new insights into the types of school leadership and professional learning structures that are beneficial for designing organizational routines where adults and students work collaboratively and continuously for instructional improvement.

**Keywords:** student voice, youth-adult partnerships, school reform, professional learning, intermediary organization partnerships

### **Creating a Shared Ownership for Learning: Instructionally focused Partnerships**

School improvement initiatives often embrace phrases that “keep students at the center.” Yet while students may be at the heart of these initiatives, they are rarely a part of the discussions and decisions concerning the design or pedagogical practice of their schooling experience (Fielding, 2001; Mitra, 2008; Lincoln, 1995; Levin, 2000; Rubin & Silva, 2003; Scalon, 2012; Zhao, 2011). In classrooms that emphasize active teaching and learning, students may be deeply engaged in discussions that are part of their academic work, and may even have a fair amount of choice regarding the projects or content on which their learning will focus. Still, they tend to be excluded from the thinking behind, planning for, and construction of their learning environments, and they are rarely asked for systematic input into efforts to evaluate or improve them. From one point of view, this situation is natural enough—they are “professional” matters, after all, and students are not yet professionals. But seen from a different vantage point, as educators concerned about *student voice* do, it is a serious omission, a missed

opportunity for students to help realize educational reform goals—that is, revitalize their learning environment, as well as enrich their own learning.

The recent popularity of student voice has inserted student perspective in discussions involving school improvement, student advocacy, school governance, teacher evaluation, teacher education, and professional development (Cook-Sather, 2006, 2010; Lodge, 2005; Morgan, 2011; Mullis, 2011; Rudduck & Fielding 2006; Yonezawa & Jones, 2007). A substantial body of research describes student voice within schools, revealing the ways it can affect student agency, educational outcomes, professional efficacy, and school climate (Demetriou & Wilson, 2010; Fielding, 2001; Fielding & Rudduck, 2002; Mullis, 2011; Rudduck & Flutter, 2004). This research has begun to shape our understanding of the possible benefits of student voice programs that aim to engage students as partners in school reform, curriculum, and instruction (Cook-Sather, 2010; Mitra, 2008).

While student voice research has addressed various effects on students and school culture, there has been less discussion of the ways in which the adult-student partnerships within student voice initiatives affect educators or their instructional practice. Commonly, student voice initiatives with the expressed purpose of school reform concurrently aim to improve academic performance. Working with students to improve schooling, however, requires a deeper exploration of how students and adults can develop partnerships in ways they both find meaningful, particularly in historically-underserved schools where resource shortages are most acute, with high percentages of administrator and teacher turnover, and where educators grapple with high poverty rates and spotty student attendance.

One such school, Viewland High School,<sup>1</sup> presents an illustrative example of how a school facing significant challenges can implement adult-student collaborations focused on improving instruction. Initially Viewland held a bad reputation in the community in that there was a perception that the school lacked academic rigor, thus people were choosing not to send their children there. Viewland looked to change this perception by establishing a partnership with a professor with expertise in school renewal and by investing resources over several years into a handful of school-wide professional learning practices, including Data-in-a-Day (DIAD), Lesson Study, project vetting, and Student Instructional Council (SIC), which were designed to foster new partnerships with key stakeholders (Lewis, Perry, & Murata, 2006; NWRL, 2000). Each practice systematically engaged students in providing instructional feedback. Over time, these processes, to be described later, became well established in the school, thereby affording a window through which to view how instructionally-focused adult-student partnerships can shape instructional practice and teacher-student relationships.

Key to the examination of Viewland was exploring what, if anything, changed as a result of student-adult collaborations. This study examined Viewland as a school that developed and refined adult-student collaboration practices for six years. To capture the individual and organizational implications of these practices I focused on several main questions:

- 1) In what ways, if any, does leadership within the school in the context of an intermediary partnership relationship enable (or inhibit) the development of adult-student collaborations within the school?

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<sup>1</sup> School names and names of individuals are pseudonyms.

- 2) In what ways, if at all, do adult-student collaborative practices reshape what goes on in classrooms and instruction itself?
- 3) How do different forms of adult-student collaborations affect the outlook and behaviors of teachers and students, in and out of the classroom?
- 4) How do power relations in the school change, if at all, inside of classrooms, or elsewhere, as adults and students participate in collaborations around the quality of instruction?

In exploring these questions, I addressed several problems of practice. First, how can schools interested in developing instructionally-focused student-adult partnerships take the first steps toward this goal? Second, how can schools develop these collaborations so that giving and receiving feedback is “safe” for both students and teachers? For students, feeling “safe” to provide feedback to teachers would indicate that students feel adequately prepared to comment on instructional practice as well as feeling assured that, if their feedback is met with negative reactions, there would be no retribution on the part of teachers. Similarly, for teachers to feel safe receiving feedback from students there may need to be assurances that the feedback provided by students would not be used in an evaluative capacity. Finally, this study considered how, if at all, schools can maintain adult-student collaborations.

### **Study Design and Methods**

This study was designed as a “basic” interpretive qualitative study (Merriam, 2009) with data collected between 2011 and 2013 from one critical case, Viewland High School, a northwest urban school with a diverse student population. This school was

information rich in that it had implemented and maintained student involvement practices developed in partnership with a university professor with the aim to facilitate instructional improvement. In this way, Viewland provided a context from which we might gain an in-depth understanding of the process and outcomes of these activities (Merriam, 2009; Patton, 2002).

### **Site Description and Background: Viewland as a Context for Student Voice**

Viewland consists of roughly 750 students and is considered high-poverty because of its free and reduced lunch count of 70%. In addition to the large African-American community at the school, many students speak a language other than English at home. The largest groups of recent immigrants at Viewland are from Africa, Vietnam, the Philippines, Central America, China, and Samoa. In January 2004, the then-principal, Principal Massey, intended to increase student enrollment at Viewland by increasing student engagement at the school. In 2006, after attending a presentation by Professor Margery Ginsberg, Principal Massey invited her to speak at Viewland to share aspects of her school reform work regarding student motivational theory. Shortly after, Principal Massey leveraged school resources to send the entire Viewland staff to a summer workshop at Professor Ginsberg's university, designed around her work about motivation and motivational conditions in learning (Ginsberg, 2001, 2011; Ginsberg & Wlodkowski, 2000). At this workshop, teachers were introduced to various ideas and practices that encouraged engaging students in more active roles within their learning environment.

Over the next year, Professor Ginsberg met informally with Principal Massey and presented at a staff in-service. Next, a "memo of understanding" was drafted between

Professor Ginsberg, the school district, and Viewland. In describing the initial agreement Professor Ginsberg noted, “There was no pay involved in any of this. They were basically just letting me in.” Professor Ginsberg volunteered a percentage of her time to the school to help shape professional development there, and Principal Massey made commitments to use the principles of Professor Ginsberg’s motivational framework in their school transformation plan. The school’s commitment to the motivational framework included a staff pledge to school-wide collaboration as well as a willingness to experiment with various professional learning strategies such as DIAD and Lesson Study (described below). Many of Professor Ginsberg’s proposed strategies already included students as participants, and in this sense, the initiation of the school-university partnership was explicitly concerned with the notion of adult-student collaboration as a central part of the school improvement equation. From these initial practices new structures and activities emerged such as the Student Instructional Council and curriculum project vettings that allowed for deeper interactions between students and teachers. These ongoing cycles created a formal system for providing teachers with student feedback.

### **Professional Learning and Student Voice at Viewland**

**Data-in-a-day (DIAD).** This initiative was originally developed by Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory (NWREL) as a way to include students in school improvement (Ginsberg, 2001; NWREL, 2000). DIAD typically unites students, family members, educators, and community members in teams as observers of specific aspects of instructional practice in a variety of classrooms throughout one day. DIAD at Viewland was launched in 2007 and persisted through three different principals. In one

DIAD cycle several teams—each of which was led by one or two Viewland students and was comprised of four (or more) members—collectively visited approximately 25 classrooms for 20 minutes each to learn from and provide feedback on instructional interactions. Each member of the team focused on one of the four conditions of the motivational framework for culturally responsive teaching: establishing inclusion, developing a positive attitude, enhancing meaning, and engendering competence. (Ginsberg & Wlodkowski, 2000). Viewland adapted these conditions to fit with the district language including “the four R’s:” relationships, relevance, rigor, and results.

DIAD feedback is not specific to a particular classroom. Rather, it is based on universal themes that the teams notice across classrooms. Although not scientific, DIAD is designed to provide information about how teaching and learning appear to observers on a single day in several classrooms as well as to allow non-educators and educators to listen to each other’s perspectives. After visiting classrooms teams compile their observations into categories depicting things they saw that related well to the four conditions of the motivational framework as well as the questions they had about what they observed.

The feedback generated from the DIAD teams was then presented to Viewland staff by an administrator or teacher leader and several participating students. Among the professional learning strategies that Viewland adopted DIAD involved the greatest number of students and teachers, thereby providing significant opportunities for teachers to listen to what students had to say about instructional practice at the school. Eventually students took ownership of DIAD, with guidance from the academic dean,

becoming responsible for planning and facilitating each session as well as compiling and presenting feedback to the staff.

**Student instructional council (SIC).** Initially SIC was formed as an extra-curricular activity with the purpose of building on DIAD visits by providing additional feedback about classroom instruction from a student perspective. The idea of SIC was conceived by Carla, the academic dean and former Viewland teacher, as a way to satisfy requests from teachers for more individualized feedback. SIC eventually became a credit-bearing course designed to formalize the practice of student driven instructional feedback. SIC students were introduced to issues in school reform and studied instructional language and observation techniques. Upon request, groups of SIC students observed teachers in their classrooms and provided them with feedback in the form of jointly written instructional memos.

**Lesson study.** Lesson study (Lewis, Perry, & Murata, 2006) is a collaborative process that includes developing, watching, and critiquing lessons with involvement from a small group of peer teachers. In a lesson study, teachers typically bring a lesson in the formative stages to a small group of colleagues for feedback and group input. After the lesson planning is complete the group watches the lesson being taught by the teacher who had proposed it. Then the group meets again at the end of the day to discuss the lesson and to set instructional goals.

At Viewland students partnered with teachers in modified lesson studies several times. One lesson study was entirely student driven in that students identified a problem of practice and then worked along with educators on a lesson design team to develop a lesson to address the issue. These students found it difficult to invest in reflective writing

practices, such as journaling, without a clear understanding of what was expected and how teachers would provide feedback. In designing the lesson students discussed how the process might look based on their motivational needs. The teachers involved designed the lesson, incorporating their instructional goals. The lesson was then taught by a volunteer teacher to language arts students. Afterward the design team met to discuss their perceptions and talk about the implications of the experience. In another example, a team of students and teachers designed a lesson on stereotype threat (Steele, 1997). Twelve students and ten math teachers participated in teaching the lesson to all tenth-grade students in their advisory period prior to the administration of state standardized tests. At the conclusion of the lesson the team met to critique the lesson.

**Project vetting.** Project vetting with students emerged in part from SIC. Viewland was oriented toward project-based learning, and teachers typically vetted project ideas to their peers. Project vetting with students was a process that SIC students and teachers developed to strengthen the potential of project-based lessons. To vet a project a teacher brought a proposed curricular project to a small group of peers and students; presented the goals, scope, sequence of the lesson; and solicited feedback. For example, one teacher vetted a project about Newton's three laws of motion in which students produced a Google SketchUp and created a new safety system for vehicles during a car crash based on Newton's three laws. Several students who participated in this particular project vetting had completed the project in prior years as students. Given this unique insider perspective they were able to draw on their personal learning experience as well as what they had learned about curriculum and

instruction through participating in SIC. With these experiences in mind the group made several suggestions, including adding a new component which included a physical 3D model. Project vetting practice does not involve real-time observation, and for that reason it is less challenging to schedule than is a lesson study. Although teachers had been vetting projects to one another for approximately three years, vetting projects with students was a new practice.

### **Researcher Role and Positionality**

Prior to selecting Viewland as a research site, I regularly visited the school in my capacity as a university pathway program manager, a community partner who participated in DIAD, and a graduate student who had taken a course with Professor Ginsberg. This previous contact and experience at the school allowed me to supplement data with my own participant observations based on my historical understanding of the context. In the role of researcher, I was mostly an observer as participant (Merriam, 2009). However, there were times when this role shifted to that of participant as observer as I engaged in activities such as DIAD.

### **Participants and Data Collection**

Data consisted of semi-structured teacher and student interviews, focus groups, administrator interviews, observations, and document analysis. The participant sample was based on the representativeness of the individuals' participation in adult-student partnership activities (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Teacher participants were chosen to represent a diverse population in terms of gender, number of years teaching, subject matter, and age of students taught. Student participants represented a range of age,

race, ethnicity, and level of academic success. Table 1 provides an overview of participation by various individuals and groups in semi-structured interviews and focus groups. Tables 2, 3, and 4 provide information regarding participation by administrators and intermediary organization partners, teachers, and students.

Table 1  
*Interview and Focus Group Details*

<b>Participants</b>	<b>Data Collection Type</b>
Principal	Semi-structured interview
Assistant Principal	Semi-structured interview
Academic Dean	Semi-structured interview
University Partner	Semi-structured interview
10 Teachers	Semi-structured interview and focus group
12 Students	Semi-structured interview and focus group

Table 2  
*Administrator and Intermediary Organization Partner Participation*

<b>Role/Title</b>	<b>Male/Female</b>	<b>Data Collection Type</b>
University Professor of Education	Female	Semi-structured interview by phone
Community partner/Instructor	Female	Semi-structured interview by phone
Academic Dean	Female	Semi-structured interview *
Assistant Principal	Male	Semi-structured interview
Principal	Female	Semi-structured interview

\* Interviewed two times; 2011 in person and in 2013 by phone.

Table 3  
Teacher Participants

<b>Male/ Female</b>	<b>Subjects/Grades Taught</b>	<b># Years Taught</b>	<b>Student Voice Participation</b>	<b>Data Collection Type and Year(s) Collected</b>
Male	9 <sup>th</sup> -12 <sup>th</sup> grade engineering, CAD, robotics, computer integrated manufacturing	18 ( 6 at Viewland)	Observed in multiple DIAD cycles	Semi-structured interview, 2013
Male	12 <sup>th</sup> grade language arts	7 (4 at Viewland)	Observed in multiple DIAD cycles Lesson study Observed by and received feedback from student instructional council	Semi-structured group interview, 2011 Semi-structured interview, 2013
Male	9 <sup>th</sup> grade science and AP chemistry	5 ( 4 at Viewland)	Observed in multiple DIAD cycles Observed by and received feedback from student instructional council	Semi-structured group interview, 2011 Semi-structured interview, 2013
Female	9 <sup>th</sup> -12 <sup>th</sup> grade world history, journalism, and online credit retrieval	2 (1 at Viewland)	Observed in multiple DIAD cycles Observer in one DIAD cycle	Semi-structured phone interview, 2013
Female	9 <sup>th</sup> -12 <sup>th</sup> grade pre-calculus and AP statistics	15 ( 1 at Viewland)	Observed in multiple DIAD cycles Observed by and received feedback from student instructional council	Semi-structured interview, 2013

<b>Male/ Female</b>	<b>Subjects/Grades Taught</b>	<b># Years Taught</b>	<b>Student Voice Participation</b>	<b>Data Collection Type and Year(s) Collected</b>
Male	9 <sup>th</sup> grade science/tech education	1 <sup>st</sup> year	Observed in two DIAD cycles	Semi-structured interview, 2013
Female	9 <sup>th</sup> -12 <sup>th</sup> grade sciences	13 ( 10 at Viewland)	Observed in multiple DIAD cycles Lesson study Observed by and received feedback from student instructional council Project vetting	Semi-structured interview, 2011 Semi-structured interview, 2013
Female	9 <sup>th</sup> -12 <sup>th</sup> grade language arts, social studies, and technology	6 (1 <sup>st</sup> at Viewland)	Observed in two DIAD cycles	Semi-structured group interview, 2011
Male	10 <sup>th</sup> grade U.S. history	18 (2 at Viewland)	Observed in multiple DIAD cycles	Semi-structured group interview, 2011
Female	9 <sup>th</sup> – 11 <sup>th</sup> grade math/algebra	9 (8 at Viewland)	Observed in multiple DIAD cycles Lesson study Observed by and received feedback from student instructional council	Semi-structured interview, 2011

Table 4  
*Student Participants*

<b>Male/ Female</b>	<b>Grade Level at Last Instance of Data Collection</b>	<b>Data Collection Type and Year(s) Collected</b>
Female	Junior	Focus group, 2011, 2013 Semi-structured interview 2013 Student panel observation, 2013
Male	Senior	Semi-structured interview, 2013 Student panel observation, 2013
Female	Senior	Focus group, 2013
Female	Senior	Focus group, 2013
Female	Senior	Focus group, 2013 Student panel observation, 2013
Female	Senior	Focus group, 2013 Student panel observation, 2013
Female	Sophomore	Focus group, 2013 Student panel observation, 2013
Female	Senior	Focus group, 2011
Female	Senior	Focus group, 2011
Male	Senior	Focus group, 2011 Student panel observation, 2013
Male	Junior	Focus group, 2011
Female	Alumna	Semi-structured interview, 2013

Interview and focus group questions were designed to generate perspectives of the cumulative influence of student-teacher partnership practices on individuals and the school. Central to the design of interview and focus group questions was the goal of understanding the perspectives of teachers and students—the ones who have the most direct or active involvement—to explore the ways they came to participate in these collaborations; how they were prepared; how they felt about the experience; and how, if at all, their participation changed their personal perspectives or professional practice.

Observations were conducted of activities where students were engaging with adults in some aspect of the practices associated with professional learning. The study consisted of nine observations including planning and team-preparation sessions, classroom observations, debriefing discussions, and group sharing of findings. Observations focused on how the activities were structured, the various roles of teachers and students, the extent to which students were considered partners, and the extent to which teachers appeared to value student feedback.

A portfolio of school improvement documents provided a behind-the-scenes glimpse and insight into the purpose and development of practices, contributing depth and quality to other data. Documents were collected at various events and from the academic dean and Professor Ginsberg. Some of these documents included meeting agendas, activity descriptions, feedback and data summary posters, copies of lessons used to prepare students to provide written feedback to teachers, and lesson study materials.

Open and axial coding was used to analyze data (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Patton, 2002; Stringer, 2004). Analysis was ongoing, and data were coded inductively for specific categories of student involvement to identify students' and teachers' perspectives relative to the four professional learning practices. The initial coding focused on instances of student voice, perceptions of the experience, teacher and student perceptions of each other in the process, perceptions of the feedback produced from each instance of student participation, and descriptive accounts of the impact of student feedback on instructional practice.

### **Effects of Adult-Student Collaborations on Teacher and Student Beliefs and Instructional Interactions**

#### **Adult-Student Collaborations in Practice**

Viewland High School's experience reveals how collaborations between adults and students require structure, preparation, and practice. While Professor Ginsberg was a driving force in the conceptual components of each of these practices, she collaborated with Carla in much of the planning and implementation of the practices at the school. In 2007 Carla was a humanities teacher and the professional development coordinator within the school. In 2011 Carla created the SIC. Eventually Carla moved out of the classroom into the position of academic dean, and she continued her support of these practices. As a school insider who garnered respect and credibility within the school, Carla's influence in implementing student-inclusive professional learning cycles was influential. With the introduction of each new practice Professor Ginsberg and Carla scaffolded effective ways to provide feedback for both students and teachers and prepared participants using role play, video, and examples from other school sites. In

some sense each practice gave way to new forms of collaboration. As teachers began to open their doors to each other, parents, and students through DIAD they became more receptive to engaging in collaborative planning and teaching through lesson study. Carla illustrated this parallel, saying, “Without question, part of what contributed to the transparency of our school was our partnership with Professor Ginsberg and those first DIADs.” It is notable that Carla, with her collaboration with Professor Ginsberg, was a driving force in sustaining these practices through several changes in school leadership.

According to a school publication, DIAD began in 2007 and “catalyzed the exploration of many kinds of instructional change and professional learning.”<sup>2</sup> By 2009 students were participating with teachers in lesson studies, and by 2011 SIC was established. It appeared that as students at Viewland gained more experience in providing constructive feedback through DIAD, teachers became more interested in hearing what they had to say. Carla explained, “When I communicated about SIC with teachers all but a few were comfortable with it.... Many teachers were eager for this feedback. To this date none of the teachers have exercised their right to opt out.” Formal structures such as SIC provided an avenue for teachers to request and receive student feedback. By allowing teachers to request a SIC observation, or to agree to it beforehand, teachers were more willing to allow a shift in the traditional student-teacher power paradigm. Additionally, teachers who had SIC visits or who participated in project vetting spoke of the practices at staff meetings to encourage their colleagues to take advantage of SIC, thus providing a credible recommendation.

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<sup>2</sup> Quote is taken from a school document designed to describe DIAD’s history and purpose at the school.

Importantly, DIAD and SIC provided opportunities for a wide variety of students to participate. Student leaders at Viewland, who were regular participants in DIAD, were encouraged to recruit other students. Additionally, Carla sent emails out to all staff, requesting recommendations for diverse participants, and non-traditional student leaders. This recruitment technique helped to include the perspectives of students who could be considered on the fringes or who might otherwise be disengaged from school. A credit-bearing course such as SIC also offered a structured system for a variety of students to gain training and experience in providing instructional feedback.

### **Enhancing Teacher-Student Relationships**

Data from students and teachers at Viewland suggest that, when properly prepared, students can provide teachers with instructional feedback that educators find informative and beneficial. Initially teachers expressed a level of astonishment at the ability of students to provide feedback about instruction. One teacher noted, "I was surprised ... they can be incredibly informative and provide very good feedback on an adult level. It surprised me that they have that capability."

Allowing teachers to work in collaboration with student observers during DIAD was one way in which teachers' perspectives of students were changed. During DIAD each classroom observation was followed by group debriefs in which team members discussed what they observed in the classroom and related it to what they had learned about effective instruction. These conversations allowed teachers and students to discuss instruction on somewhat neutral ground. Additionally, as teachers observed their students in other classes during DIAD they were able to see the strengths various

students had in different subjects as well as the different ways students responded to other teachers. Allison, a science teacher in her 13<sup>th</sup> year, illustrated this phenomenon:

It was really powerful to see kids in other places and amazing to see how other teachers were interacting with those same kids and getting different results. I know that all my students are smart, but I couldn't see those parts of them before.

In this way, Allison's perspectives of her students was altered as she began to see her students in a new light.

Students also reported changes in their perspectives. Many students indicated a new interest in instructional practice and in school overall. Several became aware of how and why teachers used specific strategies, indicating an appreciation for the thought behind lesson construction. Some students noted a change in perspective about particular teachers and in teaching overall. Shawna, a sophomore, commented:

I've learned to appreciate teachers because I learned how hard it is to be a teacher. You have to be that coach and that mentor, and you have to accommodate everybody's needs. So I know it's really hard to be a teacher and I appreciate them for that.

According to school documents, "Students who observe during DIAD self-report that they feel a stronger connection to and understanding of the work of teaching and learning." These changes in perspective are notable in themselves, but they are important for building a sense of reciprocal respect between students and teachers. In the eyes of one student this reciprocal respect had, quite simply, "made Viewland a better place."

### **Changes in Instructional Practice and Classroom Behavior**

Teachers who participated in one or more of the feedback cycles reported changes in their practice and/or behavior. These changes appeared to make classrooms more responsive to their students and to contribute to improved instructional interactions. Teachers indicated a desire to continue instructionally-focused interactions with students or to increase the amount of student feedback they received. In discussing student feedback Bradly, a first year teacher commented:

I definitely change things up now, like how I structure directions, or if we do a lecture, I break it up differently. Things like that. So it does affect my practice directly. And it makes me think of the bigger picture. Like, how do I keep getting their feedback? And then, what am I going to do with their feedback?

While teachers like Bradly noted specific changes in practice some teachers discussed the ways collaborating with students changed the way they thought about teaching and how they constructed learning experiences. Amy, a math teacher in her 15<sup>th</sup> year noted:

[Student feedback] motivates me to grow and give them more of what they need. Now I ask myself: Is it meaningful? Am I doing this because I really think it's going to improve their learning, or am I doing this just because somebody else did and I'm just following their lead?

Students took note of these changes and appreciated them. Latonna, a senior, recognized that some of the teachers she had observed and to whom she provided feedback had begun to do things differently. She found satisfaction in these changes as well as motivation to continue the work. Latonna's observation of change in teacher behavior and her noted motivation for future partnerships with educators could indicate a strengthened sense of efficacy or a belief in her ability to contribute to her educational experience.

Teachers at Viewland also noted that their experience participating in DIAD led them to solicit feedback informally in their own classrooms. In this sense the formal adult-student partnership practices at the school seemed to increase the rate at which teachers solicited informal student feedback. This phenomenon could play a part in facilitating a shift in overall school climate where students feel that they have input regarding their instructional experience. For example, Dan, the teacher most resistant to DIAD, expressed concern about the participation of some of the non-traditional student leaders in DIAD when he reported that in his perspective, "One particular student [who participates in DIAD] is one of the biggest zeros there is here, and for him to provide feedback to teachers is just ludicrous." Yet he then noted that he now solicits student feedback in class saying, "Yeah, it is useful as long as you are getting real feedback. I might end a project early or change it if they are not enjoying it." This possible increase in the occurrence of student voice within classrooms could be an important way that adult-student partnerships are enduring.

Teaching and Learning as a Partnership

Students and teachers at Viewland noted personal changes as well as instructional shifts as a result of the adult-student practices at the school. Students expressed an increase in their level of confidence in speaking to adults as well as in their belief that their actions could impact their learning environment. Teachers noted a change in their perceptions of different students and their ability to provide insightful feedback. Principal Sanders felt that as a result of the various feedback cycles teachers had begun to acknowledge that their practice might benefit from formalized student feedback saying, “Those student responses—concrete responses, those are what helps teachers make some concrete changes. That is what teachers are talking about.” This shift was demonstrated by teachers like Dan who were initially resistant to the idea of student feedback and now reported an understanding of the possible benefits of student perspectives. As a witness to the ongoing evolution at Viewland Carla said:

All but a few teachers recognize the goodness of that kind of transparency and the goodness of students taking part. It is hard to discount the incredible investment that students have in their own education. And so denying them the chance to give thoughts on what they think might be going on is hard to justify.

Vice Principal Grady asserted that engaging students as instructional partners changed how students viewed school. He felt that students had begun to treat school as less of a “prison” and more of a place where both teachers and students communicated expectations of good educational practice. He described that this newly developed partnership was evident “in the ways students and teachers talked about being at school together.” This was a shift that was also evident to students. As Jason, a junior, noted,

I have been doing this since I was a freshman, and a lot has changed. There is a lot more student work in the classrooms, art on the walls, a lot more collaborations with teachers, and better relationships. Everything has benefited us in the classrooms. As a junior now looking back I have to say it's an evolution that's going on here.

### **What Viewland Tells Us About Adult-Student Partnerships**

Viewland represents a site, like many busy urban schools, with multiple and changing priorities. The intermediary partnership between Professor Ginsberg and the shifting administration likely withstood these changes through the consistent commitment of Carla. However, teachers there also seemed to recognize that the focus on student learning, adult learning, and student-adult relationships was more than the usual surface reform. Often school reform focuses on curriculum materials or school and classroom organization. The approach that Professor Ginsberg employed recognized that school change can and should be a convergence of multiple resources. The complexity of educational reform, and the difficulty of capturing concrete changes, can sometimes make it easy to underestimate the work. This difficulty is often compounded within high-poverty schools where stakes are high and resources are scarce. Thus it is important to highlight what Viewland's development and implementation of instructionally-focused adult-student collaborations can tell us about the process of designing such collaborations, as well as what it can tell us about reform and education in urban schools in general.

**The Role of Intermediary Partnerships in Establishing Norms and Practices**

The extent to which adult-student collaborations developed and took root at Viewland would most likely not have been possible without the partnership of Professor Ginsberg. In many ways the partnership between Viewland and the university aided in establishing instructional transparency and collaboration as a cultural norm of the school. As such, broad-based student participation in adult-student collaborations was consistent with the school-wide expectation of transparent and continual instructional improvement. Some key factors in the functioning and practice of the partnership, as noted by both Professor Ginsberg and by teachers at Viewland, were the development of ownership and local control of new practices. Professor Ginsberg helped establish these aspects through “establishing a strong stable leadership team with both teachers and administrators” and the co-planning and co-facilitation of practices with teachers and students. She said, “I always did planning with the leadership team, and when it came time to facilitate, I had Carla or the students out there.”

While the concept of student voice can sometimes conjure images of bottom-up reforms, where students bring forth issues of concern and are given resources to make change, there is also the reality that adults cannot simply relinquish control entirely or listen to students without engendering some form of collective action. The idea of adult-student collaborations addresses this gap but, like at Viewland, it is a process that must be taught, learned, and practiced by all involved. Student participation in school improvement can be tokenistic if adults are unprepared to engage with students as partners (Fielding, 2004, 2012; Hart, 1997; Mitra, 2005; Rudduck, 2001). Furthermore, if both students and adults are not allowed safe arenas to try out these collaborations,

giving way to new ideas and suggestions to strengthen the process, the practice could stagnate. Given the highly-charged nature of adult-student collaboration rooted in power paradigms, a safe arena for practicing these new interactions can prove fruitful. At Viewland Professor Ginsberg helped to provide this environment by serving as an important resource, confidant, and source of encouragement for faculty members, administrators, and students who were venturing to attempt new forms of partnership. This pattern of ongoing support suggests a larger need in such school settings. Some source of neutral support, offered through an intermediary partnership (or some equivalent arrangement), appears to serve a critical role in the process of establishing the norms and practice of adult-student collaboration.

### **Fostering an Open and Committed Disposition to Student Collaboration**

The support of the university partnership enabled several developments within Viewland that reveal what it may take for adult-student partnerships to take root. As mentioned, many teachers at Viewland moved to a disposition in which they genuinely felt students might offer valuable insights, or that they were seeking student collaboration—some reached this disposition more quickly than others, and some never really got there. But attaining this disposition, at least in some degree, made it possible for there to be real action based on the exchange. Principal Sanders discussed the evolution of teacher attitudes towards student-adult collaborations, saying:

The first thing that made the broader community realize how important student voice is, is when students participated in DIAD. DIAD really made visible the potential of students as instructional allies and people who could help improve

the school as a whole. Out of that came a whole set of learning experiences with teachers and students.

This disposition is no small feat, for as Damiani (2014) asserted, “Many adults, who don’t share the same backgrounds as their urban students, struggle to view students as collaborators that can potentially inform their practice” (p. 202). Further, without establishing this disposition, teachers may often not be willing to listen to students, whom they view as possessing no academic/educational or social capital. Establishing an open and committed disposition to student collaboration is necessary in order for teachers not only to listen to student feedback but be responsive and take action.

At Viewland, as in many schools, there was a range in commitment to adult-student collaborations correlating to the amount of participation and exposure teachers had to student collaborations and feedback. This range suggests that with some form of structured encouragement and safe arenas to experiment with partnerships, even resistant teachers may be willing to engage in such collaborations. The findings of this study reinforce the idea that, as teachers become aware of student preparation to engage in such collaborations, their interest in participating in adult-student collaboration increases. Carla noted:

One thing I am proud of in terms of facilitation of the group is the work we did on the writing of the letters and students being as kind of camera like in their data, focusing on observable data ... and providing low inference kind of notes....

Several teachers have told me their instructional memo was impactful.... Even the teachers who were most resistant to DIAD see SIC feedback as useful.

Research has demonstrated that adult allies, like Carla, who have demonstrated excellence in teaching and leadership and who are thoughtful about ethical issues within education, are an important factor in building student capacity to engage with adults in collaborations, and they may also be influential in encouraging other teachers to explore student-adult collaborations as a way to improve instruction (Mitra & Gross, 2009). Teachers need help not only in beginning to view students as collaborators, but they also need support to interpret the feedback students offer. A developed cadre of adult allies within the school and administration can help faculty navigate these interactions.

### **A “Multiplier Effect” of Improvements in Teacher-Student Relationships**

Given open dispositions on the part of adults and beginning demonstrations of what adult-student collaborations can look like, the case of Viewland suggests that momentum develops and has a “multiplier effect” on the quality and reach of subsequent adult-student collaborations. Instructional collaborations between teachers and students at Viewland influenced instruction and other aspects of school governance in ways that appeared to snowball. According to a conference presentation by Carla and a Viewland graduate, “Students point out that even students who don’t participate in the Student Instructional Council still can see their work in classrooms, which creates a ripple effect to student’s perception that student voice on teaching and learning matters at our school.” Further, as students began to experience teachers’ willingness to listen and possibly be swayed by their feedback, they became more confident and open to talking about learning in deeper and more personal ways with adults. One student noted, “There was this one teacher who was new. We went to her classroom and wrote her a

memo. Then later that year I came back and saw that she had made her classroom better ... and I saw other teachers did things different, too. It motivated me to do more visits and [give] more feedback.” Concurrently, when students are afforded an opportunity to reveal that they have worthwhile things to say about instruction, and they can communicate these appropriately to teachers, adults are more apt to find the courage to continue to seek out these opportunities to collaborate with students. For example, Nancy, a teacher of 15 years, described how she came to project vetting:

So I had students come through my classroom, and I asked another student what class it was for. He’s like, “Oh, it is a class we are taking called [SIC] ... we do all kinds of cool stuff.” That prompted me to think, “Well, I could vet a project with them. Why not?”

In many ways this snowball effect may occur as a result of increases in positive relational characteristics between students and teachers, affording them both a new level of respect for each other that contributed to improved communications.

This phenomenon is echoed in other researchers’ observations, as well as in action research studies which suggest a powerful connection between students and teachers that has so far been underutilized (Rudduck & McIntyre, 2007; Kane & Chimwayange, 2014). These studies find that disruptions in entrenched educational and classroom roles could open the door to transformations in classroom and administrative practices. However, to capitalize on this snowball effect, systems and structures to create a supported and sustained approach to adult-student collaborations could be helpful. Like any new practice, it cannot become a school norm unless it occurs

frequently, as a part of professional learning, and in ways where students can see patterns in teachers as well.

### **Consistent Communication of Purpose and Process**

Along with the issue of shifting school norms and addressing underlying teacher beliefs about the potential of adult-student collaborations, several other factors help to establish consistent and continual application of such practices: a clearly communicated description of the purpose behind collaborations and a defined and established structure for engaging in the practices. Further, if faculty members are involved in the planning process, then those who may be initially resistant or wary of adult-student collaboration might buy into the process. For example, students and teachers who have taken part in developing collaborative structures and who participate in communicating this experience to other students and staff members might have more success in establishing the school's perception of the practices as a form of personal and professional growth. Within this transparent communication, leaders could message a clear definition of growth vs. evaluation. In this way the fear of constructive criticism used as formal evaluation (with possible consequences for the staff member) could be alleviated. When reflecting on his SIC observation one teacher said, "I was open to getting student feedback but then I was like, whoa, wait a minute. Is this evaluative or not?" Another teacher discussed her hesitancy in project vetting:

Vetting a project even to adults is kind of scary. But let alone to students, that may be your former students, that's really scary. Like are they going to pass along their feedback to other teachers or administrators?

While assuring faculty collaborators that student participants are not there to serve in an evaluative role, student participants may also benefit from clarity around their collaborative roles without diminishing the importance of their partnership. One teacher asserted that every student and adult involved should have some idea why such practices are encouraged at the school and how they can be important for instructional practice. In the absence of this type of communication, some teachers may continue to be dismissive of student collaboration or otherwise feel threatened.

Another issue related to the communication of the purpose and process of adult-student collaborations revolves around the extent to which the school provides formal opportunities for student voice that make student participation feasible and beneficial for students. Viewland students often participated in adult-student partnerships at their own prerogative, negotiating complex and compact schedules with work, family, studies, and extracurricular activities. While many student participants found intrinsic value in their participation in adult-student collaborations, adults may want to consider that student participation could be abused or taken for granted. The reward of compensation for student time is often equally important as compensation for adults. When asked about why they participated in such partnerships given their busy schedules, one student noted, "Doing this is detrimental to some of my other things like band and getting sleep. But if teachers ask for my feedback and take the time to listen, I can take the time to give feedback." The establishment of SIC proved an important step in addressing these issues and clearly communicated to both students and teachers that student voice was a valuable component in the functioning of the school.

## **Complexities of Power Dynamics**

Clear communication around purpose and process of adult-student collaborations can serve to alleviate many of the issues that arise from such interactions due to student-teacher power dynamics. As Fielding (2004) noted, as of yet, “[t]here are no spaces, physical or metaphorical, where staff and students meet one another as equals, as genuine partners in the shared understanding of making meaning of their work together” (p. 309). In the establishment of formal spaces and structures for adult-student collaborations, there comes more flexibility and willingness to engage in collaborative practices.

The reluctance of some adults to engage in adult-student partnerships may be related to ingrained power dynamics which establish clear roles of expert and learner. One teacher described his initial reaction to a student observation by asking, “How am I supposed to take feedback from you when you don’t even show up to class or put any effort in?” However, he continued, “Then I realized that maybe if I listened, or that other things were in place, he might show up more.” In an effort to alleviate some of the issues around power, more could be done to be transparent about how students are chosen to engage in collaborative practices and how they come to be prepared to participate. This transparency is of particular importance when engaging nontraditional student leaders in providing feedback to educators.

## **Unanswered Questions and Possible Future Research**

The Viewland case suggests that the norms and practices established under the supportive umbrella of an intermediary partnership may be sustained over time, beyond the end of that partnership. Consider the fact that DAID is (at the time of this writing) still

occurring at Viewland. Further, according to Carla, now the assistant principal, student voice at Viewland has continued to evolve. For example, student led conferences are now a “stable tradition” and students are still involved in classroom observations through a course called “Leadership.” Additional inquiry into the ways students in this course are trained to engage in adult-student collaborations and the roles they take in other aspects of instructional renewal at the school, in absence of Professor Ginsberg as a collaborator, would also prove illuminating regarding issues of sustainability.

Setting aside questions of sustainability and future actions at Viewland there also remain unanswered questions about the present functioning of adult-student collaboration at Viewland. For example, if teachers who are new to Viewland express hesitation to adult-student practices are invited to participate in instances of DIAD or project vetting, would they accept the invitation? Further, would the experience of collaborating with trained students from SIC create a transformative experience for these teachers that might change their beliefs about students or influence their practice? Or might they use the experience to further reinforce their established beliefs about the value of students as instructional collaborators? Finally, could it be possible that adult-student collaboration at Viewland influence teacher hiring practices in that teacher candidates who indicate resistance to collaboration with students might not even be brought on board?

Within this study, several findings invite further examination. Student participants appeared to attribute more value to the sanctioned or “formal” practices of adult-student collaboration, while teachers found “informal” interactions to be more influential. Thus teachers had a tendency to increase their solicitation for informal student feedback

within their classrooms while students expressed a desire for an increase in their opportunities to provide feedback in formal settings. Such a differential in attributed value, and the reasons behind this discrepancy, might prove helpful for others when conceptualizing new structures for adult-youth collaborations as they are both clearly important in different ways to both parties.

It may be significant, if possible, to document any changes in instructional practice as a result of such collaborations. Perhaps this “unseen” multiplier effect influences school culture and reform more than other practices. While research supports the benefits that student voice activities have for students, such as increased agency, attachment to school, increased effort in classroom interactions, and new understanding of the complexity of teaching and learning, we could focus more on the benefits these practices also bring adults and the situation of school within the community. Along these lines, it could prove interesting to explore if and how much student participation in adult-student collaborations within the school affect parental involvement at the school.

Finally, the viability of a shared ownership for learning in schools seems to emanate from some form of policy and school leadership. In this vein it seems important to explore how the new understandings adult-student collaborations provide about the educational experience can inform the ways in which we think about educational leadership, organizational culture, curriculum theory, and teacher education.

### **Conclusion**

While there may be a continual need to document and categorize various aspects of adult-student collaborations, it remains more important to legitimize this work

for the pragmatic value it offers the students and teachers who reside daily in schools. Given the ability of students to advocate and give voice to a range of their peers, this work could be important for students who are in schools that are considered traditionally underserved. In these schools, students may be more likely to lack the social capital, skills, or confidence to communicate effectively with adults who are in positions of authority. This study provides an example that may be of use to others who are looking to design new organizational routines and infrastructures for instructional improvement that include students as partners. Further, by contributing another example of adult-student collaborations to the literature we can begin to address how to construct programs that work under a wide range of circumstances.

School reform grinds ever forward, yet as Cook-Sather (2002) has noted, “Decades of school reform have not succeeded in making schools places where all young people want to and are able to learn” (p. 9). Further, it is not entirely clear that our schools are places where adult educators want to spend their careers. It may be time to spend energy and expertise to prime the ground for students and teachers to find equally enriching and fulfilling experiences. For school reform to move forward it would be beneficial to include students as participants. In this process, teachers, students, and the public might need to re-envision what the roles of student and teacher entail (Fielding, 2004). Further, to create schools where student-adult collaboration is encouraged and youth agency is not underestimated, there would need to be spaces where students and adults can work as partners and where issues of power can be minimized or eliminated for a time (Fielding & Rudduck, 2002). Unless policy makers and educators begin engaging students—even the ones they feel most unable to

reach—about schooling, reform efforts will likely continue to lack potency and enact little change. In schools like Viewland we can see how students and adults can grow intellectually and professionally as they create new structures to communicate and develop mutual respect.

Yet some level of transformation, or rupture of the normalized social hierarchy and organizational structures of schooling, seems to be in order. It would be a process that is ongoing and messy. However, as we now look to the pressures schools face to implement core standards, it seems timely. Common Core implementation in schools presents a new pressure on administrators, teachers, students, and schools. Can and should students play a part in sharing the design and implementation of their education? Can students serve as a bridge to their parents and communities to further unify these goals? While these aspects of student-adult collaboration may seem dangerous and subversive, it may be the one untapped resource, requiring little funding, that may provide lasting change. In this exploration of adult-student collaboration we might discover, or realize, educational settings where there is a shared ownership for learning and what Fielding (2002) described as a “radical collegiality” between the educators and students who reside there.

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