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Students As The Golden Resource: Incorporating Student Voice Into Overall School Culture

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STUDENTS AS THE GOLDEN RESOURCE: INCORPORATING STUDENT VOICE INTO OVERALL SCHOOL CULTURE

Dominick M. Lupo

Educational Leadership Doctoral Program

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STUDENTS AS THE GOLDEN RESOURCE:
INCORPORATING STUDENT VOICE INTO OVERALL SCHOOL CULTURE

Dissertation Hearing

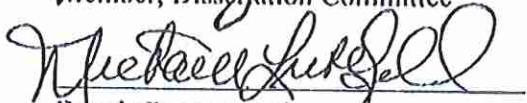Submitted in partial fulfillment
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ABSTRACT

This study is a program evaluation of AGA Middle School's current school culture as it relates to being either a student-centered culture or an adult-centered culture. Following the analysis of the program evaluation, this study also set out to gather the voices of the students of AGA Middle School in order to determine the positive relationship building strategies and characteristics that teachers whom have positive relationships with students have in common. Employing a mixed methodology of survey data along with individual student interviews from each grade level (six through eight), this study found that the current school culture committee, the PATH committee, lacked student voice and student input. However, the study also uncovered that many teachers were in fact incorporating student voice and positive student-teacher relationship building skills within their own classrooms. Ultimately, the recommendations provided as a result of this study include a structure for incorporating student voice into the previously adult-centered school culture, along with a student derived set of positive student-teacher relationship building strategies and characteristics.

PREFACE

I have been an administrator at AGA Middle School for six years, three years as assistant principal, and now three as the principal. During my time at AGA Middle School, I have seen the profound impact that including students in different initiatives can have on the success of any initiative and on the school culture overall.

Prior to researching the topic of incorporating student voice, I have always believed that if students want to be in a particular teacher's classroom, then they are going to learn in that classroom. How teachers go about creating the learning environment that students look forward to on a daily basis, in my opinion, was always the single most important factor to figure out when it came to promoting student growth and success in school. In addressing this very topic, Rita Pierson (2013) presented her Ted Talk entitled *Every Kid Needs a Champion*. When I first saw this presentation in 2014, the one quote from that presentation that really resonated with me was when she said, ""You know, kids don't learn from people they don't like." (1 minute, 43 seconds).

As a result of my beliefs in this very topic, I began to research how schools can be more intentional in making schools a place where students look forward to attending every day, and how individual teachers can go about building that attraction for students in their own classrooms. Many of the sources I came across were written by leading educational researchers, but very few of them had incorporated ideas that students themselves had on this topic. This simple fact led me to seek student voices and opinions on how we can change their experiences in the school and in the classroom. From there, I wanted to come up with a blueprint for how districts can be intentional about incorporating student voice on a regular basis in an effort to bolster student-teacher relationships and students' overall attitudes towards school. By being able

to achieve this, I hope that schools and districts can always be current with the strategies for creating a welcoming and positive learning environment no matter what demographical or environmental changes happen over time.

Throughout this process, I became hopeful that this is something that can absolutely be done and replicated in any school district. The importance that the students that were interviewed felt during this research was so pure and gratifying, and their reactions to me including them in on how teachers can improve their learning environment and relationships was amazing. As a result, I have already incorporated student ideas into the culture and classrooms, and I plan to continue this practice going forward.

DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate my work to my wife Gena, and my daughters Alena and Alyssa for their patience and support throughout this entire process. To my wife, Gena, you have persevered through more than anything that I will have to ever to in my entire life! Your positivity and mental strength to not be stopped regardless of whatever roadblocks are thrown at you is truly inspiring! Honestly, this whole process for me was easily put into perspective, and your story made it easy to keep pushing through. To my daughters, I love you infinity, and I hope that your mother and I will serve as examples for how to persevere through hard work and challenges. Also, I hope that the work that I took on will positively impact your own experiences someday. Finally, to my mother, father and brother. Thank you for making me into the son, brother, father and professional that I am and will be. You are at the roots of my life's journey, and I hope that I am able to spread the lessons of the fortunate upbringing that I was afforded to thousands of students and families that I come into contact with. I am truly lucky to have all of you in my life

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

When a doctor seeks information on how to treat a patient, the doctor seeks to understand the symptoms that the patient is currently experiencing. This information helps inform the doctor on how to proceed with testing and/or treatment. When a lawyer seeks to make a case regarding a specific crime that was committed, the lawyer's best resource is an eye witness account of the crime. This information is directly from the scene of the incident, and the information gathered from the eye witness ultimately helps inform the lawyer determine how to prove innocence or guilt. When a restaurant is looking for feedback on performance, they turn to surveys or reviews of the customers that experienced the service and food provided by the restaurant. The most successful restaurants take this real time data to make adjustments to their service and food preparations, and this helps them maintain desirability for their customers, ultimately keeping that restaurant ahead of the curve and ensuring longevity of the business. What is the common theme for all three of these examples? All three of these sample businesses operate best when they are gathering information from the people that were most impacted by the current conditions of their experiences. If the doctor only uses his or her observations to determine treatment, then they risk making the wrong treatment decision. If the lawyer only uses a singular account of a crime, the lawyer risks not providing enough evidence to help win a particular case. If a restaurant uses only the manager's observations of the service, then the restaurant risks not reaching the customer's desires, and ultimately risks losing their business due to customers being unhappy and not returning. Current conditions are extremely important to understand when trying to determine how to reform current practices in order to enhance any work, and schools are no different. Levin (2008) states, "if participation by those affected by reform is seen as necessary, then participation by students must be accorded the same status. Students have unique

knowledge and perspectives that can improve our approach to implementation" (p. 158). If we as educators want to reach our most important audience, the students, then it should be a priority to develop a culture where incorporation of student voice is both respected and expected.

The following study examines the current landscape of AGA Middle School, a suburban school outside of a large, Midwestern city, and how the school staff and administration currently foster positive student-teacher relationships and a positive school culture. Once the current state of AGA Middle School was determined, I gathered input from the students themselves in an effort to make recommendations as to how to improve both student-teacher relationships and school culture from the student perspective. Ultimately, I present a blueprint that middle schools can use to shift from the common adult-driven school districts to a more student-centered approach that will lead to a school rooted in positive relationships between students and staff. The belief is that the natural byproduct of this shift to a student-centered culture with stronger relationships between students and teachers will eventually lead to greater achievement and social-emotional growth overall. DeFur and Korinek (2010) support this claim in saying that, "the positive effects of honoring student voices and involving them in more integral, meaningful ways in their school experience cannot be ignored as we seek to improve schools and meet higher standards" (DeFur and Korinek, 2010, p. 19).

AGA Middle School is a part of Wolf School District 312 (SD 312). SD312 is a unique district in that it is made up of three schools and a separate administration building that are all located on one campus: Western Elementary School (K-2), Blackberry Elementary School (3-5), and AGA Middle School (6-8). The middle school, AGA, is made up of 418 sixth through eighth grade students, and this school will be the focus for this program review. These schools are made up of students that all live in Wolf, Illinois, and no students from any surrounding villages can

attend SD312. The Village of Wolf is a suburb of a large, Midwestern city that shares a roughly three-mile border with the north side of the city. The village itself is very diverse and this is echoed by the racial and ethnic makeup of the school. The last time the school district took a survey of the various languages that are spoken in the homes of the students that comprise the district, that number exceeded ninety different languages! Currently, the racial/ethnic makeup of AGA is 55.3% White, 35.4% Asian, 7% Hispanic, 1.5% Black, and 0.7% Two or More Races (Illinois State Board of Education, 2015-2016). There is no official breakdown of the religions that are represented in the school, but there are daily accommodations made for the various religious practices that impact dress, areas for prayer, and food consumption limitations.

AGA's mission is "To foster a safe, respectful, nurturing community; encourage students to grow academically, creatively, physically, and emotionally; and develop vital skills for success in a global society," and the school district uses this mission to guide many of the initiatives of the schools. I believe that by developing a way to incorporate student voice into the overall decision-making of the school, then we can achieve this mission as well. Skipper & Douglas (2015) go even further when they concluded that by incorporating student voice, we will be able to improve student-teacher relationships by making students feel more safe, respected, and cared for ultimately leading to a school community and culture that is best suited for student growth.

Purpose

In order to get to a student-centered school culture that promotes student voice as a vehicle for improving student-teacher relationships and culture, we need to first analyze the current conditions of the school, and what got us to these current conditions. Inconsistent leadership is one of the major factors that has led to some of the inconsistencies found at AGA

Middle School. AGA had experienced a high turnover rate in building administration from 2010-2014 as there were five different principals during this time. Along with many other factors that are impacted by lack of consistency in leadership, a major focus of the incoming administration for the 2014-2015 school year was overall school culture and the student behavior management system.

According to the existing central office administration and the staff of AGA Middle School, the school's culture and the behavior management system were not just broken, they were non-existent. Given the pressing need to address the growing number of student behavior issues and the students' growing lack of trust in staff and administration, the new building administration merged two committees that were formed by the school already; the Code of Conduct Committee and the Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports committee. These committees were originally formed due to the unmanageable number students being sent to the office for discipline referrals, and there was no direction for these committees because of the inconsistency in building leadership. Given the fact that the Code of Conduct Committee was in charge of setting disciplinary action for various behavior infractions, and then the PBIS Committee in charge of promoting positive behavior and setting behavior expectations, it seemed counterproductive for these two committees to be working independently. When the committees were merged, there was a strong focus to make the behavior expectations something that all teachers and students could easily identify. The initial meetings for this large group were focused on coming up with a common vocabulary to drive the new behavior management and behavior expectations system. It was within these meetings that "The PATH" was born.

The PATH, or as it is formally known, "The Positive Actions That Help Program" became the backbone of the AGA Middle School Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports

(PBIS) system. This PATH committee also became the school's culture committee and is made up of teacher representatives from each grade level. The committee is responsible for everything from developing student behavior expectations, to planning celebration assemblies, and even for sharing out classroom management techniques for teachers. One of the main focal points for the group was to create consistency for expectations, and to create consistency in the delivery of the expected culture to all staff. The thought is that this consistency, in theory, will lead to an overall awareness of the expectations for both staff and students, generate greater buy-in of the behavior expectations, limit distracting behaviors in the learning environment, improve student-teacher relationships, and ultimately lead to greater student learning.

The overall purpose of this evaluation is to improve current student-teacher relationship building practices by highlighting what is working and what is not working as measured by the *5Essentials* data and student interview data on both current practice, and ideas on how to improve the current PATH Program's relationship building initiatives. Although we have seen some success in the reduction of some behavior problem behaviors in the short time since the creation of the PATH, we are now looking to shift our focus to increase student involvement in an effort to increase student buy-in to the program. I am hopeful that this program evaluation will help bring greater fidelity and clarity to the original goal of encouraging positive behaviors through using the PATH program to promote consistent positive school climate, and positive student-teacher relationship strategies that are identified by the students of AGA Middle School. Ultimately, through my research, I will present a description of the ideal state, which represents what students desire from adult stakeholders in the building in regards to student-teacher relationship building strategies.

Rationale

Why analyze our school culture and the committee that drives our culture? I am passionate in my belief that schools have sacrificed the way students and teachers interact in an effort to comply with the demands of the state's determination of what it means to be a successful school. I personally believe that schools are almost forced to teach to the standardized tests given by the state because of the weight that society puts on those individual test scores. A single school district can spend majority of their time teaching test taking strategies and presenting curriculum that is focused on what will be on the state test, score well on that test, and then be seen as a more successful school than one that may score slightly lower but has provided a much more well-rounded learning experience for their students. After one year of observing the current student learning environment, I noticed that the number of students sent to the office for behavior incidents was very high for a middle school comprised of roughly four hundred students. The teachers were very quick to send students out of the classrooms when there was any sign of misbehavior, and this was due to the mindset that it was better to remove misbehavior than to address it because that would result in a loss of instructional time. With the focus so strongly on getting through the curriculum because of the pressure to have students perform well on standardized tests, the teachers were failing to build the relationships that put students in the best mindset to learn. As a result, the PATH committee introduced a minor and major behavior referral system, a behavior matrix, and a common language for teachers to use with students. Teachers were also given direction to administer minor referrals, and to oversee the consequence that they decided to attach to a particular minor referral. The purpose of this shift in how minor behaviors were addressed was intended to give teachers one more tool in their behavior management repertoire, to give teachers the position of authority in the classroom

versus always surrendering their authority to the office administration during any time of student misbehavior, and finally to encourage teachers to engage in a dialogue with the student that was struggling in their class. The shift in who determines a minor from a major infraction was a major change for staff. Teachers were also often asking whether or not a particular incident was worthy of a minor or just a redirection, and those teachers were told that the decision was up to them, and that they could use the incident as a relationship building moment to have a conversation and warn of the potential consequence if the student did not respond appropriately. This put teachers in a position to give students "another" chance, or to hear what may be causing such a behavior rather than just giving a consequence or sending the student to the office. Such an interaction was intended to reinforce the idea that the teachers are "fair" and "understanding", two common themes that students identified as being of great importance in determining whether or not they would have a positive relationship with the teacher. Teachers were also given Jaguar Paws to hand out to students when they are observed engaging in behaviors that are considered to be on the PATH. The students then take the Paws that they are given for the positive behaviors they exhibit to the office for entry into a number of different raffles for prizes. This was one initiative that the PATH committee implemented in an effort to encourage staff to interact positively with students, and to begin building better relationships with students. This initiative was developed entirely from the adult-led PATH committee, and saw some success in regards to student excitement when they were participants of the Jaguar Paws.

The PATH program is also important to me because I strongly believe that if students feel that their teachers are supportive and that the school is a supportive environment, then the students will feel better about their relationships with their teachers and school, and this will ultimately lead to students succeeding academically both in the classroom and on the

standardized tests that are used to measure success of the school overall. According to Wagner (2014), student motivation in the classroom is directly related to the relationship that the students have with the teachers. In fact, he found that "in focus groups with high school students - from wealthy suburban enclaves to struggling inner-city school - the most frequent comment from students has to do with their longing for a different kind of relationship with their teachers" (Wagner, 2014, p. 192). In this study he recorded student comments such as:

- "I need a teacher I can really talk to…", "And not just about school things, but things going on in my life." (p. 192).

- "I want to know that a teacher cares about me" (p. 192).

- He also found that even on the college level, students stated that "what was most important was having a teacher 'who didn't talk down to you - who was someone you could relate to.'" (p. 192-193).

By the teachers demonstrating positive behavior management strategies, the teachers will naturally be employing positive relationship building strategies that will lay the initial groundwork for the students to feel comfortable and supported in their classrooms. This will not only lead to greater engagement, motivation and achievement in the classroom, but also hopefully translate to a group of young adults that are better relationship builders in the community as well.

Additionally, in regards to a positive behavior support model relating to student achievement, Lassen, Steele & Sailor (2006) performed a study that found that "PBS [Positive Behavior Support] may have a significant impact on improving academic performance, primarily through increasing the amount of time students spend in their classrooms" (p. 710). By students not being sent out of the room for behavior issues, we can naturally increase the amount of

instruction that they are exposed to. Using such data will help create urgency towards making changes to the current program in place.

Goals

Reviewing behavior data, 5Essentials data, and student interview data will be the main mode of data collection for this program review. After data compilation, the ultimate goal of this review is to:

- strengthen and improve current practice as it relates to creating a student-centered culture,
- and identify what students desire from teachers in regards to positive student-teacher relationship building strategies.

By rooting this program evaluation in these particular goals, I am confident that we will have a blueprint on how to grow the PATH program to greater effectiveness through incorporation of student voice. The PATH in itself was an upgraded behavior management system and culture committee compared to what AGA had prior to the 2014-2015 school year, but the program has somewhat stalled, or hit a plateau in regards to growth. I believe that the program hit a plateau in terms of growth because the PATH program, although did a great job of giving teachers a script for outlining behavior expectations with students, it significantly lacked stressing the importance of teachers building positive relationships with students as a part of the process. The program also lacked the incorporation of student voice as a vehicle for growth in both the expectations and student-teacher relationships. Benjamin Levin (2000) goes even further to support this initiative when he concluded that "by talking with and listening to students, we can learn more about how classroom and school processes can be made more powerful, and how

improvement can be fostered, whether or not students are committed to a particular reform" (p. 158).

Compiling qualitative data will be essential to evaluating the current student-teacher relationship building practices. The most personalized data and research that is available to AGA is made available by in-house surveys, and also on research-based data that is compiled by the University of Chicago and the Urban Education Institute through data gathered by their *5 Essentials Survey* that is administered to multiple stakeholders of the school. Through twenty years of school improvement research, this group identified five essential categories that make up the most reliable "indicators of school improvement" and success. One of these essential categories is the importance of a supportive environment as measured by four components:

- *Peer Support for Academic Work*

- *Academic Personalism*

- *Safety;*

- *and Student-Teacher Trust* (https://illinois.5-essentials.org/2015/s/050160740021001/essentials/environment/)

For the sake of this program evaluation, performance measures of the final component, student-teacher trust, is an appropriate indicator for the overall success of the PATH program. By implementing a stronger PBIS and behavior management system, the hypothesis is that we should see improvement in students' overall feeling of safety in the building and students will also feel more supported by their teachers. Improvements in such areas will then lead to more trusting relationships between the students and teachers. In theory, by improving in these areas as measured by the behavior data, *5Essentials Survey* data, and informative interviews, we will ultimately be decreasing student misbehavior, decreasing distractions to the learning

environment, and ultimately be moving towards greater student learning, motivation, greater student-teacher relationships, and greater achievement overall at AGA Middle School.

Research Questions

The primary purpose of my research is to explore what students desire from their teachers in regards to how teachers build positive relationships with them. The *5Essentials Survey*, and the student interviews help paint the current landscape of how students view their relationships with teachers. I then compile the student interview data to determine a set of qualities and strategies that teachers can employ to build more positive relationships with students that are driven by the students themselves. Ultimately, leading to the answer to my main research question; "How can student-teacher relationships be improved school-wide through incorporating student voice?" I also interview students in an effort to find out what characteristics that teachers that have positive relationships with students have in common, as well as to find out what strategies can teachers employ in order to build positive relationships with students.

Conclusion

The program review portion of this dissertation serves as the vehicle that drives the change to how we as a school approach behavior management and student-teacher relationships. Right now, current behavior management and student-teacher relationship strategies are derived by the adults that are a part of the PATH committee, and the student voice is non-existent. By reviewing the behavior data, the *5Essentials* data, and by interviewing students at AGA Middle School, I gain better grasp on the current, "as-is" state of the school as it relates to the current school culture, as well as what the current students identify as positive student-teacher relationship building strategies being employed by staff (Wagner et al., 2006).

CHAPTER TWO: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Introduction

In this chapter, I examine research related to the importance of positive student-teacher relationships as it relates to overall student success, as well as how incorporating authentic student voice into the learning environment can foster such positive relationships. First, I examine the literature on the importance and overall impact of positive student-teacher relationships in education. Next, I examine the various methods that have proved to be successful in creating positive relationships in the classroom. Finally, I present strategies for incorporating authentic student voice into the educational setting. Through this review, I develop a framework to understand and employ effective relationship building practices that improve student-teacher relationships.

Importance of Positive Student-Teacher Relationships in Education

The amount of time that a student and teacher spend together throughout any given week often outweighs how much time that student and teacher spend with their own family members. With this in mind, it is no wonder why the relationship between the student and teacher is so important. School-aged children learn many of their behavioral tendencies such as resilience, ability to overcome challenges, respect towards others, and overall academic success from their teachers (Hansen, 2018). Conversely, the negative impact of negative relationships has also proven to have long-term, detrimental effects for children. Hansen (2018) highlights this relationship best when he states, "In fact, negative relationships with caregivers and teachers are known risk factors for mental and behavioral health problems (Crews et al., 2007) and poor academic achievement (Christle, Jolivette, & Nelson, 2005; Henry & Huizinga, 2007)" (p. 32). Skipper and Douglas (2015) also support this claim when they state:

A good student–teacher relationship is associated with positive outcomes such as better

school adjustment (Pianta, Steinberg, & Rollins, 1995), positive social functioning

(Hamre & Pianta, 2001), and high levels of academic achievement (Roorda, Koomen,

Spilt, & Oort, 2011). In contrast, a poor student–teacher relationship is associated with

negative outcomes such as school avoidance, low levels of self-directed learning, and low

levels of performance in the classroom (Birch & Ladd, 1997, 1998). The importance of a

positive student–teacher relationship cannot therefore be overstated. (Skipper &

Douglas, 2015, p. 276)

As was previously stated, there has been substantial research that links positive student-

teacher relationships with improved student success. Just like with any positive relationship, the

two parties involved in a positive relationship are more in tune with each other's overall well-

being. The classroom is no different. Martin and Collie (2018) recently conducted research to

measure the impacts of negative and positive relationships as it relates to academic factors such

as classroom engagement and overall academic success. Their findings cannot be understated as

they concluded that positive student-teacher relationships had a direct positive impact on

"academic engagement by way of participation, enjoyment, and aspirations" (Martin and Collie,

2018, p. 12). Lubelfeld, Polyak and Caposey (2018) quoted Quaglia et al. (2016) on this very

when they reported "Quaglia (2016) et al. discovered: Students who believe they have a voice in

school are 7x more likely to be academically motivated than students who do not believe they

have a voice. (p. 6)" (p. 76).

Research also supports the importance of positive student-teacher relationships when

examined from a negative relationship lens. De Laet, Colpin, Van Leeuwen, Van den Noortgate,

Claes, Janssens, Goossens, and Verschueren (2016) conduct research to uncover the detrimental

effects of a negative student-teacher relationship can have on the academic success and progress of a student. Much like the research that focuses on the positive relationships, this study focused on student, teacher and parent perceptions of the negative relationships with the teachers. The researchers then used this data to compare to data regarding student engagement and student misbehavior. The researchers concluded that there was in fact a direct correlation between decreased student engagement and increased student misbehavior when the student-teacher relationship was perceived as a negative relationship (De Laet et al., 2016, p. 1237).

On top of the academic and long term impacts that positive student teacher relationships can have for a particular student, there is also a striking correlation between how such positive relationships can impact student-to-student relationships. Hughes, Cavell, & Willson (2001) conducted a study where they were "concerned with the relation between peer perceptions of teacher–student relationship quality and peer perceptions of a child's positive and negative attributes, as well as liking for that child" (p. 289). The main finding that the researchers uncovered was the fact that the relationships that teachers foster with children can both positively and negatively impact peer perceptions of the students involved in the relationship. If a teacher is supportive and has an observable positive relationship with a particular student, then the student peers in that particular class viewed that student more positively. To further this point, Voight (2015) found that students that were brought into a student-led school climate group ended up building positive relationships with students that they normally would have no interaction with. Simply by bringing students of different social and cultural backgrounds together in a group that was supported by teachers, they found that some previously perceived social barriers were wiped away because of the safety that was created amongst the group. Whereas research often shows the correlations between positive student-teacher relationships and academic success, I found

these studies to be very unique because of how they were rooted in proving just how far such positive student-teacher relationships can impact a student's overall educational and social experience.

Overall, it is clear that positive student-teacher relationships will have great implications on the academic experiences of students. Krstic (2015) goes even further and suggests that schools should give significant attention to the teachers creating positive relationships with all students if they want students to succeed more and have a more positive attitude towards school.

This study suggests that more attention should be paid on emotional relationships between students and teachers. In a context of positive emotional relationship with the teacher, a large number of students will develop positive attitudes towards school and learning, and in lower grades, they will achieve better school marks. (Krstic, 2015, p. 1800)

Ultimately, if students have a positive attitude towards school, they will experience better grades, better relationships, and will display more positive behaviors overall.

Methods for Creating Positive Student-Teacher Relationships

There is considerable literature that suggests various strategies for building positive relationships with students (DeFur and Korinek, 2010). Among all of these resources, I have noted a couple of themes that have emerged. First, students want to feel that they can trust their teachers (Russell, Wentzel, & Donlan, 2016). Secondly, they want to feel that their teachers genuinely care about them (Wagner, 2014). Both of these themes also suggest the idea that students have a longing to feel socially, academically and physically safe in their classroom (Hansen, 2018). All of these themes are directly correlated with the nature of the relationship that the teacher builds with the students.

15

Trust in the classroom

The following research examines the importance of building trust between teachers and students. Russell, Wentzel, & Donlan (2016) uncovered important correlations between best practice parenting methods and building positive relationships in the classroom. Much like was discussed in the previous section regarding the amount of time that students actually spend with their teachers in relation to how much time is actually spent with their own families, it is no wonder as to the importance of incorporating such parenting tactics into the classroom. In terms of building trust, Russell et al. (2016) report that "the benefits of interpersonal trust are described most often with respect to creating and maintaining young children's secure attachments with caregivers (Cassidy, 2001), as well as their willingness to engage with and explore the environment (Sroufe, 2005)" (p. 242). The idea of students being more willing to "engage with and explore" their environment directly translates to students being more willing and readier to grow academically because of the relationship and trust that they have with their teacher (p. 242). The teacher is the most important factor in creating such an environment, and being dedicated to building positive-trusting relationships can make a significant difference in the academic growth and overall learning experience for the students.

Another study conducted a controlled experiment where a group of teachers were selected to overtly build positive relationships with students by engaging students in conversations about their lives outside of school. This method led to the teachers and students recognizing similarities that they had between each other. The students in turn had begun to trust the teachers more because of these perceived similarities. The main findings of this study proved that improved relationships between teachers and students resulted in better overall academic achievement as measured by grade reports. The method of improving relationships by creating

connections based off of similarities proved to be beneficial (Gehlbach, Brinkworth, King, Hsu, McIntyre, & Rogers, 2016, p. 350). In reflecting on this study, it struck me as interesting that a directive to a certain group of teachers to talk to students more about their personal lives could yield such positive results in terms of student-teacher relationships and academic success of those students. However, this leads me to believe that relationships can certainly improve with a directive for teachers to employ specific relationship building strategies.

Along the same findings, another a study by Hansen (2018) similarly reported the importance of teachers making an extra effort to learn and understand more about the students' lives outside of school. Hansen (2018) reported that students perceived better relationships with their teachers when they felt that the teachers took the time to find out more about what the students face on a daily basis. This simple strategy in turn led to an increase in both the student teacher relationships and academic performance. Hansen (2018) concluded that "teachers become the foundation of positive relationships when they value the input, perceptions and experiences the students bring to school each day. Indeed, the most compelling protective factor in schools today is the supportive, caring and committed relationships between students and teachers" (p. 34).

Caring in the Classroom

Students also want to believe that the teachers genuinely care about them. This can be accomplished by teachers exercising warmth in their tone towards students, and also by acting fairly in all interactions. In a 2016 study by Russell, Wentzel, & Donlan state, "some teachers suggested that interactions with students must include a degree of openness, genuineness and honesty, together with willingness to share information about oneself, showing vulnerabilities and 'acknowledging mistakes', while maintaining appropriate adult–adolescent boundaries" (p.

253). All of these actions allow for students to see their teachers in a light that makes them seem understanding of the various factors that the students bring to school with them each day. The increase in positive interactions leads to an increase in trust between the students and teachers. DeFur and Korinek (2010) interviewed seventy-four middle and high school students that reported the teacher's affect can make a significant difference in how they approach both the teacher and their learning. Simply by speaking to students with a positive tone, and demonstrating a passion for what the teacher is teaching is another strategy that can improve student teacher relationships and student achievement. Much like in the previous studies that have been referenced, this initiative can become an expectation for all teachers, and can also be effectively observed.

To further this point, Cook, Fiat, Larsen, Daikos, Slemrod, Holland, and Renshaw (2018) conducted the impacts of simply greeting students at the door with a smile and a personal acknowledgement of every child as they walked in the door. This seemingly simple relationship building strategy led to astounding results. They found that "academic engagement increased by 20 percentage points and disruptive behavior decreased by 9 percentage points—potentially adding 'an additional hour of engagement over the course of a five-hour instructional day'" (Terada, 2018). To go along with the themes that have already been stated, teachers simply approaching students with a positive disposition will give students the comfort that also yields positive results in parenting.

Along with a caring classroom, is the idea of the "fair" classroom. One theme that has emerged in my own research along with the literature that I reviewed is the idea that students want to feel that they are being treated fairly by their teachers. This was no better highlighted that in the qualitative study conducted by Ida (2015) in which the researcher sought out to find

out what makes a good teacher through the voice of the students. The researcher then sought to

compile this data in an effort to provide changes to the teacher preparation programs. The main

finding of this research showed that the teacher preparation programs are omitting a very

important aspect according to the students. According to Ida (2015), in regards to teacher actions

in the classroom, students reported that "personal attention, dealing with the students' problems,

fair treatment and showing respect to each other take the priority in their beliefs" (p. 141). This is

not to say that teachers' overall knowledge of the content area is not important, but rather, it

supports that students long to feel cared for, and long for the positive teacher relationship before

anything else. The students in this study went further to explain what the teacher can do to

achieve this, and they concluded that the teacher can start by learning more about the students'

lives outside of school, and treating them with warmth and respect (Ida, 2015). All of which are

characteristics of the teacher being dedicated to building a caring classroom.

Ellerbock, Kiefer & Alley (2014) furthered the importance of the caring classroom in

their study that interviewed middle school students in regards to what factors give them the

greatest sense of belonging in their classrooms. The main finding is that "key elements in the

teacher-student domain were teachers fostering caring connections with students, and teachers

responding to student needs" (Ellerbrock et. al., 2014, p. 7). This finding is unique in the sense

that the students themselves are the subjects that identified that creating responsive, caring

relationships is what gives them the highest sense of belonging in the classroom. This is not a

research driven finding based off of the ideas and frameworks of scholars, but rather the voice of

the students themselves. The students in this study identified that one way that teachers could

build this caring environment is to be responsive to the students' needs, and giving the sense that

the teacher is always willing to make themselves available for the students. Again, this is not

necessarily an instructional strategy, but rather a relationship building strategy that the students themselves have identified as the most important characteristic for their teachers to possess**.**

Safety in the Classroom

Along the same lines as building a caring classroom, is the result that a caring classroom will be a safe classroom. Students want to feel socially, academically and physically safe in the classroom. Such an environment will lead to students taking academic risks that will help them realize uninhibited academic growth potential. Teachers can go a long way to building such a safe classroom by recognizing and praising students' efforts in the classroom. Hansen (2018) suggests that when students are praised and feel safe in their learning, not only will they be more open to new challenges, but will also experience a heightened sense of ambition towards new challenges in their learning (p.34). Kaplan and Owings (2000) also state that "unless staff and students feel safe in schools, neither teaching nor learning will occur" (p. 24). In this article, Kaplan and Owings (2000) are referring both to physical and educational safety. They suggest that creating educational safety in the classroom can be achieved by building safety to take risks into their actual instruction. By staff being prepared for students to make mistakes and how they will respond to those mistakes with care will create the sense of caring and safety that encourages students to achieve at their maximum potential.

Another unique method of creating a caring and safe environment is to incorporate a curriculum where staff and students work in small groups on topics that transcend the normal curriculum. The model is much like an advisory class that is centered on social emotional learning and service learning. This model allows for the adults to model appropriate and caring relationships with the students, while also bonding together on various topics and sometimes a

common goal. Lubchenko (2016) suggests that creating a curriculum where staff and students can have authentic conversations about relationship topics, or where they can work together towards a community service goal is one way to build trust amongst students and staff. They found that students perceived their relationships with these particular teachers better, ultimately resulting in a greater sense of safety and trust with that teacher.

The research is clear that by teachers and schools dedicating a focus on building a trusting and caring relationship with students, the students will ultimately feel a greater sense of belonging, thus resulting in greater engagement, academic success, and a more positive learning experience. By following some of the research proven strategies discussed, teachers can go a long way in improving their relationships with students.

Student Voice

Finally, all of these themes and strategies are great ways to build positive student-teacher relationships, but the most important strategy that has emerged is the need to incorporate student voice. After all, it would be impossible to know if any of these other methods were even effective if we did not hear from the students themselves. This is why I believe that it is absolutely crucial to develop a way to incorporate student voice in all arenas of education. By giving students the proper avenue to express themselves, we are creating an avenue for building trust and positive relationships between the students and the adults in the school. Much like I explored in the first section of this literature review, systematically incorporating student voice will give the teachers and the school a way to build the supportive environment that the students have expressed is important for them.

Incorporating student voice will also give students a sense of ownership over their educational experience in a way that could never be attained in a setting where adults make all of

the decisions. Cushman and Rogers (2009) talk about the importance of incorporating student voice in creating trusting relationships. They interviewed numerous middle school students to uncover what they find to be important characteristics of their teachers. Much like the research that I have conducted with the middle school students at AGA Middle School, the students in this study revealed that being treated fairly is an essential component in building positive student-teacher relationships. Students also reported that when the teachers incorporated student voice into the building of classroom norms, the students felt that the teacher was "on their side" (Cushman and Rogers, 2009, p. 45). Along with students getting the feeling that the teacher is on their side, students gain a greater sense of ownership over their learning.

DeFur and Korinek (2010) conclude that "educators should start by asking students what is needed to improve their learning and education. Providing a safe environment in which students can speak without fear of reprisal and actually using student feedback to implement change are keys to quality input from students" (DeFur and Korinek, 2010, p. 19). By giving students a voice in the educational process, educators build trust, foster ownership of the learning process, and improve the overall student-teacher relationships. Ellerbock and Alley (2014) go even further when they argue that including the voice of the students is absolutely critical to the improvement of teacher student and student-student relationships. According to the researchers, previous studies on students' sense of belonging in schools has been driven and reported out by adults and not the students.

> Research on adolescents' school belonging predominantly includes the perceptions of educators and not the perceptions of students themselves (Nichols, 2008). As a result, much of what we know about school belonging has been primarily defined from an adult perspective (Brophy, 2005; Nichols, 2008). (Ellerbrock and Alley, 2014, p. 4)

As to how schools and teachers can go about incorporating student voice into the classroom, Voight (2015) suggests building a group where students feel empowered to share their voice and opinions on various school initiatives. By providing the group structure, students will feel the safety and comfort that they may not experience in a one-on-one experience. On top of all of the benefits of incorporating student voice, Voight (2015) also stresses the unintended, positive consequence of such a group. "First, using a team approach has the benefit of allowing student participants to develop relationships with one another, use their collective voice to recommend changes to adults, and collaboratively implement ideas" (p. 322). Voight (2015) also discusses the importance of carrying this initiative from one year to the next. Continuing the student voice initiative from one year to the next will give students the impression that the school is truly dedicated to incorporating their ideas and thoughts, rather than the thought that this program is simply a one-time attempt to appease the students. This will give students the feeling that they can trust the adults in the school, and the feeling that the school is truly invested in caring about them and their opinions.

Conclusion

Overall, "The positive effects of honoring student voices and involving them in more integral, meaningful ways in their school experience cannot be ignored as we seek to improve schools and meet higher standards" (DeFur and Korinek, 2010, p. 19). The research demonstrates the importance of positive student-teacher relationships as it relates to overall student success. The research also highlights several methods for improving student-teacher relationships. The bottom line is that the idea of ignoring student voice when attempting to build an educational environment that is characterized with caring adults, trusting relationships, and safety in the classroom is a critical mistake. Educational institutions must develop strategies for incorporating authentic student voice that is sustainable. The ultimate goal of this study is to

examine what students themselves identify as important relationship building qualities and strategies at AGA Middle School, as well as to build a structure for incorporating student voice into the overall school culture that can be replicated in any middle school.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

The PATH program evaluation serves as the current state study of my school. When connecting this program evaluation to my research, I feel that the data gathered in the program evaluation highlights the need for improvements in student-teacher relationships. At first, I struggled with how I could connect this evaluation with my research, but Patton (2008) stated that, "different evaluations answer different questions and focus on different aspects of program implementation. The key is to match the types(s) of evaluation to the information needs of specific stakeholders and primary intended users" (p. 331). For the sake of this study, the evaluation of the minor and major referrals, in conjunction with the data gathered from the *5Essentials* that explains the current state of the school in terms of how students perceive the level support that teachers give in the school, provides the connection to my research of uncovering what students would like to see teachers do to improve student-teacher relationships. The data itself does not directly tie to relationship building strategies; however, the data represents the fact that there is room for growth, thus validating the need for such research.

The methods that I used help me answer my research question because I used students as the primary research participants. Ultimately, I was trying to uncover a set of relationship building strategies or characteristics derived from the voice of the students that teachers could strive to enact as a way to strengthen the teacher-student relationships in their classrooms. It is important to present the research as a win/win scenario such as Patton (2008) highlights in his "Rules of Engagement in Support of Use" (p. 540). Through use of student interviews and surveys, it is be important to continue to remind participants how the results will ultimately strengthen the learning community. The subsequent sections discuss the processes that were employed throughout the study.

Participants

The key participants from whom I gathered the data from are four regular education students from each grade level in the middle school. These four students at each grade level consisted of two boys and two girls. The middle school is made up of 6th, 7th, and 8th grade students that range from 11 to 14 years of age, and approximately 80% of the students fall into the regular education category. The students were first randomly chosen to answer a couple of critical thinking questions that are not related to the study in an effort to gauge the student's ability to offer substantial answers necessary for this study. Based on these screening interviews, the two boys and two girls from each grade level were selected. Overall, I interviewed twelve students ranging from sixth to eighth grade.

Data Gathering Techniques

The data gathered represented a mixed methodology of both quantitative and qualitative data. For the sake of the program review, I took a snapshot of the current behavior data (major and minor referrals) and the *5Essentials* data that represents the *Supportive Environment* domain of the survey. More specifically with the *Supportive Environment* domain, I focused on the data that highlights the current climate of *Safety* and *Student Trust* (illinois.5-essentials.org). Within this section of the survey, administrators are able to gather data from students on how safe the school environment is, but more importantly for my research, data on how supported students feel by the school staff. The data represented in the behavior data and the *5Essentials* survey acted as the baseline for a measure of how safe students feel at school, and how much they trust their teachers. The goal was to compile the strategies and characteristics that students offer as positive student-teacher relationship building techniques, we can then begin to implement these strategies through our PATH program. The actual pushing out of the data and techniques along

with the strategies that students identify as being important for building positive student-teacher relationships will be best received when done by fellow colleagues, rather than by just the administration. This is why I plan to use the PATH committee, which is in charge of school culture and is made up of teacher representatives from each team in the school, as the catalyst for this change. Having staff members hold each other accountable for these initiatives creates a greater sense of buy-in from staff, and will in turn ensure a greater sense of fidelity to the initiatives. With this plan in place, I believe that we should see an increase in the overall *Supportive Environment* scores for our school, as measured by the *5Essentials* survey.

The other set of data compiled is qualitative in nature. This section describes the actual research that I conducted with students. Using the *5Essentials* in conjunction with other resources that identify strong questions for interviewing students about student-teacher relationship strategies, I was able to guide the students to identify what they see as important strategies and characteristics that teachers could employ to build positive student-teacher relationships in the school setting. For this part of my research, I individually interviewed a set of four, regular education students from each grade level in the middle school. These interviews were conducted individually and away from peer influence. I then coded all of the data to search for themes that were represented amongst all of the students. I predicted that many of the ideas and strategies would differ, so I only used the strategies identified by an overwhelming percentage of the students. I would have liked to present only the strategies that were represented by 100% of the sample size as Russell, Wentzel & Donlan (2016) did in their study that interviewed teachers on how to build student-teacher trust. In this study, the researchers all transcribed their own findings, and only the data or ideas that were present in 100% of the transcriptions were kept as reportable data for the sake of these findings. This was one way that

the researchers were able to prove educational significance in the data collected. Unfortunately, when transcribing the data that gathered from the students, I was unable to get 100% consensus on the relationship building strategies and characteristics that students found favorable. Therefore, I ended up creating a list of themes that were represented by an overwhelming majority of the student responses, and I reported these themes out as being educationally significant.

Ethical Considerations

James, Bucknam, & Milenkiewicz (2008) state, "when requesting consent, educators reveal the tie between their research efforts and the improvement of academic practices" (p. 29). In my own research, I feel that informing the parents of the research that binds the importance between positive student relationships and student learning. By presenting this research along with the research methods that I used, I hoped to break down any barriers created by trust or fear of a confidentiality breach in the reporting of the findings. I also provided the questions that I intended to ask the students to all of the parents and students involved prior to the interviews.

The topic of improving student-teacher relationships and consciously incorporating student voice are topics that I truly believe can only benefit the students. James et al. (2008) state that, "The basis of informed consent is a complete disclosure of the reasons, benefits, risks, and potential outcomes of the research" (p.29). Since middle school students are under 18 years of age, they are protected, and therefore I gained consent from both the students and their parents or guardians. In the process of requesting consent, I follow the guideline from James et al. (2008) that states, "When requesting consent, educators reveal the tie between their research efforts and the improvement of academic practices" (p. 29). This practice in itself is aligned with one of the findings from the interviews on how to build positive relationships. Confidentiality and privacy

were also be protected by not assigning any names to the students that are interviewed, and also by being conscious of time and place for when and where the interviews will be conducted.

Data Analysis Techniques

For my baseline behavior data and the *5Essentials* data, I report raw numbers of referrals and *5Essentials* survey results to paint a picture of the "as-is" state of the school. This section would not so much be an analysis as it would be more of a data presentation to support why I am exploring what students want from teachers in relationship building.

As for the interviews, I analyzed the data by searching for common themes that arose across all of the subjects. The themes uncovered are identified and discussed in the results portion of this study. I understand that the subjects do not represent the whole of the school, and also that there are many variable factors such as cultural background and differing experiences, however, if I am able to identify common themes from students that represent each grade level, then I will be able to indicate educational significance for that group of students.

Conclusion

The methods utilized to gather data are crucial to the success of any research. Careful attention to the data gathering processes sets the stage for practical, reportable data that can drive a change initiative. Also, careful attention to assuring the research subjects have confidentiality and privacy allow the subjects to feel safe in the responses that they offer the research, thus making the data as authentic as possible. Keeping all stakeholders informed of how the data are used to improve the learning environment will also help the research subjects feel that they are playing a vital role in school improvement. As a result of this study, the school being studied will have a practical and actionable set of relationship building characteristics and strategies that are derived by the students themselves.

CHAPTER FOUR: RESULTS

As-Is Analysis

The following section of this study is an analysis of the as-is setting of AGA Middle School as it relates to the current teacher-student relationship strategies employed by teachers (see appendix A). The current problem that is the fact that student-teacher relationship building strategies are all staff derived and initiated. To better understand this problem, I use the four C's (context, culture, conditions, and competencies) that are outlined by Wagner, Kegan, Lahey, Lemons, Garnier, Helsing, Howell, and Rasmussen (2006) in the book entitled *Change leadership: A practical guide to transforming our schools.* By using the four C's to analyze the change process for AGA Middle School, I employ what Wagner calls "systems thinking" (Wagner et al., 2006). Wagner (2006) defines a system as a "perceived whole whose elements 'hang together' because they continually affect each other over time and operate toward a common purpose" (p. 97). Wagner stresses the importance of being aware of the whole organization when driving change because of the relationship that change or various factors can influence the change process. The main takeaway from Wagner (2006) when understanding the systems thinking approach to change was when he described this approach as "more 'ecological' than logical, it recognizes that simple, linear cause-and-effect explanations sometimes miss the fact that today's effect may in turn be tomorrow's cause, influencing some other part of the system" (p. 97).

Context

The first C of this systems thinking approach is for Contexts. Contexts can be best understood as the cultural, political, economic, and--in the field of education--educational factors that provide influence (Wagner et al., 2006). They are the elements that often seem beyond our

control but deeply impact the work of the organization. In the case of AGA Middle School, there are many elements that impact the relationships that students have with teachers before there is a single relationship building strategy deployed. As was previously stated, AGA Middle school is made up of 418 sixth through eighth grade students. The racial/ethnic makeup of AGA is 55.3% White, 35.4% Asian, 7% Hispanic, 1.5% Black, and 0.7% Two or More Races (Illinois State Board of Education, 2016-2017). The teacher demographics at AGA Middle School are as follows; 92% White and 8% Asian.

There was a PBIS (Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports) system that was adapted for the school's behavior management system. This program is currently called the PATH (Positive Actions That Help). This system is currently driven by a committee consisting of the middle school administration and a group of teachers that represent each of the grade level teams in the school. This group generates all ideas for implementation of the behavior management program, and the fidelity of this program lacks consistency from teacher to teacher, and from classroom to classroom. Ultimately this committee could be considered our school culture committee as well. On top of developing the behavior expectations for the students, they are also responsible for planning celebration assemblies and setting the character themes for each school year. Some activities that this group has planned include PATH assemblies where students compete in fun games, and also the Jaguar Paw raffles where students can earn raffle tickets called Jaguar Paws in an effort to win prizes each quarter.

Overall, the school currently uses an adult-centered approach to decision making. Although all of the decisions are rooted in what is best for students, it is the work of adults and scholarly research that drives decision-making and change. Student input is only gathered through the *5Essentials* survey, or by individual teachers within their own classrooms. Currently,

the PATH committee is the only group of people that analyze the *5Essentials* data, and they simply report it to their colleagues. The data are not currently used to change practice in any formal professional development model. However, I do believe that coupling the *5Essentials* data along with the student interview data and input from the student advisory committee will prove to be very useful as it relates to improving overall school culture and student-teacher relationships.

Competencies

Wagner et al. (2006) define the competencies as "the repertoire of skills and knowledge that influences student learning" (p. 99). Currently, as it relates to the problem of all student-teacher relationship-building strategies being staff derived and initiated, I do believe that the PATH committee truly has the students' best interest in mind. However, there is no student voice listened to or used in any of the decision-making processes of the committee. The administration and staff are dedicated to understanding the most researched and proven behavior management and relationship building tactics to use with students, and as a result, many of these teachers have attended CHAMPS (Conversation Help Activity Movement Participation Success) training for classroom management ideas. That being said, much of these professional development attempts become isolated as none of these teachers have ever led the staff in a professional development around what was learned. Rather, the strategies learned are discussed in the PATH Committee and then pushed out to teachers as strategies that they could use in their classrooms.

Teachers and students all engage in an activity in the beginning of the year called the PATH rotations. During this activity, teachers and their homeroom students walk to seven different stations for ten minutes each to learn about the behavior expectations for the various settings of the school. This is also where students are exposed to the positive rewards system in

32

place for positive behaviors. These expectations are then posted all over the school, but they are only formally visited with students and staff one time during the PATH rotations activity. All other formal exposure to the expectations is when there is misbehavior being redirected through a behavior referral. Currently, all staff members have the discretion to issue a student a behavior referral for not following the behavior expectations. There are no set criteria for what level of a behavior infraction warrants a minor or major referral, however, the teachers are often encouraged to use their professional judgments in making such decisions. The lack of consistency from teacher to teacher often leads to students feeling that one teacher is more or less fair than another teacher. The students interviewed highlighted the importance of this consistency when asked about how teachers can show that they are either fair or understanding. Students identified that teachers that were seen as "more fair" or "understanding" when "they would not get mad right away about different behaviors." One student discussed the importance of teachers establishing a positive culture right from the beginning of the year when he stated, "I think that all negativity starts with first impression. The first time I met that teacher, the teacher got mad and it all went downhill from there." Seeing as there are not any concrete methods or expectations laid out to teachers as to how they should roll out classroom expectations, some teachers take a positive approach to introducing their expectations, and some teachers take a more harsh, punitive approach. This simple conversation that teachers have with students at the beginning of the school year is much more important than we could have ever imagined. How the teacher discusses this topic can give students the feeling that a teacher is fair or not fair, understanding or not understanding. Formalizing this process will be of the utmost importance. To stress this point even more, another student stated that one of the common characteristics of teachers that have negative relationships with students is that they "get mad fast, sometimes if a

student doesn't understand, they get frustrated easy". This inconsistency of how teachers approach students and unpredictability in the classroom is something that must be addressed if we are dedicated to providing the best possible learning environment for students, and also if we want to be intentional about improving student-teacher relationships throughout the whole school.

The PATH referral system also lacks student input and student voice into the creation of the expectations and consequences, but there are some individual classrooms that include student voice in the creation of the classroom expectations based on the PATH expectations. I have observed teachers that have consistently had students develop classroom behavior expectations for their specific classroom, and these teachers have consistently had amongst the lowest number of referrals written for behavior infractions in their classrooms. Additionally, I have personally observed processes where teachers incorporating student voice into the classroom expectations process. These teachers start by displaying each of the schoolwide PATH behavior expectations, and then in groups the students take the schoolwide expectations and breakdown what the expectations would look like in this specific classroom. Students work in groups to develop their classroom expectations, based off of the schoolwide expectations, and then the students present their classroom specific expectations to the rest of the class. The teachers then have students vote on a finalized set of expectations for the classroom. To take this a step further, these teachers created a class government where the students themselves actually track classroom behaviors with "tickets" or "citations" for not following the classroom expectations. The teachers are also allowed to give citations, but if a student wants to dispute a particular citation, it is then heard in "court" where the student pleads his/her case, and the student supreme court justices make a final determination. If behaviors prove to be more serious than that of a typical classroom

management situation, then the teacher moves to the minor and major referral system. The use of student voice and overall student ownership of the expectations and culture of the classroom has proven to be extremely effective. During the 2016-2017 school year, these teachers were responsible for only 1% of all referrals written in the school. The following year, the 2017-2018 school year, these teachers were responsible for 2% of all referrals written, and over the course of the 2018-2019 school year, these teachers were responsible for writing just 0.8% of all referrals written that year.

Conditions

According to Wagner et al. (2006), conditions is defined as "the external architecture surrounding student learning, the tangible arrangements of time, space, and resources" (p.101). The conditions can also be understood as the tangible or determinate factors that help the organization measure the current state of the organization (Wagner et al., 2006).

AGA Middle School is currently on a ten-period schedule made up of ten, forty-minute periods. Last year, STEM (Science Technology Engineering and Math) was added to the core curriculum subjects. This addition to the core curriculum subjects was a change from STEM once being a quarter long class that students attended for eight weeks as part of an elective course rotation throughout the year. With this addition to the core curriculum classes, the schedule had to drop a daily forty-minute advisory period at the end of the day. It was during this advisory period where students were exposed to a consistent teacher for the entire year that engaged the students in social-emotional lessons. The loss of this period has led to decreased exposure to social/emotional education. Now students are exposed to social-emotional learning standards in classrooms where teachers make this a priority. There is no consistency in whom or how the social-emotional standards are met.

Another condition at AGA Middle School is the data point from the *5Essentials* survey that shows that Student-Teacher Trust at AGA is positive, however, the data point from the survey, "teachers always listen to student ideas", is the lowest measure coming in at only 37% of students strongly agreeing with this statement. This data point shows that students do not feel that they have a voice in the school, and this lack of student voice will eventually lead to a decline in the overall feeling of trust between the students and the teachers. To further this point, the students interviewed for the sake of this study were asked on a scale of one to five with one being not important at all, and five being very important, how important it is for teachers to listen to student ideas when building positive relationships with students. Their responses indicated that 66.7% of the students interviewed gave a five for the question, and another 25% of students indicated a four for that question. This data shows that 91.7% of the students interviewed indicated that it is "important" to "very important" for teachers to show that they are listening to student ideas when it comes to building positive relationships with students. According to the students of AGA middle school, one of the main benefits of teachers showing that they are listening to student ideas is that students feel that this leads to a greater sense of fairness in the classroom. Seventy-five percent of the students interviewed at AGA identified fairness as "very important", and the remaining 25% of the students identified fairness as "important" when it comes to teachers developing positive student-teacher relationships. After compiling the data from the students, the relationship between listening to student ideas and building a sense of fairness in the classroom is quite evident. To highlight the relationship even further, one of the students replied to the question, "How does a teacher build a sense of fairness for a student?" by stating "listening to everyone's ideas". While another student went so far as to say that a teacher can build a sense of fairness by stating, "I would say that they [can do that] by not taking

favorites, listening to everyone's ideas, and telling everyone the same thing…".   As for the

behavior data at AGA Middle, there were 372 behavior referrals written by teachers for student

behavior infractions. Of that 372 referrals, only 5% of the students made up 54% of all referrals.

The current structure of discipline is punitive in nature, with the majority of the disciplinary

action made up of office or teacher supervised detentions. There are no current restorative justice

practices being employed at AGA Middle School. Additionally, the behavior expectations are

currently built by and presented by the teachers and the administration at AGA Middle School.

More specifically, it is the teacher representatives of the PATH Committee that review and adopt

all new procedures as it relates to behavior expectations and school culture.

Culture

When attempting to improve relationships in any arena at AGA Middle School,

improving culture is absolutely necessary. In the words of Wagner et al. (2006), "culture refers to

the invisible but powerful meaning and mindsets held individually and collectively throughout

the system" (p. 102). The current culture at AGA Middle School poses some barriers to the

improvement of student-teacher relationships through use of student voice.

Currently, some teachers reported that they feel there is a growing lack respect for adults

by the students, and conversely, some students feel that certain teachers lack respect for the

students. Much of the disrespect that is conveyed by the teachers revolves around the idea that

the teachers feel that the students are growing up in an era where there is a natural lack of respect

for authority. Whereas the students that feel that teachers lack respect for them feel that the

teachers already have their mind made up that some students are going to be troublemakers

because of some past behavior infractions. One of the students at AGA Middle School even

stated that some teachers "always find a way to put you down, I know for a fact that some

teachers don't like students, you know that because they always put you down. They are looking for you to do something wrong, they are not fair". This culture leads many of the students to feel that the system and some of the teachers are unfair in how they handle and approach some interactions. Along these same lines, 100% of students interviewed for the sake of this indicated that it is either important or very important for teachers to be fair when it comes to having positive student-teacher relationships. More specifically, there were 75% of the students that said it was "very important" for teachers to be fair. With fairness and respect being the two highest student-rated qualities for teachers to possess in the classroom, it is no wonder that students that feel teachers that are unfair are also the same teachers that lack respect for them. This is definitely one area of focus for the To-Be section of this study.

Additionally, 25% of the students interviewed reported that it is "important" to have a positive relationship with the teacher when it comes to them having success in that particular class. While even more significantly, 66.7% of the students interviewed reported that it is "very important" to have a positive relationship with the teacher when it comes to them having success in that particular class. This data concluded that 91.7% of the students reported that it is either "important" or "very important" to have a positive relationship with their teachers. Therefore, if the main mission of AGA Middle School is "To foster a safe, respectful, nurturing community; encourage students to grow academically, creatively, physically, and emotionally; and develop vital skills for success in a global society", then it is absolutely critical for the school to develop a way to foster continued improvement in the arena of building positive student-teacher relationships.

Through the research conducted, the students themselves have identified various ways that staff can adhere to the school's mission by demonstrating that they are dedicated to creating

a sense of safety and respect in their classrooms, as well as identifying specific strategies that staff can incorporate in the classroom in order to build better relationships with students.

There were several common themes that arose from the data collected in terms of how teachers can build more positive relationships with students.

First, students identified that trust is important. Students reported that a teacher can build trust by listening to the students and making them feel comfortable and safe even if they do are not successful with the content being taught. Staff can also build a sense of trust by opening up to students about themselves to the students. Also, staff can build a sense of trust by always giving extra attention to being fair in the classroom. In fact, 90% of the student respondents stated that on a scale of 1-5 with 5 being very important, it is very important for a teacher to show that they are listening to student ideas when making decisions. This gave students the sense that the teacher was fair. To further the importance of staff building a sense of fairness as a way to improve student-teacher relationships, 100% of the student respondents stated that on a scale of 1-5 with 5 being very important, it is very important for a teacher to show that they respect their students. The most common strategy identified by the students for how teachers can show that they are respecting their students is to be fair and to be understanding.

Another theme that emerged from the student interviews is that teachers that are always positive in their interactions with students are seen as favorable when it comes to students having positive relationships with the teacher. One hundred percent of the students identified positivity as a common characteristic that teachers that have positive relationships with students have in common. Some comments that students made regarding these common characteristics of teachers that have positive relationships with students include; "They are outgoing, happy respectful, fair…", "Being nice, being kind, and being respectful. [The teachers] smile a lot",

"[The teachers] make jokes, they are kind, and they are positive", Nice and always positive…",

and finally, "[The teachers] smile, [they] always have a good attitude, [and] always feel great in

a bouncy kind of mood". It is clear that the students at AGA Middle School respond favorably to

teachers that display a positive disposition, and although this is not necessarily an instructional

strategy, it can go a long way in improving student-teacher relationships in a classroom. To

expound even further on what a positive disposition looks like to the students of AGA, the

students identified kindness, fairness, being understanding, using humor, and smiling a lot as

being key characteristics and strategies that teachers that have positive relationships with

students have in common. One student reported that if the teacher is funny and smiles a lot, then

the students feel like they have a more positive relationship with those teachers.

Through analysis of the current processes of setting and communicating behavior

expectations, I found that another mindset that is present amongst staff at AGA Middle School is

the idea that administration should oversee all communication of behavior expectations and the

administration of discipline. As this authority is surrendered from the teachers to the

administration, this leads to the students bypassing communication and interactions with teachers

and going straight to the office to dispute or learn from a referral. This current process furthers

the gap of trust between teachers and students by taking away any relationship building

opportunities in the classroom, and also fractures the relationship with teachers and

administration by forcing administration to make a judgement about an incident that they did not

witness themselves. This leads to administration engaging in conversations about the incident

with only the students, and then administration ends up making the decision on discipline with

only the student perspective of the incident. This process has often led to teachers complaining

that the administration is only taking the side of the student in a particular incident, or that the

administration is being too easy on the students when deciding on the consequences for the incident at hand.

Interpretation

Overall, the results of this study found that the current practices employed at AGA Middle School lack the structures in place to incorporate student voice into the student-teacher relationship building processes. When analyzing the four C's, the changes that need to be made in order to improve student-teacher relationships through implementing strategies derived from student voice are fairly evident. The analysis of the data collected from the students presents a good blueprint for what students feel is important to the relationship building strategies teachers use with students. The data also shows that students believe that they perform better in classes where they have positive relationships with teachers. In fact, eleven out of the twelve students interviewed stated that it was either important or very important to have a positive relationship with their teacher when it comes to their overall success in the class. Some of the most prominent relationship building strategies and teacher characteristics that were highlighted by the students interviewed include fairness, understanding, respectfulness, and a positive disposition. In a time where school districts may struggle to have the means of providing the most up to date curricula due to budgetary restrictions, it appears that one of the most important determining factors of student success is free. It is simply collecting student perceptions and student voice, and then incorporating their input into the regular operations of the school and classrooms. Administration at AGA Middle School can go a long way in improving the current student-teacher relationships by sharing the specific characteristics and strategies that have been outlined by the students. On a more global scale, given the process that was utilized to gather this data, I hope that the process used for gathering the student input on various topics in the school can be replicated in any

school anywhere. I honestly feel that the more we as educators can gather student input and incorporate their ideas with fidelity, the better off educators and the students will be in terms of overall success and growth.

Judgements

As for how AGA Middle School will be able to use these findings, I take it back to the original research questions:

- *How can student-teacher relationships be improved school-wide through incorporating student voice?*

- *What characteristics do teachers that have positive relationships with students have in common?*

- *What strategies can teachers employ in order to build positive relationships with students?*

The unique feature of the data gathered as a part of this study is that it is specific to the current culture and climate of AGA Middle School. Although the ultimate goal is that other schools will also be able to imitate this exact study in their own schools, for the sake of this section, we will focus solely on how the data helps us understand the current state at AGA.

The students were very specific when it came to the common characteristics shared by teachers that have positive relationships with students. The common characteristics identified included teachers that were generally happy by perception, smiled a lot, used humor in interactions with students, and were overall positive in nature yielded the greatest feeling of positive relationships with students. These characteristics will be a great reminder for staff to be intentional about exhibiting these characteristics when interacting with students. Much like the Terada (2018) study where the researchers found a significant increase student engagement by

simply greeting students with a smile upon entering the classroom, I believe that we can take it a step further and mandate incorporation of some of the interpersonal skills that students identified as desirable.

As for the relationship building strategies that the teachers can employ in an effort to bolster student-teacher relationships, the students at AGA were very specific. The students stated that at the beginning of the year, teachers that take time to really open up about themselves, students felt more comfortable with those teachers. One student was a little more detailed when she stated, "when [the teacher [does] the introduction where they introduce themselves and what they like to do, they do it in a really positive way." Additionally, another student simply stated that teachers could build better relationships with students at the beginning of the year by "having the teacher be more open." Students also highlighted the importance of teachers being fair, understanding, and respectful in their interactions with students. Through the research conducted, 100% of the students interviewed also stated that they felt that it was very important for teachers to interact with students outside of the regular classroom in an effort to build positive relationships with students. More specifically, in order to achieve this, students reported that teachers could attend extracurricular activities, interact with students at recess or clubs, and even as simple as standing in the hallways and smiling and saying hello to students in passing. Students also reported that teachers that are understanding in situations where students may forget to do homework or if they answer a question wrong, those teachers are easier to connect with and they have better relationships with those teachers. Overall, the students gave very useful information as it relates to strategies that the PATH Committee and the AGA administration can use to bolster student-teacher relationships throughout the entire school.

Conclusion

Overall, the current practices employed at AGA Middle School lack the structures in place to incorporate student voice into the student-teacher relationship building processes. When analyzing the four C's, the changes that need to be made in order to improve student-teacher relationships through implementing strategies derived from student voice are fairly evident. The analysis of the data collected from the students presents a good blueprint for what students feel is important to the relationship building strategies teachers use with students. The following section will offer recommendations as well as examine what the students at AGA Middle School identified as some of the changes need to be made in order for AGA to become an optimal student-centered culture that uses student voice to bolster student-teacher relationships.

CHAPTER FIVE: TO-BE FRAMEWORK

Envisioning the Success: To-Be (Appendix A)

Although the lack of student voice in the relationship building strategies currently employed at AGA Middle is significant and evident, administration would be negligent in this process by not addressing this issue. Right now, all of the student-teacher relationship building strategies are derived and initiated by staff. The obvious change would be to include the voice of the students in this process, but that is not a simple change. Through analysis of Tony Wagner's (2014) four C's, it is evident that there are many factors that need to be addressed before any real change can happen. I will now analyze the four C's through a future outlook, or "to-be" lens. Taking the current conditions of the four arenas of change and reimagining them as if we had exactly what we are looking for from a student-teacher relationship-building standpoint. Ultimately, this section will provide a snapshot and a blueprint for the ideal situation at AGA Middle School.

Context

The current context of the PATH program is that the committee itself is dominated by teacher and administrator voices and ideas. This committee is responsible for coming up with ideas on how to improve both culture and expectations for students. These ideas are then shared out by the staff members of this committee to the rest of the staff. This committee was originally established as a way to include as many voices as possible into the culture building process of the school, however, the committee lacked the voice of the most important stakeholders in the school, the students.

In the most ideal situation, students would not only have their opinion heard, but they would be an integral part of this committee. The students would be a part of as many of the

meetings as possible, and would then be asked to offer their opinions on the happenings of the school, and to offer ideas on how to improve student-teacher relationships. Levin (2000) supports this claim by stating, "Virtually all school reform is planned and implemented by adults to students, we can learn more to students, we can learn more about how classroom and school processes can be made more powerful, and how improvement can be fostered, whether or not students are committed to a particular reform" (p.158). To further the importance of this initiative, 91.7% of the students interviewed reported that it was "important" to" very important" for teachers to listen to student ideas. Additionally, when asked how teachers can show that they are listening to student ideas, one student reported, "the next day you come in [to class], and the teacher actually incorporates something that you and your friends were talking about. Then that makes you happy and you have more trust in the teacher and [you feel that] they are more fair". The idea that students feel that staff members that listen to student ideas are fairer than those that do not could be, and should be applied schoolwide. This can be easily done by incorporating students on the PATH committee, and also an integral part of collecting and dissecting student culture survey results.

By incorporating student voice into this process and committee work, students will naturally feel more included, and will naturally have more buy-in into the programs and strategies presented. Cook-Sather (2002) supports this claim when discussing the effects of including student voice into the decision-making of a school, she states that, "students feel more engaged but are also more inclined to take responsibility for their education [as] it is no longer something being done to them but rather something they do" (p. 10). The best way to achieve the incorporation of student voice into not only the PATH program but also all contexts in the AGA school setting, administration and staff should create a student advisory group made up of all

three grade levels. This student advisory will then be consulted on all programs in the school. Once the adults in the building show the students that they are serious about incorporating their ideas, the students will begin to feel the shift in the overall culture moving from adult-centered to more student-centered. Lubelfeld, Polyak & Caposey (2018) stress the importance of including students into previously adult driven committees and positions when they state, "the best thing we can do for our students is to get them in positions of leadership, collaboration, and work experience with other adults" (p. 33). Ultimately, gathering student voice, and openly making use of their ideas will be the most important task for the AGA administration and staff when shifting to becoming a more student-centered culture.

Competencies

Staff is currently not offered any professional development on how to best approach student behavior and student relationships. Rather, staff is left to their own professional judgement as to how they go about building relationships with students. Although the staff handbook states that all teachers should "provide a positive learning environment through effective relationship building strategies", the exact "effective relationship building strategies" are not identified nor defined. Ideally, all staff would engage in on-going, staff-developed and staff-led professional development on the most effective relationship building strategies, and students would have a voice in discussing their perceptions of these strategies.

The creation of the student advisory group would also give staff a group that they could consult on a regular basis for their perception and input on various strategies that staff is using. Currently, staff members are able to use their discretion when determining whether or not to give a referral to a student for misbehavior. This discretion varies from teacher to teacher, and this is due to many possible factors from personal experience to formal training. One view that students

47

have when there is inconsistency from one staff member to another is that one teacher is more or less fair than another. Although student perception can vary from one student to another, allowing an outlet for them to be heard will significantly decrease the acceptance or rejection of a particular decision or strategy. Cushman and Rogers (2009) highlight this student stance well when they stated, "within any group, students will differ in how they think about fairness. They will all, however, express their outrage with similar vehemence when they perceive a situation as unfair" (p. 76). Within my own research, 100% of the students reported that it was either "important" or "very important" for teachers to be fair when it comes to having positive relationships with their students. Much like the Cushman and Rogers (2009) study, the students interviewed for the sake of this study varied on how teachers can build a sense of fairness in their classroom. For example, one student stated that a teacher "calling out the truth makes fairness," and another student stated that teachers that "treat everyone equally" are the most fair. There was, however, a theme that arose from this inquiry, and that is the fact that half of the students interviewed identified that teachers treating all students equally or giving equal attention to all students were the most common actions that a teacher could take in order to build a sense of fairness in the classroom. Strategies for providing equal attention to all students should be a main focus for all staff. Although many staff members may already feel that they do this, it needs to become an intentional practice. Successful strategies can be shared between colleagues, but even more importantly, more specific questions can be asked to the students to find out what they perceive to be the best ways that teachers develop a sense of fairness in the classroom.

Conditions

Given the previously presented conditions at AGA Middle School as it relates to the overall feeling that students have towards their relationships with teachers, I feel that there needs

to be time set aside for students and teachers to connect outside of the regular core academic setting. With students responding lowest on the *5Essentials* survey to the questions revolving around student-teacher trust and teachers listening to student ideas, it is obvious that there needs to be an outlet throughout the day for students to feel heard. Although there are strategies that teachers can use in the regular core classrooms, I also feel that AGA administration can ensure this relationship building time by implementing an advisory program.

Ideally, reverting back to a schedule that had time for an advisory period would be highly beneficial. With the addition of STEM, AGA lost the advisory period where students were exposed to various social/emotional learning activities. It was during this period where students also had one adult in the building that they were able to talk to about things other than academics on a regular basis. These advisory teachers would be the point person for all communication with that student because of the relationships built, and they would also know more about their advisory students' lives outside of school. In a professional learning community where grade level teams meet regularly, this shared personal information about individual students with the team allowed for more targeted approaches for individual students.

Another condition previously mentioned is the creation of a student advisory committee. During the research conducted, I realized that such a committee could prove to be highly beneficial. As a result, we created the very first student advisory committee made up of sixteen 8th grade students that were nominated by staff for various different factors. The main goal of the make-up of the advisory committee was to get representation from as many of the different subgroups and cultures that make up the demographics and various social groups of AGA Middle School. This advisory committee has already given feedback about the overall culture of the school, and have also given great feedback about various initiatives that they felt could use

improvement. To be more specific, the student advisory committee actually developed all of the games that were played by students during the last PATH celebration assembly. The students told all of the other kids that they had played a major part in creating the games with adults, and there was more excitement leading up to this assembly than normal. Although this was a condition that resulted as a part of the process of this research, I feel that this is an even more important recommendation than I could have imagined. The feedback from the students has been very positive, and they actually look forward to the meetings where they get to meet with the adults and share their ideas. In the future, we will expand participation in the student advisory committee to all three grade levels. This way we could make sure that voices from students in grades six through eight are being heard and represented

Overall, AGA needs to find a way to provide opportunities for students to build relationships with trusted adults. Whether it be the creation of a student advisory committee, the addition of an advisory period, or the most ideal situation, a combination of both, AGA, or any middle school for that matter, would be remiss to not consider such a shift.

Culture

The current culture of AGA Middle School is that of an adult-driven culture. The adults in the building make all decisions without any input from the students. This leads to the feelings discussed in section four where students feel that there is a lack of respect, fairness and understanding from their teachers. The ideal culture would be a student-centered culture where both students and teachers feel heard in the decision-making processes. The best way to achieve this ideal situation is to have teachers and students working together on various topics and projects throughout the building. Giving students ownership over the behavior expectations of

individual classrooms and the school as a whole would students the sense that the adults in the school respect them, and then they will in turn respect more decisions overall.

Additionally, AGA administration can go a long way in bringing the PATH committee together and presenting the data gathered from the students. The data will show that students feel that they have better relationships with teachers that exhibit the following qualities:

- Teachers that are fair

- Teachers that are understanding

- Teachers that are respectful

- Teachers that are funny

- Teachers that are positive and optimistic in their interactions

- Teachers that smile a lot

- Teachers that listen to the students

- Teachers that get to know the students outside of the classroom

The great thing about all of these qualities is that none of them cost money, but rather cost personal attention of the teacher. Students have stated that they long for teachers with these qualities, and also that they feel that they have better relationships with teachers that exhibit these qualities. One student that was interviewed stated that she feels that she has better relationships with teachers that are "Funny, kind, bright and cheerful". To further this point, another student stated that she has better relationships with teachers that "Smile, always have a good attitude, always feel great in a bouncy kind of mood". In fact, nine out of eleven of the students interviewed made reference to teachers exhibiting a positive disposition led to them having better relationships with those particular teachers. This data is even consistent with Defur and Korinek (2010) when they provided statistical significance to the fact that students that have

better relationships with teachers will often experience greater achievement, then it is an absolute must for the staff at the school to try to incorporate these qualities into every classroom.

I understand that it may not be natural for all staff to exhibit all of these qualities, but I feel that if we use the PATH committee to develop a bank of strategies that are developed in conjunction with the students, then we are making this culture shift much more accessible for the staff. With the PATH committee serving as the culture and expectations committee that is responsible for everything from setting behavior expectations in classrooms to developing celebration assemblies, then it is only natural to use this committee of teachers to push out the student-desired qualities and strategies to the teachers. I see the committee of teachers working in conjunction with the student advisory committee to gather current practices that are favorable to students as it relates to positive student-teacher relationships and a positive student experience overall. No longer will staff have to guess what they can do to connect better with students because the answers will be given straight from the students themselves.

This would truly be a significant shift in the culture overall, and may create resistance from the teachers that believe in the old model of school where the teacher is the ultimate authority in the classroom. However, that is exactly what it is, outdated and old. The truth is that the world is ever changing, and so are our students. It is expected that getting all staff members on board with such a shift may be difficult, so it is important to present all of the benefits that come along with incorporating student voice. Lubelfeld, Polyak and Caposey (2018) say it best when they state that such a culture "transformation is truly a win-win for students and leaders" (p. xvii). They also recognize that in order to achieve this shift, there needs to be two important steps taken by every staff member. Lubelfeld et al. (2018) explain the steps as, "the first is easy – believe in the brilliance of your students. The second is hard – relinquish some element of

control" (p. xvii). Although the barriers may be numerous due to the fixed mindset that is prevalent in how schools continue to operate, I truly believe that without adapting to the changing culture that the students are experiencing, we are failing to meet the ever-changing needs of our students. By not creating a student-centered culture that truly incorporates student voice into the inner-workings of the school, whether it be encouraging specific instructional strategies or relationships building strategies, then we are failing to capitalize on the most valuable resource that we have available to us… The students themselves. Levin (2010) said it best when he stated, "If participation by those affected by reform is seen as necessary, then participation by students must be accorded the same status. Students have unique knowledge and perspectives that can improve our approach to implementation" (p. 158). This is the most adaptive culture to an ever-changing world, and also a culture that will never go out of style because the information gathered for school improvement will always be coming from the intended recipients of any improvement initiatives.

Conclusion

The common theme throughout the to-be portion of this dissertation is the need for AGA Middle school to find various ways to incorporate student voice into the decision-making process of the school. Currently the school is very adult-centered when it comes to the school's culture and decision-making, and this is beginning to push students away from the various relationship building strategies being employed by staff. Cushman and Rogers (2009) best explained middle school students longing to be heard when they stated, "Middle school students know that their actions often bewilder their teachers, who are left guessing about what they want and why they want it. But kids are willing to talk about it, if we are willing to listen as they reveal the various layers of their complex reality" (p. 197). The data collected will give AGA a great sense of how

the students view the current culture, and this data will give AGA leadership a great start towards building a warehouse of student driven relationship-building strategies as it relates to student-teacher relationships. However, it is ultimately up to AGA administration to shift to a student-centered culture, and also to create a platform for regular student input into the decision-making process.

CHAPTER SIX: STRATEGIES AND ACTIONS

The shift to including student voice into the decision-making process of the school, starting with the PBIS team, will be a change that many teachers will understand as it is truly a student-centered approach. Although such a change may seem threatening to how the current system operates, the rationale for such a change along with the data presented to prove why such a change is necessary, I believe that teachers will understand that we are simply adding another dimension to an already improving system. Levin (2000) concludes that:

> Many school development approaches emphasize gathering and using data on achievement as a vital part of assessing current status and looking for areas of improvement. Equally important is information on students' views about school. The unique viewpoints of students and their particular ways of understanding and responding to situations are as vital for a school interested in change as are achievement data. The key is to make it normal, even expected, that students would have a reasoned, informed and respected voice in school decisions. (p. 166)

Such research, along with my own research, will be critical to share with the teachers and teams when attempting to build a sense of urgency towards changing to this student-centered approach.

In order to achieve the ultimate goal of improving student teacher relationships by incorporating student voice, I will need to see through the five main strategies that I identified in the *Strategies & Actions Chart* (appendix B).

First, the administration at AGA Middle School will need to foster a mindset shift that emphasizes that student voice is vital for improved relationships and growth. The PATH committee will review data received from a committee created climate survey, as well as data gathered from the *5Essentials* survey. The PATH committee along with the student advisory

committee will work in tandem to analyze the data gathered. Considering that most students have not partaken in such a data analysis, it will be the responsibility of the members of the PATH committee to help guide the students in proper data analysis. Identifying themes represented in the schoolwide culture committee will be the main source of analysis for the students as they will be invaluable resources in understanding the reasons for particular trends represented in the data. The student advisory group will then review the *5Essentials* data with the PATH committee to help staff understand the results from a student perspective as well. Once analyzed, this data will demonstrate the areas in which students feel that they would like to see improvement in their overall feelings of safety and trusting relationships with adults. Although the data will show that we are doing well in both areas overall, the data will also highlight the room for growth in both areas.

Second, the PATH committee will create a student advisory group to be included in the PATH (PBIS) Committee decision-making process. The committee will build this group by taking teacher input, demographics, and behavior data to ensure that the group reflects our student subgroups as best as possible. Members of the committee will then personally invite the identified students to be a part of the group. This will be a personal touch, and allow for members of the committee to build initial relationships with the identified students. Committee members will then contact the parents of the identified students to explain the opportunity, and also to build a relationship with the parents of these students. Students will then meet with the administration and one teacher from each grade level, as a separate group from the PATH committee, to identify various initiatives that the PATH committee is discussing. This will allow for the students to feel comfortable sharing initial reactions and thoughts without feeling any intimidation that may set in from being in front of a large group of adults. Finally, the student

advisory group will meet both as a student group, and occasionally with the full PATH committee to gather their ideas on the various initiatives being put forth by the committee. The creation of a student advisory group would not change the working conditions for any of the adults from a logistics standpoint, except for the staff members that sign up to lead the student advisory group.

Third, the PATH committee, along with administration will clarify and communicate behavior management and relationship building strategies that have been identified as being successful per the student input gathered. The teacher-led PATH committee would then push out the communication of any student initiatives that may come out of this group. More specifically, since the PATH committee will be made up of staff members from each grade level team in the school, the members of the PATH committee will be responsible for sharing the data gathered with each team of teachers. The members of the PATH committee, along with the student advisory group, will work together to develop a short, yet informative, presentation to be shared with each of the teams. The main reason for the creation of the presentation to be shared with the teams is so that we can guarantee the consistency of the message and data being presented to all staff. The ultimate goal is for these two groups to work very closely about certain topics facing the school. The student advisory group would work as both a consult for the students of the school when it comes to expectations and relationship building strategies that the staff would employ. In working with the PATH committee, the student advisory committee will be able to work directly with an influential subgroup of teachers to bring their voices and ideas to the forefront of all culture and student expectations decisions being made at AGA Middle. Administration will then provide ongoing professional development to teachers on various relationship building strategies as developed from student voice and research. The method of

professional development that will be utilized first will be a peer sharing/peer observation style of professional development. Teachers will be encouraged to visit each other's classrooms to gather ideas as to see the methods in action. Secondly, AGA administration will utilize multiple institute days to create a schedule of professional learning where teachers offer mini-lessons about the student-identified relationship building strategies for teachers. Teachers will then have a platform to share successes and failures of the strategies that they are utilizing in their classrooms. Likewise, the student advisory group will give input on their views of the strategies being employed.

Fourth, AGA administration will need to create time in the day for student/teacher relationship building. In conjunction with the administration, AGA will create a bi-weekly advisory schedule where students will have one adult that they meet with on a regular basis to engage on various social/emotional topics. This would be a break from the monotony of the core curriculum classes, and this time will allow for staff to engage more interpersonally with students. The thought is that the relationship fostered will ultimately lead to students feeling as though they have at least one trusted adult that they can turn to for all issues involved in their experience at AGA Middle School. The advisory teachers will have a social/emotional curriculum to follow, preferably one that fosters and encourages interpersonal conversations between advisory teachers and students. In order to decide on the best possible social/emotional curriculum to use during this time, administration will review and analyze various research-based curricula with both the PATH committee and the student advisory committee. Once again incorporating student input into the decision-making presses of the school. Once a curriculum is identified, then the PATH committee will be responsible for sharing out the curriculum and professional development to the rest of the staff. The rolling out of this program will not be

solely driven by the administration, and by incorporating the PATH committee, AGA will be able to increase staff buy-in.

Finally, in an effort to maintain fidelity of the program, and to monitor the effectiveness of the new relationship building strategies that were developed by the students at AGA Middle School, the AGA administration, the PATH committee, and the student advisory group will analyze *5Essentials* data in conjunction with whole school climate surveys. The climate surveys will gather student input on the students' perceptions of their relationships with their teachers, as well as their overall feeling towards school. The PATH committee and the student advisory committee will then analyze the data in an effort to tailor future actions.

Overall, the main goal is to incorporate student voice into the decision-making process of the school in an effort to improve student-teacher relationships. It is important to build urgency amongst staff for such input from students, and it is also important to make the students involved feel that they can be comfortable sharing any thoughts that they may have regarding their relationships with classroom teachers, and the functions of the school as a whole. This process needs to start early in a school year so that the groups can be formed on a yearly basis with a new group of students. As the world is constantly changing around us and in the communities around us, I hope to present a strategy that all schools can adopt when attempting to incorporate more student voice into the functions of the school from year to year. The way we build relationships with the students of today may be drastically different than how we need to build relationships with students in ten years from now, and the best way to ensure that we are building the best relationships is to hear from the students themselves.

CHAPTER SEVEN: POLICY ADVOCACY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Introduction

School policy governs how schools operate, and is often handed down from a group of lawyers to local school districts. The school boards are then responsible for adopting or rejecting school policy, and if it is accepted, then the policies become the laws that govern a school district. Finally, school policy adoption and review are often the result of committee work of school boards and lawyers, all of them whom may have never spent a day in the classrooms that the students occupy every day. That said, I feel that the most glaring issue with the development and adoption of school policy is the lack of student voice and input into the process.

I believe that incorporating student voice as a means to improve student-teacher relationships is not only a best practice, but necessary as a means to improve the overall learning experience for students. Ellerbock, Kiefer & Alley (2014) have further shown us that students that have a voice in the decision-making process experience a greater sense of school belonging and engagement; however, the development of school policy rarely, if ever, includes them in the process. On top of not being included in the policy making process, there are rarely any policies that mandate the incorporation of student voice in the educational environment. Elwood (2013) found that "in those situations where students considered they had been listened to and direct, positive change had occurred as a result of consultation and/or their participation, the outcome was more engagement in their environment, a sense of pride in themselves and their institutions and more empathy for the barriers faced by teachers and management in improving their educational institutions" (p.107). For the sake of this policy recommendation, I will not be suggesting a policy to incorporate student voice in the creation of policies, although I do believe that would be a beneficial practice, but rather an administrative procedure for a policy that will

mandate incorporation of student voice into the decision-making processes of the school and classrooms. Administrative procedures are statements and action plans that mandate how board policy is implemented in the school. School administration is responsible for developing administrative procedures, and they are also responsible for overseeing the execution of the administrative procedures.

Policy Statement

When students feel respected and heard, they are more likely to perform better and experience more positive relationships with the adults in the school (Cook, Fiat, Larsen, Daikos, Slemrod, Holland, and Renshaw, 2018). Therefore, the policy that I am recommending revolves around encouraging student voice into the decision-making process in the school and classroom in an effort to bolster student student-teacher relationships and student achievement overall. Student are too often an overlooked and underutilized resource for schools. As educators continue to create expectations for student performance and behavior, they fail to create a climate where students have ownership over their educational experience. Rather, the student-teacher relationships in the current setting is one where teachers and admin "say", and students are expected to "do". By creating a policy or administrative procedure that guides the adults in a school district to include student voice into the classroom and school decisions, school districts can increase the student buy-in to the various school improvement initiatives by creating the feeling of a partnership. Cook-Sather (2002) explains when such a climate is achieved, "students feel more engaged but are also more inclined to take responsibility for their education [as] it is no longer something being done to them but rather something they do" (p. 10). Ultimately, I feel that in all policy considerations that directly impact students and their rights to learn in a safe,

respectful, and welcoming environment, that fosters trusting relationships, policy formation and development will include student representation and input into final policy decisions.

The policy that I am recommending would be an administrative procedure for an already existing policy under the Instruction section of the district policy handbook. More specifically, Policy 6:65 states:

> Social and emotional learning (SEL) is defined as the process through which students enhance their ability to integrate thinking, feeling, and behaving to achieve important life tasks. Students competent in SEL are able to recognize and manage their emotions, establish healthy relationships, set positive goals, meet personal and social needs, and make responsible and ethical decisions (Omitted for Confidentiality, 2018).

The policy goes on to further state that there are three main goals of the State Learning Standards. These standards state that students will:

1. *Develop self-awareness and self-management skills to achieve school and life success.*

2. *Use social-awareness and interpersonal skills to establish and maintain positive relationships.*

3. *Demonstrate decision-making skills and responsible behaviors in personal, school, and community contexts* (Omitted for Confidentiality, 2018).

It can be argued that by schools and districts not making a conscious effort to incorporate and encourage student voice in schools, they would ultimately not be in compliance with the State Learning Standards. If learning the self-awareness, self-management, social-awareness, and interpersonal skills necessary for success and positive relationship building, then incorporating student voice into the decision-making process and governance of the school district is imperative, and must become common practice in order to be compliant with the learning standards set forth by the state.

The administrative procedure that I am recommending for Policy 6:65 of the Wolf School District policy manual has four integral components.

First, each school will create an advisory program where students are able to have at least one consistent, trusted adult that they can build a strong relationship with, and that also teaches them the established social emotional curriculum throughout the school year. Lubchenko (2016) reiterates the importance of such a program where students gain access to a social-emotional curriculum that fosters trusting relationships between teachers and students. However, simply giving students access to a social emotional curriculum is not enough to build that sense of trust. It is the conversations that such a program fosters that creates the trusting relationship. One of the students at AGA Middle School went so far as to say that teachers can foster trusting relationships, "probably by telling each other not deep secrets, but things that are going on in their life. It doesn't have to be bad, but they make you feel that you can trust them and then I trust them too". Within a regular curriculum such as math or reading, teachers do not often have the time to have these types of conversations with students. By instituting a specific time for staff and students to connect on topics outside of the core curriculum with a trusted adult is the main goal of the advisory program.

Second, each school must develop grade level specific student advisory committees made up of teachers and students that are identified and nominated by staff. This student advisory group must meet with rotating staff members and a building administrator on a quarterly basis to discuss staff and student ideas alike. Students that are a part of this advisory group will be presented with topics varying from overall school climate to informing the committee in charge of the behavior expectations of the school. By including students into this process, the schools will be able to gauge what is important to the current students in the school, and also build a

greater sense of ownership over the happenings of the school. Cushman and Rogers (2009) confirmed this feeling with their research when students reported feeling a greater positive relationship with staff that incorporated their thoughts and ideas into their classrooms.

Third, staff will communicate the student-derived, student-teacher relationship building strategies and characteristics that they will employ throughout the school year. Much like lesson planning, teachers will need to plan how they will be intentional in creating and maintaining positive relationships with students. As for how this will look at AGA Middle School, from a teacher characteristics standpoint alone, nine of the eleven responses to the question about what characteristics do teachers that have good relationships with students made reference to a positive disposition. Although they did not specifically say a positive disposition, some comments were as follows:

- "[These teachers] smile, always have a good attitude, always feel great in a bouncy kind of mood"

- "Funny, kind, bright and cheerful"

- "Being nice, being kind, and being respectful. Smile a lot."

Students also shared what teachers could do at the beginning of the year to build positive relationships with students. Some of the responses were as follows:

- "She took me in and kind of was like my school mother, she was really nice to us, she made sure we had fun but also made sure we were focused…"

- "In the hallway, I didn't even know who [the teachers] was, but I saw her and she just said hi to me. With you, you were just nice right away"

- "They do the introduction where they introduce themselves and what they like to do, they do it in a really positive way"

- "They are always upbeat, nice to me, in a good mood in front of me"

As for how this information will be disseminated, this communication will happen with administration, with grade level specific team members, and also as a whole school. The reason that staff will need to communicate their relationship building strategies with the principal and other teachers is two-fold. The communication to the administration will allow for the administration to hold individual staff members accountable for implementing the strategies developed. Then sharing with colleagues will allow for professional discussions around what is working and not working in classrooms.

Finally, each school will also have a student climate survey that is to be administered three times per year through the advisory program, and survey results will be analyzed by the student advisory committees. By administering this survey to the entire student population, the school will be able to broaden the positive impacts of including student voice beyond the student advisory committee. Also, the students will be able to offer very specific feedback about the operations of the school that the adults may not have been able to see on their own. To further this point, Levin (2000) states "students are the producers of school outcomes, so their involvement is fundamental to all improvement" (p. 162). On top of that, the students will experience the climate and culture of the school much differently than the staff members simply because of the age and generational gap. Such feedback will prove to be invaluable as it relates to student ownership over their learning environment.

The purpose of this policy is to increase the students' feeling that they are in a fair and safe learning environment, to increase student ownership over their learning environment, and to ultimately improve students' relationships with all teachers of their specific grade level. As was uncovered in the interviews that I conducted with the students at AGA Middle School, students

unanimously agreed that it was of the utmost importance that the teacher be considered "fair".

By creating the student advisory committees where students and teachers are working together

on various culture and climate initiatives, along with the climate surveys, students will have the

understanding that the school is listening to their ideas, and that the school is also dedicated to

improving student-teacher relationships through building trust and a sense of fairness. Kathleen

Cushman and Laura Rogers (2008) also highlighted this point when they stated that "the

behavior of your middle-grades students also may hinge on what they consider fair. Especially

when problems arise, kids at this age often hold a different perspective about what's fair that

their teacher does. They will all, however, express their outrage with similar vehemence when

they perceive a situation as unfair" (p. 76). The best way to combat the feeling of unfairness is to

include students in the setting of classroom and school expectations. The best and most

transparent way to do this is by offering and respecting an avenue for them to share their voices,

and for the teacher to respect and demonstrate that the ideas of the students were a part of the

ultimate decision making.

I envision the proposed administrative procedure making a positive difference in the

overall student experience in schools. Most importantly in the improvement of student-teacher

relationships. As was previously stated in the literature review section of this dissertation, DeFur

and Korinek (2010) conclude that "the positive effects of honoring student voices and involving

them in more integral, meaningful ways in their school experience cannot be ignored as we seek

to improve schools and meet higher standards" (p. 19). The research surrounding the importance

of including student voice as it relates to improving student-teacher relationships and ultimately,

student achievement, cannot be ignored, and instituting an administrative procedure to ensure

that a system or program where student voice is not only the norm, but mandated by the school district can have an enormous, positive impact on the overall school experience for students.

<div align="center">**Analysis of Needs**</div>

Educational Analysis

From an educational and instructional lens, this initiative could have significant impact as it relates to student achievement. By creating an administrative procedure that mandates teachers to incorporate student voice and student relationship building strategies into the classroom, the school district can make considerable strides towards ensuring that students are building better relationships with their teachers. Cook, Fiat, Larsen, Daikos, Slemrod, Holland, and Renshaw (2018) along with Defur and Korinek (2009) were able to tie positive student-teacher relationships and overall student achievement. From the research that I conducted alone, 100% of the students interviewed responded that when determining overall success in a particular class, it was "important" to "very important" to have a positive relationship with his or her teacher.

To further the importance of incorporating student voice and improving student-teacher relationships, Charlotte Danielson's (2013) *The Danielson Framework for Teaching* evaluation rubric dedicates an entire section to this very topic. The framework presented by Danielson is used in majority of school districts in Illinois as the rubric to distinguish between excellent teachers and teachers that may need improvement. The specific subdomain that dictates the importance of student-teacher relationships is *2a Creating and Environment of Respect and Rapport.* More specifically, Danielson (2013) goes on to explain that "A teacher's interactions with students set the tone for the classroom. Through their interactions, teachers convey that they are interested in and care about their students" (p. 33). By teachers including students into the decision-making process in the classroom, and by giving students authentic voice in the

classroom, teachers are ultimately demonstrating appropriate and respectful communication and

relationship building skills that will give students the feeling of genuine care, belonging and

responsibility in the learning environment.

Given the credibility of the Danielson Framework, and the value that school districts put

into using this tool to evaluate staff members, it is imperative that school districts find a way to

mandate incorporation of student voice and offer staff strategies for building positive

relationships with students.

Economic Analysis

From an economic standpoint, this initiative and implementation seem to have very

minimal repercussions. However, if we dig a little deeper, we will find that by incorporating

student voice and improving student-teacher relationships will ultimately have a similar impact

that an increased budget may present.

How is this possible? The incorporation of authentic student voice into the educational

environment through adherence to an administrative procedure will have almost the same impact

as an increase in per pupil spending. With the positive impacts on the learning environment that

come with improved student-teacher relationships such as improved student behavior, increased

student engagement, and decreased student behavior issues, a school can focus a larger

percentage of their per pupil spending on improving instruction. When district dollars are able to

be focused on improving teaching, that will have a measurable positive impact on student

achievement. For example, Herbert (2011) presents a study focused on the per pupil spending in

Oshkosh and Eau Claire, Wisconsin. In this study, researchers were trying to figure out how

these similar districts were able to achieve relatively equal student achievement scores despite

very disparate per pupil spending numbers. The researchers concluded that, "the notable

difference, according to the study, is that Eau Claire spends $330 more per student each year—or roughly $3 million total. The study notes that Eau Claire may be getting value elsewhere for its additional spending but that student outcome appears to be roughly the same. Oshkosh spent 65 percent of its budget on costs associated with teaching, while Eau Claire spent just 59 percent" (Herbert, 2011, p. 12). With a focus on improving student-teacher relationships and the subsequent improved student performance, districts will be able to reallocate funding from other corrective initiatives such as behavior management improvements or perceived curriculum problems, and put them towards improving instruction.

To achieve this goal, districts shall utilize staff development, professional development, and staff meeting time that is already prescribed to teach how and when to use the strategies presented. The next step would be to send teacher leaders to research based professional development conferences presenting on strategies for bolstering student-teacher relationships, and then the teacher leaders will come back to the district and host in-house professional development for staff during the professional development times discussed above. Although it may seem that sending staff to these professional development conferences may seem like an added expense, I would suggest that the administration reallocate already funded professional development budgets to focus on this initiative. As a result, instructional time can be better utilized because less behavior problems and increased student engagement means more time to focus on instruction, and professional development can then be focused on growing rather than fixing.

Overall, implementing an administrative procedure for a policy that mandates incorporation of student voice as an avenue for improving student-teacher relationships will

allow districts to allocate a larger percentage of their per pupil spending in improving instruction, ultimately leading to a positive impact on student achievement.

Social Analysis

Access to social media and communication through technology use has become more prevalent than ever. The rise of such socialization avenues never had to be considered as early as just fifteen years ago. However, failing to recognize the impacts of this can be detrimental to the learning environment.

Savci and Aysan (2017) conducted a study where they sought out to uncover the correlation of addiction to technology and social connectedness. The results were astounding. Adolescents that had direct access to technology displayed significant deficiencies as it relates to socialization and social connectedness. In fact, "according to Bargh and McKenna (2004), these individuals spend limited time with their family and friends and become lonely. As a consequence, social ties weaken and social connectedness decreases" (Savci and Aysan, 2017, p. 210). Given such results, it is more important than ever for educators to promote social connectedness, and to demonstrate proper relationship building skills.

Developing a policy or administrative procedure to mandate inclusion of student voice and positive student-teacher relationship building skills will be a significant step towards combating the negative social impacts of technology and social media addiction. Not only will staff be able to model proper interpersonal skills such as active listening, but they can also foster such relationship building skills between students. If students are not exposed to proper face-to-face relationship building skills in school, then it is possible that they may never have be exposed to such skills outside of schools.

Another byproduct of a student voice and student-teacher initiative is improved perceptions of student peers in a particular classroom. As I mentioned in the literature review section of this dissertation, Hughes, Cavell, & Willson (2001) conducted a study where they were "concerned with the relation between peer perceptions of teacher–student relationship quality and peer perceptions of a child's positive and negative attributes, as well as liking for that child" (p. 289). They found that the relationships that teachers foster with children can both positively and negatively impact peer perceptions of the students involved in the relationship. By giving staff a blueprint for building positive relationships, especially from the voice of the students, staff can ultimately positively impact student to student socialization and connectedness.

Political Analysis

Politically, giving students a voice in their education is in line with the fundamental rights that all Americans are afforded as citizens. If the mission of most schools involves students learning the appropriate skills to become active and participating citizens, then it should be of the utmost importance for schools to foster and teach active participation in the learning environment. The mission statement for Wolf School District 312 states:

> *Our mission is to build a community of learning that inspires curiosity, compassion and*
> *actively engaged students striving for excellence.*

Without making a conscious effort to include a policy or administrative procedure that demands the appropriate incorporation of student voice in the learning environment, I would determine that they are falling short of having truly "actively engaged" students.

On top of the obvious needs for such policies, Voight (2015) takes the importance of this initiative even further when he states, "When students have voice and power in school decision-

making, they may be able to leverage specific policy changes; they may strengthen peer and teacher–student social networks; and they may develop their own individual socioemotional competency" (p. 312). By including students into the decision-making processes of the school, a district makes it very difficult for anyone to oppose any direction that they would like to proceed on various initiatives because of the involvement of the students. The most important political factor in including student voice is to make sure that the district has a way to make sure that they are able to capture the voice of all subgroups in the school. The process of creating the student advisory groups must include guidelines that mandate the representation of all subgroups in the school. Politically, this is a crucial element of the program because of the idea that all voices and ideas are included, rather than just the present majority in the school.

Legal Analysis

Legally speaking, incorporating student voice into the learning environment as a way to bolster student-teacher relationships does not have any glaring legal or union implications. In fact, districts can lean on both the mission statement and the evaluation framework as a method for getting buy-in from any hesitant or resistant staff members.

It is also important for the district to define what policies are off limits for students to have decision making power over while still assuring students that they are able to inform such policies. For example, students may have strong feelings on policies regarding closed versus open campus, dress code, etc. However, the districts that implement the policies and administrative procedures need to be transparent about the fact that district leadership will need to retain the right to make final decisions as it relates to student safety or budgetary implications of any initiatives brought up by students.

Inevitably, some students will argue that the adults in the school are not listening to them, and the incorporation of their voice is just a facade because they will not be able to influence drastic changes. This is where educating the students involved in the process about the political processes and implications of policy creation is imperative. Before rolling out any of the administrative procedures that I have presented above, districts must make a considerable effort to inform students of the implications and limitations of their and the districts power to make decisions. Failure to do so appropriately, could potentially lead to student disengagement in the program, as well as potential legal implications of rogue decisions.

Moral and Ethical Analysis

Overall, instituting a policy that seeks to incorporate student voice and bolster student-teacher relationships is necessary because if our goal is to raise good citizens, then teaching and demonstrating positive relationship building skills, and importance of taking an active role in decision making is essential to us setting our students up for success in life beyond our district. The hope is that the combination of modeling proper relationship building skills and giving students a voice will lead to greater student achievement and a greater sense of belonging in the learning environment. Ultimately, teaching students these skills and giving them access to positive relationships, hopefully we can influence a generation of students to become collaborative and involved members of society. It is our moral and ethical obligation as educators to prepare students for success beyond school, and I believe that the administrative procedures that I have presented will lead to students having greater achievement overall, as well as a greater sense of civic involvement as they progress beyond our district and into society.

Implications for Staff and Community Relationships

The shared mission statement of Wolf School District 312 highlights the importance of having actively engaged students. Although the idea of actively engaged can be defined in many ways, I feel that the most important way to encourage students to be actively engaged in all facets of the learning community is to give them a voice in the school. As a result of this initiative, the relationships that will be most impacted will be those of the staff.

The main purpose of the student voice advocacy is to improve student-teacher relationships; therefore, it is inherent that the staff will benefit the most, but also have to adapt the most from a relational standpoint. As for how to foster the shift in how schools incorporate student voice into the decision-making process, that should be the easy undertaking. Staff has already had to shift their mindset in how they approach their students and their classrooms form an instructional standpoint with the implementation of the Danielson Framework for Teaching (FFT) (2013) as the new evaluation tool. The adoption of the Danielson FFT has supported this initiative with a heavy focus on teachers becoming more adept to incorporating student initiated and student-led activities throughout their lessons. Often times, the determining factor between a *Proficient* rating and an *Excellent* rating is the observance of student led activities. For example, the determining factor between a *Proficient* rating and an *Excellent* rating for domain 3d: Using Assessment in Instruction is that "students appear to be aware of, and there is some evidence that they have contributed to the assessment criteria" (Danielson, 2013). With this in mind, when presenting the incorporation of student voice into the decision-making process of the school, we will highlight the fact that we are supporting what the state has already set out as best practice when it comes to classroom to classroom environment and instruction. In this case, the entire school as a whole will be modeling how to incorporate student voice, thus giving teachers a

natural transition to incorporating more student voice in their own classrooms. Giving ownership to students over their learning experience will undoubtedly increase student buy-in and a sense of belonging that will foster more positive relationships between the students and teachers.

As for community relationships, this initiative will only bolster the relationships that the school has with the community. Students are the greatest advocates for the community, and vice versa, they are the greatest advocates for the schools in the community. By incorporating more student voice into the schools, the districts are ultimately incorporating the voices of the families that occupy the community. Lindsey, Robins & Terrell (1999) stress the importance of school leaders to be good listeners when it comes to becoming more culturally proficient. Leaders need to have an open ear to the community, and they must let the community know that they are actively listening and incorporating the community's thoughts and ideas in to the school district. Although it may be difficult to logistically find a way to incorporate the voice of the community members, I feel that school leaders often overlook the community resource and voice that occupies the buildings every day, the students themselves! Children are often times the most honest critics, and many of their own perceptions and ideas are the byproduct of the experiences that they live outside of school. Failure to listen to them would be a failure to incorporate the voice of the community. The incorporating more student voice initiative would only bolster the relationship that the schools build with the larger community.

Conclusion

The program evaluation that I conducted previously was about the PATH program at AGA Middle School, and although the program itself has had decent success in setting up the culture and climate for the school, the main lacking component of the program is the inclusion of student voice. Students that have a voice in creating such programs related to culture and climate

experience a greater sense of buy-in for such programs, and ultimately forecast a greater potential success for said programs. To further this point, Defur and Korinek (2009) went so far as to conclude the correlation between student voice recommendations and those of highly respected school reformists. They found that:

> The credibility of students as expert witnesses of effective instruction seems undeniable. We believe that the adolescents with whom we spoke (as well as student voices from other studies) demonstrate experiential knowledge that upgrades students to a position of authority in identifying effective instructional practices. Their perceptions were strikingly similar to those expressed by the recognized experts (e.g., faculty, researchers, educational agency representatives) who composed the Commission on the Restructuring of American High Schools (National Association of Secondary School Principals [NASSP] 2004) and who offered specific, research-based actions that school leaders could take to improve student outcomes. (p.18)

It is clear that the research shows that by listening to students, schools can get real time, culturally proficient feedback that matches what well respected educational researchers spend considerable time trying to develop on their own. Such inclusion of the student voice will give students a greater sense of belonging in their educational experience, bolster student teacher relationships, and ultimately lead to more student buy-in and greater student achievement.

CHAPTER EIGHT: CONCLUSION

Introduction

I have always been guided both professionally and personally by the Maya Angelou quote when she stated, "People will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel" (Booth & Hachiya, 2004, p. 14). In fact, it is this exact quote that inspired my dissertation topic. All too often in education, the students in a school are simply seen as the recipients of what the adults in the school bestow upon them. It is this mentality and culture that got me to thinking about how we as educators can shift school culture as a whole to become a place where students feel empowered and truly a part of the school, rather than as just guests. As was discussed earlier in this study, the benefits of shifting to a student-centered culture and including student voice as a means to improve student-teacher relationships are numerous. Such initiatives will give students an overall feeling of fairness and trust in the classroom, give students ownership over their own learning environment, and ultimately improve overall student achievement. Levin (2000) highlighted the importance of incorporating students voice and a student-centered culture best when he stated:

> Many school development approaches emphasize gathering and using data on achievement as a vital part of assessing current status and looking for areas of improvement. Equally important is information on students' views about school. The unique viewpoints of students and their particular ways of understanding and responding to situations are as vital for a school interested in change as are achievement data. The key is to make it normal, even expected, that students would have a reasoned, informed and respected voice in school decisions. (p. 166)

The biproduct of using students to identify key, current initiatives or relationship building strategies is the fact that schools can always ensure that we are meeting the current needs of any school's population regardless of any demographic changes in a school over time. As I previously stated, the way we build relationships with the students of today may be drastically different than how we need to build relationships with students in ten years from now, and the best way to ensure that we are building the best relationships is to hear from the students themselves. Ultimately, we can ensure that we are always making the students feel respected and safe, two feelings that they will surely "never forget", and also that they will want to be a part of everyday!

Discussion

Through the process of this dissertation, I began to uncover what I was most passionate about in my work as an administrator. I originally thought that I would be able to analyze the PBIS program at AGA Middle School as a way to foster growth in how teachers build better relationships with students, but in the end, I was really most concerned with analyzing the current school culture and incorporation of student voice into the decision-making processes of the school. Overall, this process has helped me address my purpose by making me realize that there was a glaring oversight in how the PATH committee goes about building a student-centered culture. That glaring oversight is the fact that at no point had the PATH committee ever collected student voice for help in guiding any of the current practices or initiatives. As a result, I feel that I have uncovered some great ways that the administration and staff at AGA Middle could go about being more intentional in incorporating student voice as a way to improve both overall school culture, and as a way to improve student-teacher relationships.

Through this process I learned how easy it is to incorporate student voice into the PATH committee. I also uncovered how underutilized student voice is not only in the PATH committee, but in the school overall. The organizational change plan involved the development of a student advisory committee that would meet both independently of staff members, and also with the PATH committee regarding different school culture initiatives. As a result of this study, we actually tried to achieve some of the goals that I had set for this study. The first step we took was the creation of the student advisory committee which is made up of a mix of eight grade students. The students that were selected to be a part of this committee have been very excited in all of the meetings, and they are starting to really own their role as ambassadors of student voice. In just the short time that the student advisory committee has become a part of AGA Middle School, we have already seen some significant changes that they have suggested become a part of regular practice. One significant change that they suggested was changing the advisory period, which was also a result of this study, to be in the morning versus the afternoon at the end of the day as the PATH committee had originally rolled out. The student advisory committee has also been able to help guide the PATH committee in their creation of the monthly PATH celebration assemblies. Since the creation of the committee, I have observed these students building excitement for the school-wide celebrations amongst the other students when they start spreading word about some of the games that they personally created for the assemblies.

The positive effects observed as a result of the student advisory committee have only further supported the policy recommendations discussed as a part of this study. The four-part administrative procedure presented should be adopted by the Wolf School District administration and school board in an effort to guarantee that all schools in the district stay dedicated to fostering a student-centered school culture that is rooted in incorporating student voice and

positive student-teacher relationships. The administrative procedure can be summed up by the following four steps:

1. Create an advisory program where students get access to a social/emotional learning curriculum led by an advisory teacher throughout the year. This program is intended ensure that every student is able to foster a positive, trusting relationship with at least one teacher in the building.

2. Each grade level will create a student advisory committee that will engage in quarterly meetings with the teachers to discuss topics ranging from overall school climate all the way to specific ideas that the students may have for classroom strategies.

3. Staff will communicate the student-derived, student-teacher relationship building strategies and characteristics that they will employ throughout the school year. Much like lesson planning, teachers will need to plan how they will be intentional in creating and maintaining positive relationships with students.

4. Finally, each school will also have a student climate survey that is to be administered three times per year through the advisory program, and survey results will be analyzed by both the school culture committee and the student advisory committees.

Considering that the overall school culture and the school culture committee, the PATH committee, lacked student voice altogether, the administrative procedure presented will go a long way in ensuring that students have a voice as it relates to creating a student-centered culture. Ultimately, we should begin to see an increase in the number of students that report positive relationships with teachers as well. Cushman and Rogers (2009) support this idea with their research that concluded that students reported feeling more positive relationship with staff that

incorporated their thoughts and ideas into their classrooms. I look forward to seeing the overall impacts of these initiatives.

Leadership Lessons

Throughout the process of this dissertation, I believe that I have truly grown as a leader. From the beginning I always believed that it is imperative to include the students into the decision-making processes of the school. I was just not exactly sure how that would or could look. One takeaway that I had is the fact that incorporating student voice is absolutely a worthy initiative for schools to undertake if they would like to improve students overall feeling towards school and student-teacher relationships. This takeaway was further strengthened by the research that I came across that draws the correlation between improving student-teacher relationships and overall academic success (Defur and Korinek, 2010). Gathering all of this information is one thing, but to turn all of this information into action is where all of the leadership lessons come into play.

The first leadership lesson that that I learned throughout this process is the importance of adaptive leadership when creating change (Heifetz, Grashow & Linsky, 2009). At the very outset of this study, I knew that I wanted to incorporate student voice into the many processes of the school, but just simply making a change as large as this without following a process could doom the initiative from the very start. Heifetz, Grashow & Linsky (2009) describe the steps of being an adaptive leader intent on creating change best in the following three steps:

The process of diagnosis and action begins with data collection and problem identification (the what). Moves through an interpretive stage (the why) and on to potential approaches to action as a series of interventions into the organization, community, or society (the what next). (p. 6)

During my research, organizational change plan and my policy advocacy, I was able to successfully go through all three of these steps.

Additionally, I found that by going through all of these steps I was able to actually implement some of the recommendations that I outlined in this study. I truly believe that I was successful in being able to create some of these changes at my own school because of the processes that I was forced to follow in completing this study. For example, in accordance with Heifetz's (2006) adaptive leadership process, I was able to first determine what the current state of student involvement in the school's culture was with an "as-is" analysis (Wagner et al., 2006). Immediately following the analysis of the current state of AGA Middle School, this process asked me to follow up with the literature review. The literature review was the ultimate "why" part of Heifetz's (2006) change process. Within the process of the literature review, I was able to give credibility to the importance of incorporating student voice by citing other scholarly articles and studies that outlined the various overall benefits of doing so, most notably, improved student-teacher relationships and increased student achievement. Finally, as it relates to the "what next" step in Heifetz's (2006) adaptive change process, I had to develop a vision of what the ideal state of AGA Middle School would be as it relates to the overall student involvement into the processes of the school. Along with that vision, I had to present a set of strategies and actions for how to achieve the vision, and finally, present a policy change that would mandate such actions in the future.

Overall, I think that simply going through this process alone has made me a better leader because I know have a blueprint for how to approach any potential changes that my organization may face. Although this process may seem like common sense, failure to properly execute any one of these steps could halt a change initiative right in its tracks, regardless of the accuracy of

82

the need for said particular change. Going forward, I will never forget the importance of these steps when creating change. Heifetz et al. (2006) made an analogy to medicine that really resonated with me. They stated that "the practice of leadership, like the practice of medicine, involves two core processes: diagnosis first, and then action" (Heifetz et al., 2006, p. 6). This quote really puts the process in perspective when you compare it to your thought process of whether or not to take the advice of a doctor. In medicine, doctors always seek to understand before determining treatment because the implications of treating the wrong condition could cost someone's life. Thankfully, this process in schools, although can have significant impact over time, does not often determine life or death for those impacted by the changes. That said, however, I would argue that the process for creating changes that can have long-term positive effects on the lives of students is right up there in terms of importance. Thus, following the steps that I followed throughout this process will always guide my professional efforts to create change.

Conclusion

As I reflect on my journey through this dissertation, I cannot help but be grateful for this experience. I started out with a passion for incorporating student voice as a way to bolster student-teacher relationships and improving overall school culture, and I am finishing here with not only a greater passion for this topic, but an actual blueprint for how to achieve this goal in any learning community that I have the privilege to lead. Simply stated, Levin (2000) said, "If participation by those affected by reform is seen as necessary, then participation by students must be accorded the same status" (p. 158). As leaders, our greatest challenge on a yearly basis is how we can reach our students both academically and socially and emotionally so that they are able to reach their own full potential. As a result, we often find ourselves scouring the latest

research and trends in the field of education, all while completely underutilizing the greatest

resource available to us, the students! I hope that you found this analysis useful, and I hope that

we as school leaders can begin to develop and implement protocols for incorporating student

voice into our school communities. By doing so, I truly believe that we will begin producing a

student that is readier to learn and grow as a result of the improved student-teacher relationships

and improved sense of belonging that they will feel throughout their learning experience.

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APPENDIX A

As-Is / To-Be Chart: An Analysis for Action

AS-IS	TO-BE	STRATEGIES
Context • PBIS based behavior management called the PATH (Positive Actions That Help). Made up of only teachers and staff.	*Context* • PBIS based behavior management called the PATH (Positive Actions That Help). Students will be active participants in the PATH committee.	*Context* • Create a student advisory group to be included in the PATH (PBIS) Committee
Conditions • Although there has been a decrease in referrals since the implementation of the program, in-class infractions have increased. • 5Essentials Data shows that we are well organized. • According to 5Essentials, Student-Teacher trust is positive, however, the "teachers always listen to student ideas" is the lowest measure. • 5% of the students make up 54% of all discipline referrals. • Students attend 10, 40-minute periods throughout the day.	*Conditions* • Decreased number of in-class referrals. • Increase in the measure in the 5Essentials category; "teachers always listen to student ideas" • More targeted relationship interventions for the 5% of the students that make up over half of all referrals. • SEL focused advisory period one or two times per week.	*Conditions* • Create time in the day for student/teacher relationship building. • Create a student advisory group to be included in the PATH (PBIS) Committee
Competencies • PBIS program called the PATH (Positive Actions That Help). • Teachers write referrals and administer discipline for minors, office handles major referrals. • Students and teachers learn the behavior expectations at the beginning of the school year. • Teachers that struggle with behavior management are sent to CHAMPS training. • PATH program lacks fidelity, consistency, and student voice.	*Competencies* • PATH program incorporates both teacher and student voice. • Teachers use more restorative justice-based responses to misbehavior. • Behavior expectations are taught and revisited throughout the year. • Behavior management and relationship building strategies discussed weekly in problem solving meetings. • Increased fidelity and consistency of the PATH program.	*Competencies* • Foster a mindset shift that student voice is vital for improved relationships and growth • Use data to monitor the effectiveness of the new relationship building initiatives
Culture • Some teachers feel that students lack respect for adults. • Some students feel that teachers lack respect for students. • Students feel entitled to discuss discontent with teacher behavior. • Teachers lack consistency and follow through on communication of expectations and discipline, and feel that administration should handle all such communication.	*Culture* • Increased respectful interactions between teachers and students. • Students connect with teachers when they feel a situation is unfair. • Teachers consistently follow through on communication of expectations. • Teachers incorporate relationship building strategies derived from student voice.	*Culture* • Clarify and communicate behavior management and relationship building strategies.

APPENDIX B

Strategies and Actions Chart

Strategies	Actions	Levers (data, relationships, accountability)
Foster a mindset shift that student voice is vital for improved relationships and growth	• Provide climate survey data to the committee • Provide 5Essentials survey data to demonstrate the As-Is condition of student-teacher relationships • Have teachers work through an individual Immunity Map Worksheet	• Data, • Relationships
Create a student advisory group to be included in the PATH (PBIS) Committee	• Grade level teams and administration will develop a list of four students that represent the grade level best • Have teacher leaders contact the students and invite them to be a part of the committee • Students will meet with administration and one teacher from each grade level, as a separate group from the PATH committee, about various initiatives that the PATH committee is discussing • Student advisory group will meet quarterly as a separate group, and will meet each trimester with the full PATH committee	• Relationships • Accountability
Clarify and communicate behavior management and relationship building strategies.	• Provide ongoing professional development to teachers on various relationship building strategies as developed from student voice and research • Have teachers share successes and failures of strategies they are utilizing in their classrooms • Have the student advisory group give input on their views of the strategies being employed. Use focus groups and surveys to gather information • Members of the PATH committee will communicate identified strategies with grade level teams during team meetings and staff meetings	• Data • Relationships
Create time in the day for student/teacher relationship building.	• Create a bi-weekly advisory schedule where students will have one adult that they would turn to for all issues involved in their experience at AGA Middle School • Create a student advisory group to incorporate student voice in the decision-making process	• Relationships • Accountability
Use data to monitor the effectiveness of the new relationship building initiatives	• Gather whole school survey data on overall climate and student-teacher relationships • Use 5Essentials survey data to analyze effectiveness • Report all data to the PATH committee in an effort to tailor future actions	• Data

Survey Questions

1. Think of a teacher that you have a positive relationship with, why do you feel that you have a positive relationship with that teacher?
2. Think of the beginning of the school year, what did that teacher do to create the feeling of a positive relationship?
3. On a scale of 1-5 with 5 being the very important and 1 being not important at all, how important is it for a teacher to be fair?
4. On a scale of 1-5 with 5 being the very important and 1 being not important at all, how important is it for a teacher to listen to student ideas?
5. On a scale of 1-5 with 5 being the very important and 1 being not important at all, how important is it for a teacher to treat students with respect?
6. On a scale of 1-5 with 5 being the very important and 1 being not important at all, how important is it for a teacher to keep promises?
7. On a scale of 1-5 with 5 being the very important and 1 being not important at all, how important is it for a teacher to be understanding?
8. On a scale of 1-5 with 5 being the very important and 1 being not important at all, how important is interacting with a teacher outside of class on creating positive relationships with students?
9. If interacting with a teacher outside of the classroom contributes to creating a positive relationship with students, what types of activities could a teacher participate in to be more present outside of the classroom?
10. On a scale of 1-5 with 5 being the very important and 1 being not important at all, how important is having a positive relationship with a teacher on your success in a particular class?
11. How does a teacher show students that he/she is understanding?
12. How does a teacher treat a student with respect?
13. How does a teacher build trust with a student?
14. How does a teacher build a feeling of safety for students?
15. How does a teacher build a sense of fairness for a student?
16. What can a teacher do in the classroom to build positive relationships with middle school students?
17. What can a teacher do outside of the classroom to build positive relationships with middle school students?
18. What characteristics do teachers that have positive relationships with students have in common?

Negative Student-Teacher Relationships

1. Think of a teacher that you have a negative relationship with, why do you feel that you have a negative relationship with that teacher?
2. Think of the beginning of the school year, what did that teacher do to create the feeling of a negative relationship?

3. What does a teacher do in the classroom to build negative relationships with middle school students?
4. What can a teacher do outside of the classroom that contributes to negative relationships with middle school students?
5. What characteristics do teachers that have negative relationships with students have in common?

Is there anything else you would like me to know about student-teacher relationships?