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Listening to Elementary Student Voice:
A Compass for Leading Their Learning and Creating Feelings of Connectedness

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the

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in

Educational Leadership

by

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The Dissertation of Melissa Galang Han is approved, and is acceptable in quality and form for publication on microfilm and electronically:

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Dedication

A dear friend once advised me to rely on my *trampoline community*, a soft place to land and a place that propels me onward. This dissertation came to be because of this community. Thank you for reminding me that I had a safe place to land. You took on the role of propelling me upward throughout every season of this journey. May all who read this dissertation become a *trampoline community* for every child who needs to be heard.

Epigraph

"A society with too few independent thinkers is vulnerable to control by disturbed and opportunistic leaders. A society which wants to create and maintain a free and democratic social system must create responsible independence of thought among its young."

John Dewey

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Vita

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Abstract of the Dissertation

Listening to Elementary Student Voice:
A Compass for Leading Their Learning and Creating Feelings of Connectedness

by

Melissa Galang Han

Doctor of Education in Educational Leadership

University of California, San Diego, 2017
California State University, San Marcos, 2017

Professor Erika Daniels, Chair

Young elementary students know what they want as learners, and they are fully capable and able to lead in contexts where adults are typically the leader – in classrooms and in research. The purpose of this case study was to explore whether and how providing authentic leadership opportunities for elementary students in two

democratically oriented classrooms created feelings of connectedness and belonging. Both third grade classrooms could be defined as democratic: learning was student-centered, and student voice was heard and implemented throughout the day. Focus group students selected for this study were from two third grade classrooms that each operationalized democratic learning and distributed leadership practices where student voice was both solicited and valued. I asked very young people to explain what helps them feel listened to and understood in classrooms - to say what helps them be seen and understood and to define that for adults. Prior researchers have not asked young people to lead us in this. This case study research informs educators of how to listen and respond to young elementary students so their voices lead their learning and thereby create feelings of connectedness. Data analysis showed classroom moments of inviting student voice, providing leadership opportunity, and creating feelings of connected. Teachers were intentional in positioning themselves as facilitators of learning and modeled genuine questioning of student thinking. This study revealed that sharing authority and acting with humility created a reciprocal relationship between teachers and students. Students then used talk to deepen each other's thinking, to advocate for each other, and to lead as co-teachers, but this only happened when they were in an environment that prioritized student voice. Students felt connected to their class community because they came to rely on and trust each other as resources.

Chapter One: Introduction

> "The cost of not [involving young people in shared decision-making] will likely come back to haunt us as a civil society and a golden opportunity to move toward a fuller and more inclusive wisdom will have been missed"
>
> - Mary McAlesse, president of UNESCO, *American Journal of Community Psychology, 2013*

Statement of the Problem

Young elementary student voices are typically not invited into discussions about teaching and learning; instead teacher voices usually lead decisions about learning in classrooms. This example of hierarchical leadership where adults are the leaders is common in schools with vulnerable populations, which are traditionally identified as students of color and students who struggle economically. When student voice is not heard, or included in discussions about learning experiences, students will resist the adult in authority and lose engagement in learning. When this happens, adults often resort to excessive discipline in an attempt to control their students. This leads to a lack of connectedness to their learning environments, which can result in poor behavioral choices. This negative spiral is manifested in discipline records as, according to the U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights (2014), Black students were suspended and expelled at a rate three times greater than White students. When Black students are removed from the learning environment, it exacerbates their lack of connectedness to their classrooms. Young, vulnerable students' voices are then silenced in an environment where adults solely lead their learning.

Traditional hierarchical leadership models rely on educators to enact disciplinary

actions that exclude vulnerable populations from school rather than include them as co-agents of change. This data indicates a need to take a closer look at alternatives to hierarchical leadership models, such as ways to increase feelings of connectedness or include the voices of minority students in the process of learning. The negative consequences resulting from Black and Latino students' lack of connectedness to and feelings of belonging in schools will continue to exist as long as their voices are excluded from their learning. Instead, educators might explore ways to include students in conversations that direct and guide their learning while also providing opportunities for them to lead improvements in their learning experiences.

Many researchers argue that students have been entrusted to the care of adults in education without being asked about their experiences – that educators make decisions *for* instead of *with* children and give them less meaningful roles. A different approach is for adults in schools to create an inclusive school climate where students of color are asked about their learning experiences rather than a climate that perpetuates a feeling of disconnection and exclusion (Caton, 2012). It is worth exploring whether there is a link between strong teacher–student relationships where students believe their teachers have genuine care and concern about what they think and stronger feelings of school connectedness. The alternative is that students learn in a context of an adult leadership model that refuses to listen to student voice, which causes a lack of trust to develop between the students and their teachers (Caton, 2012; Hulpia, 2011; Mitra & Serriere, 2012).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this case study was to explore whether and how providing authentic leadership opportunities for elementary students in two democratically oriented classrooms created feelings of connectedness and belonging. Both third grade classrooms could be defined as democratic: learning was student-centered, and student voice was heard and implemented throughout the day.

Research has used the terms student voice, democratic learning environments, distributed leadership, leadership opportunities, connectedness, and youth-adult partnership to explore ways to ground students of color more thoroughly in their educational experiences. For the purpose of this study, I used the terms *student voice, leadership opportunities*, and *school connectedness* in my analysis of how young elementary students navigated a learning environment designed to include their voices. I defined these terms according to how the research encapsulated them. Student voice meant that students used their own words and their own terms to communicate what they needed (Mitra & Serriere, 2012). Leadership opportunities were described as students noticing what they and their peers needed and initiating action with the person in power, the teacher. The leadership opportunity came when those in power, such as the teacher, created space for the student to be heard and act on their stated needs. School connectedness was defined not as merely identifying friendships within student peer groups but also when students felt they positively contributed to their learning community.

When students develop feelings of connectedness to and belonging in schools,

they believe themselves to be capable of enacting change through the practice of enacting student voice with adult guidance and validation (Pearce & Barkus, 2014). As adults and students share authority, both groups are transformed in the process (Koller & Schugurensky, 2011; Mitra & Serriere, 2012; Morgan, 2009). Students must feel that they have a say in their academic future as well as in their day-to-day school activities in order to feel connected (Gillespie &Mann, 2004; Sun et al., 2013). One key to creating feelings of *connectedness* is listening and responding to student voice (Cook-Sather, 2006).

Public education has the potential to foster a democratic culture by listening to and honoring student voices in classroom learning environments. Two third grade classrooms in a Title 1 elementary school were chosen for this study because their teachers created environments that emphasized democratic decision-making. These classrooms implemented Black and Latino student voices into leadership opportunities as part of their regular classroom activities so they were an optimal place in which to explore the results of that practice.

The key to understanding which leadership opportunities are, in fact, meaningful for elementary students is asking them questions, listening to their answers, and responding to student voice. The goal of this study was to explore whether and how providing authentic leadership opportunities for elementary students created feelings of connectedness to and belonging in two third grade democratic learning environments. Observations and interviews were done in these two third grade democratic classrooms to understand how inclusive environments created feelings of connectedness when leadership opportunities were provided.

Research Questions

I explored whether authentic and meaningful leadership opportunities for elementary students created feelings of connectedness by listening and responding to student voice. The following research questions guided the exploration of how two third grade democratic classrooms with a high population of Black or Latino students created space for student voice to be heard and enacted in leadership:

1. In classrooms designed around distributed leadership models, do students speak up and/or feel listened to?
2. When do elementary students have opportunities to participate in the leadership decisions in the classroom?
3. What leadership opportunities are meaningful to elementary students?
4. How is school connectedness affected when students participate in authentic and meaningful leadership opportunities?

Both third grade classrooms were already democratic learning environments. Ms. Rogann's students had been in second grade with her the previous year while Ms. Stavino had students who were in second grade together the previous year with a different second grade teacher. Within democratic classrooms, students' voices are honored and they are given space to say what they need to be successful. Leadership opportunities are created in these democratic learning environments because each person's voice and skills are valued in the decision-making process. Educators who respond to student voice listen to young people talk about their lives and often change important things that affect their learning or educational experiences. My quest was to determine whether connectedness

would be the result of student voice being incorporated into the learning environment.

Democracy in school is not confined to formal procedures, such as class councils or other kinds of school democratic meetings, but it is a way of living and affects relationships within the school community (Dewey, 1903). Moreover, an essential idea is that democracy is best learned by practicing it in everyday life. Schools have the potential to create communities where students actually enact democratic practices. Listening to student voice and providing leadership opportunities enables students to practice democracy and to identify themselves as contributing members to their class communities through meaningful experiences (Zeldin, Christens, & Powers, 2013).

Socio-cultural theory and self-determination theory grounded this study. They addressed the transformation students may encounter when practicing democratic citizenship in meaningful leadership opportunities in schools where their thoughts are listened to and acted upon. This begins in the classroom.

Self-determination theory. Self-determination theory states people are more deeply engaged and productive when they are given autonomy, experience competence, and feel a sense of belonging or connectedness (Ryan &Deci, 2006). Since the purpose of this study was to understand whether and how creating authentic and meaningful leadership opportunities for elementary students creates feelings of connectedness, self-determination theory was an appropriate frame. It stresses the notion that students who experience authentic or autonomous acts (like experiencing the freedom to make one's own choices) also feel more connected to individuals who support their autonomy. Connectedness means that students feel respected and cared for by the adults in a school.

Therefore, the quality of student and teacher relationships is enhanced due to greater stability and satisfaction. Students experiencing connectedness have a willingness to accept school values and have greater internalization of school-related behavioral regulations (Ryan &Deci, 2006). The relationships formed between students and teachers are associated with greater satisfaction, relationship stability, and well-being for both parties. This study explored how these types of relationships had the ability to create feelings of connectedness in two democratically oriented third grade classrooms because students were asked what leadership opportunities were meaningful for them and were supported by educators to fulfill those roles.

Socio-cultural theory. Socio-cultural theory focuses on how individual identities are impacted by social or cultural factors within a community (Kelly, 2006). Identities are in a state of constant evolution through a process that consists of negotiating the meaning of membership in a school community. Students must engage in particular social practices that will move them from the periphery towards full participation in tasks of increasing accountability (Kelly, 2006). Students then can build their identity through informal leadership partnerships with adults.

Students learn and develop leadership skills as they participate in and contribute to activities that are meaningful to the contexts in which they function. Learning is about increasing participation in social practices. This is important when addressing the power asymmetry between adults and children in our society because childhood is too often viewed as a state of ignorance and incompetence. Children in school are being ranked in social and moral terms as subordinates (Thornberg, 2010) with typical classrooms often

being teacher-led, disciplinarily-focused, and student controlling. Students tend to have little power and influence in the classroom.

On the other hand, students are trusted in democratic communities. Students then learn how to lead democratically by being listened to, deliberating, seeking arguments, and evaluating, in a collective effort through conversations with adults and peers. Communication and trust is essential in this process of democracy.

Overview of Methods

Student voice literature has primarily reflected the need to move beyond adults presuming to know what students think, believe, and feel. This study aimed to first elicit stories about students' school connectedness from the students themselves and then to think critically about what those experiences mean for the adults charged with creating their educational environments. This qualitative study was conducted at Martin Elementary, a Title 1 school in the Western Unified School District. The school, district, and participant names are pseudonyms in order to protect their identity. Participants were students and teachers from two third grade classrooms that intentionally created democratic learning environments.

Observations of the learning environments and interviews with Black and Latino students in these two classrooms explored which leadership opportunities were meaningful for them. Black or Latino students were also asked to act as co-researchers by participating in a focus group to analyze observation and interview data since existing research suggests that Black and Latino students' voices are rarely solicited or privileged in school settings.

Data analysis looked for moments of teachers inviting student voice, moments where they provided leadership opportunity, and moments where students appeared to feel connected to each other, their teachers, and their learning environments. I wanted to understand how inviting student voice to lead in the classroom created moments of connectedness.

According to Geertz (1993), "The whole point of a semiotic approach to culture is, as [he has] said, to aid us in gaining access to the conceptualized world in which our subjects live so that we can, in some extended sense of the term, converse with them" (p. 24). This quote highlights the need to understand elementary students' experiences having or not having their voices heard in their schools. This requires listening well and interpreting accurately what young students say. If I was to understand the students' lived experience, students needed to be invited to assess if my interpretation were accurate. Together, the students and I began to have a dialogue where students were deeply understood.

I worked toward understanding students' leadership experiences at Martin Elementary by collaborating with the children themselves in a co-analysis of the data. The student focus group and I co-analyzed data from observations and interviews. We looked for moments student voice was invited, moments of leadership in the classroom, and moments when students felt connected. I wanted to be aware of the power of my words and how they affected the students I was trying to represent accurately (Mehan, 1996), and co-analyzing the data with students increased the accuracy of the interpretation of student responses (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 2011). An in-depth

discussion of participation selection, data collection, and data analysis processes is found in chapter three.

Significance of Study

Students have been entrusted in the care of adults in education but are rarely asked about how their experiences influence their attitudes toward and beliefs about themselves and their place in society. Educators too often make decisions for, instead of with, children and give them less meaningful roles in their own educational experiences. Research continues to reveal that students feel more connected to school when they are listened to and are given opportunities to lead their own learning in the context of supportive, encouraging adult relationships partnerships (Sun et al., 2013).

This study adds to existing research by seeking to understand what leadership opportunities elementary students identify as creating feelings of connectedness to school. Trust acts as the glue that binds interrelationships within distributed leadership (Sun et al., 2013). As members in an organization participate in its direction and enactment of its goals, they must actively contribute to sustaining the connections between reciprocity, trust, and commitment in their relationships. This includes all stakeholders, principals, teachers, parents, and students. This study explored whether and how providing authentic leadership opportunities for elementary students in two democratically oriented classrooms, where learning was student-centered and student voice was heard and implemented throughout the day, created feelings of school connectedness and belonging.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

Introduction

This study explored the effects of privileging the voices of elementary school students through authentic and meaningful classroom leadership opportunities. Chapter 2examines the existing literature on the role of student voice in education, the effects of providing leadership opportunities in classrooms (also known as distributed leadership), and ways to increase feelings of connectedness among learners.

Researchers of distributed leadership look beyond traditional roles of leadership and instead focus on ways in which informal relationships create effective change in an organization (Spillane & Kim, 2012). Serriere, Mitra, and Reed (2011) found that relationships between students and adults change for the better when students have opportunities to connect democratic values with practical community problem solving. Additionally, when students are given opportunities to participate in decision-making and to take on leadership roles, they develop agency, explore their identity, and take initiative (Zeldin et al., 2013).

Although research addressing student voice as it relates to distributed leadership practices and feelings of connectedness does exist, it primarily highlights middle and high school aged students, with the voices of elementary students being underrepresented. Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child states that all youth, not just adolescents, have a right to be heard in all matters affecting them and to have their views taken seriously in relation to their age and maturity

(Zeldinet al., 2013). Further, Mitra and Serriere (2012) argued that elementary aged students begin to think critically about the world around them and to question injustices they see. When students are provided with opportunities to make decisions that shape their lives and the lives of their peers, they feel connected to their schools. Alongside valuing and implementing student voice in the classroom, adults need to be shown how to meaningfully partner with students in leadership roles (Mitra, Lewis, & Sanders, 2012). This results in adult validation of student voice.

Finally, the literature review discusses the findings from studies of schools where distributed leadership models were either well or poorly implemented. In the effective examples, students felt connected because they were included in decisions about their educational experiences. It is not enough to view leadership in terms of a hierarchical model where an individual in a formal role holds the bulk of the power and responsibility (Hulpia, 2011; Sun et al., 2013). In a distributed leadership model, school leadership roles go beyond managing students and instead focus on the development of relationships built upon trust, shared goals, clear roles, and quality support. These are better able to balance power and influence so that all students are well served (Spillane & Kim, 2012). This study examined the interrelatedness of student voice, leadership opportunities, and feelings of connectedness, and therefore this literature review describes what existing research says about each concept.

Role of Student Voice

Since this study explored whether and how creating authentic and meaningful leadership opportunities for elementary students leads to increased feelings of

connectedness, I examined what other studies found in regards to the inclusion of students' unique perspectives on learning, teaching, and schooling. Student voice is the term used by researchers to bring attention to the redefinition of student roles in educational research and reform (Cook-Sather, 2006). Researchers who have written about student voice view students as capable individuals whose knowledge and interests should be capitalized on when determining goals and learning methods for classrooms.

Researchers have found that authorizing student perspectives can directly improve educational practice because when teachers listen to and learn from students, they begin to see the world from those students' perspective (Cook-Sather, 2002). Students should be consulted and their perspectives included in classroom decisions. These studies mainly included representations of middle and high school student voice. My study examined whether and how the inclusion of elementary student voice created leadership opportunities and affected connectedness through authentic opportunities to practice democratic citizenship. Student voice is heard and included in a democratic learning environment.

Democracy and citizenship. Democracy has its roots in the concept of citizens practicing self-directed individuality within community (Dewey, 1903). The significance of a democratic community is reflected in the work of Dewey who viewed education as a social process. Recognizing children's interpersonal needs and the importance of collaborative activities, Dewey (1903) stated students should function as a social group. The quality of education "is realized in the degree in which individuals form a group" (p. 65). It is the teacher and school's responsibility to encourage the development of this sense of community by designing communal activities to which all contribute. As Dewey

envisioned it, teachers and students share membership in this community, and it is through collaboration that learning occurs. Being a member of a community includes feeling part of a group (Osterman, 2000). Dewey felt education, more than anywhere else, has the potential to be a source of training, character building, and development of intelligence for students to practice democratic citizenship. Leadership opportunities create authentic practice of democratic citizenship.

Dewey (1903) defined true citizenship in a democracy as a freed power of mind where a child is able to take an active role in the solving of problems even at the expense of experimentation and error. This highlights how students learn how to be citizens through practice, not perfection. Learning is not solely judged according to outcomes but also recognizes the value in the process. This means encouraging freedom, independence, and initiative in every aspect of a student's social life. Empirical research addresses how teachers can implement student voice to impact classroom culture through authentic practice of democratic citizenship (Gunter & Thomson, 2007; Holt, 2008; Serriere, Mitra, & Reed, 2011).

Researchers have argued that in order to move beyond creating obedient citizens and instead develop into engaged, justice-oriented citizens, educators must provide children with opportunities to apply democratic values (Serriere et al., 2011). Serriere et al. described that educators can provide these opportunities by asking them to contribute to decision-making processes, to be mentors, and to promote change in places that affect students. Students slowly gain the skills to share leadership in a Vygotskian style of apprenticeship through watching and learning. Then they slowly acquire the expertise to

take on leadership roles by working side by side with peers and experienced adult advisors. Relationships between students and adults change in educational settings when leadership opportunities are provided for students to connect the values of democracy with practical community problem solving (Serriere et al., 2011). This study's contribution is to highlight ways in which adults might invite students into valuable roles.

Some teachers lack understanding of student daily experiences (Gunter & Thomson, 2007). Researchers have argued both adults and students should be involved in designing interventions and changes together. There is a need for spaces of leadership where young people can speak up and share what they consider valuable in enhancing learning experiences with educators. Holt (2008) found listening to student voice enabled adults to develop an understanding of the reality in the world in which students live.

When students are listened to and treated as authorities and partners, students are shown to be capable of choosing issues that are relevant to educational improvement (Cook-Sather, 2007; Holdsworth, 2000). Some have argued that student voice must be responded to – that when adults ask, listen, respond, and enact a plan with students, it builds self-esteem, confidence, and engagement (Cook-Sather, 2007). This in turn leads to the sense of power and self-efficacy needed to create educational change. If youth are viewed as partners, they are capable of functioning within valuable roles of leadership that can transform classroom communities (Cook-Sather, 2007). If studies have found students are able to lead when adults believe in their ability to contribute to education communities, this raises questions about why students are not invited to practice their citizenship more often in classrooms, especially through leadership opportunities.

When meaningful roles for students are provided through a shared leadership model, students are capable of articulating their learning experiences and were able to contribute to school improvement endeavors (Bergmark & Kostenius, 2009; Kostenius, 2011). Kostenius (2011) explored opportunities for school improvements in Sweden based on children's lived experience and visionary ideas of school. Although the process of children voicing their opinions and participating in school improvement can be time consuming, Kostenius found the process of listening to elementary students to be valuable and worthwhile. A limitation to Kostenius's study is that the researchers interpreted the student data instead of the students themselves. The findings reveal students' dream school is a place where they are able to be involved and influence aspects of school that concern them. This is achieved when teachers trust the children to not only voice their dreams but to also be a part of enacting it. Kostenius recommended that both students and adults form what is called a dream team to visualize and develop their hopes for school improvement. The ability to be a dream team would involve adults sharing authority with students in a distributed leadership model.

When adults listened to student voice, students were found to be trustworthy, capable, and competent (Bergmark & Kostenius, 2009). Adults asking open-ended questions were found to provide opportunity for careful listening and mutual learning to take place. The purpose of listening was for adults to learn from students through invitation and collaboration. Bergmark and Kostenius argued that listening to students enabled educators to gain more knowledge about how to create and sustain democratic classroom communities.

Responding to student voice. Although research on student voice has been

linked to adults respecting the rights of students (Zeldin, Christens, & Powers, 2013), the practice of adults responding to student voice has also been explored. Zeldin et al. found listening to student voice honors their perspectives and opinions and highlighted the need for further research to show how adults should create space for students to be listened to and understood. One recommendation was including students in conversations that have the potential to alter dominant power imbalances between adults and young people.

Cook-Sather's study (2006) on student voice found adults learning from student voice required major shifts on the part of adult educators. Listening required relationships within which teachers and students could communicate with and learn from one another. This ability to communicate required respect. Adults created a listening culture by placing students placed in the position of translating other student perspectives about school experiences into language that adults could understand (Cook-Sather, 2006). When students were involved in classrooms and felt they were respected as individuals and as a social group, they were less likely to disengage from school (Cook-Sather, 2002). My study examined if this engagement in school was also a result of feeling more connected to peers, teachers, and the learning environment.

Education is a process of change that is based on rights of students and relationship between students and educators. Adults striving to reach understanding of students is part of what it means to listen and negotiate change. The relationship between students and educators has primarily been described as hierarchical with educators having authority over students. Most power relationships do not tolerate the time and energy required to listen and respond to those with less authority because it is inconvenient (Cook-Sather, 2002). My study questioned if educators chose to create the space to listen

and share authority with students by providing authentic leadership opportunities, would adults develop relationships with students that created feelings of connectedness.

Studies show students' perception of teacher support is the strongest predictor of their engagement in school. When students perceive care and concern from their teachers, their engagement and connectedness increases (Lam, Jimerson, Kikas, Cefai, Veiga, Nelson, & Zollneritsch, 2012). This study examined if students felt connected when provided with authentic leadership opportunities when adults listened and shared authority with students. Researchers have found that when adults listen and respond to student voice, personal transformation takes place for students (Koller & Schugurensky, 2011; Mitra & Serriere, 2012; Morgan, 2009).

Personal transformation. Studies have found that prioritizing student voice when creating a classroom community can be transformative for students (Koller & Schugurensky, 2011; Mitra & Serriere, 2012; Morgan, 2009). When educators provided youth with opportunities to shape their learning environments, students took this role seriously and began to think critically about the world around them and question injustices they see (Mitra & Serriere, 2012). Mitra and Serriere argued that elementary aged students were able to develop strategic thinking, empathy as they took on the perspective of others. Students then developed a sense of civic responsibility among each other, which was described as individuals believing their actions made a difference because they were heard and respected.

Mitra and Serriere (2012) found when elementary students were heard from educators, students were empowered to question authority and to push for change. This empowerment enabled the students to effectively represent the voices of other students

who were affected by school decisions. Authentic leadership opportunities that mattered to students were transformative for them due to teacher and principal guidance and partnership.

Kane and Chimwayange (2013) found that talking to students about teaching and learning improved instruction, but teachers were also hesitant to give authority to their students. However, when teachers listened and responded to student suggestions, the students became more confident in their role as critical informants about teaching and learning. Liang, Spencer, West, and Rappaport's (2013) study found that adult mentors who provided students with cues, suggestions, and role-modeling strengthened the skills necessary for democratic participation. These processes disrupted and challenged understandings of the roles students and teachers traditionally take. Teachers shifted their teaching from a focus on teaching to considerations of ways they could promote student engagement in learning. Students were able to influence the ways they were taught because teachers felt their voices mattered. It appears that a distributed leadership model is an appropriate context for student voice to be heard, responded to, and implemented for classroom change (Liang, Spencer, West, & Rappaport, 2013).

Distributed Leadership

Since this study explored whether and how creating authentic and meaningful leadership opportunities for elementary students created feelings of connectedness, it is important to understand how school leadership structures have the ability to either isolate or include student perspectives. Common hierarchal models in urban schools typically designate the principal in a leadership position while teachers, staff, and students follow

that leader (Jackson & Marriott, 2012). This model is characterized by the combination of a highly influential principal and less influential teachers and students.

Studies on alternative leadership models have shown engaging marginalized youth in decision-making and action has the potential to counter the effects of repeated negative experiences that cause youth to have self-doubt and a mistrust of adults (Serido, Borden, & Perkins, 2009). Engaging youth in positive partnerships with adults contributes to increasing competency, confidence, and connectedness within members of the community.

Leadership practices continue to evolve with a variety of leadership roles being identified that can be integrated and accessed in a systematic manner within a distributed leadership model. This study examined whether a distributed leadership model facilitates students' feeling of connectedness through inviting student voices as equal contributors to classroom communities through authentic leadership opportunities.

Distributed leadership defined. According to Bolden (2011), Sun et al. (2013), Spillane and Kim (2012), and Hulpia, Devos, and Van Keer (2011), distributed leadership works through and within relationships. Leadership is shared and transferred among all members where they pool their expertise to advance a common goal. Leadership is situated in any seat and includes students. This characteristic is what sets distributed leadership apart from other leadership models that have similar components. Trust is the component found in the relationships and partnerships within a distributed leadership model (Van Maele& Van Houtte, 2009).

Bolden (2011) stated there are key elements in distributed leadership that are

shared across researchers - collaboration, democracy, and co-leadership. Collaboration emphasizes the need for networks of people to interact with one another with membership and levels of expertise crossing the typical boundaries of leadership. The distributed leadership model offers an alternative to the traditional heroic role of the individual, typically the principal, and opens up the possibility of distributing leadership among informal leaders such as teachers, parents, and staff (Bolden, 2011). At its core, distributed leadership is dependent upon partnerships among subgroups and networks throughout an organization (Sun, Frank, Penuel, & Kim, 2013). In classrooms, ties formed among teacher and student subgroups were formed when they trusted each other.

Distributed leadership in education focuses on the interactions, interconnections, and interdependencies among people or subgroups with an emphasis on collective responsibility, teacher-teacher trust, and alignment between standards and school programs (Spillane & Kim, 2012). Collective responsibility is the extent to which school staff members take responsibility for helping one another, for supporting student behavior, and for improving instruction in their school as a whole. Teacher-teacher trust is the degree to which teachers are willing to take risks with and depend on one another. Alignment is the extent that staff members in their school believe in and enact standards and school programs. Spillane and Kim (2012) examined teacher-teacher trust relationships, but significant explorations of the teacher-student relationship are absent.

Since distributed leadership influences attitudes of others through intentional social interaction where leadership can be transferred, this suggests that all organization members have the potential to influence community actions (Jackson & Marriott, 2012).

They act to advance specific goals that represent the values, the wants and needs, and the aspirations of both leaders and followers. Spillane and Kim (2012) expanded on this notion by observing that the distributed leadership model has less to do with power equalization and more to do with a perceived agreement across members in various roles in the school structure. This perceived agreement among members, both teachers and students, is important to this study's exploration of whether and how providing authentic leadership opportunities for learners creates feelings of connectedness.

As members work with one another, the quality of support was found to be more important than who gives it (Hulpia, Devos, & Van Keer, 2011). These findings suggested teachers who believe their school is run in a distributed leadership model with group cohesion, clear roles, and a focus on goals tend to feel more connected to the school. Schools characterized with trust or mutual dependence, were often led by a leadership team that worked together in a cohesive and open way. It appears that distributed leadership helps people to connect in a meaningful way while simultaneously strengthening the link between members and the organization itself (Van Maele & Van Houtte, 2009). In such situations of interdependence, feelings of trust may reduce uncertainty and enhance cooperation among students and educators. This trust in teacher-student relationships highlights how teachers can both support and partner with students.

Vertical leadership. Although distributed leadership is characterized as responsibility being dispersed among the many rather than concentrated with the few, Crawford (2012) and Pearce and Barkus (2014) argued that formal leadership roles typically found in traditional vertical leadership, such as teachers in classrooms, still have a significant place in distributed leadership. Their central arguments are elaborated

below.

Crawford (2012) study found the issue is not determining whether vertical leadership or distributed leadership is more beneficial in impacting student learning but instead identified essential questions that must be asked. Educational leaders should ask when leadership is to be shared, how shared leadership might be developed, and how both types of leadership can be matched to the capabilities of the members. This highlights importance of a willingness to build relationships and share authority.

Pearce and Barkus (2014) identified times when vertical leadership is appropriate in a distributed leadership model. Since distributed leadership is a complex and time-consuming process, it is beneficial for work that involves interdependence, creativity, and complexity. The team leader, in a more traditional vertical leadership model, then articulates trust and confidence in the team to work towards the vision or purpose of the team.

Both Crawford (2012) and Pearce and Barkus (2014) argued against a one size fits all type of leadership model and instead sought ways to incorporate a hybrid of both vertical and distributed leadership models within schools. The vertical leader role is needed in schools where a distributed leadership with student voice is new. Because much of the existing research around distributed leadership refers to the implementation of adult voice in school leadership, it is also important to understand the role of adults in validating student voice and in building strong teacher-student partnerships.

Adult validation and partnership. Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child states youth have a right to be heard and to have their views be

taken seriously with all things that matter to them (Zeldin, Christens, & Powers, 2013). Liang, Spencer, West, and Rappaport defined voice as a "metaphor for presence, power, participation, protest, and identity" (2013, p. 262). Youth are subject to negative stereotyping such as being called immature, impulsive, and naïve, and these derogatory characteristics marginalize youth. Effective implementation of student voice requires that the adult see problems, solutions, and opportunities through the lens of the youth themselves. Adults build trust by entering the lives of youth to understand the barriers to voicing their needs while helping them communicate. Through this type of partnership, adults are not giving up power but are sharing power.

Research shows it is not a question of whether adults should work with students but how. Mitra, Lewis, and Sanders (2012), Zeldin et al. (2013), and Peacock (2006) found that adults can validate student voice by creating authentic leadership opportunities that support positive identity formation whereas Fehrman and Schutz (2011) argued that adults must also protect students from the disappointments of institutional power. Adult validation of and belief in what students are capable of affects whether and how they implement student voice.

Specific adult skills are key in successful implementation of student voice (Mitra et al., 2012). Although increasing student voice in schools can re-engage students in school communities and serve as a catalyst for positive changes in schools, schools rarely offer activities that model this democratic process. Explaining the characteristics of an adult who trusts student voice is not enough for effective implementation of student voice in leadership. Adults need to be taught how to listen and respond to student voice in

leadership.

In a study on the importance of student voice in youth adult partnerships, Mitra et al. (2012) concluded adults must learn how to scaffold youth participation in order to develop the leadership skills necessary to share in this type of partnership with students. Part of this training includes the willingness for adults to recognize their need to change their beliefs about student leadership. Student voice in distributed leadership is not transformative for students alone but for adults as well, and adults can create space for students to practice authentic and relevant leadership roles.

Youth adult partnerships have four core elements: authentic decision-making, natural mentors, reciprocity, and community connectedness (Zeldinet al., 2013). When adults create leadership roles for youth that involve them in governance, organizing, evaluation, and citizenry, the youth learn to exercise democratic principles. Youth adult partnership is defined "as the practice of multiple youth and multiple adults deliberating and acting together, in a collective [democratic] fashion over a sustained period of time, through shared work, intended to promote social justice, strengthen an organization and/or affirmatively address a community issue" (p.388). According to this definition of youth adult partnership, shared work is highlighted regardless of age. Collective deliberation, planning, action, and reflection were fundamental to the formation of positive youth adult partnership. Positive youth adult partnerships were characterized by co-learning opportunities where students were seen as allies working shoulder to shoulder with teachers. These relationships yielded feelings of community connectedness for students because students were trusted to lead their learning. This youth adult partnership

was used during subtle moments in the classroom when students initiated an idea that helped their peers learn a subject area or change a school-wide procedure. In both examples, the adult provided resources and mentorship in how to navigate procedures that were foreign to students in order to enact their idea.

Peacock (2006) found that a school community improved radically when children and staff were encouraged to use their voices to express their learning needs. Peacock made a direct connection between the implementation of adult and student voice in leadership. When adults and children both have a voice, then meaningful dialogue is able to exist between students and teachers. The children believed that a true learning conversation began to develop where both the teacher and the child trusted each other's judgments and began to plan and carry out their work together. Listening, understanding, and responding to students' voiced needs developed and strengthened as there were more opportunities to practice it. This happened when students were given authentic leadership opportunities in their classrooms.

Connectedness and Belonging

Self-determination theory. Self-determination theory states people are intrinsically motivated when their basic human needs of autonomy, competence, and belonging or connectedness are met (Ryan & Deci, 2006). For the purpose of this study, the term connectedness is used. When students are given autonomy or the freedom of choice, they experience greater satisfaction, relationship stability, and well-being. When students feel connected to their schools, they are more willing to do what is valued by the adults they feel connected with (Ryan & Deci, 2000). This highlights the importance of

students developing feelings of connectedness with teachers in classrooms because these feelings are related to academic motivation and performance (Brown & Evans, 2002). When students feel respected and cared for by educators in schools, they develop greater internalization of school-related behavioral regulations (Ryan & Deci, 2000), and students reporting higher levels of nonacademic activities like leadership opportunities also report higher levels of school connection (Brown & Evans, 2002).

Since minority students may feel isolated and not supported in the school setting, inclusion in nonacademic activities like leadership may facilitate inclusion in peer groups, positive school-related experiences, and a sense of belonging, all of which may contribute to greater school connectivity and retention (Brown & Evans, 2002). Such involvement is particularly critical for students most at risk for school failure, like Black and Latino students. Understanding which leadership opportunities, the youth feel is most meaningful occurs when students are trusted to be included with the planning and creation of opportunities to lead (Sun, 2013).

Trust. Daly (2009) defined trust as the extent to which one engages in a relationship with and is willing to be vulnerable to another on the basis that the other has competence, integrity, openness, reliability, and respect. There is a positive association between trust in schools, including increased collaboration, engagement in organizational citizenship behaviors, promotion of risk-tolerant climates, and improvements in academic productivity (Goddard, Tschannen-Moran, & Hoy, 2001). The absence of trust has been associated with anxiety, estrangement, and isolation (Thornberg & Elvstrand, 2010). As individuals engage in productive relationships, entire systems can be affected, thereby

creating a sense of collective trust in the school community (Sun et al., 2013).

When teachers believe their students are competent and reliable, they create learning environments that facilitate student academic success (Gillespie &Mann, 2004). Students who trust their teachers are more likely to take the risks that new learning involves (Goddard, Tschannen-Moran, & Hoy, 2001). Findings suggest that teachers in schools with more low-income students find trust harder to cultivate, which causes students lose valuable social support. Teachers who are willing to share authority in the learning environment usually base this decision on the trust they have in their students. Thornberg and Elvstrand (2010), however, found that traditional school structures of domination, control, or obedience inhibit the development of these trusting relationships and therefore limit children's voices because there are no embedded to do so. The researchers concluded there is a need to study learning environments that have successfully developed school democracy and student participation.

In contrast, trust between students and teachers develops when they engage in joint decision-making and negotiations (Gillespie &Mann, 2004). Trust can be viewed as mutual between two parties, shared between both teachers and students (Daly, 2009), and mutual trust is vital in developing successful democratic learning environments where all voices were of equal importance (Gillespie &Mann, 2004; Sun et al., 2013). This is the type of environment needed to create authentic leadership opportunities for students and is grounded in trusting relationships and the formation of strong communities.

Community. The concept of connectedness is commonly used among researchers when describing community. Community in this study in not a place; it is the connection

all members develop with one another and is developed when all members experience feelings of belonging, trust in others, and safety (Osterman, 2000). The members in a school community include administrators, teachers, students, and families, and all members must be equally valued. Under this definition, student voice is listened to and considered when deciding on a community's direction. Because connectedness is one of three basic psychological needs (Ryan, 1995), students must feel as if they are relied upon in deciding improvement initiatives. Feeling connected positively affected student well-being and development (Ostermann, 2000). When student needs were not satisfied in educational settings in the form of community, the result was diminished motivation, impaired development, alienation, and poor performance (Deci et al., 1991).

Classrooms that are intentional in creating structures that increase a sense of connectedness affect students' perceptions of others, leading them to view friends and other group members, like peers and teachers, more favorably and to think about them more often and in more complex ways (Sun et al., 2013). When students experience acceptance, they are more likely to be supportive of others. Students experience the classroom environment as a supportive and caring community because of how it provides opportunities to participate actively in decision-making, planning, and goal setting (Osterman, 2000). When children experience positive involvement with others, they are more likely to be intrinsically motivated, to accept the authority of others, to establish a stronger sense of identity, to experience autonomy, and to accept responsibility for regulating their own behavior in ways that are consistent with social norms (Sun et al., 2013). Research shows that conditions in the classroom, like being actively involved in community, influence students' feelings about themselves, which are reflected in student

engagement and achievement (Brown & Evans, 2002). Listening and responding to student voice as part of a classroom structure empowers students to see themselves as leaders that have equal stake in their educational future alongside with teachers. This is important since this study explored how and whether creating authentic and meaningful leadership opportunities for elementary students created feelings of connectedness.

Summary of Review of Literature

Students have the ability to both describe and advocate for changes in their learning experiences (Bergmark & Kostenius, 2009; Kane & Chimwayange, 2013; Kostenius, 2011). When students are treated as authorities and partners who are capable of choosing issues that are relevant to improving classroom communities, they practice immediate citizenship rather than waiting until adulthood (Cook-Sather, 2007; Holdsworth, 2000). Involving students in their learning experiences acknowledges them as agents for change and allows students to be recognized as capable of taking on meaningful leadership roles.

Researchers have also argued youth adult partnerships play a role in enabling students to have a voice in their educational experiences through leadership roles that contribute to classroom communities. Valuing student voice in distributed leadership goes beyond listening. It involves listening to enact changes. When students are given opportunities to participate in decision-making and to take on leadership roles in classrooms, they develop agency, identity exploration, initiative, and emotional well-being (Zeldin et al., 2013). They also form trusting relationships with their teachers and communities with their peers. This was important to this study's exploration of whether

and how creating authentic and meaningful leadership opportunities for elementary students created feelings of connectedness.

Gap in the Literature

Although the research addressing student voice in distributed leadership has demonstrated positive effects with middle and high school aged students, the voice of elementary students is rarely studied. Elementary aged students begin to think critically about the world around them and question injustices they see (Mitra & Serriere, 2012). Students as young as elementary age should be heard and learn to develop self-empowerment where they believe they have the right to question authority and push for change. When students are perceived as partners in education and are provided with opportunities to participate in decision making that will shape their lives and the lives of their peers, they are capable in fulfilling this role (Cook-Sather, 2007). Alongside valuing and implementing student voice in classrooms, teachers need to be shown how to partner with students in leadership roles through scaffolding (Mitra et al., 2012). This results in adult validation of student voice.

The research states when teachers are shown how to engage student voice into meaningful leadership roles, they are instrumental in improving classroom communities. When adults validated student voice in authentic leadership roles, they supported positive identity formation (Druin, 2005; Mitra et al., 2012; Peacock, 2006; Zeldin et al., 2013). Adult validation in what students are capable of affects how they implement student voice (Zeldin et al., 2013). When adults are shown how to engage meaningfully in youth adult partnerships, student voice and identity formation is strengthened. Youth adult

partnerships have the potential to become transformative for both students and adults. The partnership between youth and adults was important in this study's exploration of how and whether creating authentic and meaningful leadership opportunities for elementary students might create feelings of connectedness.

Conclusion

Schools have the massive task of serving students within complex situations and relationships. It is not enough to view leadership in terms of a hierarchal model where an individual in a formal role solely holds the responsibility for that mission. Black and Latino students continue to feel disconnected from their schools and remain unheard resulting in a widening achievement gap (Caton, 2012). Distributed leadership redefines leadership as an action among the collective strength of many. In this model, teacher roles go beyond managing and instead are diversified into including and trusting youth adult partnerships. These relationships, if built upon trust, shared goals, clear roles, and quality support, may be able to balance power and influence so that all students may feel connected to their schools (Spillane & Kim, 2012). This study explored whether and how creating authentic and meaningful leadership opportunities for elementary students created feelings of connectedness to their learning environments.

Chapter Three: Methodology

Introduction of Research Design

The purpose of this case study was to explore whether and how providing authentic leadership opportunities for elementary students in two democratically oriented classrooms created feelings of connectedness and belonging. Both third grade classrooms could be defined as democratic: learning was student-centered, and student voice was heard and implemented throughout the day. During this qualitative study, I observed two democratically oriented classrooms, pulled out moments of interaction that looked like what researchers would define as *student voice* and *authentic leadership*, and asked a focus group of young people to talk about what they thought of these examples and how they made them feel, to see if and how they felt any *connectedness* to the learning environment as a whole as well as to individuals within the community. The student focus group was invited to co-analyze data collected from observations and interviews because I wanted to look at how leadership opportunity affected connectedness from the students' point of view.

Many have questioned whether young students can express their experience of having or not having voice in school, but educators who work with young children can attest to their abilities to articulate their thoughts, feelings, and desires. In order to triangulate the data, however, classroom observations were also conducted and were a crucial means of capturing the behaviors of elementary students' peer interactions and interactions with adults (Jacob & Jordan, 1993). Participants included students and teachers from two third grade classrooms serving as case studies. These two third grade

classrooms practiced democratic learning as their pedagogy which places students at the center of the learning. Data solely gathered from in-person fieldwork observations may miss the facial expression and tone of participant interactions because language is more complex than what is said. It also involves, among other things, tone and the ways in which people interrupt and not interrupt one another (Chaiklin & Lave, 1993; Emerson et al., 1993). Therefore, I used video and audio recordings during observations and interviews to capture the nuances of student behaviors.

Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw encouraged researchers to zoom in on nuances, "The writer stays focused on what others are doing and saying, catching nuances of the back-and-forth between the characters" (2011, p. 98). Capturing the nuances is important because they are the unspoken exchanges that give meaning to the doing and sayings observed. Nuances were easier to notice when I was immersed in students' learning environment for a period of time and was able to capture behaviors that aligned with or went outside patterns that had been observed. I was interested in the exchanges from student to student and also among teachers and students that contributed to opportunities to lead.

Theoretical Frameworks

The theoretical frameworks that grounded the data collection and analysis were self-determination and socio-cultural theory. I saw a gap in the literature that these theories had not been extensively studied with younger children and had set forth to study the details of whether and how authentic leadership opportunities created feelings of connectedness in two third grade democratic classrooms where student voice was heard

and valued. Briefly summarized here is the impact of the theoretical frameworks on this study. Detailed criteria of how I looked for moments of student voice, leadership opportunities, and connectedness are discussed later in this chapter.

Self-determination theory. Self-determination theory (SDT) asserts that feelings of connectedness increase one's intrinsic motivation (Ryan &Deci, 2006). Adults listening, responding to, and being guided by student voice may have provided insight on how school connectedness was affected when elementary students were given authentic leadership opportunities. The challenge in this study, as in all qualitative research, was ensuring that data analysis was truly grounded in the participants' responses, and so I used the lens of SDT when I read each interview transcript and viewed each observation video. That is, I observed for moments of connectedness when students described how it felt to lead a task in groups or partnerships and studied students' interview responses when teachers supported their suggestions.

Socio-cultural theory. Socio-cultural theory states democratic citizenship is learned through authentic opportunities to practice leadership in meaningful situations. Since socio-cultural theory states identities are in a state of constant evolution, a process of negotiating membership in social communities, like in a classroom, can cause student and teacher transformation (Kelly, 2006). I attended to moments when students made suggestions to improve a class lesson or a class problem and the teacher then provided support for students to practice their ideas.

Design of the Study

Case study. Case study research is defined as a qualitative way to explore the development of a person, group, or situation and to understand how a study's participants experience the phenomenon being explored (Creswell, 2013). An elementary school in the Western Unified School District, Martin Elementary, has two third grade classrooms with democratic learning environments, which provided an appropriate setting to explore this study's research questions. Democratic learning environments value student voice and provide opportunities to guide classroom decisions, policies, and learning experiences. Since both third grade classrooms were democratically oriented, this study examined how moments of inviting student voice affected the targeted population's connectedness to school and how this created space for leadership opportunities to be voiced by students. The hallmark of a qualitative case study is that it presents an in-depth understanding of the case. To accomplish this, data collection relied upon multiple sources of information such as interviews and observations. I interviewed each classroom's focus group in the afternoon of the same day I observed their classroom, which was conducted in the morning. The interviews enabled me to understand how a student experienced the three concepts of student voice, leadership opportunities, and connectedness, from what I observed.

Sample and Population

Site selection. This study was conducted at Martin Elementary. Martin Elementary was a Title 1 school within the Western Unified School District (WUSD). Martin served an approximate student population of 429 from grades pre-kindergarten

thru five. The enrollment demographics of Baker included 100% of the student population qualified free and reduced lunch, 86.38% were Hispanic, 8.04% were Black, and 60.94% were English Language Learners. There were 10 student suspensions in the 2014-2015 academic year. Martin was chosen as the site for this study due to its high population of Latino and Black students as well as for its two third grade democratic classrooms that implemented student voice in its community.

Why these two democratically oriented classrooms. Students selected for this study were from two third grade classrooms that each operationalized distributed leadership practices where student voice was both solicited and valued. A democratic learning environment practices self-directed individuality within community (Dewey, 1903), which means students are listened to and treated as authorities and partners. Students are believed to be capable of choosing issues that are relevant to educational improvement (Cook-Sather, 2007; Holdsworth, 2000), and a democratic learning environment is student centered. Student voice is also responded to – adults ask questions, listen to answers, and enact plans with students (Cook-Sather, 2007). There are teacher moves that intentionally create space for student voice to be heard. When observing the two third grade classrooms, I used these characteristics of a democratic learning environment as criteria in creating a Rubric of Teacher Moves (see Table 1) that are either teacher centered or student centered, which researchers describe as democratic.

Table 1. Rubric of Teacher Moves

	Teacher-Centered	Student-Centered
Teacher Moves	✓ Asks close-ended questions ✓ Seeks and validates what is perceived as the correct answer ✓ Tells students the exact steps on how to solve a problem	✓ Asks open-ended questions ✓ Listens with genuine concern and curiosity ✓ Asks follow-up probing questions ✓ Creates a plan with students and supports students in the execution of the plan

The following profiles briefly describe each classroom. A more detailed description of how each of the classrooms fit the democratic learning environment criteria will be discussed in chapter four.

Ms. Rogann's third grade classroom. Ms. Rogann had taught second grade with these same students and decided to teach them again for third grade. Five focus group students were chosen based on my classroom observations, where students were found to initiate or participate in leadership opportunities. The following focus group students were from Ms. Rogann's classroom: Naim, Isabella, Andrea, Juan, and William. Naim and William were Black boys. Isabella and Andrea were Latina girls, and Juan was a Latino boy. At the beginning of third grade, Ms. Rogann's student, Fernando, switched over to Ms. Stavino's classroom.

Ms. Stavino's third grade classroom. All of Ms. Stavino's students had been in the same second grade classroom together but with a different second grade teacher. The second grade teacher had taught in a teacher-centered environment. This study's school

year was Ms. Stavino's first year teaching at Martin Elementary. Five focus group students were chosen based on my classroom observations, where students were found to initiate or participate in leadership opportunities. The following focus group students were from Ms. Stavino's classroom: Malcolm, Silvia, Eduardo, Fernando, and Miranda. Malcolm was a Black boy. Silvia and Miranda were Latina girls. Eduardo and Fernando were Latino boys. During mid-year, Ms. Stavino's student, Naim, had switched over to Ms. Rogann's classroom.

All Black and Latino focus group students from both classrooms were observed and interviewed. Those who were observed to take advantage of the leadership opportunities in class were asked to participate in a focus group. These participants were chosen to understand how and whether authentic leadership opportunities create feelings of connectedness. Both third grade teachers had agreed to open their classrooms to participate in this study, and Martin Elementary's principal also supported having the study conducted in both classrooms.

Data Collection

Purpose of the study and research questions. The purpose of this case study was to explore whether and how providing authentic leadership opportunities for elementary students in two democratically oriented classrooms created feelings of connectedness and belonging. Both third grade classrooms could be defined as democratic: learning was student-centered and student voice was heard and implemented throughout the day. The case study allowed me to focus on Martin Elementary, an urban, Title 1 elementary school, and listen to Black and Latino students from these third grade

classrooms. The following research questions guided this study in understanding how elementary classrooms create and hinder space for student voice to be heard and enacted in informal leadership opportunities:

1. In classrooms designed around distributed leadership models, do students speak up and/or feel listened to?
2. When do elementary students have opportunities to participate in the leadership decisions in the classroom?
3. What leadership opportunities are meaningful to elementary students?
4. How is school connectedness affected when students participate in authentic and meaningful leadership opportunities?

Studies described in chapter two show that democratic and distributed leadership classroom environments serve as ideal contexts for student voice to be heard. Trust forms between teachers and students when student voice is heard (Cook-Sather, 2002) and so my study explored whether and how authentic leadership opportunities provided in classroom learning environments created feelings of connectedness. Figure 1 shows how the research questions and data collection methods focused on moments of student voice, leadership opportunity, and connectedness on the Student Voice Leading to Connectedness Methodology Graphic (see Figure 1).

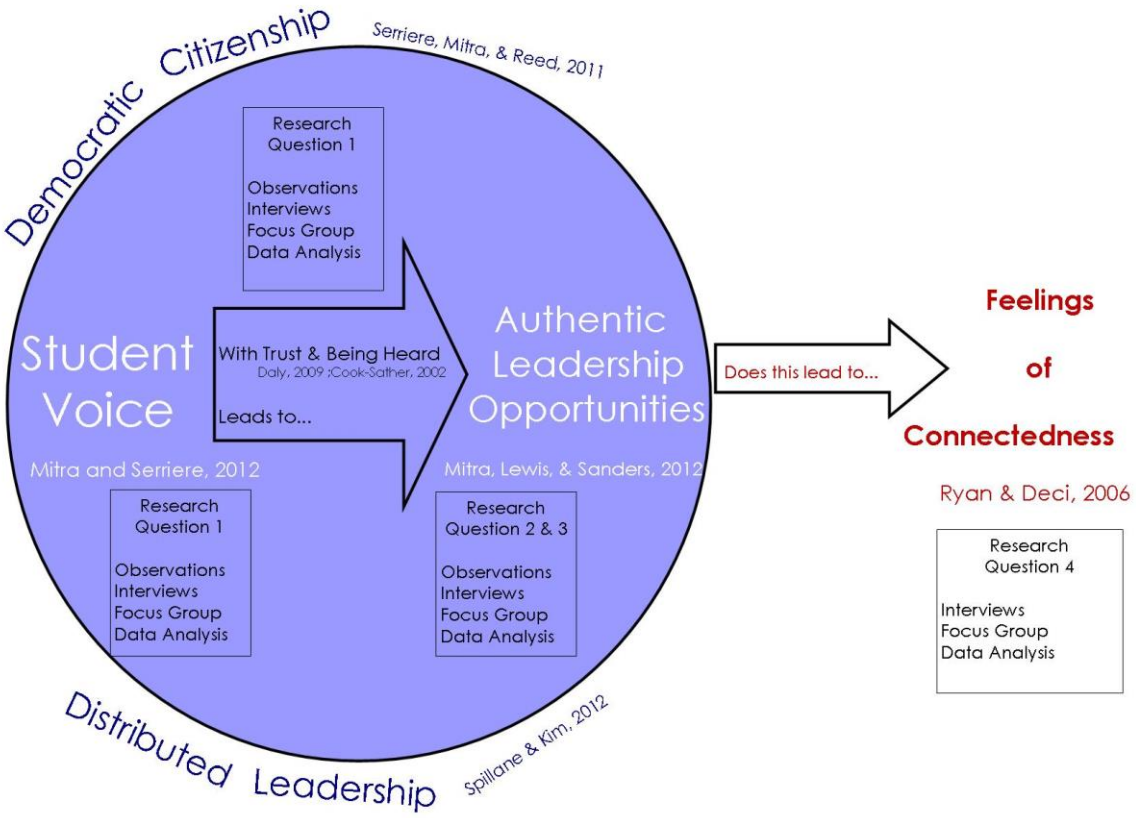

Figure 1. Student Voice Leading to Connectedness Methodology Graphic

Moments of student voice. Researchers describe student voice as when students use their own words and their own terms to communicate what they need (Cook-Sather, 2006; Mitra & Serriere, 2012). Creating a listening culture requires having students placed in the position of translating other student perspectives about school experiences into language that adults could understand can improve teaching and learning (Cook-Sather, 2006; Kane & Chimwayange, 2013). Therefore, during data collection I looked for moments when students used their own words to communicate what they or a peer needed, examples of how students and teachers listened, and ways in which student voice changed the classroom environment.

Interviews. Any effort to gain trust with students is influenced by the length of time and effort used to understand them (Bourgois, 1996). My interaction with students was crucial to getting deeper into their lived experiences, whether it was the stories they were willing to share or their descriptions of what they did on a day to day basis. As part of the interview process, I asked students to draw moments that made them feel heard, which increased their comfort levels and helped define what student voice meant to them, before talking about interactions from the observations. Questions one, two, and three are examples of ways in which examples of student voice were elicited. The rest of the interview questions are located in Appendix B.

- Draw a picture of a moment when someone listened to you today.
- Will you tell me more about it?
- What did they say to you?

Questions arose through my interactions with participants and their responses (Mishler, 1986). To explore why students responded a certain way, I used follow-up questions based on concrete experiences from observations or events students shared during interviews as well as student drawings. Accurate interpretation of student voice during my own research process was crucial since this study's purpose was to understand whether and how school connectedness is affected by leadership opportunities for elementary students.

Observations. Conducting observations of the democratic environment provided important background knowledge into the lived experiences of targeted students and allowed me to observe additional information that students might otherwise not disclose

in interviews. I recorded observations among students and teachers and took field notes on a laptop computer. I observed student behavior and responses during the first three hours of the school day since main subject areas like literacy, math, and science were taught during this time. These observations served as opportunities to witness teacher and student interactions focused on students' speaking and teachers' responses in various contexts and routines. I observed both classrooms using the protocol from the student analysis of observation data located in Appendix D. I used the following questions when looking for moments of student voice in classroom observations:

- What moments are students speaking?
- What moments are students being listened to?

Moments of leadership opportunities. Leadership opportunities exist when students notice what they and their peers need and initiate action with the person in power, the teacher (Mitra & Serriere, 2012). Therefore, I looked for leadership opportunities when students made suggestions or initiated improvements for classroom routines or learning experiences (Jackson & Marriott, 2012; Spillane & Kim, 2012).

I also looked at the role of teachers during classroom observations and ways in which the students described the teachers' roles in interviews. Liang, Spencer, West, and Rappaport (2013) found that adult mentors provide students with cues, suggestions, role modeling, or clarifications. Pearce and Barkus (2014) also described the role of a teacher as being a willing recipient of influence of students. Therefore, I looked for moments when teachers shared authority with students, showed students how to lead, and allowed students to give input on what they or their peers needed.

Interviews. Black or Latino students who took advantage of leadership opportunities in classroom observations were interviewed one-on-one. These participants were chosen to understand which leadership opportunities increased their school connectedness. Although I looked for specific leadership opportunities where students initiated ideas to improve a lesson or solve a problem, I also wanted to be open to seeing what leadership opportunities were meaningful to the students. This study utilized a semi-structured interviewing technique (Creswell, 2011) to gather the perspectives of the students on the ways in which their teachers' provision of authentic leadership opportunities in democratic learning environments affected or did not affect their feelings of school connectedness. Interview question four looked for moments of leading. The rest of the interview questions are located in Appendix B.

- What are the moments when you said things that helped your class?

Drawings were incorporated during the interviews to elicit elementary student perspectives on how they experienced meaningful leadership opportunities and connectedness. According to Harrison (2015), drawing is a process of synthesizing life experiences and a means through which the child can communicate phenomena that is too complex to describe verbally. By asking participants to talk about their drawing during interviews, I also gave them multiple opportunities to express their thoughts and perspectives.

The use of a wide range of methods to accommodate the children's preferences for participation is called the Mosaic Method (Dockett& Perry, 2015). The Mosaic Method itself is not centered on how child-friendly the methods are but is instead focused

on how researchers position themselves and children, how they perceive the competence of children, and how they plan and conduct research based on this perception. This approach also reflects the multi-layered nature of children's perspectives and experiences.

Observations. Observations were used to better understand the culture of the democratic classroom and to gain a larger perspective on which authentic leadership opportunities existed and how they were responded to inside the democratic classroom. I observed both classrooms using the protocol from the student analysis of observation data located in Appendix D. I used the following questions when looking for moments of leadership opportunities during my classroom observations:

- What moments did you notice students helping the class?
- What were the students doing?
- Who were they doing this with?
- Why do you think this helped the class?
- How was the adult involved with these decisions?
- What happened in response to the students' actions?

Moments of connectedness. School connectedness is not defined as merely the existence of friendships among student peer groups but also when students feel they are positively contributing to their learning community (Sun et al., 2013). During interviews, I looked for moments of connectedness when students expressed positive feelings about helping their class or when other students described positive feelings about a peer's leadership.

Interviews. Semi-structured interviews are open-ended conversations where the interviewer has predetermined questions guiding the interview on topics that surround the research questions. Interview questions five, six, and seven looked for moments of connectedness. The rest of the interview questions are located in Appendix B.

- How did it make you feel?
- How do you think your classmates felt when you said that?
- When do you get to do things that your class really needs?

Although the interview was structured by these questions, the interview protocol allowed the conversation to vary and change substantially from one participant to another. All interviews were recorded on a digital voice recorder and saved on a password-protected laptop.

The interviews were transcribed and coded in a process detailed in the data analysis section of this chapter. Interview questions and procedures were refined with elementary students to make sure young elementary students were able to access and understand research information and questions thoroughly. For example, research questions and information were explained in words students could understand. Participants repeated back to me what the study was about and what their participation would involve. I also paid attention to the body language of the participants as a way of assessing whether they changed their minds about participating in the interviews and/or focus groups. For example, if students wanted to play with other objects in the interview room or asked when the interview would be over, I would stop the interview.

Observations. School connectedness was also measured by student actions. I observed the ways in which students acted when they shared ideas formally or informally to the teacher and peers. Did they smile, share more ideas, or stop sharing ideas? Did these students say they enjoyed being in their classrooms? When all members of a classroom are in community, they experience its four elements: membership, influence, integration and fulfillment of needs, and a shared emotional connection (Osterman, 2000). These elements describe the reliance of members in a community on one another, and I used these elements when observing and listening to moments when students relied on their peers for help.

Basic needs satisfaction at work scale. I gave all students in grades 2 thru 5 a survey composed of a modified version of Farrelly's (2013) modified version of the Basic Needs Satisfaction at Work Scale (BNSW-S), one version of the Basic Psychological Needs Scale (BPNS). This scale measured the participants' connectedness in Martin Elementary, and the survey instrument is located in Appendix A. I was going to compare the survey results from the two third grade classrooms to the results from grades 2, 4, and 5 to see if there was a difference in school connectedness for students from the two third grade democratic learning environments that allows students to participate in authentic and meaningful leadership opportunities compared to the other grades at Martin Elementary. I concluded the survey did not answer Research Question #4: *How is school connectedness affected when students participate in authentic and meaningful leadership opportunities?* because it only asked questions about connectedness. It did not ask participants about their leadership opportunities and how it affected their feeling of connectedness. Instead, observations and interviews with students enabled me to

understand which leadership opportunities affected the participants' feelings of school connectedness (which was the central purpose of this study) more than the survey. I focus analysis on the interview and observation data.

Data Analysis

For the purpose of this study, I looked for moments of student voice, leadership opportunities, and school connectedness as observed in classrooms and noted by students. These were the primary focus of how students navigated a democratic learning environment. Since this study explored how connectedness is affected when students are given leadership opportunities, the following data analysis was designed to listen to student voice. In order to represent the students in the fairest way possible and, at the same time, include myself as a partner with students reporting the findings, this study shared authority with students as co-analyzers of the interview and observation data. I asked students their interpretations on these moments of student voice, leadership opportunities, and connectedness.

Researchers must repeatedly ask questions of students in learning contexts due to the diversity and uniqueness of each student, experience, and context (Cook-Sather, 2002). Yet children are rarely consulted by researchers or asked to help define the problem or suggest solutions for their context. Research is typically conducted *on* children but rarely *with* children. Collaborative methodology enables researchers to listen to children's perspectives and view children as experts in their own lives (Langhout & Thomas, 2010). Children's expertise can be cultivated by teaching them specific skills, and participating in research can help them gain more control of the resources that affect

their lives. Children, therefore, can become advocates for themselves and others. Below, I describe how I included students in my work as co-researchers.

Both co-analysis protocols for observation and interview data had guiding questions for students to use during group discussions. I also created space for students to improve the protocol. William wrote notes while he was coding the interview transcripts with his partner, and Isabella began to number each of the questions on the observation protocol on her own so that she could write what she noticed as she watched the videos. Because I was willing to share authority with students and invite them into the process as co-researchers, they began to initiate ideas to improve the protocols.

Interviews. I transcribed the interviews verbatim and then coded the transcripts with labels and collapsed them into larger themes. I conducted a line-by-line analysis of the data by using two types of coding, a priori and posterior. A priori coding focused on moments when students spoke, ways in which the teachers responded or listened, and moments of connectedness as described by the students' words and their actions. Posterior coding identified other themes and patterns and noted relationships across the data.

The posterior coding was used to identify the types of leadership opportunities that were meaningful for students and if it was associated with connectedness. I provided pre-selected sections of the transcribed data to the focus group and asked the focus group if what was interpreted from the drawings were accurate. In pairs, students highlighted sections that were similar using corresponding colors. I facilitated conversation among the pairs by asking students to explain the rationale for their categories. I analyzed and

videotaped this interaction. After all the data were coded, all the students sat in a circle to present and explain the coding of the data to the rest of the group.

During co-analysis of the interview data with the focus group, I provided pairs of students transcribed data that was different from their own. The students followed a discussion protocol to ensure equity of each voice being heard within a supportive active listening environment (Bucknall, 2012). The data analysis protocol consisting of guiding questions I created is located in Appendix C. I created time in the protocol for students to think and individually respond to the question in a manner that was most comfortable for them (i.e. draw and/or write). I invited each student in the focus group to respond to the guiding questions. I facilitated the discussion, took notes, and video recorded the verbal and nonverbal responses, like how the students coded the transcribed data and their facial expressions, and the exchanges between the participants. I facilitated conversation among the pairs by asking students to explain the rationale for their categories. I videotaped and analyzed this interaction. After the data were coded, all the students sat in a circle to present and explain their coding of their data sets to the rest of the group. I also videotaped and analyzed this focus group interaction looking for themes around student voice, leadership opportunities, and connectedness. I also wrote discussion responses on a poster while periodically checking with participants for accuracy of what was shared.

Observations. I previewed classroom observations captured on video and selected a few video clips that showed students taking advantage of leadership opportunities in class. The focus group was invited to co-analyze these video clips. While watching the video clips, each student filled out the Student Analysis Protocol for Observation (see Appendix D) when they saw evidence of the listed questions. After each

participant in the focus group coded all the data, I facilitated conversation among the focus group to elicit codes and themes. I videotaped and analyzed this focus group interaction.

The participants asked questions and took their role as researchers seriously. The students improved the co-analysis protocol through their clarifying questions. For example, during the co-analysis of videotaped classroom observations, I observed Ms. Rogann's student Isabella number each of the bulleted questions on the observation protocol (see Appendix D) before watching the video clips. I immediately noticed Isabella's method of coding the video clips would help the rest of the students organize what they observed to the corresponding question (see Figure 2). Students also advised me to write the file number for each classroom observation video clip on their observation analysis notes so they could record their impressions in an organized manner. I was grateful Isabella was in the first focus group because her improvement of the protocol organized the data analysis for the second focus group.

APPENDIX D STUDENT ANALYSIS PROTOCOL FOR OBSERVATIONS

Student Analysis Protocol for Observations

- After watching a video from a classroom, write or draw
  - 1 What moments are students speaking?
  - 2 What moments are students being listened to?
  - 3 What moments did you notice students helping the class?
  - 4 What were the students doing?
  - 5 Who were they doing this with?
  - 6 Why do you think this helped the class?
  - 7 How was the adult involved with these decisions?
  - 8 What happened in response to the students' actions?
- Be ready to share with the group what you noticed.

Guiding Questions for Group Discussion on Observation Data Analysis

- Each student will respond to the following questions from the researcher. The researcher will write student responses on posters.
  - What moments are students speaking?
  - What moments are students being listened to?
  - What moments did you notice students helping the class?
  - What were the students doing?
  - Who were they doing this with?
  - Why do you think this helped the class?

Figure 2. Isabella's Video Observation Co-Analysis Protocol and Notes

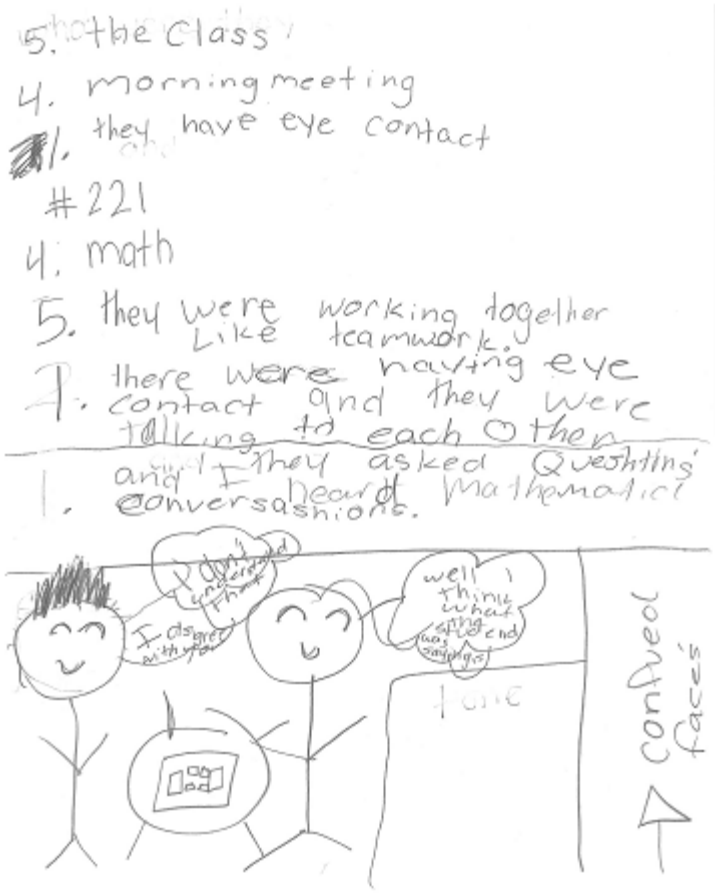

Figure 3. Isabella's Video Observation Co-Analysis Protocol and Notes

I was hesitant to show the focus group the observation videos for co-analysis because I feared the students would become distracted by watching their peers on the videos. In case this were to happen, I explained to the students that researchers need to watch a video more than once because sometimes they miss something the first time. Upon watching the observation videos, however, the students did not laugh or get distracted by what the students were doing in the videos. Instead, they carefully watched the videos and wrote notes on their protocol sheets. This indicated that students will rise to the occasion when they are invited to lead and give input on their learning environments. The observation and interview protocols created space for all students

from the focus group to give input and see it implemented right away. After the co-analysis was over, focus group students Isabella and Juan asked when they were going to meet again and exclaimed, “It was fun!”

Summary of Methods

Both students and adult researchers can take lessons they have learned in their research to create educational change. The term, ‘‘authentic novice,’’ is used by researchers to describe an adult researcher who seeks to build bridges to children’s lived worlds with research (Langhout & Thomas, 2010). The methods of this study treat youth as authentic novices with resources to be accessed rather than problems to be managed. The perspectives of children give insight to adult-defined problems in education. This study provided multiple accessible methods for children and me, the adult researcher, to partner in identifying how honoring student voice and creating leadership opportunities affect school connectedness (Langhout & Thomas, 2010).

Chapter Four: Findings

The purpose of this case study was to explore whether and how providing authentic leadership opportunities for elementary students in two democratically oriented classrooms created feelings of connectedness and belonging. Both third grade classrooms could be defined as democratic: learning was student-centered and student voice was heard and implemented throughout the day. I used studies discussed in chapter two to create criteria that describe moments of student voice, leadership opportunities, and connectedness from interviews and classroom observations.

When collecting data about moments where student voice was honored, I looked for students using their own words to communicate what they or a peer needed, how students and teachers listened, and how student voice changed the classroom environment. For moments of leadership opportunities, I looked for times when students made suggestions or initiated improvements for classroom routines or learning experiences. I looked for moments of connectedness when students expressed positive feelings when describing how they helped their class or when other students described positive feelings towards a peer's leadership and if students relied on each other for help. The following findings show what I observed, what I thought, and what the focus group students said.

Research Questions

This study was guided by the following research questions to explore how two third grade democratic classrooms with a high population of Black and Latino students created space for student voice to be heard and enacted in leadership, and whether those

practices created feelings of connectedness:

1. In classrooms designed around distributed leadership models, do students speak up and/or feel listened to?
2. When do elementary students have opportunities to participate in the leadership decisions in the classroom?
3. What leadership opportunities are meaningful to elementary students?
4. How is school connectedness affected when students participate in authentic and meaningful leadership opportunities?

Looking into Two Democratically Oriented Classrooms

Both third grade classrooms were democratically oriented because their learning environments were student-centered (see Table 2). Both teachers, Ms. Rogann and Ms. Stavino, exhibited teacher moves that allowed student voice to be heard and implemented throughout the day. A description of how these democratic learning environments created space for student voice to be heard from the beginning of the school day is explained below.

Ms. Rogann's third grade classroom. Ms. Rogann's pedagogy fostered democratic learning in multiple ways. For example, she actively asked for, listened, and responded to student input in inquiry-based lessons. During the beginning of the classroom observation, Ms. Rogann positioned herself at the back of the rug as students set up the Promethean board for the daily language review and gathered at the front of the classroom rug. Students facilitated the daily language review lesson with each other. One student stood up to correct sentence errors on the board as the other students on the rug

gave suggestions. Students did not raise their hands, but instead took turns speaking, looked at the student who was speaking, and added on to each other's ideas. Ms. Rogann remained at the back of the rug observing this whole interaction among her students and periodically asked students why they made a particular suggestion. She did not tell a student whether their suggestion was correct or incorrect. I noticed Ms. Rogann's voice was only used to facilitate conversations, while most of the talk was from the students. If a student began to speak when the rest of the class was talking, Ms. Rogann would say, "Please ask for everyone's attention." The student would then ask, "May I have your attention" and begin to speak when the class had quieted down. This set the tone for the rest of the classroom observation because student voice was the primary voice in Ms. Rogann's classroom. I will describe later in this chapter how Ms. Rogann's teacher moves affect the ability of student voice to be heard, create space for leadership opportunities, and allow feelings of connectedness to develop.

Ms. Stavino's third grade classroom. Ms. Stavino fostered collaboration among the students in inquiry-based lessons as well and facilitated classroom community reflection and goal setting. Just as Ms. Rogann was more of a facilitator, I found the same with Ms. Stavino. During the beginning of the classroom observation, Ms. Stavino and her students sat in a circle on the rug after students cleaned up their breakfast. Ms. Stavino sat on the floor with her students, at their same level. When I looked on Ms. Stavino's class schedule, I saw they were having a Morning Meeting. One girl had a small ball and said, "Good morning, Geoffrey" and rolled the ball to the boy. Geoffrey greeted that the girl, "Good morning, Stacey" and went on to describe how he and his father saw a bike race after church. The other students on the rug looked at Geoffrey

while he spoke, some smiled, and others began to ask Geoffrey questions about what he saw without raising their hands. This type of class conversation without raising hands was also seen in Ms. Rogann's classroom. Geoffrey smiled and greeted a different student with, "Good morning!" During my observation, Ms. Stavino smiled and only spoke once after the other students made a comment about Geoffrey's weekend. She asked Geoffrey what he thought when he saw the cyclists. He replied, "It was cool! I was dizzy watching the wheels." This set the tone for the rest of the classroom observation because Ms. Stavino began the day with an activity that created space for students to share whatever they wanted at that moment –what happened in their weekend or respond to a peer. Moments like the Morning Meeting were safe places for student voice to be heard. I will describe later in this chapter how I observed Ms. Stavino's teacher moves affect the ability of student voice to be heard, create space for leadership opportunities, and allow feelings of connectedness to develop.

Table 2. Assessment of Ms. Rogann and Ms. Stavino's Teacher Moves

	Teacher-Centered	**Student-Centered**
Teacher Moves	✓ Asks close-ended questions ✓ Seeks and validates what is perceived as the correct answer ✓ Tells students the exact steps on how to solve a problem	✓ Asks open-ended questions ✓ Listens with genuine concern and curiosity ✓ Asks follow-up probing questions ✓ Creates a plan with students and supports students in the execution of the plan
Ms. Rogann		✓ Asked why students gave a suggestion ✓ Listened without interrupting ✓ Did not verbally judge a student thought as correct or incorrect
Ms. Stavino		✓ Asked a student more about what he talked about ✓ Listened without interrupting ✓ Asked if other students wanted to ask him a question or make a comment

Participants

Five students from two third grade classrooms each at a Title 1 elementary school were invited to participate in a focus group and as co-researchers for this study. The ten participants were Latino and Black students who initiated conversations in class and during partner work. There were three Black boys and seven Latino students. Of the seven Latino students, four were girls and six were boys. The qualitative method of interviews and observation helped me understand what it meant to listen and be listened to from the perspective of the participants. I realized it was not enough to interview and observe the students. In order for this study to accurately reflect the voices of the students, it needed to be guided by their voices as co-researchers during the data analysis stage of the study.

Table 3. Participants' Demographic Background

Ethnicity	Gender	Teacher	Participant Name
African American	M	Rogann	Naim
Latina	F	Rogann	Isabella
Latina	F	Rogann	Andrea
Latino	M	Rogann	Juan
African American	M	Rogann	William
African American	M	Stavino	Malcolm
Latina	F	Stavino	Silvia
Latino	M	Stavino	Eduardo
Latino	M	Stavino	Fernando
Latina	F	Stavino	Miranda

Results

In chapter three, I described how I distributed my research questions and data collection methods according to how I looked for moments of student voice, leadership opportunity, and connectedness on the Student Voice Leading to Connectedness Methodology Graphic (see Figure 1). The relationship I described was primarily a linear one -student voice being heard leads to trust and allows leadership opportunities to be created which then leads to feelings of connectedness. After collecting and analyzing the interview and observation data of both third grade classrooms, I found that the arrow was not linear between student voice, leadership opportunities, and connectedness. Instead, it went in both directions as shown on Figure 2's Reciprocal Relationship Between Teacher Role, Student Voice, Leadership Opportunities, and Connectedness. Sometimes connectedness led back to the concepts of student voice and authentic leadership. Students used their voice to lead classroom interactions, which led to understanding of each other's needs and perspectives. When students felt understood, they felt a sense of connectedness in their classroom community. This gave them the confidence to practice leading in ways that benefited others and enabled them to feel a sense of connectedness to or belonging in their classrooms because their presence mattered to their peers' learning experiences. Although the findings were organized according to moments of leadership opportunities, student voice, and connectedness, there were many moments where all three concepts showed reciprocal relationships with each other. The reciprocal relationship of student voice being heard, authentic leadership opportunities being offered, and feelings of connectedness being developed was initiated by both teachers

using their role as facilitators of learning and shared authority with their students. Although I did not find much difference in the moments of student voice, leadership opportunities, and connectedness between both classrooms, I described in detail what I found in each classroom based on the data collected and analyzed from classroom observations and student interviews.

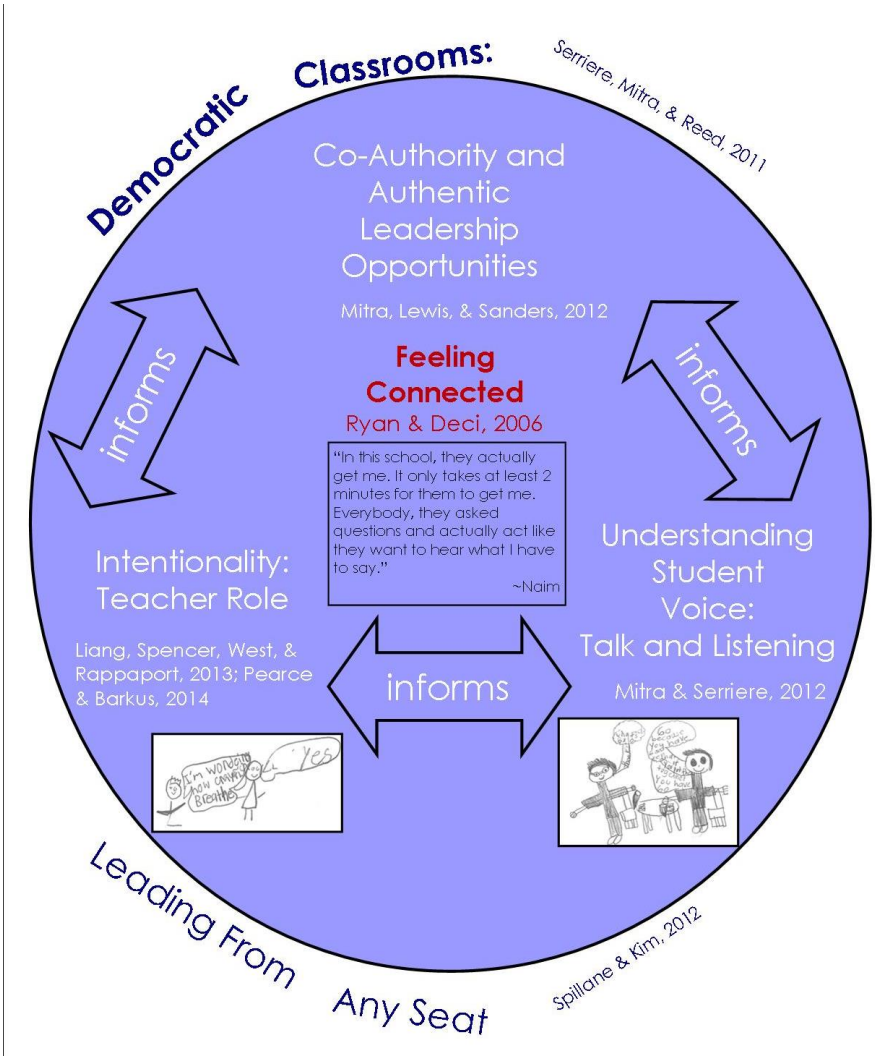

Figure 4. Reciprocal Relationship Between Teacher Role, Student Voice, Leadership Opportunities, and Connectedness

Moments of Leadership Opportunities: Leading from Any Seat

Intentionality: leadership, co-authority, and teacher role. Leadership is typically seen as one individual directing and making decisions for the many. In traditional classrooms, the teacher usually takes on the position of leading the students. As mentioned in chapter three, I looked for leadership opportunities when students made suggestions or initiated improvements for classroom routines or learning experiences (Jackson & Marriott, 2012; Spillane & Kim, 2012). Within the two third grade classrooms, both teachers had been intentional in designing their classroom environments to create space for their students to explore the freedom to voice what they were wondering and to share ideas that benefited their peers. This theme emerged in response to Research Questions #2 and 3: *When do elementary students have opportunities to participate in the leadership decisions in the classroom?* and *What leadership opportunities are meaningful to elementary students?* The two third grade teachers did not have a designated time in the day that allowed students to voice their ideas but instead had woven the opportunities for students to be heard throughout the day and in every lesson.

During observations of both classrooms, instruction was not teacher directed but instead inquiry based. Instruction was designed around a single open-ended question asked to the whole class during math and science instruction. Instead of telling the students how to solve a problem or teaching them steps, Ms. Rogann and Ms. Stavino purposefully asked students to both talk with partners and to share with the whole class their questions and ideas. Not once did the teachers tell the students they were wrong or

right. Instead, they asked more questions of students to gain a deeper understanding of each other's ideas. The intentionality of designing inquiry-based instruction from both teachers created space for students to feel their ideas contributed to the learning that was happening among their peers.

Ms. Rogann's third grade classroom. Ms. Rogann created leadership opportunities for her students when she listened to their ideas. This informed her teacher moves so she could understand what leadership opportunities were meaningful to them. Ms. Rogann's students valued how she created space to listen to them. William stated, "I feel people really need to share their ideas, because it's really better to share your thoughts instead of keeping them."

Naim also expressed the need for his voice to be heard despite his ideas being questioned:

> Well, it made me feel like they wanted to hear what I said and wanted to know if I was right like being skeptical, but at the same time, I really didn't care because all I want is really for them to listen to what I have to say.

Ms. Rogann used her role as facilitator of her students' learning to model and teach her students how to have conversations with each other about their ideas. While watching a whole class conversation about a shared reading text from *The Tale of Despereaux*, the focus group from Ms. Stavino's class noticed that Ms. Rogann asked students to talk to a partner about a student's question, "What does it mean when Roscuro said light is like life?" Instead of Ms. Rogann repeating the student's question, she asked the student to state her own question to the class. As the students turned to their partners on the rug to talk about the question, Ms. Rogann also knelt down to talk with a pair of

students already immersed in conversation. One student in the focus group explained that this showed Ms. Rogann was listening to those students and was taking their ideas seriously. Ms. Rogann modeled the act of listening and seeking to understand a student by asking questions and physically kneeling on the ground with them like a peer. Ms. Rogann also asked students, "Can you say more about that?" when they would contribute an answer to a question or refer to a student's idea when adding her own idea, "Juan, that reminded me of your idea about how light and darkness go against each other in this text." By asking questions and referencing a student's idea, Ms. Rogann shared authority with her students so they could speak up more, contribute their ideas, and lead by asking questions about the text or of each other.

Some of the students replicated the conversation behaviors of Ms. Rogann with one another. William asked a student, "Can you say that again?" just as Ms. Rogann had done earlier with a different student. This was a moment of leading because students initiated their own questions and opinions to facilitate each other's learning. Students would begin with, "What does it mean by...?" During the shared reading observation, I noticed Isabella ask Juan, "What do you mean by Despereaux is like Roscuro?" In an interview, Juan described how they pursued conversations with each other as their teachers did with them:

> Oh, we would ask. We would tell them. Like if I say, 'William,' William could say something, and then if I say, 'Andrea, Isabella,' anybody they would tell us, 'I don't get this. Can you say it again?' Then we would keep telling them until they understand it.

Students came to trust their teachers and trust that their voices were important enough to be understood because Ms. Rogann intentionally used her role in the classroom

as a facilitator of learning. Naim described how he felt about Ms. Rogann:

> She'd be the only person that understands me or the only person that I can actually explain it to. She asked me "what do you mean? “And then I know [she wants to know what I mean].

Eventually, students began to share ideas in class that enabled them to take on the role of co-teachers because of Ms. Rogann’s modeling and facilitation. When students took on the role of co-teachers, they showed a willingness to lead their learning.

Juan stated he noticed Adrian needed help with the open-ended math problem:

> All the time when we do something, I would help people, and they would say thank you. With Adrian, I'm not trying to be mean or anything, but sometimes he doesn't do anything, and then I have to tell him to do the work instead of just sitting there doing nothing. Then when I help that's when he turns on his brain, and then he starts working.

Adrian did not need to ask for help. He explained how Ms. Rogann gives him the freedom to help his peers. In this example, Juan led Adrian’s learning because he facilitated Adrian’s learning just as Ms. Rogann had done for him.

Researcher:	The example of how you asked him if he knows what to do or when a friend comes up to you and asks you for help, do you have to ask for permission from somebody to do it, or can you do that anytime that it's needed?
Juan:	Well, I can mostly do it anytime.
Researcher:	Is it only you, or do you feel the whole class can do that anytime?
Juan:	The whole class.
Researcher:	How do you know that you can do it anytime?
Juan:	Because whenever we're doing something, they wouldn't play around. They would just talk with their partners, and try to figure out a question.

During an observation, Juan also led his own learning when he chose to work on his own during the first few minutes of the math task while the rest of the class worked in small groups of three or in pairs. After Juan worked independently for a few minutes, he

then walked to a small group and leaned over to talk with them. The democratic learning environment designed by Ms. Rogann enabled students like Juan to lead each other's learning because they noticed and then acted when their peers needed help. They also had the freedom to lead their own learning and do what they needed at that moment as Juan did for himself. This example revealed that leadership is fluid where both students and teachers step up as needed in partner work, small group, and whole class tasks. Juan knew his teacher, Ms. Rogann, allowed him and his peers to lead when they recognized the need because Ms. Rogann shared authority with her students. During the classroom observation, Ms. Rogann sat close to the students' level whenever ideas were exchanged in whole class conversations. This positioning of herself as an equal to her students also showed students she was sharing authority with them so they could lead.

During interviews, students mentioned they could help in any way within their classroom at any time. The act of helping was seen as leading. Students noticed each other, and they noticed that they had opportunities in class to initiate ideas and actions that could help their peers. Isabella said, "I just do it when I see it." However, Naim had a different understanding:

> Well, if it was like what happened with William, I wouldn't need to ask. I would just like run over there and try to get [the whiteboard] out the way before [he was] going to fall. Then if they actually need something, like looking some word up in the dictionary that nobody knows, I will have to ask to do that because then the teacher would be thinking that I'm just getting up.

When I asked Naim when he could initiate helping the class, he explained that there was a difference between helpfulness and distracting the class. Although he still needed to ask Ms. Rogann for permission to do something that could help the whole

class, Naim stated, “Well, I really don't mind. I can ask her any time.” He was okay deferring to his teacher’s authority because his ability to speak up was not limited to certain times in the day. Ms. Rogann’s role as an authority figure was one who protected every student’s right to feel heard and understood. Her position was not to control her students, so Naim was not threatened by her. He felt safe deferring to her authority when needed. This interaction between Ms. Rogann and Naim shows how authority and humility are needed when teachers and students share authority in a classroom so both can lead. During a classroom observation of a whole group science conversation, Naim asked Ms. Rogann, “Why don’t we change science groups?” Ms. Rogann then responded, “You may take one minute and decide your roles today. I will not decide. You can decide.” Ms. Rogann used her authority to create space for Naim to lead by changing the science groups. When Naim suggested an idea to improve the roles of his science group members, Ms. Rogann was comfortable stepping back and allowing him to lead. If Ms. Rogann needed to use her authority to lead how learning was happening in her class, Naim was also comfortable deferring to her authority because of the relationship she had built with him.

Ms. Stavino’s third grade classroom. Ms. Stavino created leadership opportunities for her students by trusting them to pursue their curiosities in learning. After being asked to draw and describe a moment when someone listened to him that day in an interview (see Figure 3), Eduardo stated he shared a question he was wondering about crayfish:

> When Ms. Stavino told me, ‘Research it’, I researched how they breathe. I went on YouTube and checked how do crayfish breathe and I found out evidence. I did it with my group. I worked with my group and me and my

partner, we put a video on and we saw the video. Someone put food dye on it, on the crayfish, and then they breathed from its mouth.

Figure 5. Eduardo's Interview Drawing

This ability to for students to pursue learning together and collaborate when students felt it was needed created moments of authentic leadership for students because Ms. Stavino built her instruction around student questioning and sharing of ideas. Meaningful leadership opportunities were also linked to student choice. Students, like Eduardo, were able to look up their own wonderings in science with partners. Another example when Ms. Stavino created a moment of leadership for her students was when she asked them to do a gallery walk of the posters where math partners wrote their math strategies and explained their thinking in words. She gave math partners two red dot stickers to place on the posters that showed the most helpful strategies and explained their thinking clearly. This was a moment of leadership because Ms. Stavino did not pick the posters herself but asked students to choose what was the most helpful for their understanding of the math story problem. As students walked around to the tables with the strategy posters, some students said, "That's the same." I heard students having conversations, saw them leaning over the posters, and watched them reading and pointing

at the posters at each table. I heard another student say, “This is efficient.” Students randomly walked to tables, and some returned to tables they had already visited.

Ms. Stavino’s students also felt comfortable leading by improving classroom routines. Fernando noticed students were taking too long finding math partners and some students were left without a partner. Fernando described how he suggested Ms. Stavino change the way students choose partners during a math task:

> Some people just lay around when they pick their friend. I thought, ‘I can fix that.’ I thought of that idea and then I solved that problem because everyone was working and their sheets were filled.

In the observation video, right before students were excused to work on the math task, I saw Fernando call out to Ms. Stavino a suggestion on how she could create math partners, “Could you pick the partners through sticks?” Ms. Stavino looked at Fernando and listened. When other students heard Fernando’s idea, some said, “No” and some said, “Yes” Fernando kept his eyes on Ms. Stavino as other students responded in various ways. Ms. Stavino then said, “Since it sounds like most enjoyed the round of partners last week, so I will do that again.” Ms. Stavino took a cup of popsicle sticks with the students’ names on them. Fernando whispered, “Yes!” The rest of the class was silent. She proceeded to pull two sticks at a time so students could work with each other. Students found their partner and began the math task immediately without any visible resistance.

Ms. Stavino also embraced her role as facilitator of learning. During classroom observations, Ms. Stavino enabled students to lead by asking her students to share strategies in how to approach solving a math task. Questions asked of students were followed by more questions to deeply understand the thinking of a student. During a math

lesson, I observed Ms. Stavino read the math story problem and ask her students to turn to a partner and share how they might approach the problem. As students spoke to their partners, Ms. Stavino observed her students engage in conversations with each other and then walked to a pair of students. She knelt down on the ground with them and looked at the student that was sharing. When it was time for students to share their strategy, Ms. Stavino called on Jerry. Jerry shared his strategy, "After he plays, we need to figure out how many fourths he has left to play." After Jerry shared his strategy, Ms. Stavino repeated Jerry's strategy, "Jerry says we need to find how many fourths are left to play. That's interesting." When students would engage in small group conversation, Ms. Stavino would prompt students to face each other as they asked each other questions, disagree with one another, turn to one another for help, and add on to each other's comments. Eduardo expressed how this happened in Ms. Stavino's class, "Whenever I'm stuck on something, Ms. Stavino says, 'Tell a friend if you need help', and I always tell someone and then they help me with the hard thing." Andrea expressed a similar description about Ms. Rogann:

> Because Ms. Rogann always says let other people talk because other people don't talk a lot. They talk because Ms. Rogann sometimes says you're not talking that much. Can you say more about that about what he said or she said.

When Ms. Stavino intentionally took on the role of facilitator in student learning by asking students questions and creating space for them to share their ideas with their peers, students replicated this behavior with one another in how they spoke and listened to each other. Ms. Stavino created space for her students to lead each other's learning

because students were prompted to turn to each other for help. The act of" helping" was also seen as leading in Ms. Stavino's class as was in Ms. Rogann's class.

Moments of Student Voice: Observable Behaviors of Listening Lead to Feeling Connected and Feeling Understood

Observable behaviors: talk and listening. Since both Ms. Rogann and Ms. Stavino chose to share authority with their students so they could lead each other, students spoke up in certain situations. However, speaking could not be isolated from listening. As mentioned in chapter three, I looked for moments when students were using their own words to communicate what they or a peer needed, how students and teachers listened, and how student voice changed the classroom environment. These were the criteria I used while interviewing students and observing each of the third grade democratic classrooms for student voice. The focus group defined what being listened to meant to them through interviews and co-analysis. This theme emerged in response to Research Question #1: *In classrooms designed around distributed leadership models, do students speak up and/or feel listened to?* Analysis of classroom instruction showed students wanting to ask questions and engage in "how to" conversations with each other in math, science, and shared reading lessons. Students wanted to talk when it was useful to their peers. Students shared strategies with each other.

Ms. Rogann's third grade classroom. Ms. Rogann's inquiry based instruction created a purpose for her students to feel motivated to listen to each other because they wanted their ideas to be understood. This was a moment of student voice. An authentic problem was posed to the class, and students collaborated with one another. In a

classroom observation, Ms. Rogann read a math story problem to the class. She asked students to talk in partnerships about what they understood from the problem and not the answer. Students then began to turn to partners right away. I heard students begin conversations with, “I understand that...” and “I think you need to...because it says...” By Ms. Rogann asking an open-ended question, the students had more space to share their ideas. This was a moment of student voice being honored because multiple perspectives were encouraged.

Students also researched their own questions, and they found information linked to their question. Ms. Rogann trusted the students to work together to find various ways to engage with the problem. During the observation, Ms. Rogann asked Naim’s group what they needed to explore questions they had about their crayfish. When she walked away, Naim grabbed his computer. He then asked his group, “What do you want to look up?” By Ms. Rogann listening to the voices of Naim’s group, Naim learned how to also listen to his group’s voices. The trust Ms. Rogann had in her students to work together to find what they needed for their learning enabled students to turn to one another as resources. During an interview with Naim, he described this same moment of student voice when Naim and his group researched their own questions about crayfish:

> I told my group to come here and look at the computer because we're looking up the crayfish and why they behave that way. If we got up to the biggest crayfish, it would have done this. We looked up why it behaves that way and then I went to this website. I went to that website and saw why they do that to protect themselves. It's like a threat and if it keeps on going, then it's just going to pinch.

During the co-analysis of videotaped classroom observations, Ms. Rogann’s students explained what they defined as helpful talk in their classroom. Isabella stated

what she shares “help[ed] them think about more stuff.” Silvia felt “adding on” to a conversation was an effective way to speak or be included when someone asked a question and they did not want to answer it, but they might just have wanted to add on to what somebody else has already said. This example showed how student voice and leadership affect each other because Isabella wanted to use her voice, student voice, to help, or lead, her peers think more about what they were learning.

Figure 6. Poster of Interview Co-Analysis Notes

Students also interacted with each other as co-teachers. Andrea noticed her classmates needed her help so she used her voice to initiate teaching her class. She stated, “Only a little bit of kids know what prepositions are and I almost forgot about that and then I explained it.” Andrea chose to use talk to teach her peers because she was needed. When asked how this made her feel, she expressed, “Really happy because people were remembering what I said.” Her ability to teach her peers and be remembered gave her a

place in her classroom community, a sense of belonging. Andrea's example showed how when student voice is heard, students use their voice to lead learning, which results in a feeling of connectedness.

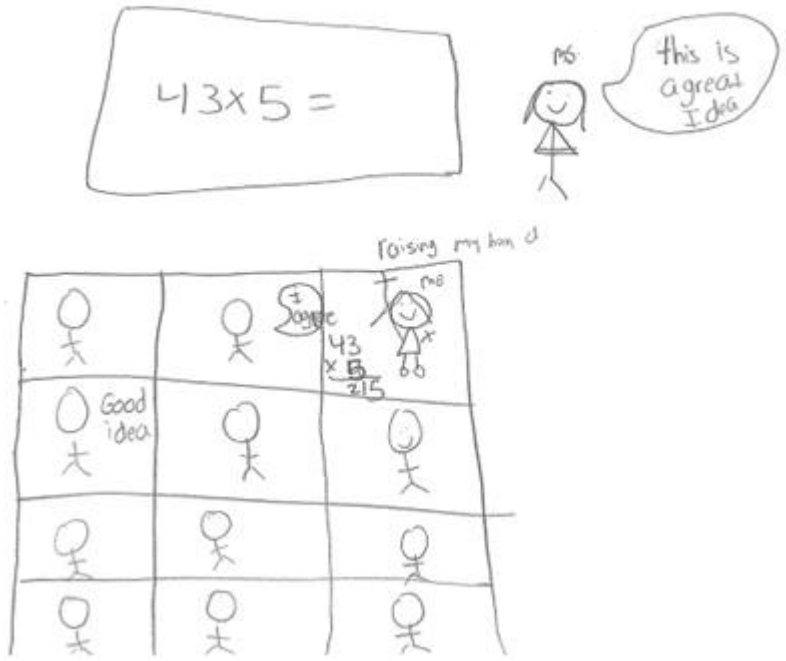

Figure 7. Andrea's Interview Drawing

In another example of how student voice was used to lead learning, Juan shared a time when he taught William multiplication. Juan developed William's understanding of multiplication instead of merely giving him the answer:

> Well, today when we were in math. I think it was yesterday when William said if I know what's 6 times 10, and then I told him that if you put 6 groups and you put 10 in each one you'll have 60. Then that's what he said he thinks, and that's when he was putting it on his paper.

Figure 8. Juan's Interview Drawing

Juan also used student voice to teach his peer just as Andrea did. Juan also felt happy when he helped William understand math. The feeling of "happiness" revealed connectedness. The happiness was in the context of him teaching his peers and them gaining understanding:

> Maybe they feel happy because they actually understand it now. Then if they don't get it they would tell me again if I could say it again, and they would get, I don't know, happy. They wouldn't not know the answer of the question, so when they don't understand it I would tell them again, and again, and again until they understand it. Then they would be happy, and they would understand it instead of not understanding it.

The examples of how students used student voice from Ms. Rogann's class, showed being listened to and feeling connected were not the mere acceptance of what someone said. There needed to be a meaningful response. The meaningful response involved empowering students to question each other in order to understand one another. During a math observation, Ms. Rogann told a student that her role was to listen to other people's ideas and be a skeptic in the whole class conversation by asking questions about other students' ideas. Ms. Rogann explained, "You know what's going to make you

smarter right now is listening and being a skeptic and helping other people develop their ideas?" This was an example of how Ms. Rogann was explicitly teaching a student how to respond in meaningful ways to other people's ideas or how to respond to student voice.

Naim described meaningful talk as peers exchanging critical dialogue. He stated:

> Understanding what I want them to understand and listening. Then I let them talk and I try to understand what they're saying and what they mean. We take turns, understanding what each other says and means.

This example from Naim shows how the students learned to listen to understand each other. This use of listening to understand student voice from peers developed their feelings of connectedness.

Ms. Stavino's third grade classroom. Ms. Stavino had also used inquiry based instruction and her open-ended questioning to elicit her students' various perspectives. During a class observation, Ms. Stavino gave her students a Shel Silverstein poem. After she read it aloud, she said, "Talk to a partner about what you noticed." Students turned to a partner sitting next to them and began to talk immediately. After a few minutes, Ms. Stavino asked for the students' attention and asked what they noticed again. A moment of student voice as when one student spoke without raising her hand, "I notice gravity is really weird in this poem." Ms. Stavino then responded with a probing question, "It's really weird? Why do you say that?" The student then looked at the poem and stated, "We usually fall down, not up." Ms. Stavino used open-ended and probing questioning to create space for students to share their perspectives or their student voice.

In Ms. Stavino's class, student voice was honored as they were encouraged to engage with each other's thinking. During interviews, students described listening as being a physical response. Students knew they were being listened to when other students

looked at them and were silent when they spoke. Malcolm described this physical response of listening, “They're listening, because if they look you right in the eyes, that means they're listening.”

During co-analysis, the focus group agreed “looking at the speaker” showed being listened to when they spoke. This first step of being heard gave students assurance that their voices were being acknowledged. However, listening went beyond the physical response for students. During co-analysis of video observations of Ms. Stavino’s class, William noticed that students responded to each other’s thinking in class conversations in helpful ways versus unhelpful behaviors. He defined unhelpful talk as students “just saying the answer.” He described helpful talk as when students made statements that “turn on their brain” or “help turn on their brain.” William also stated listening was not only saying, “I agree or disagree”. Asking questions showed that they were listening to each other. Moments of student voice happened when students asked each other questions in order to understand each other’s thinking. Fernando also stated, “When they're looking at you. They're wondering things. They're just curious. They ask a lot of questions and when they talk more about that. “

During an interview with Malcolm, he described the response of his peers while sharing his math strategy on a poster with his partner:

> They was confused because on the poster, I was writing but then I forgot to put 2/4 because I just put 2. Then, they was asking me questions. I heard them talking to their partner. They was all like you forgot to put the four under the two. It's because I didn't have that much time because I forgot. When they saw I didn't do it, they started asking me questions so then I told them I forgot.

I too observed this interaction during their math lesson. One student pointed out

Malcolm's written explanation did not match his number line. Ms. Stavino said, "I'm glad you asked that question" and proceeded to read his written explanation aloud for the whole class. Ms. Stavino asked other students to explain Malcolm's thinking in their own words just from looking at the poster. Malcolm watched students explain what they understood from his poster in their own words. He remained silent. This was a moment of using listening and talk to understand student voice. When asked in the interview how he felt after his peers questioned him, he responded, "Better. Sometimes they forget to put something so then they know how it feels." Although Malcolm forgot to include a number on the fraction, he felt safe because his peers understood his mistake. His peers listened because they critically analyzed his work and paid attention to his thinking. He still felt a sense of belonging or connectedness to his peers despite his mistake. By having a safe environment for student voice to be heard and responded to, students in Ms. Stavino's class were able to engage with challenging subjects without negative ramifications.

Being listened to affected Silvia's ability to encounter subjects she felt insecure about, like math:

> It makes me feel that I think I feel like I'm somewhere. I feel like I'm somewhere and I think people are looking at me and I'm starting to talk. Then when I want to start talking I freeze and don't say nothing.

Since Silvia's democratic classroom embraced curiosity and safety to use student voice to question what students do not know, there was an absence of ridicule when she did not understand something. Instead, students were witnessed coming alongside their peers to "add onto" their voice and not overpower it. This "adding onto" another peer's voice was also seen as a moment of student voice because students wanted to include their

perspective. For example, Fernando and Silvia were partners during a math task. During math partner work on the observation video, I saw Silvia walk up to the board and point to a few words on the math story problem. Fernando was looking at her, and Silvia walked back to the round table they were working at. Fernando then said a few words, and they both added writing on the poster they shared. Ms. Stavino had been walking to every round table group to ask and listen to strategies. When she stopped at Fernando and Silvia's table, she asked, "What strategy did you use?" Both Silvia and Fernando talked to Ms. Stavino. Ms. Stavino then replied, "Are you adding and subtracting fractions? Why is that?" I noticed Ms. Stavino continued to use open-ended questioning and refrained from stating if an answer was right or wrong. Instead, she focused her questioning on eliciting student ideas and used follow-up questions to help students explain their reasoning. When students gathered on the rug to share out their strategies, Fernando noticed Silvia was pausing in her explanation during math. Fernando asked Silvia if he could add onto what she was attempting to say:

> Ms. Stavino says, 'Do you need someone to help?' and someone raises their hand, that's Fernando, and he really helps me. He knows what to say and he knows when to say it. That is how I understand it now.

Since Fernando listened to Silvia's ideas during the math task, he asked her if he could help the class understand her. She agreed. Fernando described how he used student voice to speak on behalf of Silvia:

> Some people get confused, why they did that. I explained why they did that, and they actually understood why they did that because I explained it in my own language, in my own words. Then they understand why they did that.

Fernando describes student voice as being his own words in the way he chooses to

explain something. His moment of leadership was using his voice to help his peers understand something they did not understand before.

When Fernando helped the class understand Silvia, she felt "happy" being listened to and understood. This feeling of "happiness" created a moment of connectedness because Fernando used his student voice to lead a conversation that helped Silvia be understood. Silvia remained connected to her class community although she had insecurities in math. Her connectedness developed because Fernando listened to understand her.

During interviews, Miranda described this exchange between Fernando and Silvia. She defined what Fernando said for Silvia as "helpful". Fernando's "helpful" act in speaking on the behalf of Silvia was a moment of leadership. Miranda also felt "good" about using her voice to help her peers learn, "It made me feel good cause I was helping people, classmates, to do that. It made me feel good because I was actually helping them learn." By Miranda using her voice to help peers learn was another moment of leadership, but Miranda described the result of her leadership in relation to a feeling. This "good" feeling in helping her peers was another moment of connectedness because of authentic leadership. Feeling connected because of leadership opportunities was also described in how students thought other students saw them.

The Result: Moments of Connectedness

In chapter three, I mentioned I would look for moments of connectedness when students expressed positive feelings when describing how they helped their class or when other students described positive feelings towards a peer's leadership during interviews. I

also described how I would look for the ways in which students responded when they shared ideas formally or informally with the teacher and peers during classroom observations. Did they smile, share more ideas, or stop sharing ideas? Did these students say they enjoyed being in their classrooms?

When students were taught how to invite each other into conversations, notice their peers' needs, remember what they said, and respond to what a peer said, students eventually did this on their own and for each other. The classroom culture changed. They assumed what they wondered was what their peers wondered too. They began to believe they belonged in their classroom community. This theme emerged in response to Research Question #4: *How is school connectedness affected when students participate in authentic and meaningful leadership opportunities?*

Although both Ms. Rogann and Ms. Stavino intentionally crafted a learning environment where students developed agency and practiced collaborative conversations, the students associated listening as an act primarily done with peers. Students were building academic agency and fostering a sense of belonging among their peers. Talk led to listening. Listening was illustrated through both physical and verbal responses. Students used their voice to lead classroom interactions, which led to understanding of each other's needs and perspectives. When students felt understood, they also felt a sense of connectedness. This gave them the confidence to practice leading in ways that benefited others and enabled them to feel a sense of connectedness or belonging in their classrooms because their presence mattered to their peers' learning experiences.

Ms. Rogann's third grade classroom. In a classroom observation, William fell while cleaning up their math materials. Naim immediately asked William, "William, are

you ok?" Ms. Rogann came right after Naim and asked the same question to William. Then a group of six students walked over to look at William with serious looks on their faces. William looked up from the ground and said, "I tripped on a whiteboard." This was a moment of connectedness because students showed genuine concern for a fellow student.

During co-analysis of interviews, the focus group noticed students felt "happy" when they were listened to and when their words were remembered. Andrea expressed this "happiness" when describing how she felt when others listened to her, "Really happy because people were remembering what I said." Although the feeling of "happiness" may appear to some as a simple emotion, this was significant for the students' sense of belonging and connectedness to their class community because "happiness" was feeling connected.

The opportunity to listen and speak more freely enabled students to notice one another. This noticing of other members in a community showed connectedness. Noticing each other's needs and responding revealed students were connected. Juan noticed Adrian needed help and felt a responsibility to help him:

> Well, when we were in the table I had to help Adrian, and then he didn't know what to do because he was all the way at the back in the [back row of the rug], and he wasn't listening. He was my partner, and then I had to help him. I told him, 'Do you understand this?' Then he said, 'No.' Then that's when I tried to turn on his brain, and that's when he did, when I helped him. Then that's when he started doing his work.

Juan's response showed he felt his peer needed his role in his classroom. Feeling needed in a community creates feelings of connectedness.

Naim described listening and connectedness as mutual understanding. This

mutual understanding helped him feel connected to his classroom peers. This was Naim's first year at Martin Elementary as he had attended a different elementary school the year before. Naim stated, "Somebody actually gets me" when asked how it made him feel when someone understood him. When asked if he felt "one school got him more than the other," he responded by stating:

> My old school, they barely even got me. I will ask them the question and then they'll be like, 'What do you mean?' I try to explain it to them and they're like, 'I don't get it.' It takes me awhile to get them to see what I mean. It would originally take me 15 minutes to get them to see what I mean. In this school, they actually get me. It only takes at least 2 minutes for them to get me. Because nobody really knew what I meant in my old school. Like here, I came from nobody know what I meant from all the way to here, everybody knows what I mean. Everybody, they asked questions and actually act like they want to hear what I have to say.

When observing Naim's interactions with other students from Ms. Rogann's class, I saw Naim immediately talk with and listen to his partners, contribute comments in whole class conversations, ask his science group what they wanted to research, and ask Ms. Rogann to change science roles. Naim was seen to move freely in the classroom by sitting with different students on the rug and at table groups. All these behaviors showed connectedness because both his peers and teacher recognized his presence. When asked if there was a difference between him wanting to be at one school more than the other, he replied:

> It's really the same, but every day I wake up, I'm like, 'It's a new day. Let's see if they have more questions or let's see if they actually get me.' When I'm here, I'll wake up, it's a brand new day, I know they're going to get me. Yes, they're going to ask questions, I know it.

Although most of the focus students felt being able to speak, be heard, and understood were significant to them feeling connected due to leading their classroom

environment, Juan felt “regular”, “I just felt the same. I just felt regular.” Juan felt “regular” helping William figure out what 6x10 equaled during a math task. Having the freedom to help his peers when he needed it, felt normal or “regular” for Juan.

Ms. Stavino’s third grade classroom. During co-analysis, the focus group called students helping each other as “teamwork”. The act of helping and working as a team showed connectedness in Ms. Stavino’s classroom community. During an observation of a math task, one girl was randomly partnered with a boy. The boy was silently looking at the math story problem on the board and said, “I told you I can’t explain it.” The girl then said, “Try your best. Is it the same or maybe is it different?” They both then looked at the board again. The girl shared her thinking, “Well I think it’s adding. What do you think? Do you think it’s subtracting?” The boy then told the girl to share her strategy. She then described how she would add the fractions, “Ok. Well I would add the two fourths to the one fourth to make three fourths. What do you think we should do?” The girl showed teamwork with her partner because although she knew how to solve the math problem, she wanted to ask him questions to include his ideas in their partnership. She wanted to include his perspective. This was a moment of connectedness.

Figure 9. Andrea's Video Analysis of "Teamwork"

Fernando's ability to listen to and understand his peers enabled him to help other students understand each other, just as he had helped the class understand Silvia's thinking during math. Fernando used his leadership to increase understanding for Silvia. Understanding gave listening and leading a purpose, which led to feelings of connectedness. Fernando also saw this ability to help others understand and feel understood as creating a feeling of connectedness or a sense of belonging. He felt he was needed. This affected how Fernando saw himself; "It made me feel proud of myself because I always wanted to help my friends. Whenever they need help, I always raise my hand so I could help them."

This also affected how he believed his peers saw him, "I think he meant he appreciates it and that's why he's proud. He appreciates a lot. He appreciates it, and that's what makes him proud of myself." When asked how Silvia felt after Fernando helped her, she called him a "true friend." She elaborated:

> Excited, like, 'Oh, thank you Fernando!' I feel really thankful for Fernando because he's a really true friend for me because he knows what to say and he raises his hand so I pick him so I can know when it's time to say it. That's why Fernando is a true friend.

Calling Fernando a “true friend” showed a moment of connectedness because Silvia needed Fernando and felt she could rely on him when she needed him during the share out portion of math. Silvia could rely on Fernando because he used his voice to lead others to understand her. Student voice was used by students, like Fernando, to lead their own as well as their peers’ learning, which resulted in their connectedness.

Summary of Results

The ten participants in this study were Black and Latino third grade students attending a Title 1 elementary school. They were invited to co-analyze data collected from observations and interviews as a focus group. The data showed multiple ways in which school connectedness was affected when elementary students used their voice in informal leadership opportunities in the classroom to lead their learning.

Chapter Five: Discussion

Introduction

When students develop feelings of connectedness to and belonging in schools, they believe themselves to be capable of enacting change through the practice of citizenship with adult guidance and validation (Cook-Sather, 2002). This study explored whether and how providing authentic leadership opportunities for elementary students created feelings of connectedness and belonging in two third grade democratic learning environments –where student voice was heard throughout the day and instruction was student-centered.

At the heart of citizenship in democracy is voice. Public educators have the potential to foster a democratic culture by beginning to listen to and implement student voice, in addition to the traditional model of valuing only adult voices, in the classroom to enact significant school change. Educators can listen and respond to student voice by including students in meaningful, informal leadership opportunities in classrooms (Cook-Sather, 2006). This study explored what this type of inclusion looks like in the elementary years as well as its impact on students' own feelings of connectedness to their peers, teachers, and classrooms.

Context of the Problem

Young elementary student voice is typically not invited in discussions of teaching and learning. They are too often not considered to be capable of leading their own learning experiences. Instead, teacher voice usually leads learning in classrooms. This

example of hierarchical leadership where adults are the leaders is common in schools with vulnerable populations, which are traditionally identified as students of color and students who struggle economically. When student voice is not heard and students are not asked to lead their learning experiences, students will resist the adult in authority and lose engagement in learning. Instead, research suggests they need to be included in conversations that direct and guide their learning while also providing opportunities for students to lead the changes needed to improve their learning experiences (Liang, Spencer, West, and Rappaport, 2013). It is important for adults in schools to create an inclusive school climate where students of color are asked about their learning experiences rather than a climate that perpetuates a feeling of disconnection and exclusion.

Purpose of the Study in Context of the Larger Problem

For the purpose of this study, I used the terms *student voice, leadership opportunities*, and *school connectedness* in my analysis of how young elementary students navigated a learning environment intentionally designed to include their voices. I defined these terms according to how the research encapsulated them.

Student voice exists both when students use their own words and when the adults in their sphere listen to them and act upon their thoughts, feelings, and needs (Cook-Sather, 2006). Having leadership opportunities means that students notice what they and their peers need and then initiate action with the person in power, the teacher. The leadership opportunity comes when those in power, such as the teacher, create space for the student to be heard and enact their stated needs (Spillane & Kim, 2012).

Connectedness is not merely having friendships but also when students feel they positively contribute to a community (Kelly, 2006). This study explored whether and how providing authentic leadership opportunities for elementary students created feelings of connectedness and belonging in two third grade democratic learning environments. The following research findings and conclusions highlight ways in which feelings of connectedness develop when teachers share authority with students by providing leadership opportunities in a democratic learning environment and listen to student voice. Two third grade classrooms in a Title 1 elementary school were chosen for this study because the teachers intentionally created learning environments where authority was shared. These classrooms honored Black and Latino student voices by creating distributed leadership opportunities.

The key to understanding which leadership opportunities were, in fact, meaningful for elementary students was through asking them questions, listening to their answers, and responding to their voices. Observations and interviews were done in these two third grade democratic classrooms to understand how inclusive environments where leadership opportunities are provided impact feelings of connectedness.

Ten students from two third grade classrooms were invited to participate in a focus group and as co-researchers for this study. In order for this study to accurately reflect the voices of the students, it needed to be guided by their voices as co-researchers during the data analysis stage of the study. The conclusions and implications of these findings for elementary teachers, school leaders focused on social justice, and at-risk students are described later in the chapter.

Moments of Leadership Opportunities: Leading from Any Seat

Teachers believe students are their partners. Both third grade teachers had been intentional in designing their classroom environments to create space for their students' voice what they were wondering about and to share ideas that benefited their peers. This theme emerged in response to Research Questions #2 and 3: *When do elementary students have opportunities to participate in the leadership decisions in the classroom?* and *What leadership opportunities are meaningful to elementary students?* Both teachers intentionally took on the role as facilitator in student learning by asking students questions and creating space for them to share their ideas with their peers; students replicated this behavior with one another in how they spoke and listened to each other during all whole class and partner discussions. Students and teachers asked each other probing questions like, "What do you mean by ...?" and "Can you say more about that?" Asking open-ended questions provided opportunities for careful listening and mutual learning to take place. The purpose of the listening behaviors was to learn from their students through invitation and collaboration. This authentic partnership with students enabled the teachers to gain more knowledge about how to create and sustain democratic classroom communities (Pearce & Barkus, 2014).

Both third grade teachers developed the classroom community by designing learning opportunities in which all learners could contribute. Learning was collaborative and inquiry-based for both third grade classrooms. Students asked their own questions, and teachers were intentional in enabling students to teach one another by answering each other's questions and develop peer partnerships in researching their questions.

Recognizing children's interpersonal needs and the importance of collaborative activities, Dewey (1903) believed students should function as a social group. Teachers and students share membership in this community, and it is through collaboration that learning occurs. Being a member of a community includes feeling part of a group. Education, more than anywhere else, has the potential to be a source of training, character building, and development of intelligence for students to practice democratic citizenship. Leadership opportunities create authentic practice of democratic citizenship as was shown throughout the students' classroom behaviors and interview comments.

Young students in both Ms. Stavino's and Ms. Rogann's classrooms slowly gained the skills to share leadership in a Vygotskian style of apprenticeship from their teachers. The students began this relational process by watching and learning how their teachers asked each other open-ended questions and actively listened to the answers. Then the students slowly acquired the expertise to take on leadership roles by working side by side with their peers and their teachers. For example, Isabella asked Juan, "What do you mean by Despereaux is like Roscuro?" Isabella used the same open-ended questioning to a peer that Ms. Rogann had modeled for the class. In order to move beyond being obedient citizens and develop into engaged, justice-oriented citizens, children need to have opportunities to apply democratic values (Serriere et al., 2011), and the students in the two classrooms studied here had those opportunities. The third grade teachers asked questions of student thinking, directed students to face one another during collaborative conversations held during whole and small groups, and had students turn to one another as resources. Eduardo explained how he internalized Ms. Stavino's modeling, "Whenever I'm stuck on something, Ms. Stavino says, 'Tell a friend if you

need help', and I always tell someone and then they help me with the hard thing."

Neither teacher "gave the answer" to her students. Instead, they both used their role as facilitators of student thinking. Andrea expressed how Ms. Rogann created space for her to teach the class, "Ms. Rogann told me can you explain to someone about the prepositions?" Students in both classrooms then replicated these same teacher behaviors during interactions with each other. When asked when he had helped someone in class, Juan shared a time when he taught William multiplication. Juan developed William's understanding of multiplication instead of merely giving him the answer:

> Well, today when we were in math. I think it was yesterday when William said if I know what's 6 times 10, and then I told him that if you put 6 groups and you put 10 in each one you'll have 60. Then that's what he said he thinks, and that's when he was putting it on his paper.

These examples show how the teachers created authentic leadership opportunities and expected the students to serve as co-teachers for one another.

Trust between students and teachers developed because both groups were willing to enter negotiations and joint decision-making, which aligned with findings from previous studies (Gillespie &Mann, 2004). Students in both third grade classrooms voluntarily co-taught with their peers whenever it was needed. Students did not feel they had to ask permission from their teachers to teach math concepts to a peer, research their own questions during science, or give suggestions in improving partner work. Democratic competence was developed as teachers believed students were not passive but constantly making meaning of what is around them (Serriere et al., 2011).

Trust is viewed as mutual between two parties, shared between both teachers and students (Daly, 2006). Both third grade teachers chose to share authority with their

students in the classroom as was evidenced by both Naim, from Ms. Rogann's class, and Fernando, from Ms. Stavino's class, feeling comfortable improving classroom routines like choosing partners in math and science tasks. Fernando described how he suggested Ms. Stavino change the way students choose partners during a math task, "Some people just lay around when they pick their friend. I thought, 'I can fix that.' I thought of that idea and then I solved that problem because everyone was working and their sheets were filled." When teachers share authority and students trust them more, everyone begins to feel connected.

Trust in Naim enabled Ms. Rogann to share authority with him when he wanted to change science roles. Naim reciprocated in deferring to the authority of Ms. Rogann with other decisions that could affect the whole class. He was okay with deferring to the authority of the teacher because he could trust her. Ms. Rogann's role in the classroom was an authority figure who protected every student to feel heard and understood. Her perspective on authority was not to control her students, so her authority did not threaten Naim. He felt safe to defer to her authority when needed. Mutual trust is vital in a successful democratic learning environment where all voices are of equal importance (Gillespie & Mann, 2004; Sun et al., 2013).

Moments of Student Voice: Observable Behaviors of Listening Lead to Feeling Connected and Feeling Understood

Students use talk and listening to co-teach. Since both classroom teachers chose to share authority with their students, students spoke up in certain situations and defined what being listened to meant to them. This theme emerged in response to Research

Question #1: *In classrooms designed around distributed leadership models, do students speak up and/or feel listened to?*

When students advocate for one another, they develop into caring individuals and activists for social causes (Bergmark & Kostenius, 2009). The third grade focus group described helpful conversations as being when they could "add onto" each other's ideas, share math strategies a peer needed, and "turn on each other's brains". Student leadership roles provided an opportunity to learn how to represent their peers accurately while experiencing personal growth. This was evident when the focus group identified examples of meaningful talk that helped their peers learn in class. They saw their leadership role as being co-teachers for one another. Meaningful dialogue between students and adults in leadership encourages students to speak using the interests of their peers to improve the quality of their education (Kane & Chimwayange, 2013; Koller & Schugurensky, 2011).

Students in both third grade classrooms were given opportunities throughout the day to be consulted and their perspectives were included in classroom decisions. They relied on each other to listen, ask questions, and engage in active conversation until they were understood. Throughout the focus group discussions and one-on-one interviews, the students indicated that these examples increased their feelings of connectedness. This was especially helpful when Fernando helped Ms. Stavino and the other students understand Silvia's mathematical thinking when she had difficulty expressing it herself. There was not a designated time in the day for students to share their ideas, but rather it was the culture of the learning environments for students to listen, respond, and understand each other throughout the day whenever the need arose. The honoring of the collective student

voice increased feelings of school connectedness because it provided authentic opportunities to practice democratic citizenship. These examples reinforced Cook-Sather's (2002) findings that authorizing student perspectives can directly improve educational practice because when teachers listen to and learn from students, they can begin to see the world from those students' perspective.

Listening was first described by the focus group as being a physical response. Students used words like "looking right in the eyes" and "silent" while someone was speaking to show what listening looked like. Miranda described how she knew her peers were listening when she spoke, "They all turned around and they weren't talking." These listening behaviors operationalize Cook-Sather's (2007) findings that student voice must be responded to after it is solicited. Listening to understand proved to be instrumental in enabling one focus group student to feel safe enough to be corrected by his peers with a math mistake and another to seek the aid of a peer to explain her thinking to the rest of the class. Creating a listening culture in each of these third grade classrooms placed students in the position of translating other student perspectives about school experiences into language that others would understand (Cook-Sather, 2006).

By listening to student voice, educators can then learn which leadership opportunities have the strongest impact on increasing student connectedness. When adults ask, listen, respond, and enact a plan with students it builds self-esteem, confidence, and engagement. This yields stronger voice, sense of power and self-efficacy needed to create educational change. Listening to student voices enables adults to develop an understanding of the reality in the world in which students live (Holt, 2008). Ms. Stavino understood how Silvia approached a math problem because she provided

opportunities for students to talk through their thinking with each other. Silvia's partner, Fernando, was able to help her communicate her thinking to the rest of the class when she felt insecure articulating her own thoughts. Silvia trusted Fernando because he listened to and understood her, and he accurately represented her thoughts to her peers. Silvia also developed more agency in math because she was listened to and treated with dignity in a non-authoritarian environment. As a result, Fernando had also felt a sense of power and self-efficacy in sharing his partner's ideas. By listening to student voice, students like Fernando, are found to be trustworthy, capable, and competent (Bergmark & Kostenius, 2009). Students then build confidence and a sense of belonging in their classroom community.

The Result: Moments of Connectedness

Students form communities when they rely on one another. The observations, interviews, and co-analysis data in this study showed when students were taught by their teachers how to invite each other into conversations, notice their peers' needs, remember what they said, and respond to what a peer said, students eventually did this on their own and for each other. The classroom culture changed. When students are involved in classrooms and feel they are respected as individuals and as a social group, they are likely to feel a greater sense of respect and connectedness and are less likely to disengage from school (Cook-Sather, 2002). The students in this study demonstrated these positive feelings as well. This theme emerged in response to Research Question #4: *How is school connectedness affected when students participate in authentic and meaningful leadership opportunities?*

Both Ms. Rogann and Ms. Stavino created democratic classroom learning environments where student voice was heard throughout the day in whole and small group interactions. Teachers modeled how to ask probing questions of student thinking during an inquiry-based instruction and did not shut down thinking or tell students the answers. Instead, they encouraged students to turn to one another as resources. This created a safe community for students share their thinking with one another. Miranda felt she had an important role in her classroom, "[Sharing math strategies] made me feel good because I was actually helping them learn." Naim also trusted Ms. Rogann because she listened and asked him questions so she could understand him. When students feel connected to their schools, they are more willing to do what is valued by the person they feel connected with (Ryan &Deci, 2000).

Emotional connections to the learning community resulted from opportunities to share ideas with and listen to peers. Eduardo expressed this happiness when he said, "The moment [I helped Silvia explain her thinking to the class]? It was amazing because I loved it." Eduardo's experiences illustrate Osterman's findings (2000) that community is developed when all members experience feelings of belonging, trust in others, and safety. Focus group students in this study believed they were active members in their classroom communities and felt they had the ability to influence each other by co-teaching a concept when needed. They also that asking questions of each other was a genuine expression of wanting to understand one another. These third grade classrooms were communities where authentic leadership opportunities encouraged them to use their voices, which led to stronger feelings of connectedness.

Implications

Implications for elementary teachers. Young elementary students have the ability to lead their own learning experiences. When elementary teachers build trust as Ms. Rogann and Ms. Stavino did, by intentionally designing learning environments where student thinking is consistently heard, valued, and used to improve classroom functioning, elementary students voice their own needs while also helping each other communicate. Through this type of partnership, elementary teachers do not give up power but rather share it with all members of the learning community. Youth adult partnerships give voice to students when elementary teachers see problems, solutions, and strengths through their students' perspectives. Elementary teachers can create space for this to happen throughout the day when they share authority with elementary students believing they have valuable insights to improve learning environment for all students in their community.

Student input can also improve teaching in classrooms. When elementary teachers listen, and respond to student suggestions, students witness changes in the teachers' practice and become more confident in their role as critical informants of teaching and learning. Teachers then shift their teaching from a focus on teaching content to a focus on asking questions about how they can promote student engagement in learning. Both third grade teachers in this study intentionally used inquiry-based instruction to create spaces for students to voice their thinking and questions. They also modeled how to listen, respond through asking probing questions, and design opportunities for students to turn to one another as resources.

This study has shown that young elementary school students have the ability to clearly communicate with each other, to think critically, to listen with the purpose of understanding their peers, and to co-teach in an environment where teachers share authority with students because student voice is believed to improve instruction. When young elementary students are given opportunities from elementary teachers to lead and be heard, they then do the same for each other and develop a sense of belonging.

Students used their voice to lead classroom interactions, which led to deeper understanding of each other's needs and perspectives. When students felt understood, they felt a sense of connectedness in their classroom community. This gave them the confidence to practice leading in ways that benefited others and enabled them to feel a sense of connectedness or belonging in their classrooms because their presence mattered to their peers' learning experiences. The reciprocal relationship of student voice being heard, taking advantage of leadership opportunities, and feeling strong levels of connectedness was initiated by both teachers using their role as facilitators of learning and shared authority with their students (see Figure 2. Reciprocal Relationship Between Teacher Role, Student Voice, Leadership Opportunities, and Connectedness).

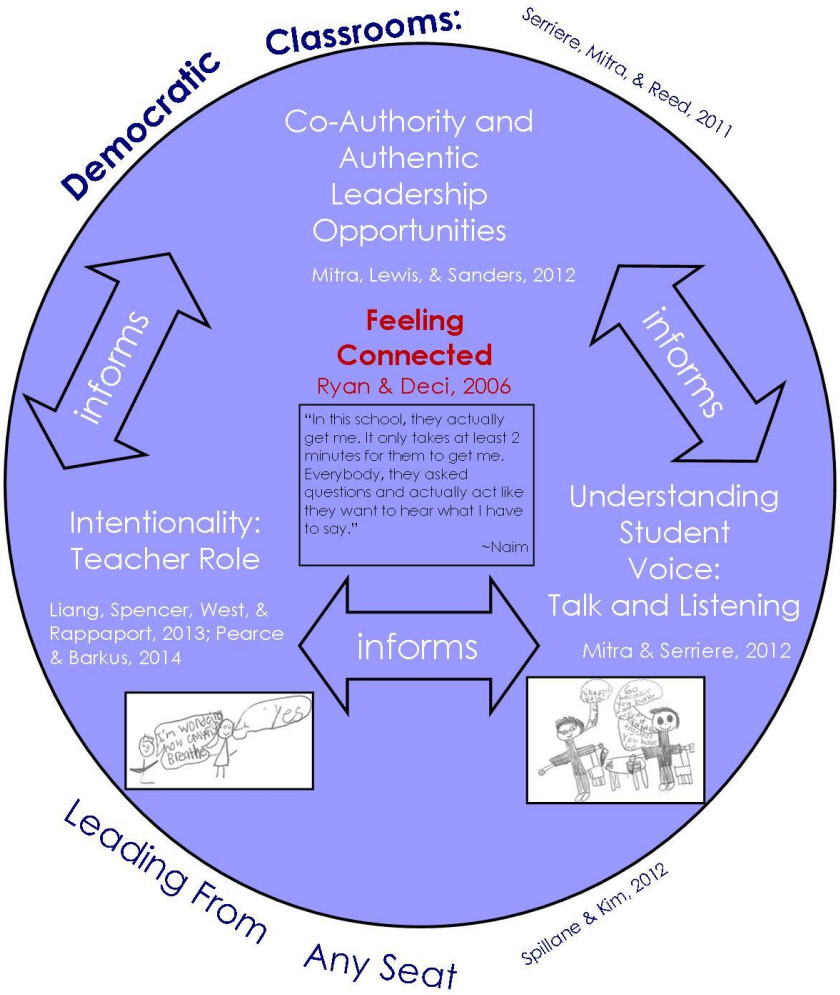

Figure 10. Reciprocal Relationship Between Teacher Role, Student Voice, Leadership Opportunities, and Connectedness

Elementary teachers create these types of inclusive classrooms when they believe learning experiences are enhanced by student contributions. When we observe our students, we gain insight into how they respond to each other, to us, and to learning experiences. We can ask students more about the responses they make and ask them to

help improve the experience for others. This belief enables teachers to design opportunities to listen to the knowledge students carry with them. If an inquiry-based curriculum, like the science and math instruction both third grade teachers used, begins with open-ended questioning, students then want to engage in conversation with each other. When students engage in academic conversations where they strive to be understood and to understand one another, teachers gain access to the students' unobservable thoughts and feelings. Teachers have a critical role in facilitating this engagement and should refrain from correcting student thinking during these conversations. The role of teachers is to model curiosity, ask students more questions about their reasoning, and connect students to each other as resources through partner and small group collaboration. When elementary teachers listen to student thinking during inquiry-based instruction, students will initiate sharing their ideas more often and therefore feel more connected in their class communities. Table 3 shows Nonverbal and Verbal Teacher Moves that Enable Student Leadership of Learning.

Table 4. Nonverbal and Verbal Teacher Moves that Enable Student Leadership of Learning

Teacher Moves	**Nonverbal**	**Verbal**
	❖ Stand at the back or on the side of a student-led whole group lesson ❖ Sit at the same level with students during the sharing of ideas ❖ Keep facial expressions neutral for every idea ❖ Observe often how students respond to each other and to you (i.e. Do they smile? Do they take on asking each other open-ended questions?)	❖ "What did you notice?" ❖ "Can you say more about ...?" ❖ "Why do you think...?" ❖ "How do you think...?" ❖ "What do you think about __'s idea about ...?" ❖ "Are you saying...? Did I understand that correctly?"

Implications for school leaders focused on social justice. Urban schools typically function with a hierarchal leadership model. This model is characterized by the combination of a highly influential principal and the low influence of a teacher. Some of the most vulnerable student populations attend schools in which they do not take leadership of their learning and are therefore characterized as having the least desirable learning conditions (Jackson & Marriott, 2012). The responsibility lies with all stakeholders to provide a positive, strong leadership model that challenges the deep, troubling inequities within the system. For young people, especially underprivileged youth, a democratic, non-hierarchical approach provides an opportunity to experience the respect and acknowledgment of adults. This validation may be especially meaningful to youth because adults typically hold positions of higher status over them.

Engaging youth in positive partnerships with adults contributes to increasing competency and confidence and creates a sense of connectedness to the community. Distributed leadership is necessary in counteracting the negative effects of hierarchal systems that continue to affect the success of students in those communities because leadership is shared among all its members, including students. Engaging marginalized youth in decision-making and action, as was seen in this study, has the potential to counter the effects of repeated negative experiences that cause youth to have self-doubt and a mistrust of adults (Serido, Borden, & Perkins, 2009). A distributed leadership model facilitates students' feeling of connectedness because student voice is invited and then acted upon as an equal contributor to classroom communities through authentic leadership opportunities. Both third grade teachers in this study shared authority with their students as was evidenced when Naim wanted to change science roles and Fernando

felt the freedom to improve how his class chose partners during math tasks.

Student participation involves students working on issues they choose and adding something of value to the community in which they function. It also meets the academic goals schools are required to achieve. The third grade focus group felt they could improve how their classroom functioned because they were trusted to voice and act upon needs as they happened. Their needs were not isolated to individual needs but also positively impacted the class community.

Education is a process of change that is based on rights and relationship. Most power relationships do not tolerate the time and energy required to listen and respond to those with less authority for a variety of different reasons (Cook-Sather, 2002). Understanding student voice requires a whole school effort where adults take the time to learn how to listen to what their students say, ask inquiry-based questions, and respond to student ideas. School staff members can learn how to listen and respond to student voice from colleagues who are already practicing this discipline. Learning how to listen in such a way that students feel heard and understood should be recognized as a process that is developed and improved over time and practice. Schools should give themselves the time to reflect on how to improve this skill and share effective listening strategies with each other. Administrators support teachers doing this work by enabling the school staff to co-create a listening culture together. Administrators should facilitate a professional development where they practice listening and engaging with each other's ideas as Ms. Rogann and Ms. Stavino did with their students. Professional development may also include studying the latest research and teachers sharing effective practices in responding

to student voice because adults can only model for students what they themselves are experiencing. In addition, administrators can engage in the learning process of how to listen and understand student voice by practicing this skill themselves. By going into classrooms, placing themselves at the level of students, ask students open-ended questions, and approach students with a willingness to be taught by them, administrators model distributed leadership. Listening is not a skill that is mastered but instead is matured and developed over time with practice and support. Administrators support teachers in this development when they themselves are practicing this with both students and teachers. Their role is not to judge teachers on whether or not they are listening but to learn alongside them.

Schools can develop trust or mutual dependency among its staff, as well as be led by a leadership team that works together in a cohesive and open way. This shows how distributed leadership helps people connect in a meaningful way while strengthening the link between members in an organization. If educators experience this connection between each other, they are able to transfer this within their classroom community.

In situations of interdependence, trust may reduce uncertainty and enhance cooperation among students and educators. Since distributed leadership influences attitudes of others through intentional social interaction where leadership can be transferred, this suggests that all organization members have the potential to influence the direction of an organization (Jackson & Marriott, 2012). Schools can invite all its members, including students, to make decisions in leading together.

Implications for at-risk students. A distributed leadership model is the alternative to an authoritarian environment because youth are seen as partners in leading and improving learning environments. Educators will then gain a clear picture of what causes students to feel isolated, why so many students decide to exit, and how schooling might be different for them (Cook-Sather, 2002). The willingness to listen begins with relationships based on mutual respect between educators and students and requires diligent work and intentionality.

When educators create space to listen to and share authority with students, they develop strong relationships with students and increase student connectedness. Educators continually relearn how to listen depending on the students with whom they interact. Each student comes with his/her own unique voice, identity, strengths, interests, and curiosities. It is the responsibility of educators to adjust how they listen according to the varying personalities of their students. When students experience educators taking time to listen to a diversity of needs and expressions of personalities, trust is strengthened, thereby increasing student connectedness.

Studies show students' perception of teacher support is the strongest predictor of their engagement in school. When students perceive care and concern from their teachers, they become more engaged and feel connected (Lam, Jimerson, Kikas, Cefai, Veiga, Nelson, & Zollneritsch, 2012). Schools are a primary social influence in the lives of youth. Adults in schools should build and support the kind of culture that values involvement, voice, and decision-making based on trusting relationships because it yields an increase in ownership, responsibility, and ultimately success for students. The students themselves also valued the creation of a culture that values involvement. William stated,

“I feel people really need to share their ideas, because it's really better to share your thoughts instead of keeping them.”

Naim also valued his voice being heard despite his ideas being questioned:

> Well, it made me feel like they wanted to hear what I said and wanted to know if I was right like being skeptical, but at the same time, I really didn't care because all I want is really for them to listen to what I have to say.

As was explained in chapter four, William and Naim’s class communities were consistently invited by their teachers to share their ideas, which led to students inviting each other to speak. This created moments of connectedness.

Future Considerations

The purpose of this case study was to explore whether and how providing authentic leadership opportunities for elementary students created feelings of connectedness and belonging since both third grade classrooms were democratic where learning was student-centered and student voice was heard and implemented throughout the day. Further research is needed to understand how to implement elementary student voice in the leadership of schools.

Student voice theory does not argue whether adults should work with students but rather advocates for a specific way of doing so. Specific adult skills are key in successful implementation of student voice (Mitra, Lewis, & Sanders, 2012). These skills include designing multiple opportunities throughout the day to listen and understand how students are experiencing their learning environment and invite them to give input in adjusting it. Although increasing student voice in schools can re-engage students in

school communities and serve as a catalyst for positive changes in schools, schools rarely offer activities that model this democratic process. It is not enough to explain the characteristics of an adult who trusts student voice. Adults need to be taught how to listen and respond to student voice in leadership beyond the classroom and on a school level.

Current research on student voice within distributed leadership finds that participants become more empowered and confident. Liang, Spencer, West, and Rappaport (2013) found that adult mentors need support and training in fostering youth engagement through a method called instrumental scaffolding. Adults engage youth by providing them with cues, suggestions, role modeling, or clarifications that strengthens skills necessary for democratic participation. Youth participation, especially when coupled with youth adult partnership, becomes a process that engages young people in a respectful and meaningful way because it helps them understand themselves in relation to the world around them. More research is needed to explore how elementary students understand themselves in relation to the world around them when student voice is heard, understood, and implemented for school communities through adult invitation and validation.

The implementation of elementary student voice is maximized when those in authority learn how to listen and co-create a listening school culture. Research has the potential to give insight to this process if elementary students are included in conversations about school improvement as partners in leadership with adults. Elementary aged students can be seen as partners because they have the ability to think critically about the world around them and question injustices they see (Mitra & Serriere,

2012). Younger student voice can deliver insight on how to improve school communities when they are invited to weigh in on how their classroom experiences affect them, as I had asked them to.

Limitations

The following limitations of this study are described below. The limitations discussed in chapter three are revisited in this section in relation to generalizability and positionality.

Generalizability

A limitation of this study was the lack of generalizability of the findings to other urban elementary schools. The small sample size and coding of the data with students as co-analyzers were limited representations of the larger population. Ten third grade students were chosen. Each student was unique, and each voice was represented in this study while also being heard as one group. Their voices were heard and included in co-analysis of the data produced by this study so researchers and educators may accurately understand their experiences in a democratic learning environment. Another limitation was data collected from one Title 1 elementary school. These limitations are an inherent part of qualitative research because the goal is not generalizability but rather a credible exploration of the participants' lived experiences, with deep questions raised for other researchers of student voice and connectedness. Although this study's data do not claim to apply to all students, the themes do give insight into how young elementary students feel listened to, what they choose to talk about, and how they choose to use talk to lead in

the classroom thus ultimately leading to connectedness.

Positionality

As an educator employed in the school district and school site the study was conducted, I had access to resources as well as carried biases that might have affected the study. This position also brought with it a depth of insight about the third grade team and the wider school community. Students may or may have not felt comfortable with me during interviews and focus group co-analysis sessions due to my position as an educator in the school site. I took precautions in trying to assure that the data was analyzed objectively. These precautions included triangulating the data from observations and interviews, inviting students to co-analyze the data, and cross checking interview responses with participants through member checking to minimize bias.

Conclusion

Young elementary students know what they want as learners, and they are fully capable of and able to lead in contexts where adults are typically the leader – classrooms and in research. The purpose of this case study was to explore whether and how providing authentic leadership opportunities for elementary students in two democratically oriented classrooms created feelings of connectedness and belonging. Both third grade classrooms could be defined as democratic: learning was student-centered, and student voice was heard and implemented throughout the day. Focus group students selected for this study were from two third grade classrooms that each operationalized democratic learning and distributed leadership practices where student

voice was both solicited and valued. I have asked very young people to teach us what helps them feel listened to and understood in classrooms - to say what helps them be seen and understood and to define that for adults. Prior researchers have not asked young people to lead us in this. This case study shows how the term *student voice* can be put to work by elementary students in leading their own learning, not just the typical uses of weighing in on policy or how schools should be run. This research informs educators of how to listen and respond to young elementary students so their voices lead their learning and thereby create feelings of connectedness. This qualitative study found moments of inviting student voice, providing leadership opportunity, and feeling connected, while inviting the student focus group to co-analyze data collected from observations and interviews. Teachers were found to be intentional in placing themselves as facilitators of learning and modeled genuine questioning of student thinking. This study revealed how sharing authority and humility balanced the reciprocal relationship of teacher moves that helped students lead and how students leading informed teacher moves. Students then wanted to use talk to deepen each other's thinking, advocate for each other, and lead as co-teachers, but this only happened when they were in an environment that used listening to understand student voice. Students felt connected to their class community because they came to rely on and trust each other as resources.

This study provided accessible, qualitative methods and roles for children alongside an adult researcher as partners to identify how school connectedness is affected by leadership opportunities and was able to building upon the strengths of these child researchers (Langhout & Thomas, 2010). Students have the ability to describe and analyze their learning experiences as was exhibited through the co-analysis of interview

and observation data with the focus group. Students proved to accurately interpret each other's voice. When students are treated as authorities and partners who are capable of choosing issues that are relevant to improving classroom learning experiences, they inform teacher moves that enable students to feel connected to their learning, peers, and teachers.

Schools have the massive task of serving their students within complex situations and relationships. It is not enough to view leadership of this task in terms of a hierarchal model where an individual in a formal role solely holds the responsibility of that mission. Black and Latino students continue to feel disconnected from their schools and remain unheard resulting in a widening achievement gap. Distributed leadership redefines leadership as an action among the collective strength of many. Teacher roles go beyond managing and instead are diversified into including and trusting partnerships with their students.

Community in this study in not a place; it is the connection all members develop with one another. Community is developed when all members experience membership, influence, integration and fulfillment of needs, and a shared emotional connection (Osterman, 2000). Under this definition, students like these ten focus group students will feel connectedness if their voices are listened to and used as contributors to leading their learning.

Appendix A: Survey Instrument

Survey Instrument on Paper

Survey ID:_____

My Feelings About School

Circle what applies to you:

What is your grade level? 2nd 3rd 4th 5th

What is your race?

Hispanic African American White Asian

RATING

	Please read each question. Think about how true it is for you. Put an "X" in the box that seems to match what you think.	**1** Not at all true for me	**2** Not true for me	**3** Some-what true for me	**4** True for me	**5** Very true for me
	I really like the people at this school.					
	People at this school tell me I am good at my school work.					
	I am free to express my ideas and opinions at this school.					
	I consider the people at this school to be my friends.					
	I have been able to learn interesting new things at this school.					
	Most days I feel good about the work I do at this school.					
	My feelings are taken into consideration at this school.					
	I can pretty much be myself at this school.					
	People at this school are friendly towards me.					

Survey Instrument on Qualtrics

We really care about how you feel about school. This survey can help us make our school better. If you want to please fill out the survey. Your feedback is confidential. Please read each question. Think about how true it is for you. Choose a box that seems to match what you think.

What is your grade level?

2nd	3rd	4th	5th

What is your race?

Hispanic	African American	White	Asian

I really like the people at this school.

Not at all true for me	Not true for me	Somewhat true for me	True for me	Very true for me

---

People at this school tell me I am good at my school work.

Not at all true for me	Not true for me	Somewhat true for me	True for me	Very true for me

I am free to express my ideas and opinions at this school.

Not at all true for me	Not true for me	Somewhat true for me	True for me	Very true for me

I consider the people at this school to be my friends.

Not at all true for me	Not true for me	Somewhat true for me	True for me	Very true for me

I have been able to learn interesting new things at this school.

Not at all true for me	Not true for me	Somewhat true for me	True for me	Very true for me

Most days I feel good about the work I do at this school.

Not at all true for me	Not true for me	Somewhat true for me	True for me	Very true for me

---

My feelings are taken into consideration at this school.

Not at all true for me	Not true for me	Somewhat true for me	True for me	Very true for me

---

I can pretty much be myself at this school.

Not at all true for me	Not true for me	Somewhat true for me	True for me	Very true for me

People at this school are friendly towards me.

Not at all true for me	Not true for me	Somewhat true for me	True for me	Very true for me

Appendix B: Semi-Structured Interview Questions

Semi-Structured Interview Questions

1. Draw a picture of a moment when someone listened to you today.
2. Will you tell me more about it?
3. What did they say to you?
4. What are the moments when you said things that helped your class?
5. How did it make you feel?
6. How do you think your classmates felt when you said that?
7. When do you get to do things that your class really needs?

Appendix C: Student Analysis Protocol for Interviews

Student Analysis Protocol for Interviews

- In pairs, you will highlight parts of sentences that match a category on the color key posters.
- Color Key for Coding Categories
    - Pink = Ways the student(s) helped the class
    - Yellow = How a student felt listened to
    - Blue = What students talk about
    - Green = How the student feels in the class
- Cut out the highlighted parts and glue them to the matching color key poster.
- Be ready to share with the group the similarities and differences you noticed in each category.

Guiding Questions for Group Discussion on Interview Data Analysis

- Each pair will respond to the following questions from the researcher
    - What parts did you cut and paste on each poster?
    - Why did you think they belong under that category?
    - What similarities and differences do you notice in each category?
- Other students in the group will be invited to ask and respond to each pair presenting
    - Do you have any questions for this pair?
- Once all pairs have presented, the researcher will ask for each category

- What similarities do you notice among all the responses for the ___ category?
- Did any responses surprise you for the ___ category? Why did it surprise you?

Appendix D: Student Analysis Protocol for Observations

Student Analysis Protocol for Observations

- After watching a video from a classroom, write or draw
    - What moments are students speaking?
    - What moments are students being listened to?
    - What moments did you notice students helping the class?
    - What were the students doing?
    - Who were they doing this with?
    - Why do you think this helped the class?
    - How was the adult involved with these decisions?
    - What happened in response to the students' actions?
- Be ready to share with the group what you noticed.

Guiding Questions for Group Discussion on Observation Data Analysis

- Each student will respond to the following questions from the researcher. The researcher will write student responses on posters.
    - What moments are students speaking?
    - What moments are students being listened to?
    - What moments did you notice students helping the class?
    - What were the students doing?
    - Who were they doing this with?
    - Why do you think this helped the class?
    - How was the adult involved with these decisions?

    - What happened in response to the students' actions?

- Other students in the group will be invited to ask and respond to each student presenting
    - Do you have any questions for this student's response?
- Once all students have presented, the researcher will ask
    - What similarities do you notice among all the responses?

Did any responses surprise you? Why did it surprise you?

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