

# Teaching the Acceptance of Diversity: an Ant-Bias Education Initiative that Empowers Student Leaders to be the Agents of Change

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**BOSTON COLLEGE**  
Lynch School of Education

Department of Education Administration

**TEACHING THE ACCEPTANCE OF DIVERSITY: AN ANTI-BIAS  
EDUCATION INITIATIVE THAT EMPOWERS STUDENT LEADERS TO BE  
THE AGENTS OF CHANGE**

Dissertation  
by

**KIMBERLY J. SMITH**

Submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
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## **ABSTRACT**

### **TEACHING THE ACCEPTANCE OF DIVERSITY: AN ANTI-BIAS EDUCATION INITIATIVE THAT EMPOWERS STUDENT LEADERS TO BE THE AGENTS OF CHANGE**

by

Kimberly J. Smith

Dissertation chair: Dr. Elizabeth Twomey

As our world continues to evolve as a global community, schools must prepare students to live, work, and thrive in a diverse society. Teaching the acceptance of diversity to our students is a significant step in building a safe and peaceful culture within our school communities. Teaching the acceptance of diversity to a generation of young people is a significant step in building a peaceful world.

This qualitative case study examined an anti-bias education initiative that empowered students to become leaders and activists in their high school. The findings of this study revealed that the diversity education initiative did not have an immediate impact on school culture, but the students who took active leadership roles encountered a transformational experience.

The student leaders demonstrated substantial growth in the skills and understandings essential to anti-bias activism. Significant to this development was heightened awareness of discriminatory language and behavior, a more comprehensive view of diversity and its role in community, and the ability to engage peers in dialogue about challenging diversity topics. In a dialogic exploration of individual differences, student leaders discovered the commonality that connects all humanity. This insight

led them to affirm individual identity, to conceptualize the richness that diversity adds to community, and ultimately to embrace diversity *as* community.

The findings of this study point to the incremental nature of school culture change and the need to institutionalize a diversity education/student leader effort as a long-term initiative in order to achieve substantive school improvement. The findings compel educators to provide leadership opportunities for students, cultivating their ability to become productive citizen-leaders in an increasingly global community. This is the subject matter of their lives, an authentic curriculum that activates their knowledge, their ability, and their responsibility to transform their world (Starratt, 2008). This dissertation captures the lived experiences of a group of students who led this diversity education initiative, and how their reflections inform educational policy, practice, and leadership.

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Finally, I dedicate this work to Paula, who has loved me enough to stand by me through this arduous but rewarding task. One day last summer she brought home a peace symbol for my car and said, “For my pacifist. Be patient, someday the world will get there”. It is this love and understanding that gets me through.

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# Chapter One

## Overview of the Study

### Introduction

As our world continues to evolve as a global community, schools must prepare students to live, work, and thrive in a diverse society. Teaching the acceptance of diversity to our students is a significant step in building a safe and peaceful culture within our school communities. Teaching the acceptance of diversity to a generation of young people is a significant step in building a peaceful world.

This case study examines an anti-bias education initiative that empowers student leaders to be the agents of change in a high school setting. School leaders face a moral imperative to prepare their students to “participate as active citizens of the community, rather than as spectators or tourists” (Starratt, 2005, p. 124). In fact, harnessing student leadership to teach tolerance, to influence peers with anti-bias messages, and to model respectful behaviors within their school and community may be a highly effective means of creating a safe and peaceful school culture and learning environment. Peer leadership, peer mediation, and peer support programs have a history of positive results in secondary schools (Cowie & Wallace, 2000). The student leadership initiative in this case study will focus specifically on teaching tolerance and the acceptance of diversity.

Intolerance, prejudice, discrimination, and peer-harassment create an unsafe learning environment for students. The AAUW report, *Hostile Hallways*, suggests that “a safe and equitable learning environment is fundamental to success”, and found that the educational impact of student-on-student harassment in school is profound, with significant educational, emotional, and behavioral consequences (AAUW 1993, p. 18).

Learning and motivation theories emphasize that students' emotional and effective experiences in school are crucial factors in accounting for "optimal experiences", interest, and success in school (Printrich & De Groot, 1990).

Vogt (1997) asserts that tolerance for diversity is learned, and his research shows a strong correlation between education and tolerance. Student populations are diverse in a variety of ways, including gender, race, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, disability (physical, learning, emotional), physical appearance, and socioeconomic status.

Teaching students to accept, and even embrace, the differences among us must be a critical component of the education provided to students in our schools if we strive for equity and justice in society.

Educational leaders are challenged to expect a “greater, deeper, more courageous humanity from the students”, and invite students to a “transformed sense of citizenship, a local and a global citizenship, where concern for the rights of others is suffused with caring and compassion” (Starratt, 2005, p. 134).

### **Focus of the Study**

This dissertation is a descriptive case study of an initiative to teach the acceptance of diversity through the efforts of a Diversity Council, with students taking significant leadership roles. The study took place in a high school that is located in a suburb of Boston, with a school population of approximately 1,000 students, spanning grades 9 – 12. The school does not have a culturally diverse population: 94.2% of the student body is White, 2.5% is African-American, 1.9% is Hispanic, and other ethnic or multi-ethnic groups are less than 1.5%.

Late in 2005, four graduates of this school were murdered in a shooting that involved peer-on-peer violence. Two of the young men were African-American, one of whom was a METCO graduate, one was White, and the other was a young man of Middle-Eastern heritage. The four friends' ages ranged from 19 – 21 years old. In the days and weeks following their violent deaths, the emotional reactions of the school and community revealed troubling stereotypes and biases, as well as deep concerns about the increase of violence among young people.

In response to these concerns, the researcher and two other school administrators initiated a "Diversity Council" of adults and students, with an expressed interest in actively taking on the issues of discrimination, intolerance, and prejudice in the school community. Sixteen students, five faculty members, and three administrators constituted the founding membership of the council.

The Diversity Council's first initiative was to investigate the school climate from the students' perspective: the council developed a school-wide student survey on prejudice and discrimination, issuing the survey to 1,013 students in homeroom. The survey was anonymous and voluntary. The survey asked the question: *Have you ever witnessed, or been a victim of, prejudice or discrimination at [this] High School?* The definitions of prejudice, stereotype, and discrimination were included on the survey. For those answering "yes", the students were asked to identify the type of prejudice or discrimination from a list, with an option to add a type not listed on the survey. Students could select more than one type. More than 75% of the students (773) responded to the survey. More than 50% of those who responded (388) said "yes", that they had

witnessed or been a victim of prejudice or discrimination in school. The types of discrimination listed among those who responded “yes” were:

- 72% Physical Appearance
- 64% Race
- 63% Sexual Orientation
- 53% Social Group
- 40% Religion
- 40% Disability
- 38% Gender
- 36% Academic
- 18% Economic Class
- 1% Other

In response to this information, the newly formed Diversity Council established its mission: to promote the acceptance of differences in individual human beings, to celebrate diversity, and to promote a safe and peaceful environment for learning in school, free from peer harassment, prejudice, or discrimination.

### **The Project**

The researcher took a leadership role in preparing a year-long anti-bias education initiative to implement this mission. The Diversity Council student leaders and faculty advisors took part in 18 hours of intensive training led by professional facilitators from the Anti-Defamation League’s “A World of Difference” Institute. Researchers at Yale University partnered with the Anti-Defamation League to evaluate this training protocol with positive results (Levy Paluck & Green, 2006). In this training, Diversity Council student leaders learned to be peer educators, practicing facilitation and conflict resolution skills in response to incidents of discrimination. Student leaders and faculty advisors participated in the exploration of stereotyping, language, and behavior that has the

potential to perpetuate bias and the manifestation of prejudice in schools, communities, and society.

At the completion of the training program, the Diversity Council student leaders facilitated workshops and group discussions for ninth graders in their high school. Diversity Council student leaders were expected to take responsibility as activists and allies when faced with discriminatory, bias, or prejudice interactions that take place in the cafeteria, hallways, and classrooms. In addition, the Diversity Council prepared events and initiatives within the school and community to celebrate multiculturalism and diversity.

A positive outcome for all of the Diversity Council's efforts would be an improved school climate: a climate that includes a safe atmosphere and an equal opportunity to learn for all students. A group of student leaders have developed some of the skills, knowledge, and experience necessary to become activists in and beyond their school communities.

### **Guiding Hypotheses & Research Questions**

Qualitative researchers do not often state formal hypotheses before conducting a study as they search to understand the contextual nature of their settings before stating a research focus. The qualitative researcher may, however, create guiding hypotheses, observing emerging patterns or associations that lead to the formation of new, focused hypotheses as the research proceeds (Gay, Mills, & Airasian, 2006).

In this case study, the researcher developed several guiding hypotheses as the student leaders of the Diversity Council implement this anti-bias education program:

- The anti-bias education initiative will have a positive impact on the social/cultural character of the school. Empowering student leaders to be anti-bias activists will correlate with less incidents of bias behavior by students of the school community.
- The anti-bias education initiative will affect the perception among the student body that the learning environment is physically and emotionally safe, with a fair and equal opportunity to learn for all students. Empowering student leaders to be the agents of change is an effective means of achieving school improvement.
- Participation as Diversity Council student leaders in the anti-bias education initiative will have a lasting impact on the students' leadership skills and their understanding of the effects of anti-bias activism.

The researcher plans to gather evidence to test these claims through the development of research questions (Gay, Mills, & Airasian, 2006). The following three research questions will provide the focus for data collection efforts:

1. *In what tangible ways did the Diversity Council student leaders' efforts influence their school peers' acceptance of diversity and the social/cultural character of the school?*
2. *Did the initiatives of the Diversity Council peer leadership program impact the learning environment, in terms of safe and equal opportunities for all students, in the perceptions of the Diversity Council student leaders and faculty advisors?*



3. *What specific skills and/or understandings from their participation on the Diversity Council do the Diversity Council student leaders believe will have lasting effects beyond their graduation from high school?*

### **Theoretical Rationale**

The theoretical framework for this study is based on three strands of related research and literature. In this study, the researcher will review the literature on empowering students, “student voice”, and student leadership in school reform. Michael Fullan (2001) warns educational leaders that unless students have a meaningful role in educational change, the initiative is likely to fail. An effective multicultural, diversity, or anti-bias education program must include students as more than passive recipients of an idealistic educational enterprise. Research reveals that successful school intervention programs involve grassroots participation, the empowerment of students and teachers to deal with the problem, and a proactive vision that includes democracy at the core of the mission (Astor, Meyer, Benbenishty, Marachi, & Rosemond, 2005).

What if we bring our students to the forefront of diversity education, tapping into their thoughts, beliefs, and ideals? What if we use the strength of peer relationships and the power of youthful fervor to challenge bias among peers? Are we brave enough to expand the idea of distributive leadership to include the youngest citizens of our school communities? And how might this evolving group of student leaders impact the world around them, long after their school initiative is complete?

A second topic pertinent to this study is the effect of diversity, multicultural, or anti-bias education initiatives in schools. Redefining racism and discrimination through

multicultural education can positively affect the culture of learning (Nieto, 1996). Nieto contends that it is the school's perception of students' language, culture, and class as inadequate or negative, and it is the "subsequent devalued status of these characteristics in the academic environment that helps to explain school failure" (p. 230). Students who represent diverse minority populations may not find schooling exciting or inviting; they often feel unwelcome, insignificant, and alienated (Gay, 2004). Gay espouses that multicultural education may be a significant factor in closing the achievement gap between these students and their majority counterparts, revitalizing faith in the "promises of democracy, equality, and justice", and building education systems that reflect diversity in social contributions, and providing better opportunities for students (p. 34).

The third theme germane to this study is the safe learning environment that is essential in establishing an equal opportunity to learn for all students. This section will focus on the effects of bias and discriminatory behavior among students, particularly in the form of peer harassment and bullying. Research demonstrates that there are significant psychological and health consequences for students who are the targets of verbal abuse, physical abuse, or social ostracism (Juvonen & Graham, 2001). Students who are frequent targets of peer aggression have psychological consequences: they feel more depressed, anxious, and lonely than other students, and they experience more physical symptoms and are more likely to incur illnesses than their peers (Nishina, Juvonen, & Mitkow, 2005).

Eisenberg, Neumark-Sztainer, & Perry (2003) studied school connectedness, finding that most students who face the most peer harassment in school have lower grades than those who are subjected to the least, or no, harassment. In a study by Smith,

Talamelli, Cowie, Naylor, & Chauhan (2004), researchers found that one-third of victims who were harassed over a period of time admitted that the fear of bullying had led them to be truant from school. Ruddick, Champlain, & Wallace (1996) list security, in relation to the physical setting and interpersonal encounters within the school, as a primary factor in students' motivation, engagement, and success in school.

These three strands of literature - empowering students, diversity education, and a safe learning environment - set the theoretical landscape for this study of an anti-bias education initiative that activates student leaders to be the agents of change. Chapter Two will feature an extensive review of the related research and literature on each of these topics. In addition, Chapter Two will provide the theoretical rationale for the researcher's selected approach for qualitative research methods.

### **Significance of the Study**

If teaching the acceptance of diversity is a fundamental value of a peaceful society, it should be a fundamental aim of education as well. The significance of this study is found in the exploration of a student leader initiative to provide diversity education in an attempt to meet this aim. This study specifically examines the impact of a Diversity Council that utilizes student leaders as the primary resource for improving school culture and the learning environment for students. In addition, this study captures the perceptions of the student leaders and faculty advisors, to understand their newly acquired skills and understandings, and the lasting effects of their engagement as anti-bias activists.

Although this study is in the context of a single high school and community, the results may have broader implications for other schools and communities. We must not quickly assume, however, that the findings of this field study are an instance of a more general phenomenon (Miles & Huberman, 1994). How representative this case study is and how much we can generalize the results to other educational settings will depend largely on the internal validity, reliability, and external validity of the research (Merriam, 1998).

In this case study, the researcher accounts for internal validity by triangulating data, checking interpretations with participants, spending as much contact and observation time in the field as possible, asking colleagues to review data instruments and data interpretation, and by being transparent in regard to the researcher's biases, assumptions, and theoretical orientation at the outset of the study (Merriam, 1998). The researcher ensured reliability by, in addition to the steps above, carefully producing an "audit trail": each step of data collection, data interpretation, and researcher's decision making was recorded to maximize the replication of the study (Merriam, 1998).

To enhance the possibility of generalization, the researcher accounted for external validity by providing a rich, narrative description of the setting, participants, events, and research. In this way, readers are able to determine how closely their own educational context matches the research study and whether findings can be transferred to their own setting (Merriam, 1998).

The researcher was highly cognizant of all ethical issues in preparation of the research process. Early in the study, the researcher carefully considered the project's worthiness, the researcher's competence, and the informed consent of participants. As

the project developed, the researcher continued to monitor any potential harm and risk to participants, the researcher's relationship with the participants, and the confidentiality and anonymity of the study. Finally, in the end stages of the project, the researcher reflected upon the quality of and the use of the research results. The ethical considerations listed here were informed by Miles & Huberman's *Qualitative Data Analysis* (1994).

If internal validity, reliability, external validity, and ethical considerations are carefully addressed throughout the research, generalizability and the significance of the study is enhanced. The researcher must connect the study to theoretical networks beyond the immediate study in an effort to add to the potential transferability of the findings. The researcher also must seek to learn if the findings are congruent with, connected to, or confirmatory of prior theory and research (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

It is the researcher's goal to produce useable knowledge and insight for other educators. This research study will have significance in the field of education if the findings are the catalyst for action or further study in diversity education, student leadership, or safe schools.

## **Research Design**

### *Research methodology and specific aims*

This qualitative research was designed as a descriptive case study in which the researcher was a participant observer. The product of qualitative research focuses on process, meaning, and understanding: in order to vicariously experience a phenomenon,

the researcher transports the reader to the setting through a vivid, rich, descriptive narrative of the contextual setting and situation (Merriam, 1998).

In this case study, the researcher assessed the impact of an anti-bias education initiative led by a high school Diversity Council. A significant feature of the anti-bias education initiative is that it empowers student leaders to be the agents of change. The researcher examined the ways in which the anti-bias education initiative influenced the social/cultural character of a school and its learning environment. In addition, the researcher studied the lasting effects of anti-bias activism and the cultivation of student leadership in the perceptions of the Diversity Council students and teachers involved in the initiative.

#### *Methods of data collection and analysis*

An important feature of qualitative data is the "strong potential for revealing complexity", where the data provides descriptions that are "vivid, nested in a real context, and have a ring of truth" (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p.10). The methodology for this study includes the use of focus group discussions, interviews, researchers' observations and field notes, participants' written reflections, and the collection of artifacts, reports, and program documents. To strengthen reliability and internal validity, this researcher triangulated data by using multiple sources and methods to confirm the emerging findings at each stage of the study (Merriam, 1998).

The researcher analyzed data simultaneously with data collection. During the collection of data, the researcher continued to refine the focus of the study, reflect on

emerging themes, asking new or evolving questions to direct the ongoing collection of data.

Each step of data collection and analysis was carefully recorded in order to increase internal validity. The researcher's doctoral program professors and colleagues provided an expert pilot and review of data collection instruments, and examined and provided feedback on the researcher's analysis and interpretation of data. The researcher contextualized findings in the existing body of theory and literature. The data is reported in the form of a thematic narrative text, organized by the research questions and emergent themes of the study.

#### *Description of subject population, research setting, and sample*

This case study takes place in a suburban high school with a school population of approximately 1,000 students spanning grades 9 – 12. The school is located in a middle/upper-middle class community of 25,000 within ten miles of Boston. The median household income of this community in 2005 was \$75,100, with a median house/condominium value of \$425,500. (Retrieved on November 17, 2007, from [www.city-data.com/city/\[town\]-Massachusetts.html](http://www.city-data.com/city/[town]-Massachusetts.html)). Forty percent of the adults in the community hold a Bachelor's degree or higher. The high school population reflects a community that is not racially diverse: 94.2% of the student body is White, 2.5% is African-American, 1.9% is Hispanic, and other ethnic or multi-ethnic groups are less than 1.5%.

To learn about the issues of central importance to this study, a purposive sample was selected by the researcher. The Diversity Council was comprised of 22 juniors and

seniors who were selected through faculty nominations and application review. Three administrators (including the researcher) and four faculty members participated in the council as advisors to the student leaders. The researcher believes that a study participant sample of nine selected from the Diversity Council, including six students and three advisors, is adequate to represent the perceptions, attitudes, beliefs, and experiences of the larger group.

The researcher met with prospective members of the sample to provide a thorough and transparent description of the study. The researcher asked for volunteers and selected the six students and three advisors for the sample. The participants for this study were given an informed consent form that explicitly outlined the volunteer nature of their participation and the confidentiality of the research results. The researcher asked prospective members to return the signed document as their intent to participate. The document clearly stated that participants were free to withdraw at any time. The researcher explicitly stated to the adult members of the sample that participation would have no connection to their work evaluations. Parent signatures were required for student participants.

#### *Provisions for subject & data confidentiality, research risks & benefits*

The informed consent form assured study participants that all of their responses will be anonymous and confidential. The researcher does not use the names or identifying information of the participants or the school in the study. The researcher maintains the anonymity of participants by using pseudonyms.



This research study posed minimal risk to subjects. The probability and magnitude of harm or discomfort incurred by subjects in this study were not greater than those ordinarily encountered in daily life or during the performance of routine physical or psychological examinations or tests. The benefits to subjects in this study were limited to an enhanced educational experience as a result of participation. Study participants were notified that they would not receive any type of compensation for participating in this research study.

#### *Investigator experience*

The researcher holds a Bachelor's Degree in Education from the University of New Hampshire and a Master's Degree in Counseling Psychology from Boston College. The researcher has been a licensed and experienced educator in the public schools for 24 years, working closely with high school students for the duration of the researcher's career. The researcher is a certified professional education administrator and is currently working as an assistant principal in the high school setting for this study.

#### **Limitations of the Study**

Since the researcher is a supervising and evaluating administrator at the school where the study was conducted, the complexity of the relationship between researcher and faculty participants increased the potential for participant bias. The researcher faced a similar concern with students who contributed to the study. In an effort to assuage participant bias, the researcher articulated the purpose of the study with transparency,

asking both faculty and student participants to be honest in their responses in order to gather the most accurate data possible.

The researcher also considered the possibility of researcher bias as the study unfolded. As an administrator of the school, the researcher was hopeful that the student leadership initiative of the Diversity Council would have a positive effect on the social/cultural atmosphere and learning environment of the school. In order to minimize researcher bias, the researcher triangulated data at each stage of the study and obtained an expert review of data analysis and data interpretation from Boston College professors and doctoral program colleagues.

This study was limited to one school year. Long-term observation at a research site or repeated observations of the same phenomenon over time increases the validity of findings (Merriam, 1998). The time constraints of this study should be recognized as the reader contemplates the findings.

The conditions of this study were specific to this high school setting, so it should not be generalized to other school settings without careful consideration of contextual factors. The results may have broader implications for educational policy and practice as each educational leader considers the characteristics of his or her specific setting. The limitations of this study will be explored further in Chapter Three.

### **Definition of Terms**

The following acronyms are used in this study and are defined here:

**METCO** is a state-funded grant program that promotes racial integration and educational opportunities for students in Boston and receiving suburban districts.

**MCAS** is the abbreviation for the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System, a standards-based series of exams in English Language Arts, Math, Science, and Social Studies. Students in Massachusetts must pass the Grade 10 ELA, Math, and Science exams in order to receive a high school diploma.

The following terms are used in this study. The definitions were retrieved from the Anti-Defamation League (2006):

**Ally** – someone who speaks out or takes actions that are supportive of another person.

**Anti-bias activism** – an active commitment to challenging prejudice, stereotyping, and discrimination.

**Bias** – an inclination or preference either for or against an individual or group that interferes with impartial judgment.

**Bystander** - someone who witnesses an act of bias or discrimination and does not say or do anything to intervene.

**Culture** – the patterns of daily life learned consciously and unconsciously by a group of people.

**Discrimination** – the denial of justice and fair treatment by both individuals and institutions; an action that can follow prejudicial thinking.

**Diversity** – the differences or variances in a population.

**Multicultural** – the multiple cultures of a population.

**Prejudice** – prejudging or making a decision about a person or group of people without sufficient knowledge; prejudicial thinking is frequently based on stereotypes.

**Stereotype** – an oversimplified generalization about a person or group of people without regard for individual differences.

### **Overview of the Study**

Chapter One presents the focus of the study and provides a description of the research project. The research questions for the study are introduced, as well as the theoretical rationale that provides the landscape for data interpretation and analysis in later chapters. A portrayal of the significance of this study is followed by an overview of research design and methodology. The researcher then examines the limitations of the study and defines terms that are used throughout the dissertation.

Chapter Two presents a review of related literature. An introduction proposes the theoretical foundation upon which the study is based. The researcher presents three themes that are essential to the study, synthesizing the significant research and literature for each theme. Chapter Two concludes with a description of the theoretical rationale for the selected methods of research, detailing how the researcher was informed by the literature on qualitative research in preparing and executing this study.

Chapter Three is a methodical depiction of the research design used in this case study. The researcher presents guiding hypotheses as they informed research questions. A section on research methodology describes the stages of the study and the researcher's selected methods of qualitative research and presentation. A detailed account of the selected participant sample and the rationale for the sample is presented. Data gathering procedures are outlined, including pilot tests and a systematic reporting of the data collection timeline. The researcher presents methods of data analysis, formats for

reporting the data, and frameworks for discussion of the findings. A closer look at the limitations of the study completes Chapter Three.

Chapter Four is an extensive report of the findings. The chapter is a narrative description of the study, illustrating the findings from the researcher's field notes, focus group discussions, interviews, artifacts, and participants' written reflections in rich, descriptive detail. The findings are analyzed in the context of the research questions and the themes that emerged during data collection and analysis. Figures and tables visually synthesize the findings for enhanced analysis and interpretation.

Chapter Five is a discussion of the researcher's conclusions and the implications for further research. In this chapter, the researcher looks closely at how this study informs educational practice, policy, and leadership. The researcher seeks to discover meaning from the findings and the potential implications for those meanings. The chapter includes the researcher's recommendations for further research.

## Chapter Two

### Review of Related Literature

#### Introduction

Ruddick, Chaplain, & Wallace (1996) establish the *conditions of learning* as a primary factor in students' motivation and engagement in school. They state six principles, from the pupils' perspective, which make a significant difference in the improvement of schools: respect, fairness, autonomy, intellectual challenge, social support, and security. Four of these are critical to this study:

1. **Respect** for pupils as individuals and as a body occupying a significant position in the institution of the school
2. **Fairness** to all pupils irrespective of their class, gender, ethnicity, or academic status
3. **Social Support** as an important component in helping pupils cope with conflict or stress
4. **Security** in relation to the physical setting and the interpersonal encounters within the school

In the context of this study, the researcher examined the impact of using student leaders as active participants in diversity education as a means to create this safe learning environment and to develop young anti-bias activists in promoting social justice in their school communities. Streamlining these four principles into three themes sets the stage for this literature review: *empowering students* to be active participants in the improvement of schools, *diversity education* as a means to establish fairness, social support, and to plant the seeds of social justice in our youngest citizens, and *a safe*

*learning environment* to provide the physical, emotional, and interpersonal security that students need to be successful in school.

This chapter will review the existing literature and research on each of these three themes, clarifying the theoretical orientation of the researcher for this study. Chapter Two concludes with the theoretical rationale for the selected methods of research.

### **Empowering Students**

Levin (2000) states: “Education reform cannot succeed and should not proceed without much more direct involvement of students in all its aspects” (p.155). Alison Cook-Sather (2003) agrees as she laments, “...there is something amiss about a system that does not consult the constituency it is intended to serve” (p. 959). It makes sense to begin by *listening* to our students, hearing their voice, valuing their input. Then educators might engage in *dialogue* with our students, exchanging our mutual voices, sharing power. In this way, the stage is set for students to take action, to become participants in school improvement, and to take on leadership roles within the school community and beyond.

#### *The emergence of “student voice” in school reform*

What pupils say about teaching, learning, and schooling is not only worth listening to but provides an important – perhaps the most important – foundation for thinking about ways of improving schools.

(Ruddick, Chaplain, & Wallace, 1996, p. 1)

Ruddick & Flutter (2000) refer to students as the “expert witnesses” in the processes of educational change (p. 82). In the past fifteen years, a growing body of literature on “student voice” urges us to carefully consider the role of students in school improvement and reform. In the early 1990’s, educators began to rethink the exclusion of students in the conversation about teaching, learning, and the institution of schools. Michael Fullan (2001) suggests, “...we hardly know anything about what students think about educational change because no one ever asks them” (p. 182). Fellow Canadian Benjamin Levin (2000) argues that the most promising strategies for reform include students as capable partners in the process. Ruddick, Champlain, & Wallace (1996) led the early student voice movement in the United Kingdom, championing the students’ role in conversations about school improvement.

Research and reform efforts in student voice burgeoned in the late 1990’s and early 21<sup>st</sup> century in the United States, Canada, England, and Australia. The definition of “student voice” emerged from listening to what the students have to say to a fuller role in the process of educational change. Cook-Sather (2006) defines “student voice” as students having the “presence, power, and agency” to “influence analyses of, decisions about, and practices in school” (p. 363).

Students must become more than just participants in the improvement of schools; they must be situated at the center of education reform. Levin (2000) gives the following “pragmatic” arguments for doing so (p. 156-157):

1. Effective implementation of change requires participation by and buy-in from all those involved, students no less than teachers;



2. Students have unique knowledge and perspectives that can make reform efforts more successful and improve their implementation;
3. Students' views can help mobilize staff and parent opinion in favor of meaningful reform;
4. Constructivist learning, which is increasingly important to high standards reforms, requires a more active student role in schooling;
5. Students are the producers of school outcomes, so their involvement is fundamental to all improvement.

In the thriving educational movement toward professional learning communities, student voice plays a critical role. Fielding (2001) calls the inclusion of students in the learning community a “radical collegiality”; a “more dialogic form of democracy” in which teachers in a learning community must not only learn from one another, from parents and their community, but most importantly, from their students (p. 130).

### *Citizenship education*

In more than a century of American history, we have had an expansive set of goals for the curriculum in the public schools, and education for citizenship has always been among them (Rothstein & Jacobsen, 2006). Fielding (2004) believes that “the re-emerging field of ‘student voice’ has the potential to offer an important contribution to education for civic society” (p. 197).

It is a commonly held belief among educators that the best opportunity for students to learn about citizenship is to *experience* the principles of citizenship by *living them* within their school community. Ruddick and Flutter (2000) suggest that we find

ways “to build more opportunities for pupil participation and pupil voice into the fabric of the school’s structure” (p. 83). In order to do so, the culture of a school must provide meaningful opportunities for students to encounter civic roles as part of daily life.

Fielding (2001) connects the development of a “dialogic learning community” to the broader reach of humanity. Students learn “not only of what it means to be a citizen, but also of what it means to be and become a person”, and the challenge of this inclusive educational community “has to do with power and authority, freedom and equality, and, as important and necessary as each of these, the dispositions and values of democratic living” (p. 138). It is only then that we can begin to look to our students with a vision of their future roles in society.

Freire (1970) suggests that, through dialogue and problem-posing, teacher and student take on a joint responsibility for reflection and growth, establishing an authentic form of thought and action in praxis. As students are posed with problems relating to them in the world and with the world, they will feel increasingly challenged and obliged to respond to that challenge.

In order to accomplish Freire’s praxis and Fielding’s dialogic learning community, schools must be willing to create a more balanced regime of power, a shared system of authority and control in our schools with students holding a more prominent place. The culture of such a school is likely to change.

### *The character of schools and a shift of power*

Policy makers may think about school primarily in terms of teaching and learning, but for pupils school is a holistic experience: it is about lessons, it is about what happens

between lessons, and it is about the power and regimes that define who and what matter to the school (Ruddick & Flutter, 2000).

One of the more profound, positive aspects of student voice is the cultural shift of the power dynamic between adults and young people in the school setting, “rupturing the security of traditional power relations between teachers and students and redefining the boundaries of possibility” (Ruddick & Fielding, 2006, p. 225). The movement for student voice depends on adult educators being prepared to view young people differently.

Ruddick & Flutter’s research demonstrates the relationships between the students’ sense of self and status in the school and the students’ commitment to learning. So often students have been excluded from the consultative process, “bracketing out” their voice in an “outdated view of childhood which fails to acknowledge children’s capacity to reflect on issues affecting their lives” (Ruddick & Flutter, 2000, p. 86). Yet students have demonstrated that they not only have the capacity to provide valuable insight and reflection, their ability to do so has had a powerful effect on the character of their school.

Fielding (2001) learned that, in his 1998 *Students as Researchers* project, the pursuit of student voice and student empowerment led to the emergence of new organizational structures within schools, incorporating students as equal partners in curriculum renewal. Structural change seemed to have unfolded from cultural changes, primarily in teachers’ attitudes to students as students demonstrated quality research and the ability to identify and articulate their insights.

Cook-Sather (2006) suggests that school reform efforts create a “listening culture”, one that connects to constructivist, multicultural, and antiracist pedagogies in

relation to teachers improving their practice by listening closely to what students have to say (p. 367). Similarly, Levin's (2000) research produced data that students have a powerful influence on the willingness of teachers to consider change. Although teachers are reluctant to accept external research or the experiences of other schools, they find surveys from their own students compelling and are far more disposed to move forward with school reform as a result. Levin's study also finds that student data and opinion has strong effect on parents: parents can be a barrier to change if they fear that new initiatives are being "tried out" on their children, but when their children talk to them about their experience of schooling, parents are more open to alternative educational practices. The culture of an entire learning community can be altered with the significant voice of students as a resource for change.

### *Students in leadership roles*

Ruddick, Chaplain, and Wallace (1996) claim that secondary schools "do not adequately take account of the social maturity of young people" in regard to their inclusion and participation in school improvement (p. 1). Student voice includes a "growing cluster of activities that encourage various forms of overt student leadership" (Fielding, 2004, p. 199). Fielding promotes a "post-structuralist reading of student voice", encouraging all kinds of student engagement, moving beyond the traditional school councils and undertaking active roles in contributing to civic society (p. 208).

With an aim of civic education clearly pointed toward the growth of students as contributing members of society, it is interesting that we do not often give students practical experience in leadership. In Sergiovanni's (1990) concept of transformative

leadership, the successful educational leader builds leadership in others and strives to become a leader of leaders. We see a progression of educational practice toward distributive leadership, extending the reach of leadership opportunity to teachers and other adults in the school community. Why do we not extend this reach further to cultivate leadership in our students, the most valuable resource for the future of our society?

Warner & O'Neill Grace (2003) cite the value of student leadership training: “Corporations seek to develop leaders’ abilities to motivate, create investment, and produce high-energy contexts. Schools need to develop similar aptitudes in order to motivate and catalyze students... [by] building the leadership context to allow the students to develop leadership awareness and skill sets” (p. 12). Building leadership capacity in our student population has significant potential for school renewal.

Included in capacity building for students are opportunities for peer leadership, particularly in an effort to affect school culture. During adolescence, teenagers often reject the ideals of parents and other adults at the same time they are seeking reassurance from their peer group. For student leaders, this is an ideal vacuum to fill (Sullivan, Cleary, & Sullivan, 2004). deMarrais (1995) states that students “want very much to be accepted by their friends, and doing so means adopting the cultural values of their friends” (p. 113). Included in the developmental factors of adolescents is conformity, deMarrais says, and the instinct for not wanting to be different from your friends involves “trying on different identities exemplified by their friends”, “learning the norms and values of a group and trying to stay within them” (p. 87). As pupils move through their secondary educations, peers begin to occupy this central role in their lives, providing

social support in times of distress or when individuals are in conflict with adults. In contrast, peers can be a significant source of stress through bullying or isolation (Ruddick, Chaplain, & Wallace, 1996).

Important to the study of peer relationships and problem behavior among teens is the relationship of the individual to the group and the context of the social setting, such as the classroom or the school, in which the relationship takes place (Keisner, Cadinu, Poulin, & Bucci, 2002). Social norms and students' concern for self-presentation affect their expression of prejudice (Rutland, Cameron, Milne, & McGeorge, 2005). As young people come to understand that others endorse stereotypes, the insight that they gain into others' motives profoundly affects their understanding of the social world around them (McKown & Weinstein, 2003).

The influence of peers during adolescence is clear, presenting an ideal opportunity for student leaders to become the agents of change in school reform. As active participants in a diversity education program, student leaders can influence peers to form anti-bias values and to create an environment of establish fairness, social support, and social justice in the school community.

### **Diversity Education**

Multicultural, anti-bias, and diversity education initiatives in schools are grounded in a variety of purposes, but the researcher posits three purposes that are acutely relevant to this study:

1. *To establish an equal opportunity to learn for all students.*

2. *To provide the knowledge, skills, and experiences that will assist students in becoming contributing members of an increasingly diverse and global society.*
3. *To promote social responsibility, social transformation, and social justice.*

### *An equal opportunity to learn*

A school environment that promotes fairness, equality, and physical and emotional safety for students is critical to establishing an equal opportunity to learn. Richards, Brown, & Ford (2007) state the importance of multicultural education as an imperative to promote equity and mutual respect among students in our schools. Their experiential research reveals that when students are subject to discrimination because of their differences, the results can be feelings of unworthiness, frustration, or anger, often resulting in low achievement.

An empirical research study by Elias, Graczyk, & Weissberg (2003) reveals that a safe learning environment is a precursor to less risky behavior for students, greater attachment and commitment to school, and better academic performance. The Multicultural Education Consensus Panel (2001) confirms that a safe and orderly learning environment is one of the most important ways to provide equitable opportunities for students to learn and to meet high standards. Combating stereotypes, bias and prejudice behaviors, and discrimination through diversity education initiatives is one way to create an improved school culture that is perceived as emotionally and physically safe for all students.

*Preparing for participation in a global society*

If [school] communities do not find ways to help their members to understand the diversity of beliefs, cultures, and practices within and beyond their schools, I worry about how well these students, as adults, will be equipped to handle a world of complexity and difference. Existing societal norms that exclude some people and oppressive power structures are likely to persist if they remain unchallenged.

(Shields, 2000, p. 290)

Gay (2004) intimates that students need to understand how multicultural issues shape the social, political, economic, and cultural fabric of the United States and an increasingly global society. The National Center on Education and the Economy's report, *Tough Choices or Tough Times*, states that "employers everywhere have access to a worldwide workforce composed of people who...participate in work teams that are truly global" (2007, p. XVII).

Derman-Sparks (1998), declares that "children of the twenty-first century can no longer be psychologically bound by outdated and limiting assumptions about their fellow/sister citizens of this country and of the world", and that they must "learn how to live productively and justly with the range of human diversity that exists on this planet" (p. 399). Derman-Sparks calls for anti-bias education as an activist approach for our schools to challenge prejudice, stereotyping, and bias as a first step in preparing our students to enter this diverse society.

The Multicultural Education Consensus Panel (2001) reviewed and synthesized the research related to diversity education, and concluded that schools must include opportunities for students to learn about stereotyping and other related biases that have



negative effects on diverse intergroup relations in or beyond the school community. This is an imperative, the panel states, whether the school is relatively monocultural or richly diverse: the school organization can either enhance or detract from the development of a learning community that prepares students for participation in a multicultural and democratic society. Optimally, a school will provide opportunities for students to develop the knowledge, skills, and attitudes needed to interact positively with people from diverse groups in a complex world.

Shields (2000) espouses the development a school environment that represents a “community of difference”. In an authentic community of difference, Shields says, diversity is the *foundation* for community. The “common centre” is “constructed from the negotiation of disparate beliefs and values as participants learn to respect and listen to each other”. In this concept, Shields continues, “the bond among [community] members are not assumed, but forged, and boundaries are not imposed but negotiated” (2000, p. 276). In this work, students learn how to be part of a respectful community within a microcosm of the societal community.

Shields reminds us that assumed homogeneity in any community “is somewhat illusory” and that differences can be explored and incorporated into a “fuller sense of community” (p. 278). If “we are to use differences as resources”, Shields states, “we will need to overcome stereotypes and focus on understanding the interplay of richness and complexity which individuals and groups contribute to the development of community norms” (p. 282). An important aspect of Shields work is the clear message that community does not require similarity: “Indeed”, she says, “differences in beliefs, abilities, assumptions, and practices ought to be made explicit so they may be valued,

respected, and celebrated if we are to move through superficial concepts of community which strive for homogeneity to authentic community...recognizing and understanding multiple perspectives in order to build new bridges that strengthen community” (p. 289).

*Promoting social responsibility, social transformation, social justice through education*

As society becomes more enlightened, it realizes that it is responsible not to transmit and conserve the whole of its existing achievements, but only such as make for a better future society. The school is its chief agency for the accomplishment of this end.

(Dewey, 1916, p. 24)

Nieto (1996) believes that multicultural education can have a substantive and positive impact on the diversity education experiences of most students. She sees a progression of goals for multicultural education that begins with tolerance and leads to wholehearted support for pluralism. Students who begin with the first step of tolerance are on the path to the acceptance of diversity, the respect for others, and the affirmation of the importance of other cultures. Research shows that prejudice and bias is a *learned* phenomenon and can be *unlearned* (Vogt, 1997). Vogt’s research presents a significant correlation between diversity education and tolerance.

Nieto (1996) further defines multicultural education as a process of comprehensive school reform and basic education for all students, as it “challenges and rejects racism and other forms of discrimination in schools and society”, and “accepts and affirms the pluralism that students, their communities, and teachers represent”...and as it “promotes the democratic principles of social justice” (p. 307). Most importantly, Nieto

maintains that multicultural education “invites students and teachers to put their learning into action for social justice” (p. 316). To be anti-racist, she insists, it means working affirmatively to combat racism, making antiracism and antidiscrimination an explicit part of the curricular and teaching young people skills in confronting racism (p. 309).

deMarrais (1995) asserts that multicultural education “openly challenges and rejects racism, sexism, and other forms of discrimination and oppression through critical pedagogy”, a pedagogy that advances social justice (p. 300).

In order to meet these aims, Nieto (1996) maintains that multicultural education questions the whole context of education, including the curriculum, students’ placement, physical structure, pedagogical strategies, assumptions about student ability, hiring of staff, and parent involvement (p. 86). Gay (2004) agrees, and contends that educational leaders must weave multicultural education into all aspects of school life, including curriculum, instruction, learning climate, and school leadership: “In its comprehensive form, it must be an integral part of everything that happens in the education enterprise” (p. 31).

Renowned as the “father of multicultural education” in the United States, Banks (1997) asserts that citizenship education in a multicultural society must aim to help all students, including white students, to develop “the knowledge, attitudes, and skill to participate within but also to help transform and reconstruct society” (p. 13). Ayvazian (1995) agrees, stating that those who are in the dominant category – therefore receiving unearned advantage and privilege – have the greatest potential to be influential and powerful agents of change as allies to those facing discrimination.

Banks (2006) cites the important implications for educational practice, in which school leaders are encouraged to engage students in dialogic encounters surrounding differences and inequality. In order to be meaningful to the school environment, these encounters must be nurtured and deepened to become an ongoing process, providing a sequential development of knowledge, skills, and values over time (Banks, 2006). Tatum (1997) claims makes the claim that “silences and denials surrounding [dominant] privilege...keep the thinking about equality or equity incomplete, protecting unearned advantage and conferred dominance by making these taboo subjects” (p. 12). We can not transform our schools in silence.

Slavin’s research (2001) strongly supports the notion that cooperative interracial contact situations in schools have positive effects on cross-racial friendships, racial attitudes, and behavior. Stephan & Stephan (2004) promote “superordinate groups” (extra and co-curricular activities, such as the drama club, the debate club, the basketball team, and the school chorus) to improve intergroup relations. Opportunities for students to find the commonality among a diverse membership in their school community will prepare them to participate in and co-construct a safe learning environment with their peers.

### **A Safe Learning Environment**

The “ultimate sense of feeling safe” is the affirmation of the “common humanity of the group” (Shields, 2000, p. 291). One of the prevailing issues in unsafe school cultures is bullying and harassment among peers. Social science research presents substantial evidence that student-on-student harassment in schools is both prevalent and

consequential (Chaves 2002). Twenty-eight states have enacted anti-bullying legislation in recent years. Incidents of harassment or bullying can be directly aggressive (physical or verbal) or indirectly aggressive (gossip, rumors, or social exclusion).

Although bullying and harassment is typified by the bully and target's inequality of access to power (Naylor, Cowie, Cossin, deBettencourt, & Lemme, 2006), there are a multiplicity of types and causes of bullying behaviors, and intolerance for diversity is among them. "Racist bullying" refers to both physically and psychologically hurtful behavior that causes its victim to feel marginalized and worthless because of his color, ethnicity, culture, and national origin (Richardson, 2006).

A 2005 National School Climate Survey demonstrated that anti-LGTB (lesbian, gay, transgender, or bisexual) bullying and harassment "remain commonplace in America's schools" (Hunt & Regis, 2006, p. 30) and the frequency and intensity for some of these students is extreme (D'Augelli, Grossman, & Starks, 2006). Research in harassment based on sexual orientation demonstrates one example of a causal relationship between the intolerance of diversity and certain types of bullying behaviors.

Peer-on-peer sexual harassment has existed in schools for decades, but it is only recently that the problem has surfaced in both in the courts as a legal dilemma and in social science research (Chaves, 2002). In the past, schools ignored claims, often blaming the victim (they "did something" to provoke harassment), setting the harassing behaviors aside or "shrugging off the complaint as evidence that 'boys will be boys'" (Chaves, 2002, p. 287). Historically, it has been the pervasive view that peer-on-peer sexual harassment is a normal aspect of social/sexual child development (p. 287), leading school authorities to consider the matter as one of no great concern. In light of emerging

social science evidence, however, this perspective may lead to serious consequences for victims.

The most significant of the early research on student-to-student sexual harassment in schools was the 1993 American Association of University Women (AAUW) report, *Hostile Hallways*. In this study, more than 1600 students in 70 U.S. schools, grades 8 – 11, were surveyed to profile the issue of sexual harassment in the public schools. In a survey, sexual harassment was defined as “unwanted” or “unwelcome” sexual behavior that interferes with the student’s life, and students were asked to respond to school-related experiences during school-related times. Responses indicated that 80% of students had been a target of physical or sexual harassment (AAUW, 1993). The AAUW report suggests that “a safe and equitable learning environment is fundamental to success”, and found that the educational impact of student-on-student sexual harassment in school is profound, stating significant psychological, physical, behavioral, and academic consequences (AAUW, 1993, p. 18).

### *Consequences of harassment*

How long students stay in school, how committed they feel, and the quality of their performance often depend upon their social class, race, and gender as well as characteristics of the community, pressures from outside the school, and attributes of the school itself.

deMarrais (1995, p. 84)

Students who are targets of peer harassment or bullying are at a clear disadvantage: their opportunity to learn and to achieve in school is significantly impacted by the unsafe environment in which they are expected to do so. As a causal relationship between the intolerance of diversity and bullying behaviors is demonstrated in the research (Richardson, 2006; Hunt & Regis, 2006), efforts to teach tolerance in schools become essential to creating a safe environment in which all students can learn.

Students who are frequent targets of peer aggression have psychological consequences: they feel more depressed, anxious, and lonely than other students. These internalizing symptoms lead to disengagement from school. (Nishina, Juvonen, & Mitkow, 2005). The AAUW report (1993) studied the psychological impact on students. Students who were targets of sexual harassment by peers reported a range of emotional implications: 50% suffered from embarrassment, 48% were “very” or “somewhat upset”, 37% felt self-conscious, 29% felt less confident or less sure about themselves, 21% doubted whether they could have a happy romantic relationship, 17% felt confused about who they are, and 16% felt less popular as a result of being sexually harassed (p. 19-20). Research by Rusby, Forrester, Biglan, & Metzeler (2005) also found associations between peer victimization and depression, loneliness, poor self-concept, and anxiety.

Students also experience more physical symptoms and are more likely to incur illnesses than their peers (Nishina, et al. 2005). Nishina cites other studies that explore the possible physiological explanations of this phenomenon, research indicating that social rejection activates the same area of the brain that registers physical pain. He cites research that connects stressful events, especially those that occur chronically, to the increase of stress hormones, which in turn suppress immune system functioning. Nishina

surmises: “Thus, students who are targets of peer harassment may be more likely to get colds or other illnesses that prevent them from going to school” (p. 46).

Nishina presents another explanation: physical symptoms are more “socially acceptable” than psychological difficulties. They suggest that, among adolescents, “...it may be more acceptable to say ‘I’m feeling sick’ than ‘I’m feeling nervous or sad’” (p. 46). Physical symptoms may elicit more positive attention (sympathy or help) from adults and peers, and parents are more likely to allow their child to miss and avoid school with physical symptoms than for emotional reasons. It also may be that physical illness, as opposed to psychological weakness, limits the likelihood of being a continued target of peer aggression (Nishina, et al. 2005).

Behavioral consequences are also indicated in student-on-student harassment research. Students who were physically or verbally harassed in middle school are more likely to have significant behavioral consequences in high school (Rusby, Forrester, Biglan, & Metzler, 2005). Rusby et al. found that a high level of physical harassment of a victim in middle school was a significant predictor of aggression from the victim in high school. They also found that frequent verbal harassment in middle school was a significant predictor of victims’ antisocial behaviors and associations with deviant peers in high school. This study indicates that exposure to verbal harassment in middle school is a predictor for alcohol use in high school, nearly three times higher than students who were not verbally harassed in middle school (p. 468 – 470).

The AAUW report (1993) emphasizes the educational impact of victims of peer harassment: 23% reported not wanting to attend school, wanting to stay at home, or wanting to cut a class, 23% reported not wanting to talk in class as much, 21% reported



that it was harder to pay attention in school, 16% reported that they had made a lower grade on a test and found it harder to study, 12% thought about changing schools, and 4% doubted that they had what it takes to graduate (p. 18-19). The research of Nishina, Juvonen et al. (2005) suggests that peer harassment negatively impacts the GPA of victims, and that victims miss learning opportunities due to their inability to focus and from frequent absences from school.

In a study of lesbian, gay, and bisexual youth, nearly 80% reported verbal victimization, 11% physical abuse, and 9% sexual harassment, with victimization, on average, beginning at the age of thirteen (D'Augelli et al., 2006). In a three year study of lesbian, gay, and bisexual youth in schools of the United Kingdom, over 50% of the 119 participants had contemplated self-harm or suicide at the time they were being harassed, and 40% had engaged in such behaviors at least once. Seventeen percent of the students exhibited symptoms associated with Post Traumatic Stress Syndrome later in life (Rivers & Cowie, 2006). Another study looked at suicide attempts among male gay youth: 71% of participants had considered suicide at some point in their life, with 39% reporting at least one suicide attempt (Savin-Williams & Ream, 2003).

Eisenberg, Neumark-Sztainer, & Perry (2003) studied school connectedness, finding that students who face the most peer harassment in school have lower grades than those who are subjected to the least harassment. Conclusions from their research indicate that students who were most harassed had average grades ranging from C- to F. Students who were least harassed fell in the A- to C range (p. 314).

### *Legal issues*

Legal history provides insight into the development of school policy in regard to student-on-student harassment. As a substantial number of cases began to appear involving student-on-student harassment in schools, plaintiffs used the “hostile environment” category to model their complaints after Title VII litigation, the 1964 Act which addresses employee-to-employee workplace sexual harassment (Alexander, 2005). Plaintiffs were claiming that schools were liable for damages when students harassed other students, creating an educational environment that is hostile and that negatively impacted their learning opportunities.

In *Davis v. Monroe County Board of Education* (1999), the U.S. Supreme Court held that peer-on-peer sexual harassment was actionable under Title IX. The categories of *quid pro quo* and “hostile environment” define the categories of sexual discrimination which may be pursued under Title IX (Alexander, 2005). *Quid pro quo* harassment may be pursued when a person in a position of power (administrator, teacher, coach) attempts to force submission to sexual behaviors by using rewards or punishment to coerce the student to comply. “Hostile environment” may be used when the harassment of a student has created an educational environment that is “hostile, offensive, or intimidating”, even in cases when the harassment is solely due to gender (Alexander, 2005, p. 461).

*Davis* (1999) is significant in its inclusion of student-on-student sexual harassment because, unlike the more traditional definition of sexual harassment, neither student has a subordinate role. In *Davis*, a fifth grade girl was incessantly harassed by a boy in her class. The school did nothing to remedy the problem; the school officials had

notice of the ongoing harassment and were deliberately indifferent, failing to take any action that would end the harassing behavior.

The Supreme Court specifically took notice of the fact that schools cannot be compared to an adult workplace, and that children do not always act in a manner that would be considered acceptable within the realm of adult interactions. Teasing and name-calling alone does not constitute harassment. The Court stated that the behavior must be so “severe, pervasive, and objectively offensive” that the victims are “effectively denied equal access to an institution’s resources and opportunities...the equal access to education that Title IX is designed to protect” (*Davis*, 1999, p. 8-9). In this case, the Court found that the student-on-student harassment had a negative effect on the victim’s education and that the school authorities’ failure to take action was “clearly unreasonable in light of the known circumstances” (p. 7).

#### *Massachusetts General Law & anti-bullying legislation*

As this study takes place in Massachusetts, an inspection of Massachusetts law is pertinent. Massachusetts General Law 272, Section 98 prohibits “discrimination or restriction based on race, color, religious creed, national origin, sex, sexual orientation...”. The law also states that “all persons shall have the right to the full and equal accommodations, advantages, facilities, and privileges of any place of public accommodation” and that “this right is recognized and declared to be a Civil Right”.

The Massachusetts Legislature held public hearings before the Joint Committee of Education on May 1, 2007, presenting anti-bullying legislation for Massachusetts public schools. Senate Bill No. 275 would require schools to establish a bullying action and

prevention plan (185<sup>th</sup> General Court of the Commonwealth of Mass., 2007) The bill describes bullying as intimidation that can “disrupt a school’s ability to educate its students”, creating “an atmosphere in which behavior can escalate into violence”. The general court finds that “a safe and civil environment is necessary for students to learn and achieve high academic standards”.

In Senate Bill No. 275, bullying includes repeated “written, electronic, or verbal expressions, physical acts, or gestures which a reasonable student under the circumstances should know would or could cause physical harm, damage to another student’s property, or a hostile school environment”. The behavior must be severe, interfering with a student’s opportunity to learn or participate in his or her education. The bill requires schools to report incidents of bullying, to implement the use of bullying prevention resources, and to establish prompt communication parents or guardians. A designated school official must be appointed to implement and enforce the plan. Twenty-eight states have enacted anti-bullying legislation in recent years.

### *Combating harassment in schools*

It is clear that the psychological, physical, behavioral, and academic impact of student-on-student harassment diminishes the victim’s opportunity to learn. It is imperative that schools work to create a social and cultural learning environment that is free from peer harassment. Chamberlain (2001) points out the inadequacies of schools’ current “legalistic” policies. Schools base their policies, procedures, and practices on a defensive legal position to protect them from liability, yet there is little evidence that these policies prevent harassment from happening (p. 150).

Chamberlain examines school policies that are based on legal guidelines, such as the *quid pro quo* or “hostile environment” categories that may be pursued under Title IX. First, school policies assume that there is a cultural consensus about the naming of behaviors and that anyone in the school community can determine what constitutes “sexual”, “offensive”, or “unwelcome” behavior. Secondly, law-based policies presume a perpetrator and a victim. Often in cases of sexual harassment in the school setting, a perpetrator and victim are not clearly defined; many times there is group interaction involved. Finally, school policies fail to address issues of the continuing social relationships that precede and follow the incidents of harassment: where social relationships for adolescents override academic aspirations, “the need to maintain, be accepted, and not be labeled as a ‘snitch’ or ‘baby’ often overrides the wish to defend oneself or one’s rights” (p. 147 ).

Chamberlain also notes that legal policies recognize the power differential between teachers and students, but do not recognize the power differential among students. Social status, however, is prevalent in adolescent culture. Chamberlain uses this example: a girl may feel supported in reporting sexual harassment from a socially isolated, unattractive boy, but would lose peer support for reporting a similar behavior from the most popular boy in school (p. 148).

Chamberlain emphasizes that no list of legally defined behaviors of harassment would ever be long enough. The law is powerful and the contributions of the legal system are significant, but school administrators need to focus less on punishing sexual harassment behaviors and focus more on “making changes in the practices that support a culture of harassment, discrimination, and domination” (p. 153).

The researcher believes that such practices begin with diversity education, in which educational leaders institute initiatives that promote the acceptance and appreciation of individual differences, including race, ethnicity, disability, religion, gender, sexual orientation, and socioeconomic status. School leaders must guide the members of the school community in the exploration of stereotyping, and discriminatory language and behavior that have the potential to perpetuate bias and the manifestation of prejudice. School leaders must create initiatives that celebrate multiculturalism and diversity as a means to improve the culture, social character, and learning environment within the school. It is the ethical responsibility of school leaders to provide a safe and supportive educational environment, an environment in which all individual students among a diverse student body have an equal and adequate opportunity to learn.

### **Theoretical Rationale for the Selected Methods of Research**

#### *Peer training program*

In the project related to this study, a Diversity Council of student leaders led anti-bias education workshops for ninth graders in their high school. The Diversity Council student leaders prepared to take on the role of anti-bias activists when faced with discriminatory, bias, or prejudice interactions that take place in the cafeteria, hallways, and classrooms. In order to prepare to prepare for this work, the student leaders and their faculty advisors took part in 18 hours of training led by professional facilitators from the Anti-Defamation League's "A World of Difference" Institute. In this training, Diversity Council student leaders learned to be peer leaders and anti-bias educators, practicing facilitation and conflict resolution skills in response to incidents of discrimination.

The researcher chose the ADL “A World of Difference” Peer Training Program based on empirical research produced by Yale University in 2006. The study findings revealed the Peer Training Program had a positive impact on students following the first year of program activity at their schools, raising the salience of anti-bias issues and influencing the behaviors and attitudes of students involved in the program (Levy Paluck & Green, 2006). The quantitative and qualitative research performed in this study yielded strong evidence that the “A World of Difference” Peer Training Program was a successful training program for cultivating student activists in anti-bias initiatives. Some of the results included the following:

- In treatment schools, Peer Trainers were significantly more likely to agree that structural discrimination exists. The effect of the Peer Training Program was greater than the influence of student’s identity as a person of color for believing that structural discrimination exists (program = .29, identity = .12)
- Peer Trainers were more aware of prejudice and teasing in their school. Seventy three percent of Peer Trainers in treatment school stated that they had overheard teasing in their school sometime “this week”, compared to only 42% of control Peer Trainers. Only 4% of treatment Peer Trainers, compared to 22% of control Peer Trainers, stated that they “never” overheard teasing.
- Peer Trainers in treatment schools were more likely to believe that students should be activists and allies when teasing and insulting happens in their schools, out of responsibility for school culture – a responsibility

conferred by the power of peer influence – or a related kind of moral or practical responsibility. Although there was no statistical significance in the control Peer Trainer group, there was statistical significance in the belief that intervening could work (treatment = .12, control = <.05), and the Peer Training Program seemed to help students to elaborate on their reasons for being allies.

- Peer Trainers talked more often about social bias with their classmates and were more comfortable doing so. Thirty three percent of treatment Peer Trainers stated that they discussed issues of social bias “very often”, compared to 22% of control Peer Trainers. Treatment Peer Trainers were significantly more likely to say that they felt comfortable discussing these issues: 58% responded to this question using the highest rating, “extremely comfortable”, compared to 40% of control Peer Trainers.
- In observed (not self-reported) behavior, treatments Peer Trainers were significantly more likely to be allies than control Peer Trainers. A majority (58%) of treatment Peer Trainers were nominated by their fellow students as someone in the school who would be likely to step in if a student was being teased or insulted, compared to 30% of control Peer Trainers.

### *Qualitative research design*

The Yale study (2006) described above was a quantitative and qualitative study used to evaluate the ADL Peer Training program, measuring the impact of the “A World



of Difference” training on Peer Trainers that had completed the program. The researcher hopes to build on what the Yale study describes as the “scant base of research on anti-bias programs that combine both instructional approaches (which attempt to modify the knowledge, attitudes, or behaviors of individuals) and peer influence approaches (which attempt to change the social norms of the school or peer group)” (Levy Paluck & Green, 2006).

This researcher builds on the Yale study, focusing on the perspectives of student leaders and faculty advisors of a Diversity Council as they actively took on issues of discrimination, intolerance, and prejudice in their school community. The Diversity Council’s initiatives include anti-bias education programs for ninth graders, leadership as anti-bias activists, and the preparation of events and programs that celebrate multiculturalism and diversity in the school.

The researcher hopes to learn how the student leaders and faculty advisors perceive their influence on the social/cultural character of their school and how they perceive their influence on the learning environment, in terms of safe and equal opportunities for all students. The researcher also seeks to discover how the student leaders perceive the changes in themselves, especially in the lasting impact on their leadership skills and their understanding of the effects of anti-bias activism.

The researcher utilized qualitative research methodology to this end. Merriam (1998) states that “research focused on discovery, insight, and understanding from the perspectives of those being studied offers the greatest promise of making significant contributions to the knowledge base and practice of education” (p. 1). The researcher strives to fill some of the gaps in the limited research on anti-bias programs with an up-

close view of a diversity education program in action. In a qualitative research study, the researcher provides a “richly descriptive” narration of the phenomenon under study, “in order to afford the reader the vicarious experience of having been there” (p. 238).

Chapter Three will provide a comprehensive description of the qualitative research design.

## **Chapter 3**

### **Design of the Study**

#### **Introduction**

This chapter explores the research design used in this case study. First, the researcher reveals a closer look at how the guiding hypotheses and research questions refine the focus of the study. Next, the researcher presents an overview of the design of the study and rationale for the selected design. An outline of the research methodology illuminates the researchers' selection of methods for collecting, analyzing, and reporting data. The remainder of the chapter provides a detailed description of the sample, data gathering procedures, methods of data analysis, and the framework for reporting and discussing findings.

#### **Guiding Hypotheses & Research Questions**

Qualitative researchers do not generally state formal hypotheses before conducting a study because they “seek to understand the nature of their participants and contexts before stating a research focus or hypothesis”. The qualitative researcher may wish instead to develop guiding hypotheses and observe emerging patterns or associations that lead to the formation of new hypotheses (Gay, Mills, & Airasian, 2006, p. 61).

In this case study, the researcher developed three guiding hypotheses as the student leaders of the Diversity Council implemented an anti-bias education program:

- The anti-bias education initiative will have a positive impact on the social/cultural character of the school. Empowering student leaders to be anti-bias activists will correlate with less incidents of bias behavior by students of the school community.
- The anti-bias education initiative will affect the perception among the student body that the learning environment is physically and emotionally safe, with a fair and equal opportunity to learn for all students. Empowering student leaders to be the agents of change is an effective means of achieving school improvement.
- Participation as Diversity Council student leaders in the anti-bias education initiative will have a lasting impact on the students' leadership skills and their understanding of the effects of anti-bias activism.

In stating these guiding hypotheses, the researcher “operationalized” these suppositions through the development of research questions to focus data collection (Gay, Mills, & Airasian, 2006, p. 61). The following three research questions were the focal point for data collection efforts:

1. *In what tangible ways did the Diversity Council student leaders' efforts influence their school peers' acceptance of diversity and the social/cultural character of the school?*
2. *Did the initiatives of the Diversity Council peer leadership program impact the learning environment, in terms of safe and equal opportunities for all students, in the perceptions of the Diversity Council student leaders and faculty advisors?*

3. *What specific skills and/or understandings from their participation on the Diversity Council do the Diversity Council student leaders believe will have lasting effects beyond their graduation from high school?*

### **Research Design & Methodology**

The researcher used qualitative research methods in this study, examining the experiences of a Diversity Council as they brought an anti-bias education initiative to their high school community. This case study has a descriptive orientation: the researcher provides knowledge through a “lived experience” in the school setting (Merriam, 1998, p. 4). The researcher was a participant observer, and as in most qualitative research, the researcher was the primary instrument for data collection and analysis.

The researcher used narrative analysis to focus on “the ways humans experience the world” and to tell the “story” of that lived experience (p. 157). The product of this case study research attempts to be “richly descriptive,” in an effort to understand this diversity education initiative in its unique, bounded context (p.8). The researcher believes that the case study format with a narrative orientation will be the most effective way to inform educators of the experiences of this Diversity Council. In a narrative context, the researcher provides the “richness and holism” that has a “strong potential for revealing complexity” in the exploration of educational issues (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 10).

The methodology of the qualitative researcher was centered on fieldwork, “spending considerable time in the setting under study, immersing oneself in this setting,

and collecting as much relevant information as possible as unobtrusively as possible” (Gay, Mills, & Airasian, 2006, p. 413).

The study proceeded in three stages: 1) *the pre-intervention stage*, which included the peer leader training program for Diversity Council student leaders in preparation for the anti-bias education initiative, 2) *the intervention stage*, in which the Diversity Council student leaders presented a series of anti-bias educational programs and activities for ninth graders and sponsored school-wide diversity education initiatives, and 3) *the post-intervention stage*, in which the researcher and participants reflected upon program initiatives at the conclusion of the intervention. To strengthen reliability and internal validity, this researcher triangulated data by using multiple sources and methods to confirm the emerging findings in each of the three stages (Merriam, 1998).

The researcher was an active participant observer. As an administrative advisor to the Diversity Council, the researcher had close and personal access to the events and daily activities as the anti-bias education initiative unfolded. The benefit of participant observation is that it affords the researcher an opportunity to “gain insights and develop relationships with participant that would not be possible if the researcher observed but did not participate (Gay, Mills, & Airasian, 2006, p. 414). At the same time, the researcher must take great care to evaluate the effects of researcher bias and the potential for compromised objectivity. These limitations will be discussed at length later in this chapter.

The researcher utilized narrative research to present the findings for this study. Gay, Mills, & Airasian (2006) describe narrative research in this way:

Narrative research allows the researcher to share the storied lives of teachers [and students] in the hope of providing insights and understandings about challenging educational issues as well as enriching the lives of those teachers [and students]. Narrative research can contribute to our understanding of the complex world of the classroom and the nuances of the educational enterprise that exist between teachers and students. It simply is not always possible, nor desirable, to reduce our understanding of teaching and learning to numbers (p. 430).

The researcher collected a chronology of the experiences of the Diversity Council as they implemented the anti-bias education program. The researcher gathered data from the personal stories and perceptions of the study participants, synthesizing and analyzing these stories for educational context and meaning. The researcher then wrote a narrative account, telling the story of the Diversity Council and the new understandings that emerged in the process.

### **Sample & Rationale for Sample**

This case study took place in a suburban high school with a school population of approximately 1,000 students spanning grades 9 – 12. The school is nested in a middle to upper-middle class community of 25,000. The median household income of this community in 2005 was \$75,100, with a median house/condominium value of \$425,500. Forty percent of the adults in the community hold a Bachelor's degree or higher (Retrieved on 11/17/08, from [www.city-data.com/city/\[town\]-Massachusetts.html](http://www.city-data.com/city/[town]-Massachusetts.html)).

The high school population reflects a community that is not racially diverse: 94.2% of the student body is White, 2.5% is African-American, 1.9% is Hispanic, and other ethnic or multi-ethnic groups are less than 1.5%. The faculty and administration is even less diverse, with only one person of color on staff. The students in the school perform well on the MCAS (Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System) exams, with 100% passing English, 98% passing Math, and 97% passing Science in 2008 (Retrieved on 1/29/08, from [http://profiles.doe.mass.edu/mcas/performance\\_level](http://profiles.doe.mass.edu/mcas/performance_level)).

To learn about the issues of central importance to this study, a purposive sample from the Diversity Council was selected by the researcher. The Diversity Council was comprised of 22 juniors and seniors who were selected through faculty nominations and application review. Three administrators (including the researcher) and four faculty members participated in the council as advisors to the student leaders.

The researcher believed that a sample of nine selected from the Diversity Council, including six students and three advisors, would be adequate to represent the perceptions, attitudes, beliefs, and experiences of the larger group. Qualitative sampling is a process of selecting a small number of individuals that take on the role of “key informants” in a research study (Gay, Mills, & Airasian, 2006, p. 117). A sample size of nine provided the needed data to inform the researcher’s inquiry and to explore in depth the research questions for this study.

The researcher observed all 22 students in the Diversity Council as they participated in 18 hours of peer-leader training led by professional facilitators from the Anti-Defamation League’s “A World of Difference” Institute. The researcher identified a subset of students who demonstrated a willingness to share their ideas and an ability to



effectively communicate their insights and reflections during the training sessions. A primary goal for researchers in qualitative research is to select participants who can best add to the understanding of the phenomenon under study, not simply represent some larger population (Gay, Mills, & Airasian, 2006). The researcher chose from this subset six students who were representative of the gender, ages, and grades of the Diversity Council (see Table 3.1). The racial diversity of the six students selected were also representative of the larger student body.

Table 3.1. Description of student sample participants.

<i>Student</i>	<i>Gender</i>	<i>Age</i>	<i>Grade</i>	<i>Race</i>
Kelly	Female	17	12	Caucasian
Maria	Female	17	12	Caucasian
Diana	Female	16	11	Hispanic-Latina
Jane	Female	16	11	Caucasian
Everett	Male	17	12	Caucasian
Daniel	Male	16	11	Caucasian

The researcher asked three of the seven faculty/administrator advisors of the Diversity Council to participate in the study. The researcher included two administrators who were able to provide an overall perspective of the effectiveness of the diversity education initiative within the school community. The researcher included the faculty member who had daily contact with both the Diversity Council student leaders as well as

a significant cross-section of the student body. The researcher believed that it was important to include a combination of educators who represented a broad range of experience in education.

Table 3.2. Description of faculty sample participants.

<i>Adult</i>	<i>Role</i>	<i>Gender</i>	<i>Race</i>	<i>Years in Education</i>
1	Administrator	Female	Caucasian	33
2	Program director	Female	Caucasian	5
3	Teacher	Female	Caucasian	3.3

The sample was selected before the intervention stage of the study. The researcher met with prospective members of the sample to provide a thorough and transparent description of the study. All nine participants were given an informed consent form that explicitly outlined the volunteer nature of their participation and the confidentiality of the research results. The document clearly stated that participants were free to withdraw at any time. The researcher asked prospective members to return the signed document as their intent to participate. Parent signatures were required for student participants.

### **Pilot Test of Data Gathering Procedures**

Focus group discussion and interview protocols were reviewed by a panel of colleagues in the researcher's doctoral program. In addition, the instruments were reviewed by professors from the doctoral program who are experts in qualitative and

quantitative research. Focus group and interview questions were piloted with teachers from the Diversity Council who were not included in the sample. The instruments were revised by the researcher based on feedback from the expert reviews and pilot tests.

The incident reports developed by the researcher for this study faced similar scrutiny by colleagues in the researcher's doctoral program who are practiced in similar research. The researcher shared the incident report with the other faculty and administrative advisors of the Diversity Council who received training in the specifics of this anti-bias education program. Commentary from this review guided modifications by the researcher prior to use in data collection.

All pilot tests of data gathering procedures took place in the eight weeks prior to data collection, allowing time for revision and review.

## **Data Gathering Procedures**

### **I. Pre-Intervention Stage (June 2007 – December 2007)**

Data gathering began in the pre-intervention stage of the study. School culture and the learning environment are at core of the study, so the researcher collected school records, artifacts, and documents that provided evidence of the existing atmosphere of the school prior to the Diversity Council's intervention. Included among these artifacts is a student questionnaire that was issued to the student body eighteen months prior to this study. The focus of this 2006 survey was prejudice and discrimination within the school community. The results of the survey propelled the establishment of a Diversity Council and was useful in revealing the perceptions of the student body during the year or so prior to the anti-bias education initiative.

Other pertinent records and documents that were collected during the pre-intervention stage were: 1) school disciplinary records that were directly connected to bias or discriminatory behavior, 2) records of physical fights and violence that were directly connected to discriminatory language or behavior, and 3) school reports of cases of bullying or harassment among students.

Also at the core of the study is the personal growth and development of the student leaders as anti-bias activists. In order to capture the “starting point” for the students and faculty advisors involved in this initiative, the researcher gathered evidence to reflect their beliefs, perceptions, and experiences in the pre-intervention stage of the study. All artifacts that were relevant to the nomination, application, and selection of the student leaders will be collected for review. The researcher also gathered all artifacts connected to the Anti-Defamation League World of Difference Peer Leader Training Program.

The pre-intervention stage of the study included a three-day training for faculty advisors and a three-day training for the student leaders. The researcher assembled all training program documents, attendance records, agendas, and summary evaluations. In addition, the researcher carefully recorded observations during the training sessions in a field notes journal. The researcher’s fieldwork during the training sessions focused on the foundation of beliefs and perceptions of our Diversity Council students and faculty advisors as they embarked upon their new leadership and anti-bias activist roles.

The final data collecting method for the pre-intervention stage of this study was a focus group discussion. The focus group was comprised of all nine study participants. The guiding questions and topics for the focus group discussion were driven by the

research questions for this study. The researcher focused on the beliefs, perceptions, and experiences of the students and faculty advisors prior to the anti-bias education intervention. The focus group discussion was a 45-minute session held in a school conference room. The session was audio-taped by the researcher and transcribed by an assistant to the researcher. All focus group participants were invited to request a review the transcription for accuracy.

## II. Intervention Stage (January 2008 – April 2008)

During the intervention stage, Diversity Council student leaders presented a series of anti-bias educational programs and activities for ninth grade classes in the school. In addition to this work, the Diversity Council sponsored several school-wide anti-bias education initiatives, including a mural contest and a button campaign. The researcher continued data collection with extensive observation, field notes, and journaling.

The researcher created an incident report for the purpose of data collection during the intervention stage of the study. Diversity Council student leaders and faculty advisors filled out an incident report as they witnessed incidents of bias language or behavior within the school community. Student leaders were trained to identify the types and categories of bias behavior and trained to observe and identify the roles of perpetrator, victim, confronter, ally, and bystander in these reports. The student leaders were trained with intervention strategies, and they were asked to report these personal experiences in the incident report.

During the intervention stage of the study, student members of the sample participated in a one-on-one interview with the researcher. The interviews were semi-

structured, with questions and topics guided by the research questions. Structured questions were designed for the researcher to synthesize and analyze common responses from participants, and flexible, open-ended questions provided an opportunity for new ideas and understandings to emerge. Each interview was approximately 20 minutes in length, held in the researcher's office. The interview was audio-taped by the researcher and transcribed by an assistant to the researcher. Participants were invited to request a review the transcription for accuracy.

### III. Post-Intervention Stage (May 2008 – July 2008)

Post-intervention data collection included a second and final focus group discussion. The researcher used many of the same questions and topics as the pre-intervention focus group discussion in an effort to identify changes in beliefs and perceptions over time. The focus group discussion was a 45-minute session held in a school conference room. The session was audio-taped by the researcher and transcribed by an assistant to the researcher. All focus group participants were invited to request a review the transcription for accuracy.

The researcher collected and reviewed disciplinary reports and school records of harassment, similar to those reviewed during the pre-intervention stage. Students' written reflections were collected at the conclusion of the anti-bias education initiative for review by the researcher. Throughout the process of data collection, the researcher documented each step of data collection in order to increase the internal validity of the study.

## Methods of Data Analysis

The researcher began data analysis during the data gathering process. Merriam (1998) asserts, “the right way to analyze data in a qualitative study is to do it *simultaneously* with data collection” (p. 162). During the collection of data, the researcher continued to refine the focus of the study, reflecting on emerging themes, and asking new or evolved questions that will direct the next collection of data.

The researcher formulated a strategic plan to:

- generate a list of themes based on research questions and review of related literature
- create a “start list” of codes to represent themes
- develop a form for recording and organizing data by theme
- continuously update themes and codes as data collection proceeded, capturing new themes, patterns, and connections as they emerged
- ensure triangulation of data by including a minimum of three columns for data collection sources representing each category
- ask “key questions” to focus and categorize data
- use visual displays to identify relationships and patterns
- keep a list of unanswered questions and missing data

The researcher’s strategic plan was informed by *Educational Research: Competencies for Analysis and Applications* (Gay, Mills, & Airasian, 2006) and *Qualitative Data Analysis* (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The researcher documented each step of data analysis in order to increase internal validity.

The researcher sought to understand the data through the process of interpretation. Gay, Mills, & Airasian (2006) remind us that “the goal of data interpretation is to find the meaning of the data...based heavily on the connections, common aspects, and linkages among the data, especially the identified categories and patterns” (p. 478). Merriam (1998) states the importance of creating categories that reflect the purpose of the research, are adequate to include all relevant data, are mutually exclusive from one another but conceptually congruent (similar levels of abstraction), and are exacting in capturing the meaning of the category. The researcher was attentive to creating categories that would facilitate the interpretation of data.

As data interpretation began to unfold, the researcher enlisted the assistance of colleagues to “offer insights that [the researcher] may have missed because of [the researcher’s] closeness to the work” (Gay, Mills, & Airasian, 2006, p. 479). The researcher’s doctoral program professors and classmates provided an expert review of data analysis and interpretation. Faculty advisors to the Diversity Council provided an inside look at data analysis for meaning and understanding.

The researcher contextualized findings in theory and in the existing body of literature. Theory can provide “a rationale or sense of meaning to the work” and the literature a foundation for “the unique contribution the qualitative researcher has made to our understanding of the topic studied” (Gay, Mills, & Airasian, 2006, p. 479).

### **Formats for Reporting the Data**

The researcher reported the data principally in the form of thematic narrative text, organized chronologically, with a direct link to research questions for this study. The



researcher also used visual data displays “to permit a viewing of a full data set in the same location...arranged systematically to answer the research questions at hand” (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 91-92). The figures used in Chapter Four illustrate changes in beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors over time.

The figures also illustrate how some factors examined in the study exert an influence on others (Miles & Huberman, 1994). All figures are accompanied by an explanatory narrative text. In the context of this study, the researcher is interested in the relationships of many variables, including peer leadership, anti-bias education, the social/cultural character of a school, and a safe learning environment. Visual displays were an effective way to synthesize and interpret data for this study.

### **Frameworks for Discussion of the Findings**

In the discussion of the findings, the researcher contextualizes the study in the theoretical landscape of the literature review. Returning to the themes of Chapter Two, the researcher will compare the findings of this study to existing theory and research three areas: *empowering students* to be active participants in the improvement of schools, *diversity education* as a means to establish fairness, social support, and to plant the seeds of social justice in our youngest citizens, and *a safe learning environment* to provide the physical, emotional, and interpersonal security that students need to be successful in school. The researcher will evaluate the findings in relationship to the research questions for this study and how these findings contribute to body of knowledge that exists in the field of education. The researcher will reveal a complete presentation and discussion of the findings for this study in Chapters Four and Five.

## **Limitations of the Study**

This research was carried out in a single school, with a small sample and the time constraint of one calendar year. It is important to note the limitation of contextual applications for this research.

Since the researcher is a supervising and evaluating administrator at the school where the study was conducted, the relationship between researcher and faculty participants becomes more complex, with the potential for participant bias. The faculty advisors may tell the administrator what they believe the researcher wants to hear, and they may be reluctant to be forthcoming in instances that would expose weaknesses in their teaching practice or reflect poorly on their performance in the classroom. In an effort to minimize participant bias, the researcher met with faculty participants in advance of the study to clearly state that their participation in the study would have no bearing on their professional evaluation during the course of the year. The researcher articulated the purpose of the study with transparency, asking faculty participants to be honest in their responses in order to gather the most accurate data possible.

The researcher faced a similar concern of the potential for bias with students who contribute to the study. Since the administrative researcher holds a position of authority in the school, students are likely to attempt to please the researcher with positive responses. In an effort to lessen the possibility of participant bias, the researcher met with student participants in advance of the study to clearly state that their participation in the study would have no bearing on their grades, promotion, or opportunities in school or school activities during the school year. The researcher articulated the purpose of the study with transparency, asking student participants to be honest in their responses in

order to gather the most accurate data possible. Concerns for both faculty and student bias were further mitigated by the triangulation of data during the course of data collection.

The researcher considered the possibility of researcher bias as the study took place. Since the researcher is an administrator of this school, the researcher was hopeful that the student leadership initiative of the Diversity Council would have a positive effect on the social/cultural atmosphere and learning environment of the school. In order to assuage researcher bias, the researcher triangulated data at each stage of the study and asked colleagues to perform an expert review of data analysis and data interpretation along the way.

The research accounted for validity in this research, as well as the quality of conclusions. Trochim (2006) states the importance of establishing credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability in qualitative research, mirroring the traditional checks for validity, reliability, and objectivity in quantitative research.

To ensure the credibility of this study, the researcher gave participants the opportunity to review the final product and to evaluate the believability of the study. The researcher attempted to enhance transferability by carefully describing the research context and the assumptions central to the research, so that an informed judgment of transferability can be made. The researcher ensures dependability by describing changes that occurred during the study and how these changes affected the researcher's decisions throughout the course of the study. Finally, the researcher improved the confirmability of the research by documenting data collection and data analysis, conducting an inspection

of all procedures to seek and describe contradictions, potential bias, or distortions in the results of the study.

## **Chapter Four**

### **Reporting of the Findings and Analysis of Data**

#### **Introduction**

This chapter begins with a presentation of the context of the study: the setting, the participants, and relevant interactions and events that provide a rich and detailed backdrop for this story. The researcher synthesized field notes and journal entries into descriptive narrative passages to convey the heart of the study: the dialogue and interactions of its characters and a witnessing of events as they were lived. In this qualitative case study, the researcher provided a “vividly descriptive” narration of the phenomenon under study, “in order to afford the reader the vicarious experience of having been there” (Merriam, 1998, p. 238). Pseudonyms were used for all individuals and places described in the narrative to protect the anonymity of the actual setting and persons involved.

Chapter Four was organized to reflect the progression of the data collection process, beginning with the pre-intervention stage of the study, continuing with the intervention stage, and culminating with the post-intervention stage of the study. Triangulation of data occurred in each stage of the study in order to verify findings. Footnotes were used to provide data sources in this chapter.

The researcher described categorization and thematic protocols as the study evolved. Early analysis of the data and the way in which this analysis informed subsequent data collection was reported at each stage. Figures, charts, and diagrams visually synthesized the findings at each stage of the study. A more thorough analysis of the data and a discussion of the findings will occur in Chapter Five.

## A “Roadmap” for the Reporting of the Findings

The *pre-intervention* stage of the study focused on the existing culture of the school setting and the existing beliefs, attitudes, and perceptions of the sample participants prior to the Diversity Council’s anti-bias education initiative. The researcher explored the way in which these pre-existing conditions informed the research questions as the study unfolded. To achieve triangulation of data, the researcher examined three sources of data during the pre-intervention stage:

- School records, artifacts, and documents
- Researcher field notes from Diversity Council training sessions
- Focus Group discussion

The *intervention* stage revealed the way in which emerging ideas, beliefs, and perceptions continued to inform data collection and the researcher’s early analysis of the findings. In this stage, the researcher constructed data collection protocols to reflect themes as they surfaced, and the researcher began to organize and connect these threads of data as they enlightened the research questions. The presentation of data in this section was organized by four significant themes. To ensure validity of data in the intervention stage, the researcher triangulated the data using three sources:

- Student interviews
- Incident reports
- Researcher field notes from Diversity Council anti-bias education initiatives

The *post-intervention* stage of the study focused on the culture of the school after the Diversity Council initiatives were completed. The researcher was interested in any changes in the beliefs, attitudes, and perceptions of the sample participants as a result of

the anti-bias education initiatives. Data collected in the post-intervention stage was triangulated to verify findings by examining three sources:

- Focus Group discussion
- School records, artifacts, and documents
- Student leader's written reflections

The post-intervention stage of the study further illustrated the four central themes that had emerged from the data and how these findings informed the researcher's continuing analysis of the data.

The researcher constructed a summary analysis of the converging elements of data. This summary included additional diagrams to visually synthesize the findings in a way that fused the four emergent themes and connected them to the research questions. This analysis guided the researcher to a more in-depth analysis and the discussion of the findings in Chapter Five.

Chapter Five explored the relationship of the findings to the research and literature presented in Chapter Two, and how the findings of this study contribute to the existing body of research. In addition, the researcher reflected upon the implications of this study for educational practice and policy, and presents recommendations for further research. Chapter Five also examined how this study informed the leadership practice of the researcher, with a specific focus on social justice issues in education.

### **Pre-Intervention**

The researcher collected school records and documents regarding a specific incident of discriminatory language and behavior that occurred early in the pre-

intervention stage of the study. The researcher reconstructed the data with a descriptive narration of the incident to provide the reader with an intimate view of the school where the Diversity Council student leaders were preparing to implement an anti-bias education curriculum.

*Lakeview High School: October 11, 2007*

*Each time the bell rings at Lakeview High School, there is a gridlock of teenagers in an intersection of hallways that the students affectionately refer to as “crash corner”. In a mishap of architectural design, a newer section of the building connects to the old structure, joining two offset squares at one corner point. Double steel doors, propped open with wooden doorstops, open into an intersection of four major corridors that lead to and from the Math, Science, and Social Studies departments. Passage through this intersection is also the only access to a stairwell that leads to the English department on the first floor. At each passing between classes, students push through the throng of students, heading in any one of four possible directions, bumping backpacks and shuffling feet, unable to move much faster.*

*Most interactions are friendly, some teens straining on tiptoe to see a friend over the sea of faces, pointing to where they might meet if they can work their way through the crowd. Others maneuver the swarm alone, either anxiously pushing forward or content in allowing the herd to carry them slowly along. Finally, like vehicles in rush hour traffic, once the volume dwindles, the speed of the pack increases and movement becomes a more steady flow. The warning bell signals a final rush, and those who remain disappear into classrooms.*



*Wendy lingers at her locker. She has an ideal location, with a window view of an interior courtyard and a clear sightline to crash corner. She is a freshman, but she has already learned to allow a few extra minutes for the crowd to dissipate before she attempts to walk through. She holds a travel pass to a study hall in the Science department, where she plans to study for a vocabulary quiz with a friend during her free period. Wendy arrives and signs in with Mr. Ferris, who greets her with a warm smile. She is a frequent visitor and Mr. Ferris knows that she is a responsible student who stays on task, adding no burden to the management of his ninth grade study hall.*

*Wendy slides into a desk and opens her books, waiting for her friend to produce the vocabulary flash cards they had created together on the previous day. A few rows to Wendy's right, Joey and Derek are lounging and chatting together. "Do you have a quarter?" Wendy hears Joey ask Derek. "I'm short for lunch". Derek responds, "Yeah, I have a quarter. But I'm not giving it to you!" Joey snorts and says in disgust, "Don't be a Jew. Just give me the quarter".*

*Wendy lifts her head. She's known Joey since elementary school, and he never fails to irritate her. But this is worse. "What did you say?" she says to him. "I'm Jewish and that really offends me". Mr. Ferris shifts uncomfortably at his desk, but says nothing. Other students look up and wait for Joey's response. Joey shrugs. "Nothing", he says, "But I have this neighbor, Mike, who is Jewish and I can't stand him. So I guess I don't like Jewish people". Mr. Ferris can see the anger rising in Wendy. He decides to intervene, but keeps his tone playful, hoping to calm the interaction before it escalates. "You don't like a whole race of people", he says, "just because you don't like one*

person?" Joey responds, "Yeah. The Holocaust was a good thing". Turning to Derek he laughs and shouts, "Yay for Hitler!"

Wendy stands up and turns to Mr. Ferris. "Do you give me permission to go over and slap him?" Mr. Ferris, still hoping to dissolve the issue with humor, says "Yes, he deserves it for that comment!" Wendy makes a move toward Joey, who jumps up and darts out of the way, laughing. Derek addresses Wendy. "Hey Wendy," he says, "What do you think that is?" Derek points at a chemical cabinet that closely resembles an oven door. Wendy is furious now and Joey's laughter fuels her anger. She makes another move toward him, but he maneuvers away. Wendy returns to her desk and decides to ignore the boys, but she is unable to concentrate for the rest of the period. Although Joey continues to snicker and mutter comments to Derek and other friends, Mr. Ferris is relieved that the incident is over and he goes back to correcting papers.

The bell rings. Wendy is among the first to exit the room and she is soon caught in the deluge at crash corner. In the confusion, she doesn't notice Joey move to a position directly in front of her. The crush of bodies keeps her from moving away. Joey becomes aware of Wendy behind him, and turns to say something to her. Without thinking, Wendy slaps him, hard, across the face. There is an audible gasp from the crowd of students around her. She turns and pushes her way to the nearest opening and runs down the corridor, tears welling in her eyes. She can hardly believe what she has done.

The next morning Wendy goes to her locker before school begins. Within minutes of her arrival, she sees a group of boys approaching her locker, with Joey among them. As the boys pass her locker, Joey calls out, "Jew!" and there is a ripple of laughter in the group. Wendy ignores them, but she hurries to gather her books and walks to the

*cafeteria, where she sits each day with friends before her first class. Wendy is sitting there when Joey's group walks by again, Joey shouting "Jew!" when they pass her table.*

*During the morning hours of school, it becomes clear to Wendy that rumors of her slapping Joey on the previous day have spread widely among the student body. Students have asked her about it all morning. Now Wendy begins to fear that she will face disciplinary action if a school administrator should hear about the incident. Striking another student always results in a suspension. It does not take long before Wendy is in tears in the girls' bathroom, calling her mother on her cell phone and pleading with her to allow her to be dismissed from school.<sup>1</sup>*

Two days before this incident took place at Lakeview High School, the Diversity Council student leaders were engaged in the Anti-Defamation League's *World of Difference Institute* peer leader training sessions. The researcher observed the training sessions in order to understand the student leaders' perceptions of their community and school culture in the pre-intervention stage of the study. The researcher wrote extensively in a journal to capture the essence of the community in which the student leaders live, and to provide the reader with a snapshot of the pre-intervention beliefs and understandings of the student leaders as they prepared to embark upon their diversity education initiative.

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<sup>1</sup> Wendy's story retold from school discipline document, harassment report, and investigation report

*Training Sessions: October 9, 2007*

*Professional trainers from the ADL led the peer training sessions at an off-campus location, in a conference room at the Lakeview Savings Bank in the center of town. Upon their arrival this morning, the guest ADL trainers commented on the quaint beauty of the town. Lakeview is a suburb of Boston that has retained its mid-twentieth century appearance: at the center of town is a small park with a gazebo, flowerbeds and walkways, a World War II Memorial, and wooden benches shaded by tall oaks. A variety of small businesses, retail stores, and coffee shops line Main Street, and the steeples of several churches punctuate the skyline. The post office, bank, library, and town hall are prominent brick buildings that are frequently bustling with people - White people. The sidewalks, corner market, and the train station are busy on this sunny October morning, mothers accompanied by small children, professional men and women on their way to work, blue-collar workers picking up their morning coffee, and retired men gathering at the donut shop to engage in their daily Red Sox banter.*

*One of the ADL trainers is an African American male with long dreadlocks. His name is Ron. Ron smiled during the morning session break, sipping his coffee and remarking that he got “the look” from a number of people this morning as he sat in his car waiting for the Lakeview Savings Bank to open; the look that wonders why you are there, what you are doing, and if you are doing something wrong. “Wouldn’t it surprise them”, he said, “if they knew that I was here to teach their children the impact of stereotypes”.*

*Ron placed his coffee down and called the students back to their seats. “So”, he said, “What kind of diversity do you have in your school?” The students hesitated. One*

*student raised her hand. “We aren’t diverse at all. We’re pretty much all the same. We have the METCO kids, but that’s pretty much it”. Another student added, “There are different cliques...you know, like social groups”.*

*Ron asked what kind of problems with stereotypes, bias language, or bullying they had in their school. The student leaders considered the question for a minute. “None, really” one student said. The other twenty-one students nodded in agreement.<sup>2</sup>*

On this very morning Ron, the African-American ADL trainer, began his day with a discomfoting lack of welcome in Lakeview. Just two days later Wendy’s story takes place at Lakeview High School. Yet when asked directly if their school had problems or issues with stereotypes, bias language, or bullying, the students seemed unaware that any problem existed. However, as the training unfolded, the student leaders began to reveal a more mixed perception of the social/cultural character of their school.

This mixed perception is not new: a 2006 survey of the student body revealed that 50% of the students at Lakeview High School had witnessed or been a victim of prejudice or discrimination while at school<sup>3</sup>. Figure 4.1 shows the types of prejudice or discrimination that these students confronted, with physical appearance, race, sexual orientation, and religion as the most common types.

Just as many students in this survey responded that they had never witnessed or been a victim of prejudice or discrimination while in school. The researcher noted that, as the Diversity Council student leaders raised their own awareness of stereotypes and discriminatory language and behavior during the ADL training sessions, they began to

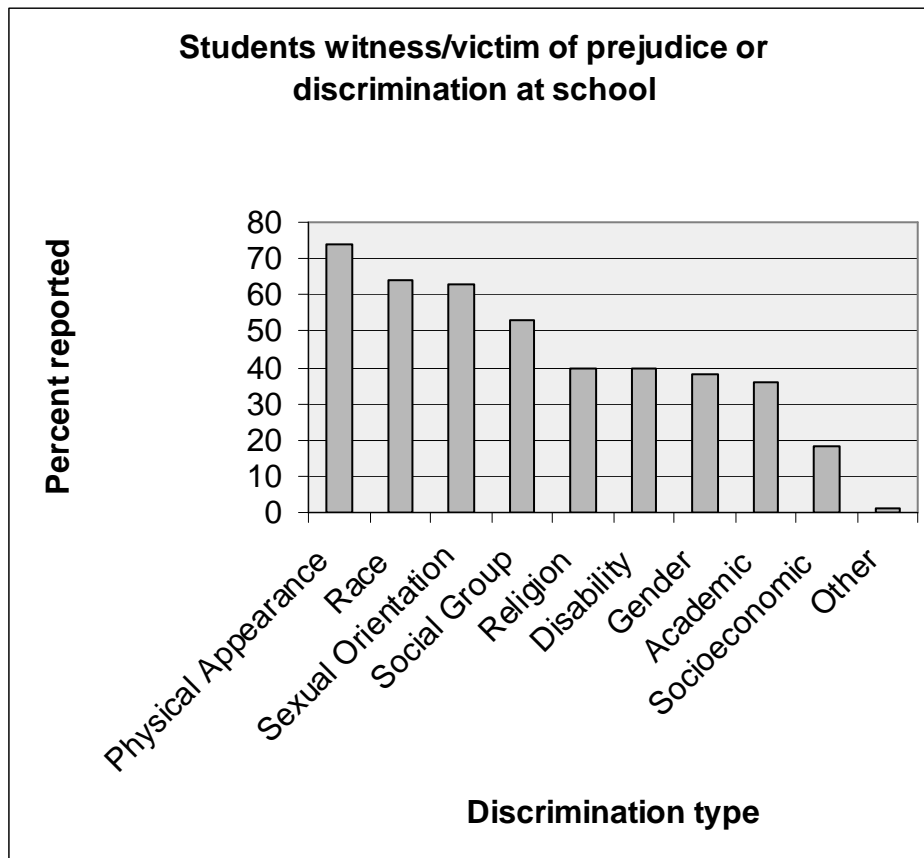
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<sup>2</sup> Researcher’s field notes, ADL peer training session

<sup>3</sup> Artifact, 2006 school survey on prejudice and discrimination

unveil a more troubling picture of the social/cultural character of their school community.<sup>4</sup> This may be true of the student body at large: lack of awareness regarding bias and discriminatory language might influence the students' ability to identify occurrences in their daily interactions at school.

Figure 4.1. Student-reported discrimination at school.



In order to better understand the pre-existing culture at Lakeview High School prior to the intervention of the Diversity Council, the researcher held a Focus Group discussion. The sample participants consisted of six Diversity Council student leaders

<sup>4</sup> Researcher's field notes, ADL peer training session

(four girls, two boys) and three Diversity Council faculty advisors (a school administrator, a program director, and a teacher). The topics for this Focus Group discussion were driven by the research questions for the study. The researcher developed initial categories and codes for data collection directly from significant aspects of the research questions. These general categories were:

- Social/Cultural Character of School Community
- Safe Learning Environment
- Student leader influence
- Acceptance of diversity among peers

Emerging themes and codes were added to these general categories as the researcher reviewed, analyzed, and synthesized the data from the Focus Group discussion:

- Heightened Awareness
- Peer Leader Influence & School Culture Change
- The Role of Dialogue

The data collected in the Focus Group discussion focused on the existing culture of the school setting and the existing beliefs, attitudes, and perceptions of the sample participants prior to the Diversity Council's anti-bias education initiative. An excerpt from the researcher's journal is followed by selections from the Focus Group discussion that captures thematic connections to the research questions for this study.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Researcher's journal and transcripts from Focus Group Session #1

*Focus Group: November 8, 2007*

*We gather around a table in a small conference room with an audio tape recorder at the center. It is an antiquated machine with a hand-held microphone attached by a curled cord that stretches awkwardly, requiring us to pass the microphone to one another as we speak while the old recorder slides along behind it. We share a laugh at the clumsiness of this method, but it sets the tone for a relaxed and informal conversation among us.*

Early in the discussion, the researcher explored aspects of one of the research questions: do the student leaders and faculty advisors perceive that their school learning environment provides a safe and equal opportunity for all students? The researcher's inquiry sought to discover whether student leaders believe that students feel safe at Lakeview High School. One student answered this way:

I think the majority of kids do, but the majority of kids fit in with what typical high schoolers here are like. There are always going to be a group of kids who are different and who don't fit in with what people think a high schooler should be like.

Another student speculates about the impact of bias language and behavior on academic performance:

If you are in a classroom and you fear someone making fun of what you are wearing or your sexuality or something, you are concentrating on all these other things and how people are thinking of you...you really should just be able to be free of that, and you can do one hundred percent and you can reach your full academic potential.



The researcher then directed the discussion to the student leaders' and faculty advisors' perceptions of the social/cultural character of their school. What happens when people face discriminatory language or behavior? The researcher's questions sought to discover the typical responses to bias language or bullying behavior in the school, and several students respond:

I think the major response would be to either laugh or just stand there and stare. Everyone has this morbid curiosity when it comes to fights and no one really wants to get involved but they all want to see what happened. I don't think anyone would really intervene.

I think a lot of the people who are bystanders are like, "Oh, I'm really glad that's not me" and wouldn't want to put themselves in jeopardy by standing up for the person. But I have seen - on rare occasions - somebody steps in and just kind of calmly says "That's really not cool to do that", or "I don't approve of that", or "I don't appreciate you doing that". I was always surprised at the person's bravery who did step in and at the effectiveness of it, because they almost stun all the people standing there because it is unfortunately so rare that something like that happens.

The researcher asked if bullying and name-calling are reported. One student believed that it is not reported because:

It has kind of become an accepted thing...if it was say an upperclassman pushing a freshman or a younger kid, people are just going to think, "Oh well, he doesn't

really mean it”...it’s something that just happens...I think that is why it doesn’t get reported, because it just becomes accepted.

Another student agreed that it is part of the school culture and that students rarely tell an adult what is going on:

I think the only thing that is going to be reported is when a teacher walks out of a classroom and sees it.

A faculty advisor added this insight to the dynamics of these interactions:

Something that bothers me a lot is that sometimes if an adult is there and we might step in to try to do something and both of the people involved, the perpetrator and the victim, might say, “Oh, we were only kidding around and this person is really my friend”...you wonder if the person who is the recipient of whatever is happening actually feels that way. So I am hoping that in some way we can eventually give power to [the victim] and let them know it is not OK to be treated like that...and that it becomes the culture around here that it isn’t OK.

The researcher asked how adults in the building respond to bias or harassing language and behavior. One student offered this thought:

I’ve seen my math teacher intervene in conversations, “You shouldn’t say that” and “Why don’t you try saying something else”.

But another student expressed frustration that teachers don’t always help:

In one of my classes, either yesterday or the day before, we were doing a problem on the board and one of the kids was like “that is so retarded” and “this problem is so gay”. He used both wicked derogatory terms in one sentence loud

enough for the class to hear. The class just started laughing. My teacher didn't do anything. It really bothered me...it was disappointing but that happens a lot.

A student agreed and commented on the impact:

And I think it is normal for us right now not to feel comfortable intervening when we see teachers that don't even intervene.

The evidence found in the narrative description of Wendy's experience substantiates this student's concerns. The teacher involved, Mr. Ferris, did not take immediate action in response to the discriminatory language in his classroom. It is likely that the incident would have evolved differently had this teacher reacted quickly and directly to confront the behavior.

Faculty advisors in the Focus Group described the issue as one of whole-school culture:

We need them to know that students care and are offended and have high expectations of [teachers] to help.

This whole initiative that we are all involved in is about so much more than the kids. I think that sometimes people might think that it is the students that need to change and they are the only people who maybe don't understand how to treat each other equally but it is about all of us in this building. We all have a lot to learn and have a long way to go.

The researcher explored another important element of the research questions: to understand the student leaders' beliefs about the ways in which their efforts as a Diversity Council will influence their school peers' acceptance of diversity and the social/cultural character of the school. The researcher asked the student leaders and faculty advisors

what they would perceive to be an ideal outcome for their work as a Diversity Council, as it pertains to the culture of the school. Students were optimistic:

I just want to change that idea of what is socially acceptable and try to make everyone a little more aware of what they are doing and what they are saying.

I think just kind of making the school a safer place...I think that if a kids hears someone in the hall maybe being mean to someone, not only will they stick up for them but when other people see them sticking up that they will join in and it will kind of be a group thing.

The faculty advisors also expressed an optimistic point of view:

It just seems that both with the adults and students around here sometimes we just don't even step back and think about what we are saying or doing or the implications of our attitudes. So by some people deciding that they are going to try to actively do something that would highlight that I think is very important. If one person questions something that they might normally say or do...that is going to be the start of something...

...it will be a gradual process, [awareness] that this Council is here...it gives the faculty a place to go as well as other students...a student that may not feel comfortable addressing whatever the situation will maybe have a place to come and say..."I've noticed this" and "Could you guys maybe address this situation". So I think over time eventually it will be a great thing.

In next set of questions, the researcher asked the Diversity Council student leaders if they believe they are capable of taking an activist role in their school. Students expressed hesitancy to intervene in bullying interactions at this early stage of their program:

Honestly, right now I wouldn't step in front of everyone, but I might take the kid aside and say "I'm here for you and if you need anything just talk to me", and "I'm going to be your friend and help you through this". I wouldn't step in right away just because I don't feel comfortable yet, but hopefully in the long run I'll be able to do that.

I would like to be able to say that I thought I would step in and do something but I can't honestly say that I believe that. I would like to someday be able to get to that point but right now I guess maybe I would try and talk to the person afterwards or maybe I would report the incident if I thought it would help.

I feel like I should be doing more to, you know, like help out the kids who are being bullied and teased, but I just don't feel like I could do an effective job of that yet. I don't know how to do it effectively while keeping everyone safe and without worrying about getting backlash from it.

These responses demonstrated the student leaders' readiness to take on the role of an active bystander, but their lack of confidence to act as a confronter. Although the student leaders questioned their ability to take an activist role in these situations, they did express ways in which they already saw themselves changing as a result of the peer leader

training. The first significant change had to do with their ability to talk about the sometimes difficult diversity topics of race, sexual orientation, or disability:

Through the training there were a lot of subjects discussed that weren't exactly comfortable topics...but we somehow were able to move past that.

A lot of stuff is not talked about, but [now] we feel comfortable talking about it so it has changed us.

Another area of development was their belief that they have become more accepting of differences in others:

The trust that was formed in just those three [training sessions] was really profound...we all accepted each others' differences.

I kind of realized that you can't always look at someone and really judge him... I guess you can say I realized the phrase "never judge a book by its cover" is actually true.

Another significant area of growth for the student leaders was in heightened awareness. One student expressed her surprise at her increased awareness of discriminatory language and behavior in her school, and all of the leaders affirmed similar experiences:

I notice a lot more in the halls or in class or whatever...I've just heard a lot more things that I never really would have heard but they kind of jumped out at me even if it was some side conversation that I wasn't a part of.

Next the researcher focused on the discussion of peer leader influence. Students talked about the gradual change that an individual is able to make, even if the sphere of influence was just in his or her own family or small circle of friends:

I have three little brothers. One of my brothers will always just say he doesn't like doing homework. I'll try to sit down and do his homework with him and he'll just be like, "This is so gay". And so I always say, "That is not a good word" and he's like, "I don't care". I say, "Well, just say it's so stupid". He's like, "Fine, it's so stupid". But you know he doesn't say it any more, so it kind of gets the point across to him.

Almost the same situation [happened] in my house except with my older brother. Around me he changes the way he speaks because he knows I don't like when he calls things "retarded" or when he calls people he's mad at "fags". So he changed the way he spoke around me and I've noticed when he was on the phone with his friends he would say to them "You know, don't use that word", and it kind of took off from there. I know he never meant it offensively towards gay people or towards people with disabilities or anything...it just became so a part of his subculture, but [a new awareness] was kind of like rippling out from him... he was stopping his friends from using those kinds of words so it was good.

All of the student leaders in the sample agreed that school culture change will be a long slow process. Several students speculated that change is incremental and will take time: ...if you have maybe one kid, one on one, saying to another kid, "You know, you shouldn't say that", or "That could hurt somebody"...that person might actually think, "Well maybe I shouldn't say that".

I think that if you make a difference to one person or even a small handful of people then you have made a difference.

I think it's too far fetched of an idea to change everyone's perception immediately. I think it is going to be a gradual change in this school. By reaching out to a couple of freshmen, they'll teach it to the freshmen next year... so I think it is going to be a gradual change. It is going to take some time but I think it will work out.

#### *Early analysis of data*

Field notes from the ADL peer training sessions revealed that the newly appointed Diversity Council student leaders did not initially view their school community as diverse. Early in the ADL training sessions, the student leaders specifically indicated race, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, learning disability, physical appearance, and social group as their understanding of diversity. During the course of the training sessions, their expanding *definition* of diversity began to influence their *perception* of the diversity within their school community, and the researcher noted that this was an important theme to explore further in the study.

In the early stages of the ADL peer training sessions, the student leaders suggested that there was no significant problem with stereotypes, bias language, or harassment in their school community. Juxtaposed with the story of Wendy and the experience of Ron, the ADL trainer, there was a clear disconnect between the students'



perceptions and concrete examples of stereotypes, bias language, and harassment in their school and community.

However, the data indicated that the training sessions had the effect of heightening the awareness of the student leaders. The researcher noted the evolving perception of these students of what was or may be happening in their school. This changing view emerged in the Focus Group session, when students described the ways in which bias and discriminatory language and actions had “kind of become an accepted thing” in their school. The students also talked about their ability to heighten the awareness of their peers and siblings and how this has had a positive effect in diminishing the use of discriminatory language.

Heightened awareness continued to be an important theme in this study, as heightened awareness sharpens one’s perceptions of bias language and behavior in daily interactions and can become an educational initiative to reduce bias language and behavior in a school community. This early finding is in keeping with the results of the Levy Paluk & Green study (2006), when researchers at Yale University partnered with the Anti-Defamation League to evaluate their Peer Leader Training protocol.

The researcher’s third research question explores the ways in which the students’ participation in the Diversity Council will have lasting impact on their leadership skills and their understanding of the effects of anti-bias activism. Early findings indicate that the students did not see themselves as fully capable activists and leaders during the pre-intervention stage. They reported that their comfort level did not extend beyond family, close friends, or interacting one-on-one with a victim of bullying. However, they

expressed a hopeful outlook in their ability to grow into stronger leadership and activist roles in the future.

In the first Focus Group session, the students began to contemplate the nature of change. Data from this session revealed their perception that change is incremental. The students believed that, although it may occur gradually, they do have influence among their peers at school. The researcher was interested in continuing to pursue both of these themes: the study participants' perceptions of the nature of change and their beliefs about the effectiveness of student leadership in anti-bias education initiatives in this school community.

Dialogue about stereotypes, bias, and discrimination was a final theme from the early findings that provoked considerable interest for the researcher. The students astutely observed that, "A lot of stuff is not talked about, but [now] we feel comfortable talking about it so it has changed us". The researcher was curious to examine the ways in which dialogue played a role in how the student leaders have changed, and the way that it would help them to engage their peers.

## **Intervention**

### *Diversity Council initiatives*

In January of 2008, the Diversity Council student leaders, with the support of faculty advisors, began to implement their anti-bias education initiatives at Lakeview High School. The central focus of their work was leading anti-bias education workshops for ninth grade students. The workshops consisted of a series of activities and discussions that student leaders learned during the ADL training sessions. They practiced

their skills as workshop facilitators in their Diversity Leader class, a scheduled curriculum course that meets every other day for 48 minutes each session. By January, the student leaders had organized themselves into facilitator groups of two or three, and had scheduled monthly workshop sessions with ninth grade study hall classes through May. The workshops focused on diversity issues, stereotypes and bias language, prejudice and discrimination. The student leaders ran the workshops for their younger peers with minimal adult assistance.

The student leaders also organized several school-wide initiatives. In January, they began a button campaign, giving out “I don’t put up with put-downs” buttons (produced by the ADL) to other students in the school who expressed an interest in cultivating a positive school culture. The student leaders continued this campaign through May.

In February, the Diversity Council took the lead in celebrating Black History Month. The student leaders created and displayed biographical posters of African-Americans who are important figures in American history, education, science, and culture. They highlighted the poetry and music of African-American artists using the school public address system prior to morning announcements. The student leaders garnered the help of the METCO director in organizing a Black history tour in Boston for themselves and other interested students.

In May, the Diversity Council sponsored a mural contest, inviting the student body to create an original mural design that depicts the celebration of diversity within a community. The contest winner will have his or her mural painted in the school cafeteria.

From January to May, student leaders planned activities for their own Diversity Leader class to explore and enhance their education in regard to diversity issues. They invited guest speakers into their class to engage in discussion about diversity in the school community. The METCO director talked about the experiences of students of color who travel from the city to be part of this school community. The Alternative School director talked about the experiences and lives of students who are placed in the Alternative School program due to significant social/emotional/behavioral disabilities.

Under the direction of their faculty advisor, the Diversity Council also implemented a class project based on the book, *One Hundred Young Americans* (Franzini, 2007). From this book depicting 100 teenagers who represent the diversity of American youth, each of the student leaders randomly selected two teens. The students learned about their assigned teenagers and prepared a class presentation to describe the elements of diversity that they discovered as well as making a personal connection in finding what they have in common.

#### *Collection of data and thematic organization*

During the Intervention stage of the study, the researcher recorded field notes in a journal, documenting observations of the Diversity Council initiatives and school culture. The researcher met with each of the six student leaders who participated in this study for individual semi-structured interviews.

Table 4.2. Pseudonyms and descriptors for student interviews.

<i>Student</i>	<i>Gender</i>	<i>Age</i>	<i>Grade</i>	<i>Race</i>
Kelly	Female	17	12	Caucasian
Maria	Female	17	12	Caucasian
Diana	Female	16	11	Hispanic-Latina
Jane	Female	16	11	Caucasian
Everett	Male	17	12	Caucasian
Daniel	Male	16	11	Caucasian

To enhance data collection during the intervention stage of the study, the researcher also developed an incident report for Diversity Council student leaders and faculty advisors to record incidents of bias language and behavior in the school and the responses of those who witnessed the event, and gathered school discipline and harassment investigation reports over this period of time. A copy of the incident report template appears in the appendix of this dissertation.

The researcher organized the data from the intervention stage of the study based on the research questions and the four emergent themes connected to these questions:

1. The first two research questions explored the perceptions of the student leaders and faculty advisors in whether the initiatives of their Diversity Council had an affect on the social/cultural character of their school community and/or an impact on the perception among students that the learning environment is physically and emotionally safe, with an equal opportunity to learn for all students. The first two themes that emerged in the findings connected to these research questions:

*Theme 1: Peer leader influence and school culture change*

*Theme 2: Heightened awareness of bias language and behavior*

2. The third and fourth themes were derived from data based on the third research question. The third research question focused on the perceptions of the student leaders on whether their participation in the Diversity Council will have an impact on their leadership skills and their understanding of the effects of anti-bias activism. The two themes that emerged in the findings connected to this third research question:

*Theme 3: Expanding the meaning of diversity*

*Theme 4: Dialogue versus silence in accepting and affirming diversity*

The researcher organized the data from the intervention stage by clustering the data by these four themes.

*Theme 1: Peer leader influence and school culture change*

Data from student leader interviews revealed the ways in which they view their influence among peers and how school culture change takes place. Students in the participant sample thought about change this way:<sup>6</sup>

Diana: Don't put the ["Superman"] cape on and don't think that you are going to be able to solve every single problem. I went into the freshmen class and I just

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<sup>6</sup> Transcripts from student leader interviews

thought, you know, we're going to be changing their lives. It wasn't like that. The first time it kind of blew my ego.

Maria: Our biggest concern is that we haven't reached a big enough number of people yet. But I think that since the program is in really its inaugural year, we don't want to be too unrealistic and take on more than we can handle. I think this program has a lot of potential for a ripple effect. But it is first going to affect the twenty-two people that are directly involved in it...the whole ripple effect starting with us and that's where it begins...

Jane: I had a very idealistic view of it. For the first year it was really unrealistic...as far as the majority of the student body, I think a lot of them don't even know we are around. But the biggest difference [in the acceptance of diversity] is with the kids who are actually in the Diversity Council. We're from so many different social groups within the high school that it is definitely affecting a ton of different social groups that some of their friends are changing the way they speak or view things.

Daniel: The biggest difference that I've noticed in my friends is they don't use the language that they used to use. They don't say the jokes that they used to make because I tried to teach them, you know, what the Diversity Council is for and why we are here...if they make a mistake they know I'm there and they'll say, "Oops, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to say that".

Jane: People still make racial jokes, but it has got to the point where my friends and my family don't do it around me. Every once in a while when I'm talking to my brother he'll say something like, "that's so gay" and then he will catch himself and he goes, "I know that really bothers you. I'm sorry. I'll try not to do that around you". I think if you start to learn how to sensor out what you are saying that eventually it will stop being in your vocabulary.

One student talked about a technique that they learned in the ADL training sessions to confront bias language. If someone says something offensive, the confronter says, "Ouch". If an individual is aware that he has accidentally said something offensive, he catches himself, saying "Oops":

Everett: I think kids are just more aware of everything and even little things like "ouch" or "oops" that we learned...in my Accounting class we use it all the time. A lot of times people will say something not even realizing it could hurt somebody or affect somebody and I think it is a nice way to do it, too, instead of saying, "Why did you say that?" It's just "Ouch" and they say, "Maybe I shouldn't say that".

The students talked about their role as allies and confronters in making their school a safer place:

Diana: We notice things in the hallway. If we see someone getting called a name, we'll turn around. Some of us still haven't built up enough courage to say "Stop that". But we'll look in [the victim's] eye and say "Hey, I'm here for you". I know a bunch of kids that do that in the Diversity Council. I think that we'll grow to become that confronter because right now everyone is just so, like "We're



doing this”. This is really going to happen, we just need to take some time. Right now we’re just being allies.

Daniel: You could probably go out and count hundreds of students with the [I don’t put up with put-downs] pin on their clothes...I think once you accept everyone else then it is definitely a safer place around the school.

*Theme 2: Heightened awareness of bias language and behavior*

All six students in the sample for this study noticed how their own heightened awareness of stereotypes, bias, and discriminatory language made a difference in what they saw and heard around them. They also made a connection between heightening the awareness of their peers and a positive impact on decreasing bias language and behavior:

Kelly: It’s made me a lot more aware of things. I joke around sometimes, but it made me see like how a different group would be affected by it...I never said it in a harmful way, but I can see even in a joking way it could really hurt someone. I’m a lot more aware of hearing other people saying stuff, too.

Maria: Before you could walk down the halls and you didn’t really notice the bullying or the name-calling that was going on. Since we’ve gone through this training I know I’ve noticed someone will say something and I go, wow, that really could be interpreted as inappropriate, or I wonder if that bothered the person who was on the receiving end of that comment.

Everett: The biggest thing is awareness. Just getting people aware of everything that does go on. I know before this I was thinking, you know, that it is not bad here. We have a good school environment. I think everyone is pretty much nice to each other, but when you look at it the whole year you really realize what does go on. There are kids that don't want to come to school because they get picked on. So I think it just opened up everyone's eyes. I've kind of looked back and think of some of the things I used to say and see how people could have got upset by it. Before I think I would have just been, "Well, I didn't mean it like that". And now I know I shouldn't have said that. It kind of changes your views on everybody.

To gather evidence of bias language and behavior in the school community, the researcher collected and reviewed incident reports, school discipline records, and harassment investigation reports during the intervention stage of the study. All incidents listed here occurred during this five month period (January – May, 2008) and point to elements of discriminatory language:<sup>7</sup>

- An argument between two female students escalated in a school bathroom. The White female called the Black female, "Nigger", and a physical fight ensued. Teachers intervened and reported the incident.
- A male student harassed a female student in the classrooms, cafeteria, and hallways, continuously saying "kneepads" as an inference to sexual relations with

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<sup>7</sup> Incident reports, school discipline records, and harassment investigation reports

her boyfriend. A teacher referred the female student to the administration when she arrived to class crying one day.

- A female student reported that another student was posting messages on the internet, referring to her as a “dyke” and other slurs that refer to her sexuality. The victim knew who the perpetrator was, but did not report it until that student passed her in the hallway at school, remarking to a friend, “Is that a boy or a girl?”
- A teacher reported that a White student turned to a Hispanic student in class and says, “You were evicted from the fruit stand”.
- A teacher reported that a White student commented to a Black student in class that she should be “sitting at the back of the bus”.
- A female student reported that a male student consistently makes sexually explicit comments during class, making her and other female students uncomfortable.
- A student became angry and called an overweight student “fat shit” in class. A teacher reported the behavior.
- In response to a student participating in the LGBT “Day of Silence”, a male student announces in class that he “hates gays”. Another student joins him in stating negative views about gay people, eventually swearing at the victim. The teacher reported the incident.
- A school administrator discovered graffiti in the school elevator that reads, “No homo”.

These incidents are depicted by diversity type in Figure 4.3 and by reporter in Figure 4.4.

Figure 4.3. Synthesis of incident reports by diversity type.

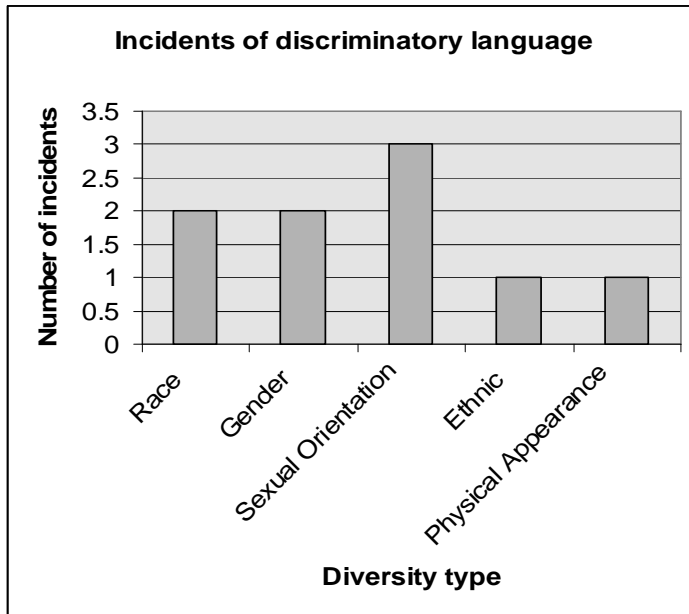
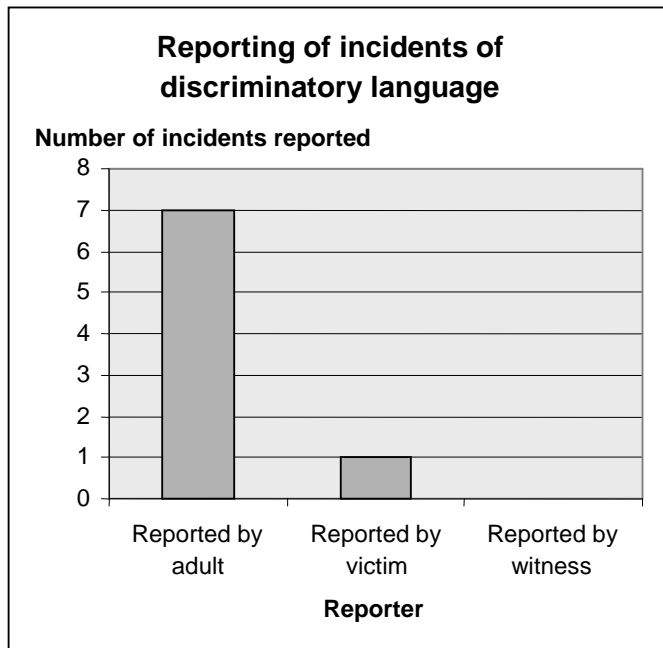


Figure 4.4. Synthesis of incidents by reporter.



It is notable that all but one incident was reported by an adult, most often a teacher, and that no student who witnessed an incident of discriminatory behavior reported it.

Only two of nine victims reported the incident in which they were involved. It is significant that in 78% of these cases it was an adult and not a student who reported the transgression, illuminating an aspect of school culture important to this study.

*Theme 3: Expanding the meaning of diversity*

During the eighth months that included training, intervention, and Diversity Leader class sessions, the student leaders began to expand their definition of diversity and consider the role of diversity in community:<sup>8</sup>

Daniel: I've come to realize so many different people who go to this school. Our [Diversity Leader] teacher brought in the director from the program at the Alternative School. I went up to her after class and I said, "Wow, that really opened my eyes". I never would have thought of them as being part of the Diversity Council discussion. That really opened my eyes. I felt like I can somehow make a difference in their lives by saying hi to them every day and just trying to be there for them.

Diana: I didn't realize how much disabilities made you diverse. I knew that, but it didn't really hit me. There is a kid I learned about in the "One Hundred Young Americans" book who lost both of his arms...it was in the back of my mind but I never really thought about it...like [a person with disabilities] doesn't really have a group to identify with.

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<sup>8</sup> Transcripts from student interviews

Everett: I think going into this I thought of diversity as, you know, Black and White, Catholic, stuff like that. Now you see that this person might be into sports and this person might be into drama and that makes them diverse. I think every little difference is diversity.

Kelly: I mostly thought of diversity as race. But now you can see that everything is considered diverse.

Diana: We got this book called “One Hundred Young Americans”. We had to take notes on our person and get up and say just the basic facts about the person and what we could relate to with them. One of the people that I had was a boy who was really into body-building. I was like, I don’t see what I could possibly have in common with this guy. And then we started talking about it and we decided that anyone who has ever really thrown themselves into any project would be able relate to this boy even though it wasn’t the same activity. I hadn’t even thought of that. Even though the activity is different the feelings behind it are still the same. It kind of makes you wonder [about] all the people that are in this school that you don’t think you have anything in common with; there is probably something that you can relate to.

Daniel: A lot of the students [in the freshmen workshops] so far seem a little shy. The most surprising thing that I’ve seen in them is that they are all a lot alike. Because when we were doing the identity sculptures [activity] a lot of them had

the same thing on their identity sculpture which was family. Everyone had a little heart or F for family.

Daniel: I don't think you can go through your life without really knowing diversity. You've got to work with it first before you go into the world. If you go to a job and there is a big diverse community there then you aren't going to be comfortable unless you do.

Several of the students referred to the day when the Alternative School director visited Diversity Leader class and how this experience helped them to broaden their understanding of diversity in their school community. The researcher's journal and field notes revealed that this experience enhanced the meaning and substance of diversity topics for the Diversity student leaders. The dialogue and interactions of this class were reconstructed from the researcher's journal and field notes.

*Diversity Leader class: March 11, 2008*

*Ms. Connolly stands in front of the Diversity Leader class, leaning against a table at the front of the room. The students sit at their desks, unevenly arranged in a semicircle around her. She introduces herself as the Alternative School director, and asks the students, "Are you familiar with my kids?" The students nod. "You've probably seen them sitting on the radiator outside [room] 3013. You know, the scary looking ones". The students laugh, acknowledging both the blunt nature of her remark and the truth embedded in it. "So what stereotypes do you associate with them?" she asks. The*

*students are silent, reluctant to answer. “Let me help you”, she says, “Drugs? Trouble with the law? The ones that can’t function in class without getting suspended?”*

*“There is some truth in that”, she adds. “But I’ll tell you what is also true. If you look beyond what you see – what they wear, the hoods covering their faces, the attitude – they are really just quite frightened”.*

*“Most of these kids come from difficult home lives – we have students whose parents who are dead or disabled from a drug overdose, or missing because they are in jail. Or parents who are there but are incapable of properly taking care of them. Most of them have had very little of what you have had – someone to teach them right from wrong, to manage day-to-day problems or conflicts. They hide behind those hoods because they are terrified”.*

*“It is true that some of them abuse drugs or alcohol and some are on probation for breaking the law. Yet most all of them are quite bright and capable of learning...but so much emotional stuff gets in the way that they have to get past that roadblock first, before they can learn. That is what my program is for”.*

*“What you see in school”, Ms. Connolly continues, “is a tough demeanor and kids that aren’t very friendly. What you don’t see is how beautiful they really are when you get to know them on the inside. They are all really quite unique and wonderful, and have so much to offer”.*

*The class is quiet. One student raises his hand and Ms. Connolly acknowledges him. “It reminds me of the Diversity Iceberg that we talked about”, he says. “You can’t look at how someone is dressed and make assumptions about what kind of person they are”.*



*Another student chimes in, “I have to admit, I always thought of them as druggies and that’s it. I looked down on them. I never considered trying to get to know them”.*

*“It wouldn’t be easy”, Ms. Connolly responds. “The first time you say hello they might be so surprised you might not get anything back. But don’t give up. Eventually they might actually believe that you mean it and grunt back at you”. Everyone laughs.*

*One boy says, “Truthfully, I’m kind of resentful. I mean, some of us have difficult situations at home, too. We don’t use it as an excuse, though”. A girl next to him chimes in, “I was thinking that, too. I’m friends with the sister of one of the kids in your program, and she just works hard and does OK. She has the same home life as her brother”.*

*“I get that”, Ms. Connolly says, “but that brings us back to what makes us all different. How many of you have siblings? Isn’t it true that two kids in the same family can be completely different? Maybe one can cope with just about anything while the other can hardly cope at all. One might struggle with depression and anxiety while the other doesn’t. Then you add traumatic experience on top of that and every person reacts differently. Trauma can affect two siblings in completely different ways, based on the age of the children at the time of the trauma alone”.*

*The students contemplate this. One girl raises her hand and says, “I walk by that radiator where they hang out every day. I’ve always been kind of afraid to look at them, to even acknowledge that they’re there. I never stopped to think that they might be more afraid of me – I mean us, the majority of kids in this school – because they don’t really fit in”. The Diversity Leader teacher nods and responds, “It’s human nature to be resentful*

*or fearful of the differences in other people when you don't know or understand those differences".*

*"You don't know what a difference you might make", Ms. Connolly adds, "if they know that when you look their way, that you actually see them".<sup>9</sup>*

#### *Theme 4: Dialogue versus silence*

As student interviews continued, the student leaders articulated the transformational power of dialogue. They expressed the ways in which their own comfort in talking about issues of diversity helped them to grow as leaders and to facilitate understanding in others:<sup>10</sup>

Jane: I think the big part of the training was getting comfortable talking about anything - about race or sexuality or about anything that makes someone feel uncomfortable. For me that's what I got the most out of the training. I think the only way to be effective leaders is being able to talk about things that make other people uncomfortable and be OK with it.

Maria: The first step to overcoming prejudice is to be able to talk about it. If we can't talk about it we are never going to get anywhere. I thought about that a lot this year as we've been going through this process. It is really important. How are you going to solve a problem you can't talk about?

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<sup>9</sup> Dialogue reconstructed from researcher's journal

<sup>10</sup> Transcripts from student interviews

Diana: I just think we need to get [people] more comfortable with listening...we talk about certain things and you can just see their face is like, "Oh my God, you are talking about this right now? Are you really doing this? This is a touchy subject. We're not allowed to talk about this in school". And I feel like if we get them more acclimated to it, I think they will feel more comfortable listening to what people – like kids in the METCO program – what they go through. It's going to be easier for them to understand.

Jane: You are talking about race with someone who is a different race than you. You don't want to come off appearing to be ignorant or offensive or racist in any way, and I think we really learned how to handle it just as a fact. People are different races and you just go from there.

Daniel: The interracial marriage question and interracial dating...I couldn't even talk about it, but then as we got further and further through the training I was fine. I can talk to different people now more than I did before. I feel really good about that.

Everett: Just being able to go in [to Diversity Leader class] and discuss things with the kids and everyone is really open.

Jane: We are all from different social groups...you have really good athletes and then you have kids involved in music and drama and we are from all over the

board, but when we get in that [Diversity Leader] classroom we can talk about basically anything without feeling self conscious or without getting embarrassed about it. We can all talk without getting offended or without getting angry at each other. I think that is really cool. I think that being comfortable enough to talk about race or sexuality or anything is going to help me in college when I want to campaign for certain causes. I think that is really going to be beneficial.

### *Analysis of data*

Transcripts from student interviews and the researcher's field notes revealed that the students believe that culture change in their school will be a "ripple effect": Diversity Leaders growing and learning themselves, then influencing their immediate family and friends, and perhaps heightening the awareness of some of their peers at school. A few students referred to an overly idealistic view at the beginning of their mission: arriving in a "Superman's cape" and changing the views and behaviors of the student body. They quickly realized that change would indeed be a much slower process, and that they could influence their peers, but in a much more incremental way. They perceived their role as leaders and activists slowly evolving from ally to confronter as they hope to make their school a safer environment for all students.

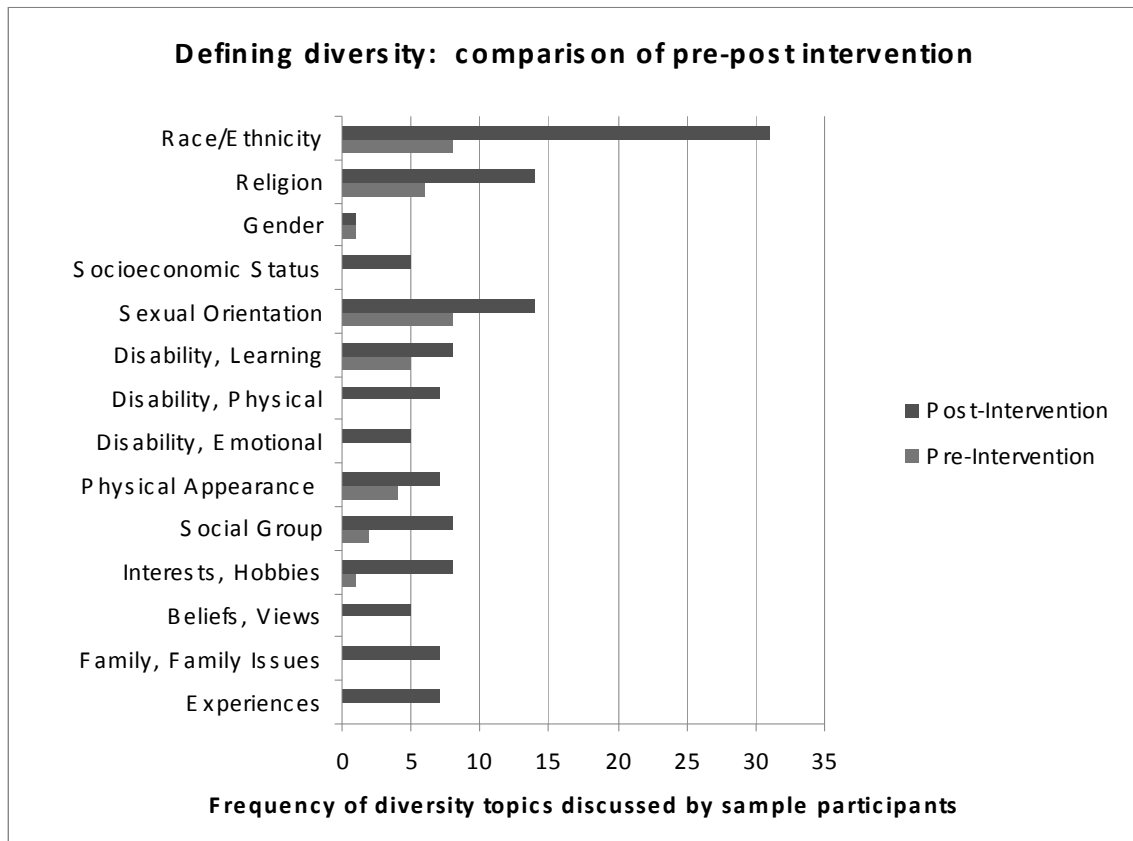
Significant to these young leaders' experience was their expanding definition of diversity. In the early stages of this project, student leaders spoke of race, religion, and sexual orientation most often.<sup>11</sup> Over time, the students began to articulate all kinds of human differences as part of diversity, including the interests, passions, and beliefs of

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<sup>11</sup> Researcher's field notes

individuals. The student leaders began to describe the many types of diversity that are present in their school community – the same community that they said was “not diverse at all” during the pre-intervention stage of the study. Figure 4.5 highlights the student leaders’ broadening definition and understanding of diversity from the pre-intervention stage of the study to the post-intervention stage.

#### 4.5. Sample participants expand the meaning of diversity.



In Figure 4.5, the researcher recorded the number of times that sample participants talked about specific diversity topics. The diversity topics discussed by

sample participants widened over time, revealing an expanding view of diversity to that includes many individual human differences.

It is interesting to note that, in addition to increasing the *types* of diversity included in dialogue, the *frequency* with which students discussed some topics increased dramatically. For example, Figure 4.5 demonstrates that student leaders talked about race four times as often by the end of the study compared to the pre-intervention stage. Student leaders talked about sexual orientation almost twice as much as they did during the early stages of the study. It would appear that the student leaders became more at ease with dialogue about diversity topics that they had previously identified as “uncomfortable”.<sup>12</sup>

As the Diversity Council leaders extended their definition of diversity to include many individual differences, they also began to search for commonality in diversity. They were able to cite examples of the ways in which teenagers, regardless of individual differences, are the same and are able to relate to one another. In the post-intervention stage of the study the researcher planned to continue the exploration of the value that the student leaders place on human differences as an enriching aspect of community.

Finally, the Diversity Council student leaders portrayed dialogue as an essential feature of anti-bias activism. They believed that stereotypes, prejudice, and discrimination will not change in silence. The student leaders had to first become more comfortable discussing topics of race, sexuality, and individual differences among themselves before they could make a difference with others. The researcher wondered how these essential conversations might play a role in the affirmation of identity among

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<sup>12</sup> Researcher’s field notes, ADL peer training sessions

young people, and how identity affirmation and the acceptance of diversity converge in school culture.

### **Post-Intervention**

The post-intervention stage of the study focused on the transformation of beliefs, attitudes, and perceptions of the sample participants as a result of their work as a Diversity Council. The researcher utilized a second Focus Group discussion to further explore the themes that emerged in the study. In addition, the researcher reviewed incident reports, school discipline records, and harassment investigation reports to detect any changes in the type or amount of incidents of bias language or behavior in the school community. Student leaders' written reflections provided a final source of data with which to capture the perceptions and beliefs of sample participants.

#### *Collection and organization of data*

The researcher continued to streamline data collection through the research questions and themes that evolved throughout the study. The following themes persisted as most significant to the research questions for this study:

- **Peer influence** in school reform and the incremental nature of **school culture change**
- **Heightened awareness** as it is tied to personal growth, self-discovery, activism, and school culture change

- **Expanding the definition of diversity** as it leads to discovering commonality in individual differences, and as this leads to embracing diversity as of great value to community
- **Dialogue** as an essential feature of anti-bias activism

The researcher used these themes to generate discussion topics for the final Focus Group session. An excerpt from the researcher's journal is followed by selections from the Focus Group discussion to capture thematic connections to the research questions.

*Focus Group: May 16, 2008*

*We gather for our final focus group discussion. The atmosphere has a different feeling from the October focus group discussion; the awkwardness and the formality are missing. Instead there is the comfortable and familiar feeling of a family sitting down to dinner, the chatter and laughter among people who are sure of their place at the table and the opportunity for their voices to be heard.<sup>13</sup>*

The researcher began the discussion by asking the group how their experiences with the Diversity Council have altered their thinking about change and the effectiveness of peer leadership in changing school culture. Several students weighed in:

I think everybody would agree that we would have all loved there to be one moment or one defining aspect of success, but that's not really reality. I think we've all come to realize that. I think there was a while during the year that everyone was kind of like, wow, this is discouraging and I wish we saw more of

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<sup>13</sup> Researcher's filed notes, Focus Group Session #2



the effects, but then I think everybody stepped back and looked at it and realized that the work there *was* progress, but it was just on a smaller scale. So I guess that is important to realize that change isn't always obvious. It's in the little things that make a difference and enough little things are eventually going to add up.

I think it just shows that you aren't going to be able to change everybody's point of view...you can affect a couple kids in that class and then they'll go out and maybe change one or two persons' point of views, and the ripple effect will end up going through the whole school. I think that's how you have to do it.

The discussion turned to whether students as leaders can make a difference in school culture, and whether this influence is less, equal, or more than that of adults. Students thoughtfully considered this question:

It is easier to hear things from someone your own age. They can communicate to you what they think and how they see certain things. I definitely think we have more of an advantage of going in and talking to these freshmen kids because we've been there before and we know what it is like. I think it is easier than an adult because [the adult] has so much more experience. They know way more than [the kids] do so they aren't going to see things as clear as [we] do.

I think you are more apt to listen to someone you can relate to.

I definitely think peer leadership is more effective [as long as] you have an extended period of time. I think initially the freshmen had a really hard time listening to someone who is only two years older than them...but as the weeks went on we started getting a little bit more and kids started opening up a little. We can build that respect. Then after we get their respect then they can relate to us easier. So I think that if we are in there for a while, then peer leadership is really effective and it is a really strong force.

Even though I was a little bit older than them, they could still kind of find themselves inside of me and they would be more comfortable to talk to me. Me being still young, I can still joke around and stuff and have a little fun.

The researcher directed the conversation to heightened awareness, a theme that emerged in the data from student leader interviews. A faculty advisor suggested the importance of the anti-bias message as one that is internalized by the student leader:

The message is something that the students own and communicate, and then it becomes that [school] community we all want it to be.

One student astutely connected heightened awareness to responsibility for activism:

I think we've all talked about that we've noticed more. Once you do notice, you feel like now that I picked up on it I really should do something...even picking up on it and knowing that there is an issue is a huge step to solving it.

Another student referred to the "I don't put up with put-downs" button campaign as an initiative that has been an effective means of heightening awareness, and the impact of raising awareness in assuaging bias language:

The “I don’t put up with put-downs” is a stock phrase. I did hear somebody who wasn’t even in Diversity use it in class one day. Somebody said something that really wasn’t appropriate and somebody was like, “Hey, that’s not cool. Like we don’t put up with put-downs around here”. Everybody laughed about it, but the person made them think, “I probably really shouldn’t have said that”.

A student expressed how heightened awareness stimulated self-discovery and personal growth:

I know it’s definitely made me more aware of how people feel, watch what I say, and hear what other people say. Before this year I might say something and not really think about how it could have been offensive to somebody. But after this class for a year, I think you realize even if you [do] say it, when the group disperses you can go up and apologize and tell them how you feel about it. I think you will be just more accepting and willing to learn ... to accept [others] and to learn what they are about”.

The last topic of the focus group discussion focused on the student leaders’ expanding view of diversity. Several students explained:

From when we are really young, we get it drilled into our heads that we have to be accepting of everyone regardless of race and religion, and those are the two major things that we always get told about. Those are the two aspects of diversity that people need to be tolerant of. But this program, it was really helpful in pushing it out into lifestyle choices, and preferences in music or clothing, or just little things that make every one of us obviously unique and different, and make it so that we don’t run in the same circles. Even those differences, although

they can be somewhat trivial, they're really important making people who they are.

I don't think that there is anything that can limit the definition of diversity. I think everything around us now is diverse.

I never really thought about diversity being something beyond our race, your religion. But after [the Alternative School Director] came in, I got such a different view on what diversity really is and how there are so many different people...whether it be different problems, or just different life styles...that's actually diversity.

It opened up my eyes to disabilities, learning disabilities, physical disabilities. In February I had an arm brace on, and for a while I'd get these weird looks and glances...I never knew what it felt like to be partially disabled. So I felt bad because it is a big aspect [of diversity] that a lot of people forget about.

A faculty advisor articulated her expanding view:

A lot of times when I thought about diversity I thought of race. But being involved in this I thought about a friend whose parent was a minister, and she would get picked on at school because she had to go to church a lot, so she would downplay church. Diversity is so many more things. There are kids who are overweight that get picked on. There are so many things that fall into the category of diversity and this program really opens up your eyes to it.

By expanding the meaning of diversity to all individual differences, the students began to embrace diversity as *essential* to community. One student articulated how diversity creates a richer community and enhances relationships within that community:

Not only just did we get to see the different types of diversity, but I really didn't think about how important that is to us. It came up recently when I was doing a college search. One of the places was explaining how they matched people to their roommates. The way they explained it, I was like, wow, you are going to end up with a person just like you and how boring is that. I don't want that. I don't want to live with someone who is just another me. I was thinking about it and I was like, wow, we've learned about so many different types of diversity and I started to realize that really is important and that makes life more interesting.

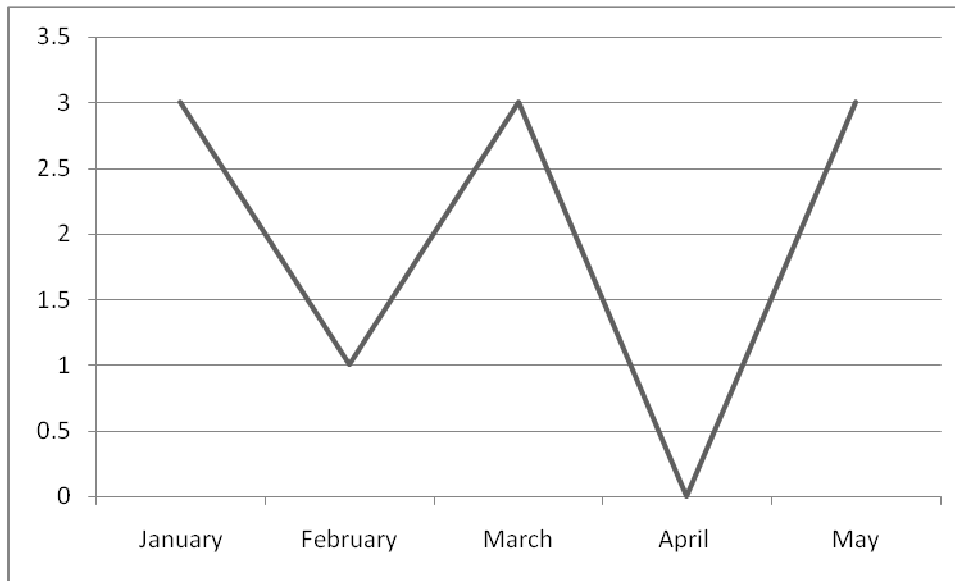
### *Synthesis of artifacts*

The researcher assembled and reviewed incident reports, discipline records, and harassment investigation reports from the five-month period of the Diversity Council anti-bias education intervention. These documents provided evidence of the number of reported occurrences of bias language and behavior in the school community. For the purpose of the post-intervention stage of the study, the researcher was interested in whether the number of incidents decreased during this time period.

As shown in Figure 4.6, three incidents of bias or discriminatory language or behavior were reported in each of January, March, and May. Fewer incidents were reported during February and April, but it should be noted that school vacations occur during those months. Evidence from school documents would indicate that there has

been no change in the frequency of incidents of bias language and behavior in the school community over this period.

Figure 4.6. Reported occurrences of bias language or behavior.



The researcher considered the theme of heightened awareness and how this may have affected the number of identified and reported incidents. Heightened awareness of *recognizing* discriminatory language may have caused an increase in the number of identified cases. Heightened awareness may also have had the effect of stimulating a *sense of responsibility* of witnesses, victims, or faculty to report these behaviors.

Heightened awareness of diversity issues in a school community may also have kindled *an oppositional response* from some students who might increase bias language and behaviors during this time period. So while the empirical data suggests that the number of incidents did not *decrease* during the Diversity Council intervention, the effect of heightened awareness resulting from the Diversity Council program may correlate to an

increase in the recognition of discriminatory behavior and in the number of times that incidents were reported.

*Student written reflections: June 6, 2008*

The final data collection for this study included written reflections of student leaders. The students articulated their perceptions and beliefs regarding their work as agents of change in the culture of their school community. They continued to express their views on the definition of diversity and its role in community, and the impact of dialogue in anti-bias education and activism. The following excerpts from their writing illuminate these themes.<sup>14</sup> The students conveyed that their most significant accomplishment was personal growth:

Jane: My biggest accomplishment in this year's class was personal growth. I have learned so much about what diversity and acceptance truly are, and how I can personally make a difference in my school community. This year's program became a self-discovery course for all of us.

Daniel: My biggest accomplishment is myself being able to realize what diversity really is and how it comes in all different forms. I have also gained more confidence in both my public speaking and actions.

The students viewed dialogue and communication as an important part of their mission as anti-bias activists:

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<sup>14</sup> Transcripts from student leaders' written reflections

Diana: My friends understand that I do not like hearing put-downs, so they don't do it any more. I feel that I'm reaching out to my friends. I'm also helping my [younger] sister to understand her peers and their races and culture. She is not as hesitant to talk to other kids.

Daniel: I feel like I have upheld the ideas of the class both inside and outside of the program. My family and I discuss the program as well as my friends...I feel I'm making an impact on them.

The students explained how their view of diversity evolved and their view of the richness of diversity as part of community:

Diana: I quickly learned that my definition of diversity did not include disabilities...I felt terrible that I had unconsciously forgot about this [group].

Jane: I know now that diversity extends itself to religion, physical appearance, class, interests, social circles...opening my eyes to the beauty of all differences.

The students reflected upon the culture of their school and whether the Diversity Council has had, or will have, an impact on the character of the school community:

Jane: Despite the small-scale work that we did this year, I do see a positive change in [our school]. Because of this class, I am hanging out with students from all different social circles. I never thought that we had anything in common, and now that I know them, I can see that we do. Also, my close friends have become much more cautious about using offensive language around me...they're respectful enough to censor themselves around me. If we continue to work with



freshmen, or sophomores even, in a few years fights in the hallways and derogatory language could be cut back on significantly. In an ideal world, in a few years if a student called someone a “fag”, it would be considered socially unacceptable.

Diana: Amongst the people I usually see everyday, their language has changed. I don't hear “You're so gay” so often. [Over time], we might be able to eliminate most of the name-calling.

Daniel: With the continuation of the program, great things can and will happen. We planted the seed of the flower this year and that flower will grow into something amazing and beautiful.

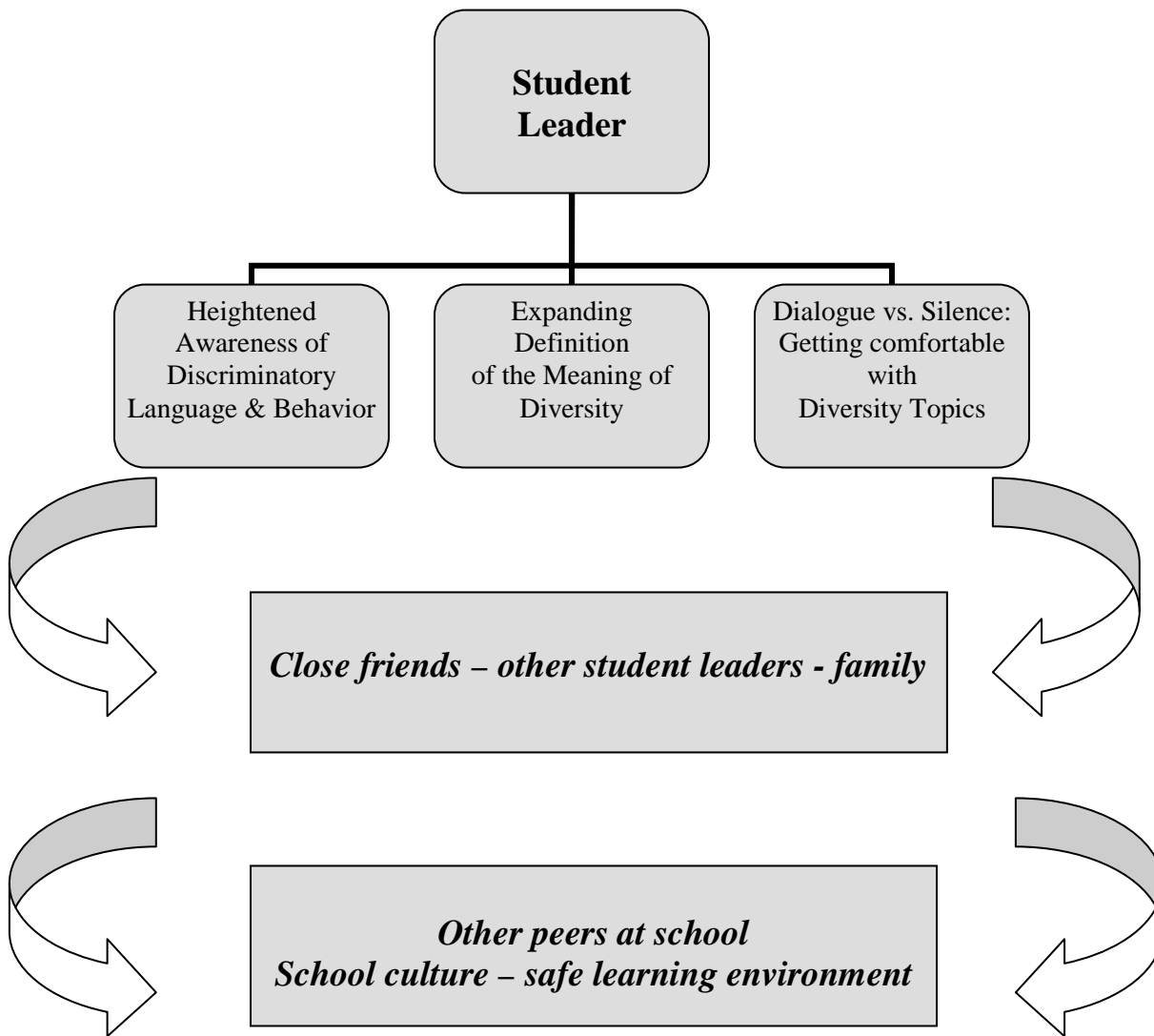
### **Summary Analysis of Data**

Research question #1 explores the impact of the student leader's work in terms of school culture: *In what tangible ways did the Diversity Council student leaders' efforts influence their school peers' acceptance of diversity and the social/cultural character of the school?*

Research question #2 narrows the view of school culture to more specifically explore the nature of the learning environment: *Did the initiatives of the Diversity Council peer leadership program impact the learning environment, in terms of safe and equal opportunities for all students, in the perceptions of the Diversity Council student leaders and faculty advisors?*

This study provided rich insight for both of these questions. Data revealed that student leaders see their sphere of influence as an incremental progression toward school culture change. Figure 4.7 depicts this evolving sphere of influence, a visual representation of the “ripple effect” to which the students refer.

Figure 4.7. Peer leader influence and the nature of school culture change.



In this diagram, the first stage of significant change is the self-development and growth of the student leaders themselves. The data illuminated three key areas of

growth: 1) their heightened awareness of discriminatory language and behavior in the world around them, 2) their expanding definition of diversity to all human differences, and 3) the impact of moving from silence to dialogue, as they became comfortable talking about diversity topics.

As student leaders reflected upon their personal growth, they also began to see that their immediate sphere of influence – closest friends, other student leaders, family members – is where they have the most immediate impact in lessening bias and discriminatory language.

The student leaders believe that this sphere of influence will slowly expand to other peers at school. All six of the students in the sample for this study expressed the belief that if the Diversity Leader program continues for a period of years, peer influence will create a safer and more equitable learning environment for all students. They believe that, over time, the efforts of the Diversity Council will initiate a shift in the accepted norms of language and behavior in their school.

Research question #3 seeks the student leaders' perceptions of their work as leaders and activists in their world beyond high school:

*What specific skills and/or understandings from their participation on the Diversity Council do the Diversity Council student leaders believe will have lasting effects beyond their graduation from high school?*

Transcripts from interviews, focus group discussions, written reflections, and the researcher's field notes pointed to an evolving understanding of the meaning of diversity

for student leaders. In addition, the data indicated that the student leaders' conception of the relationship of diversity to community has evolved as well.

#### 4.8. The Expanding View of Diversity as all Individual Differences.

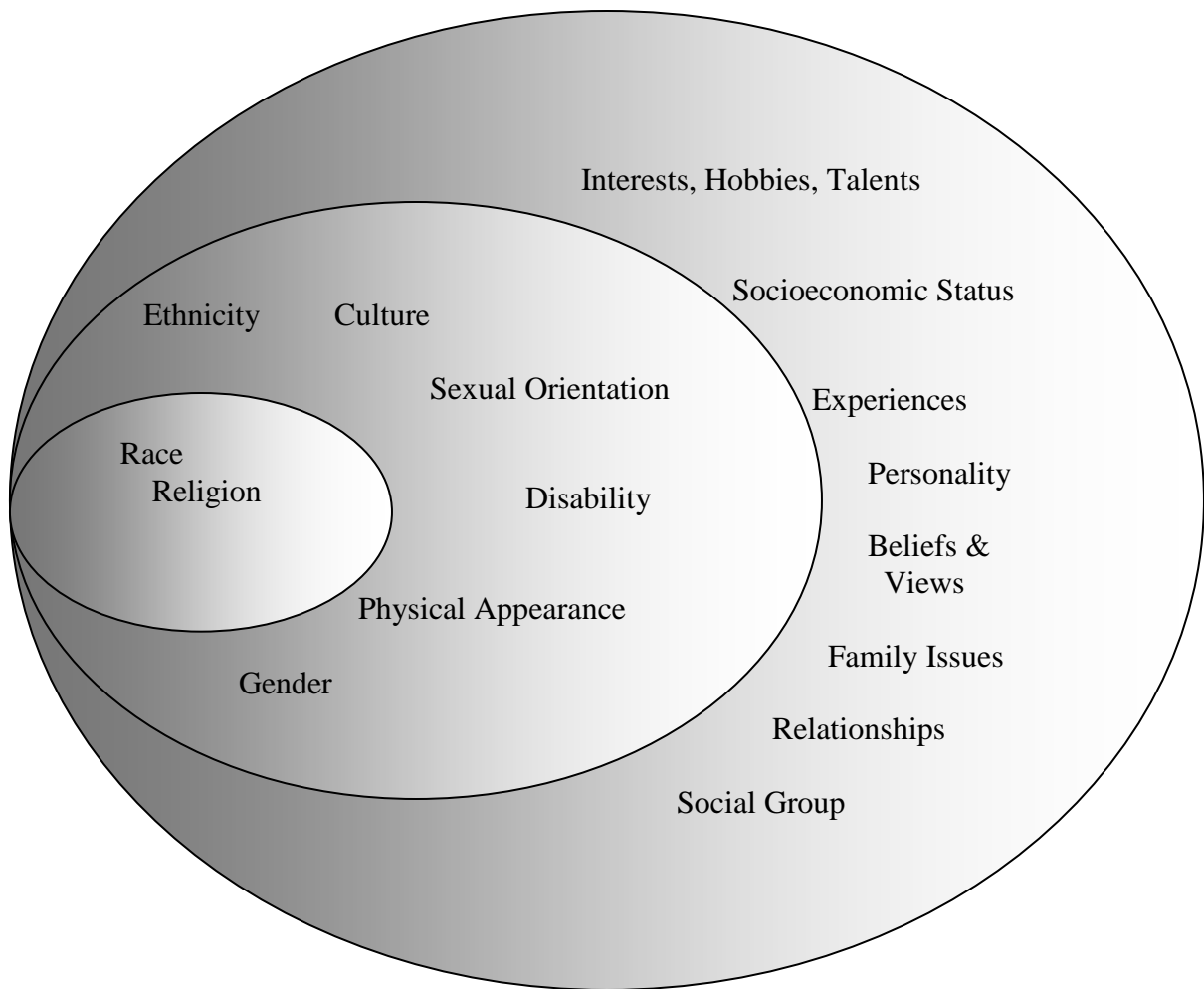
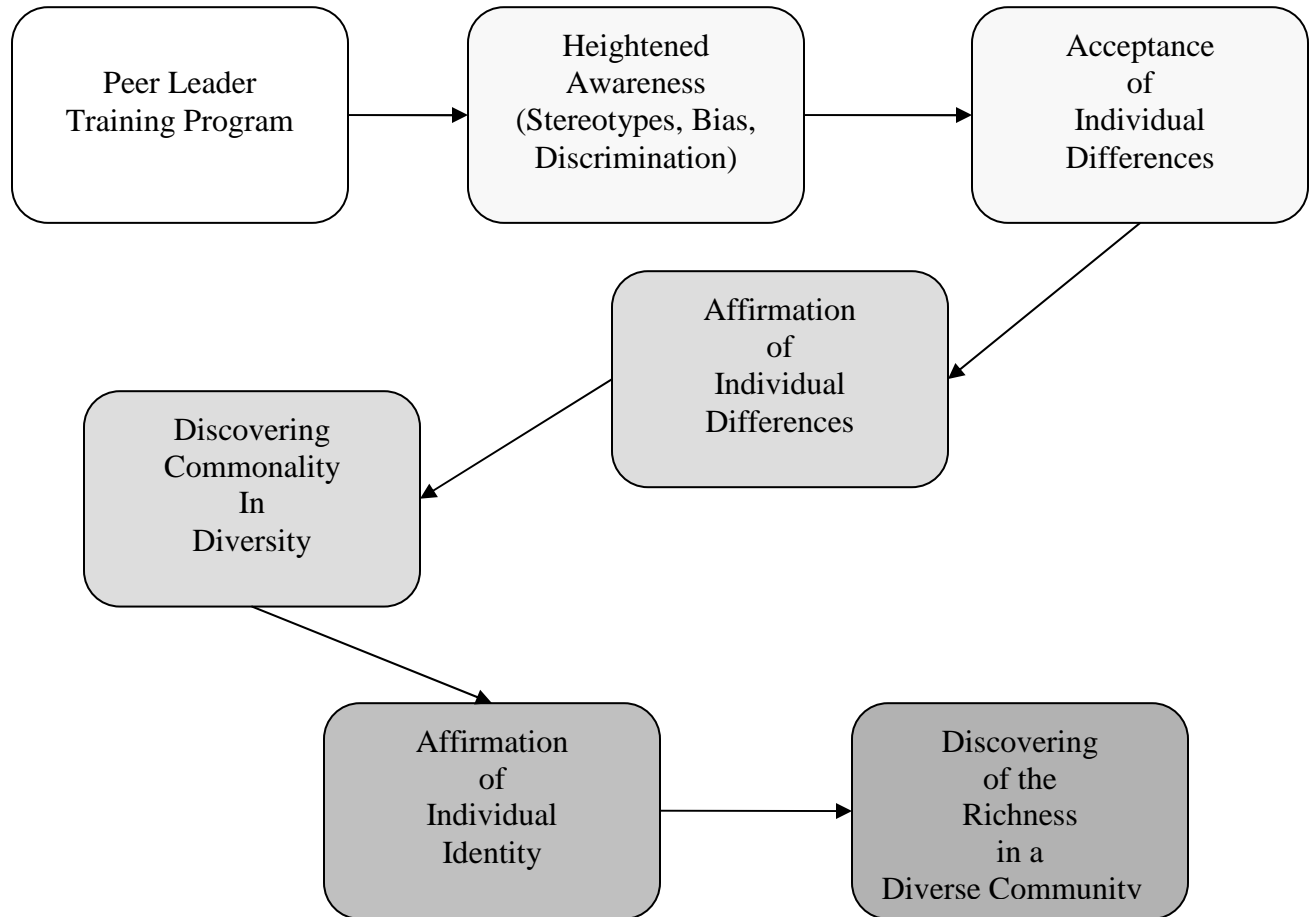


Figure 4.8 highlights the way in which the student leaders broadened their definition of diversity. Early in the study, most students identified race and religion as the diversity, sometimes extending the definition to sexual orientation or disability. Yet as the training and intervention work unfolded, the student leaders began to talk about diversity as a wide range of individual differences that included physical, psychological, emotional, familial, personal, and experiential factors. As the student leaders embraced a more expansive view of diversity, their understanding of the role of diversity in community began to transform.

Data collected from interviews, focus group sessions, written reflections, and the researcher's journal revealed that the student leaders perceive that dialogue has a transformative effect on their view of diversity as it relates to community. Data points to the way in which the early stages of discourse lead to a heightened awareness of stereotypes, bias, and discrimination. Heightened awareness contributes to the recognition and acceptance of individual differences. In a dialogic exploration of individual differences, student leaders discovered the threads of commonality that connect all humanity. Data from later stages of the study revealed that dialogue continues with the interplay between the uniqueness of individuals in a community and the common ground that binds them. Through this discourse, student leaders affirmed the identity of the individual and discover the richness that diversity adds to community.

Figure 4.9 is a visual representation of this transformation, depicting a continuum of the acceptance of diversity to the affirmation of individual identity and the rich sense of community that evolves through dialogue.

4.9. The continuum of the acceptance and affirmation of diversity through dialogue.



**Conclusion**

Chapter Five extends this summary analysis to a deeper understanding of the meaning embedded in the interpretation of data. The chapter includes a summary of findings and a discussion linking the findings to the literature review in Chapter Two.

The researcher expands the discussion to include recommendations for educational policy

and practice, and implications for further research. Chapter Five culminates with a commentary on how this study informs educational leadership and the unremitting quest for school improvement.

## **Chapter Five**

### **Discussion and Implications of Findings**

#### **Introduction**

Chapter Five commences with a summary of the findings from the previous chapter. The summary is organized by the research questions for the study, with an explanation of the cluster of findings significant to each question. The next section is a discussion of the findings, in which the researcher returns to the literature review from Chapter Two as a theoretical framework for a discussion of the four themes that emerged in this study. The researcher then reviews the limitations of the study, with a focus on reliability, validity, and ethical considerations.

The next section of the chapter is the researcher's commentary on the elements of this study that inform educational practice and policy. In addition, the researcher discusses implications for leadership, providing insight from the personal experiences of an administrator closely working with the participants of this study. The chapter concludes with a final reflection on the significance of this research for educational leaders.

#### **Summary of Findings**

The research questions designed for this qualitative case study sought to understand the effectiveness of a diversity education initiative that empowered student leaders to be the agents of school culture change.

Data was collected and verified through the triangulation of sources. The sample participants engaged in focus group discussions and individual interviews with the researcher. Several of the students also provided written reflections of their experiences



with the Diversity Council. The researcher collected documents, records, and artifacts that were pertinent to the study. The researcher also recorded extensive field notes, observations, and personal reflections in a journal.

The researcher analyzed and interpreted the data in an exploration of the research questions for this study. The cluster of findings for each is summarized as follows:

*Research Question #1 - In what tangible ways did the Diversity Council student leaders' efforts influence their school peers' acceptance of diversity and the social/cultural character of the school?*

The findings of the study revealed that the Diversity Council anti-bias education initiative did not have a discernable impact on school culture during the five month intervention period. However, the data did provide substantial evidence that the students who took active leadership roles in this initiative encountered a transformational experience of personal growth and development. Findings indicated that the intensive involvement of the student leaders had the effect of increasing their understanding and skills as leaders and anti-bias activists. Significant to this development was their heightened awareness of discriminatory language and behavior, their extended view of the definition of diversity and its relationship to community, and their improved ability to engage in dialogue about diversity topics with peers.

As a result of a more acute awareness of the stereotypes and bias language present in the daily interactions and conversations at school and home, some student leaders made changes in their own language and many were able to effectively dialogue with their closest friends and family. Findings revealed that the Diversity Council leaders'

efforts had a positive effect on this immediate sphere of influence, ameliorating discriminatory language and behavior as a result.

The findings suggested that the student leaders' ability to reach a wider berth of school peers will take a longer period of time than the length of this study, but all members of the sample were optimistic about the "ripple effect" of school culture change as their sphere of influence gradually expands. The findings of the study pointed to the need to institutionalize a diversity education/student leadership effort as a long-term initiative to improve the social/cultural character of the school.

*Research Question #2: Did the initiatives of the Diversity Council peer leadership program impact the learning environment, in terms of a safe and equal opportunity for all students, in the perceptions of the Diversity Council student leaders and faculty advisors?*

A significant area of personal growth for the Diversity Council student leaders was their heightened awareness of discriminatory language and behavior. As the student leaders learned about stereotypes, prejudice, and discrimination in the ADL peer training sessions, they began to recognize discriminatory language and bullying behavior in their school environment. Their perception of their school culture began to change as they became more keenly aware of some of the bias and discriminatory interactions that happened there.

The student leaders expressed a new understanding of the anti-bias culture that is necessary to create an equal opportunity for all students to access an emotionally and physically safe environment in which to learn. They begin to identify the negative effects

on victims of bullying and harassment, including the inability to concentrate in school, diminished academic performance, and truancy. They described the need for respectful peer interactions, support from teachers, and targeted diversity education efforts to cultivate the acceptance of individual differences.

The student leaders articulated that heightened awareness triggered their sense of responsibility to take action. The findings of this study indicate that they were not ready to confront peers who bullied or harassed other peers in school, but they were able to actively support the victim and to report incidents of discriminatory language and behavior to an adult. Student leaders were optimistic that their abilities as leaders and activists would continue to develop over time, and that practiced skills and increased confidence would enable them to confront perpetrators directly.

The sample participants perceived that the Diversity Council's anti-bias education peer leader program must be an ongoing effort, renewed and sustained each school year, in order to support a safe and equal learning environment for a diverse student body. The findings also indicate that whole-school culture change must include all adults in the school community (administration, faculty, and staff), defining their roles and responsibilities in creating and maintaining a safe learning environment.

*Research Question #3: What specific skills and/or understandings from their participation in the Diversity Council to the Diversity Council student leaders believe will have lasting effects beyond high school?*

The student leaders broadened their view of diversity to include all individual human differences, expanding their understanding of diversity and its role in community.

The findings demonstrate that the student leaders developed their public speaking and communication skills, especially around challenging diversity topics, and they increased their confidence and abilities in leading dialogue with their families and their peers. The student leaders perceived that this experience will project to increased opportunity, initiative, and success as leaders and activists in their communities beyond high school.

The findings reveal that dialogue forged a path of significant growth for the student leaders. Through dialogue, they discovered the wide variety of individual differences in their school community, when they initially perceived their school to be lacking in diversity. Continued dialogue led student leaders to accept and affirm the diversity in others, and then seek the commonality that ties all humanity together. As they reached this level of understanding, the student leaders began to see the value and richness that individual difference add to a community, ultimately embracing diversity *as* community.

The student leaders expressed their desire to seek diversity in their college experience, noting the richness that diversity brings to relationships and to community. This finding may indicate a readiness for active citizenship in an increasingly global society.

## **Discussion of Findings**

### *Peer leader influence and school culture change*

The findings of this study indicate that there was a significant impact on the student leaders who were directly involved in the Diversity Council initiative. The students who participated as initiative leaders improved their public speaking skills,

became more comfortable engaging in discourse about challenging diversity topics, and progressed in their ability to take a activist roles when they witnessed discriminatory behavior in their school community.

When the student leaders completed the ADL peer leader training sessions, their awareness of bias language and behavior became more acute. The student leaders were able to provide an inside look at the bias and discriminatory social interactions that occurred in their school community, a view that the adults rarely witnessed. The students who engage in harassing behaviors are careful to make sure that adults are not present. The student leaders said that bullying and name-calling had “kind of become an accepted thing...something that just happens”. They lamented this accepted norm and expressed their desire to replace this norm with one in which “it becomes the culture around here that it *isn't* OK”. The student leaders believed that their work as role models and activists would initiate a gradual shift in the cultural norms of the school.

These findings are in keeping with Ruddick and Flutter’s (2000) assertion that students are the “expert witnesses” of our schools (p. 82). The students are at the center of the social experiences that adults in schools only view from the periphery. It is prudent to listen to the students’ perspectives and to include them more fully in any process or protocol for school improvement. Levin (2000) says that it is only pragmatic to do so, because students have the unique knowledge and perspective to make reform efforts more successful and to improve their implementation. Fielding (2001) also reminds educators that true professional learning communities include the opportunity to learn from their students who have the most intimate perspective of all that happens within the school.

The findings from this case study establish that the Diversity Council student leaders were able to assuage bias language and behavior within their immediate sphere of influence, including their closet friends and family members. Although this study did not produce evidence of widespread change in the social/cultural character of the school during the five-month intervention period, all members of the participant sample expressed an optimistic view that school culture change would happen incrementally. The student leaders believed that positive change began with their efforts with those in their immediate sphere of influence, who in turn would impact others with whom they had a personal connection. The student leaders referred to this expanding influence as the “ripple effect” of change.

They also perceived that the workshops with their younger peers were a first step in establishing a new set of accepted norms in the school community; norms that included the acceptance of diversity and the expectation of a safe and respectful learning environment for all students, regardless of individual differences. They believed that adolescents are often more receptive to the ideas of other students than they are to adults. The student leaders believed that their own behaviors as role models, activists, and allies in the school community would have the effect of gradually shifting the cultural norms of accepted behaviors among their peers.

Ruddick & Flutter (2000) concluded that school is a holistic experience for students: it is not only what happens in the lesson, but it is about what happens *between* the lessons and the power and regimes that define who and what matter in the school. Ruddick & Fielding (2006) believe that redefining the traditional power relations of adults and students in a school is a critical element in the emergence of “student voice”,

the term that Cook-Sather (2006) defines as students having the “presence, power, and agency” to influence the culture and practices of a school (p. 363).

The findings of this study support these assertions: the student leaders of the Diversity Council had witnessed a positive change – at least within their immediate sphere of influence – and they perceived that there were indications of both sustainability and progress in their ability to influence a larger population. At the conclusion of the study, one student articulated the impact of their efforts this way:

Despite the small-scale work that we did this year, I do see a positive change...if we continue to work with [younger peers], in a few years fights in the hallways and derogatory language could be cut back on significantly...in a few years if a student called someone a ‘fag’, it would be considered socially unacceptable.

The findings of this study indicate that student leaders believe that they have the “power, presence, and agency” to which Cook-Sather (2006) refers.

The findings of this study also support the existing research and literature on peer influence: the student leaders perceived that their younger peers listened to them even more than the adults in the school environment. The student leaders believed that “it is easier to hear things from someone your own age” because the adults “aren’t going to see things as we do”. In their workshop presentations, the student leaders perceived that their peers were “more apt to listen to someone [they] can relate to” and that “peer leadership is really effective” and “ a really strong force”. Their beliefs are congruent with research conducted by Ruddick, Chaplain, & Wallace (1996), who identify an adolescent phenomenon in which peers begin to occupy a central role for one another during secondary education.

Ruddick, Chaplain, & Wallace (1996) also point to the critical importance of peer social support for teenagers during times of distress. The findings of this case study demonstrate how salient the impact of peer alliance can be at a time of distress for a student who is being bullied in school. One student leader recalled an incident when she witnessed a student who stood up for a victim, and commented on “the person’s bravery who did step in and at the effectiveness of it, because they almost stun all of the people standing there”. Student leaders in this study perceived peer allies as having a strong social impact on peer bullies, victims, and witnesses.

Levin (2000) believes that “Education reform cannot succeed and should not proceed” without direct involvement of students in all aspects of the reform initiative (p. 155). Ruddick, Chaplain, & Wallace (1996) say that student voice should be the very foundation for our thinking about ways to improve schools. The student leaders of the Diversity Council provided rich insight and thoughtful reflection throughout the study. They offered the critical perspective of students who are part of the peer interactions and social experiences at the heart of school culture. Their voices contributed to a better understanding of the evolving diversity education initiative and an especially powerful narrative on their personal growth as leaders during the study.

The findings of this case study present compelling evidence that student voice offers valuable insight for implementing school improvement initiatives. The findings also suggest that accessing student leadership in school improvement has the potential to effectively advance these initiatives for sustainable change.



### *Heightened awareness of bias language and behavior*

A school environment that ensures fairness, equality, and the physical and emotional safety of its students is critical to establishing an equal opportunity for all students to learn. The findings of this case study reveal that, as a result of the peer training sessions and ongoing Diversity Class discussion, the student leaders became more keenly aware of the stereotypes, bias language, and bullying behavior that were enmeshed in their school culture. In an ongoing discourse about diversity topics, the student leaders identified the negative effects on victims of discriminatory language and behavior, including a decline in academic performance, truancy, and an inability to concentrate in school.

Ruddick, Chaplain, & Wallace (1996) establish security – the physical setting and the interpersonal encounters within the school – as one of six conditions of learning that are essential for student motivation and engagement in the classroom. The findings of this study confirm that the student leaders' perceptions are congruent with empirical research studies on the educational impact of peer harassment in schools. Rusby, Forrester, Biglan, & Metzeler (2005) studied the impact of peer harassment on victims, finding associations between peer victimization and psychological effects (depression, anxiety) and as a predictor of peer aggression. The research of Nishina, Juvonen et al. (2005) suggests that peer harassment negatively impacts the victim's grade point average and that the victim often misses learning opportunities due to his or her inability to focus or due to frequent absences from class or school.

The findings of this case study were similar. The story of Wendy in Chapter Four, retold from school discipline and investigation documents, provides evidence of the

consequences of victimization congruent with the research and literature delineated in Chapter Two. Wendy was the victim of discriminatory language and harassment based on her religion. Her story described the embarrassment and outrage that she experienced in the classroom, followed by her inability to concentrate on academic objectives for the remainder of the class period. Uncharacteristic of her normal behavior, Wendy physically assaulted the perpetrator. She described the anxiety and fear associated with ongoing harassment and the impact on her social relationships when it was clear that rumors had spread among the student body. Eventually Wendy left school as a result of her emotional distress. Her story is a concrete example from the case study of the psychological and academic consequences of peer harassment.

Shields (2000) states that the “ultimate sense of feeling safe” is the affirmation of the “common humanity of the group” (p. 291). The findings of this case study resonate with Shields’ assertion. The student leaders explored the diversity among their school peers and sought the commonality that they had often overlooked. For example, the student leaders considered their own fear and bias in regard to the Alternative School student population, a group of students in a program for students with emotional or behavioral disabilities. One student leader remarked how she had “always been kind of afraid to look at them, to acknowledge that they’re there”. She recognized that her fear was based on stereotypes and bias, and that she had not looked beyond their physical appearance to seek commonality. As the Diversity leaders were exposed to the ways in which they could connect to and understand these students, their sense of safety was augmented. One student leader remarked that he was once reticent but now wished to

make a connection with them: “I felt like I can somehow make a difference in their lives by saying hi to them every day and just trying to be there for them”.

The findings of this study suggest that involvement in the ADL peer training sessions had the effect of heightening the awareness of student leaders that prejudice and discrimination exists in their school community. This finding is in keeping with the Levy Paluck & Green study at Yale (2006), who demonstrated that 73% of student leaders who had completed the ADL peer training protocol overheard teasing in their school during a given week, compared to only 42% of a control group. The findings of the Diversity Council case study also suggest that heightened awareness had the effect of activating the student leaders’ sense of responsibility to take action when faced with discriminatory language or behavior. This finding is also congruent with the findings of the Yale study, in which student leaders in treatment schools were more likely to believe that students should be activists and allies when incidents happen in their school. The student leaders’ responsibility to take action in response to intolerance or discrimination will be discussed later in this chapter as an aspect of promoting social responsibility.

#### *Expanding the meaning of diversity*

In this case study, the student leaders significantly broadened their understanding of diversity to include all individual human differences. In this process, they encountered a new meaning of community as it is enhanced by a diverse population. The student leaders embraced the value and richness that individual differences add to a community, ultimately embracing diversity *as* community. This learning was significant to the findings of this case study and bears a noteworthy connection to the work of Shields and

her theoretical framework of schools as “communities of difference”. In an article written in 2000, Shields encourages the “deliberate and moral creation” of a community of difference to ensure that all students are accepted and included in the learning environment (p. 38).

In a 2000 article, Shields wrote that school communities should use differences as the very *foundation* for community. A school community founded on difference would be built from the negotiation of disparate beliefs and values; a community that is inclusive without conformity. “Shared goals”, she writes, “can neither be assumed nor imposed, rather they must emerge from the diversity of membership” (p. 290). An unquestioned acceptance of the status quo may marginalize or exclude some students; oppressive power structures will persist if they remain unchallenged. Shields believes that homogeneity is “somewhat illusory”, and that recognizing shared humanity does not necessitate overlooking the differences of individuals (p. 278). In a community of difference, students learn “attitudes of openness” to learn from others, and the school develops a “deep commitment to dialogue”, in the spirit of a truly democratic education (p. 285, 290).

The findings from this case study suggest that the student leaders who were intensely involved in anti-bias education progressed on a continuum of similar understandings through the interplay of dialogue and experience in the Diversity Council. Findings indicate that students began to broaden their view of diversity, learning to accept and affirm all individual human differences. This understanding implored them to seek commonality within diversity, discovering the threads of commonality that connect all humanity. The student leaders explored individual identity development and the

impact on self-efficacy as individual identity is positively affirmed by members of a community. They reflected upon the richness and value that diversity brings to interpersonal relationships and the important role of diversity as a foundation of community. The student leaders began to express interest in pursuing opportunities to attain diversity in their relationships and communities beyond high school. One student leader conceptualized this as she engaged in her search for prospective colleges:

One of the places was explaining how they matched people to their roommates.

The way they explained it, I was like, wow, you are going to end up with a person just like you and how boring is that. I don't want that. I don't want to live with someone who is just another me...we've learned about so many different types of diversity and I started to realize that really is important and that makes life more interesting.

Shields (2000) professes that "If [school] communities do not find ways to help their members to understand the diversity of beliefs, cultures, and practices within and beyond their schools, I worry about how well these students, as adults, will be equipped to handle a world of complexity and difference" (p. 290). Derman-Sparks (1998) declares that children must "learn how to live productively and justly with the range of human diversity that exists on this planet" (p. 399).

The participants of the Diversity Council case study illustrate similar ideas, making the connection between the diversity education initiative and preparation for life and work in a diverse society. One student said:

I don't think you can go through your life without really knowing diversity.

You've got to work with it first before you go into the world. If you go to a job

and there is a big diverse community there then you aren't going to be comfortable unless you do.

The Multicultural Education Consensus Panel (2001) concluded that schools must provide opportunities for students to develop the knowledge, skills, and attitudes needed to interact positively with people from diverse groups in a complex world. To this end, the findings of this study make a strong case for the transformational power of dialogue.

### *The transformational power of dialogue*

The student leaders developed their skills of dialogue around challenging diversity topics: their increased comfort in talking about issues of diversity helped them to grow as leaders and to facilitate understanding in others. One student made the connection between dialogue and personal transformation:

A lot of stuff is not talked about, but [now] we feel comfortable talking about it so it has changed us.

A student described how she was able to influence the language of others:

People still make racial jokes, but it has got to the point where my friends and my family don't do it around me...I think it you start to learn how to sensor out what you are saying that eventually it will stop being in your vocabulary.

Another student discussed the learning experience of opening dialogue to challenging topics – such as race – to increase understanding among peers:

We talk about certain things and you can just see their face is like, “Oh my God, you are talking about this right now? Are you really doing this? [Race] is a touchy subject. We're not allowed to talk about this is school”.

And I feel like if we get them more acclimated to it, I think they will all feel more comfortable listening to what people – like kids in the METCO program – what they go through. It's going to be easier for them to understand.

Silence perpetuates racism and oppression in society, and silence has the same effect in schools. Silence denies some students the acceptance, support, and responsiveness they need to be successful. Tatum (1997) asserts, “The silences and denials surrounding [dominant] privilege...keep the thinking about equality or equity incomplete, protecting unearned advantage and conferred dominance by making these taboo subjects” (p. 12). Dialogue becomes the first step in dismantling an institutionalized system of privilege and opening the door of opportunity, acceptance, and equality to a diverse student population. The findings of this case study substantiate this belief, as student leaders connected dialogue to personal growth and transformation, as well as the growth and transformation of those within their sphere of influence.

The findings of the study reveal an optimistic perception among Diversity Council leaders that their emerging awareness, skills, and confidence will project to leadership and activism in their communities beyond high school. In this way, a student-led diversity education initiative is a methodology that has the potential to promote the democratic principles of social justice. The study also reveals the perception of its participants that this initiative is a means to cultivate future citizen-leaders who will have the capacity and the sense of responsibility to transform and reconstruct their society.

Vogt's research (1997) makes a case for using the educational system as a tool for teaching tolerance. Nieto (1996) encourages the inclusion of diversity education to “promote the democratic principles of social justice”, and to propel students to put their

learning into action for justice in their communities (p. 307). Banks (1997) also believes that diversity education is a means to help all students develop “the knowledge, attitudes, and skill to participate within but also to help transform and reconstruct society” (p. 13).

More than 70 years earlier, Dewey stated his beliefs that education has an important progressive and reconstructive social function:

We are doubtless far from realizing the potential efficacy of education as a constructive agency of improving society, from realizing that it represents not only a development of children and youth but also of the future society of which they will be the constituents (p.92).

Dewey urged educators to continuously reconstruct the curriculum of schools, evolving with and for the betterment of society. Starratt (2008) describes authenticity in teaching and learning as a curriculum in which the student “enters the world of the subject matter”, a world in which they are “dramatically implicated” (p. 22). Starratt says that the student forms an intimate relationship with what they are learning, not only becoming responsible *for* what they know, but also becoming responsible *to* what they know: the authentic learning process cultivates an understanding of the interconnectedness of human beings and a responsibility to use the tools of generating and applying knowledge in service to their community.

Dialogue was a key feature in the growth of the student leaders as activists. The findings of the Diversity Council case study indicate that the students understood dialogue to be a transformational vehicle for reflection and action. One student leader astutely asked, “How can you change something if you can’t talk about it?” Her words resonate with those of Freire (1970, p. 75):



Within the word we find two dimensions, reflection and action, in such radical interaction that if one is sacrificed – even in part – the other immediately suffers. There is no true word that is not at the same time praxis. Thus, to speak a true word is to transform the world.

Human existence cannot be silent...men are not built in silence, but in word, in work, in action-reflection...not the privilege of some few men, but the right of every man.

### **Limitations of the Study**

This research was carried out in a single school, with a small sample and a time constraint of ten months. It is important to note the limitation of contextual applications for this research due to the brevity of the study. Long-term observation at a research site or repeated observations of the same phenomenon over time increases the validity of findings (Merriam, 1998).

In addition, the study took place during the inaugural year of the Diversity Council student leadership initiative. As with any program, the initial year of implementation is often fraught with missteps due to inexperience. The persons involved are discovering and solving unexpected problems as the program evolves. This program was no exception: the faculty advisors and student leaders learned a great deal about the structures and protocols that will enhance the success of the diversity leader initiative in future years. It is important to note this limitation in examining the results of the study.

The student leaders involved in this study were nominated by faculty and were selected through an application process. As a result, it is likely that these students were

more open to diversity education than a random sample of their high school peers. Since leadership potential was a factor in the nomination process, these students were also more likely to demonstrate commitment to growth and development in leadership training than a random sample of their high school peers.

Ethics were a foremost consideration for this researcher. An informed consent form assured study participants that all of their responses were anonymous and confidential. The researcher did not use the names or identifying information of the participants or the school in the study, maintaining anonymity with the use of pseudonyms. The research study posed minimal risk to subjects and the benefits to subjects in this study were limited to an enhanced educational experience as a result of participation.

Since the researcher is a supervising and evaluating administrator at the school in which the study was conducted, the relationship between researcher and participants became more complex, and the researcher acknowledged the potential for participant bias. Faculty and student participants were likely to attempt to please the researcher with positive responses and a successful initiative. In an effort to assuage participant bias, the researcher articulated the purpose of the study with transparency, clearly stating that their participation in the study would have no bearing on their evaluation, promotion, or opportunities in the school. The researcher asked participants to be honest in their responses in order to gather the most accurate data possible. Concerns for participant bias were further mitigated by the triangulation of data during the course of data collection.

The researcher also acknowledged the potential for researcher bias. Since the researcher is an administrator of this school, the researcher was hopeful that the student leadership initiative of the Diversity Council would have a positive effect on the social/cultural atmosphere and learning environment of the school. In order to mitigate researcher bias, the researcher triangulated data at each stage of the study and obtained an expert review of data analysis and interpretation from Boston College professors and doctoral program colleagues.

The researcher carefully considered internal validity as the study unfolded. Merriam (1998) reminds us that one of the assumptions underlying qualitative research is that “reality is holistic, multidimensional, and ever-changing; it is not a single, fixed, objective phenomenon waiting to be discovered, observed, and measured as in quantitative research” (p. 202). With this complexity in mind, the researcher intermittently checked the findings and interpretation of data with sample participants for plausibility. To enhance external validity, the researcher provided a rich and thorough description of the study so that readers will be able to determine the transferability of findings to their own situations.

Merriam also cautions that reliability is problematic in the social sciences “simply because human behavior is never static” (p. 205). The researcher made a resolute effort to obtain reliability with a transparent description of the assumptions and theory that underpin the study, a detailed accounting of data collection, and an inspection of the consistency of findings with the data collected.

## **Implications for Practice**

Of the findings that emerged from this study, the most significant was the powerful educational impact that a leadership opportunity – an opportunity with a specific mission for social justice – had for the students involved. Critical to the success of their leadership development was the 18-hour ADL peer leader training session and the Diversity Leader class, which met for 48 minutes during school hours on alternating days throughout the school year. This structural framework provided students with an opportunity to continue the reflection, learning, and dialogue that began during the training. In addition, the students were given the opportunity to *practice* their leadership skills and to advance their mission by leading diversity education workshops for their younger peers. Most student leaders directed five or six workshops with the same group of ninth grade students, leading discussions and activities around diversity topics.

In this leadership initiative, students were empowered to become the agents of change, a social justice mission of acceptance, respect, and equity for all students in the school community. In the process, the student leaders encountered substantial personal growth. Significant to their learning was a heightened awareness of the presence of discriminatory language and behavior in the social interactions of their daily lives. The students developed a more comprehensive view of diversity and its role in community, and they learned about change itself – the incremental nature of progress and the vital importance of dialogue as a critical means of advancing their mission.

So the researcher asks: with this initiative, a diversity education mission that empowers student leaders to be the agents of change, have we planted the seeds of social justice in our schools and in our future citizen-leaders who will act to transform their

world? The findings of this study suggest a promising answer. It is the working hypothesis of this researcher that this diversity leadership initiative prepared students for participation in a global society, cultivated their skills in leadership and activism for social justice, and used education as a reconstructive agent to build a more just school and a more just society.

*Preparing students for participation in a global society*

In Chapter One, the researcher posits: teaching the acceptance of diversity is a significant step in building a safe, peaceful, and equitable learning environment in our schools; teaching the acceptance of diversity to a generation of young people is a significant step in building toward a peaceful world.

The findings of this study indicated that the effort to teach the *acceptance* of diversity stopped short of an attainable goal, at least for the student leader group: acceptance was only a *first* step in a continuum of understanding for them, a continuum that transcended acceptance and brought them to the *affirmation* of individualism and an understanding of diversity as the very *foundation* of community.

In addition, the student leaders significantly broadened their definition of diversity over the course of the study. During the pre-intervention stage, the student leaders rarely identified or discussed diversity topics beyond race, religion, ethnicity, and sexual orientation. Through dialogue and experience, they expanded their understanding of diversity to include *all* human differences. The students learned that a comprehensive view of diversity in their school community was more than just recognition of an individual as part of a minority group, such as a student who is homosexual, or one who

practices the Muslim faith in a predominantly Christian community. Their understanding evolved to include individual differences that are multifaceted: each human being is a lifetime of experiences, beliefs, interests, abilities or disabilities, personal and familial relationships, so that no label, grouping, or category could possibly encompass the uniqueness of individual identity.

In this way, the student leaders progressed from *accepting* others to *affirming* individual identity. Identity development during adolescence is a time of discovery, growth, and an application of self-efficacy. The affirmation of individual identity by members of the school community, especially from same-age peers, sends powerful messages of self-worth and value to adolescents during this critical stage of identity development.

This diversity education initiative inspired its student leaders not only to seek the broad spectrum of individualism among their peers, but propelled them to seek commonality as well. One student in the participant sample, a female with interests in music and education, considered a young man whose passion was body-building and said, “What could I possibly have in common with this boy?” After reflecting for a moment, she speculated that she could understand “anyone who has ever thrown themselves into anything”, realizing that it was not his choice of a hobby but the *passion* for that hobby that she could relate to. In this she made the connection: two very different individuals can share similar emotions or values, establishing commonality based on shared humanity.

It was at this stage that student leaders began to link diversity to community, noting the ways in which individuality *enriches* community. The students were able to

articulate how individual difference contributes to a more vibrant whole. In keeping with the viewpoint of Freire (1970), the well-being of the community is dependant upon the creative diversity of its membership, and its growth depends on those who challenge conformity. Individual talents, beliefs, and views benefit the community as a whole. Student leaders expressed a desire to actively seek out diversity in their lives beyond high school; they verbalized their belief that a community and relationships built on difference would lead to fuller and more interesting life experiences.

These findings would suggest that the immersion of student leaders in a diversity education leadership initiative had the effect of preparing these student leaders for participation in a diverse, global society. As these students increased their conceptual understanding of diversity *as* community, they have released the inherent tension between individuality and community to find an essential, and perhaps more ethical, balance. They have learned that the affirmation of individuality is the foundation for creating a more replete societal whole.

#### *Cultivating students as leaders and activists for social justice*

The findings of the study reveal significant growth and skill development of the student leaders, particularly in the area of communication and dialogue. Student leaders indicated that they were more confident in their public speaking ability, and much more able, willing, and responsible to engage in challenging discourse about diversity topics. Dialogue was a key feature in the growth of these student leaders, a transformational vehicle for reflection and action. One student astutely asked the question, “How can you change something if you can’t talk about it?”

Freire (1970) defines praxis as reflection and action upon the world in order to reform it. The roots of praxis, he says, are in dialogue. As learners reflect and act upon their world, so they reform it. Silence only perpetuates an unjust status quo and the continuation of the roles of the oppressor and oppressed. Freire maintains that both oppressor and oppressed are dehumanized in the process. Dialogue plays a critical role in the continuation of oppression or as liberation from oppression. Discriminatory language propagates distorted images, fear, and hate. Language of acceptance and affirmation promotes equality.

The student leaders embraced dialogue among themselves, their families, their close friends, and their younger peers to further their mission. With practice, they lessened their own discomfort in talking about the diversity topics that had previously been difficult for them, particularly race and sexuality. One student described her own evolution in talking about race:

You don't want to come off appearing to be ignorant or offensive or racist in any way, and I think we really learned how to handle it just as fact. People are different races and you just go from there.

The transformative power of dialogue is in the exchange of ideas, the interplay of viewpoints, and the personal reflection that follows. It is a potent opportunity for growth in adolescents as they explore these challenging diversity topics. It is an ethical opportunity for schools to cultivate a more a physically and emotionally safe environment for a diverse student membership. It is an essential opportunity for students as they approach citizenship in an increasingly global society.



One of the emergent themes of this study was that heightened awareness of injustice in their community had the effect of triggering a sense of responsibility in the student leaders to act in response to that injustice. One student leader made this connection of reflection and action:

We've noticed more...once you do notice, you feel like now that I picked up on it I really should do something...

Starratt (2008) describes this activation from knowledge to responsibility as the moral character of learning. In this study, the student leaders' heightened awareness compelled them to engage others in a dialogue about bias, stereotypes, and the consequences of discriminatory language and behavior on its victims, community, and society. They believed that school culture change begins with their proactive work as leaders in diversity education. They believed that they had a positive impact on the people within their immediate sphere of influence, who would in turn impact their own immediate sphere of influence, eventually broadening in concentric circles to reach a larger community. Many of the student leaders in this study referred to this phenomenon as the "ripple effect" of culture change.

The student leaders also perceived that other aspects of their leadership work would have an effect over time: their anti-bias education workshops with younger peers, their increasing roles as activists and allies in opposition to discriminatory language or behavior in school, and their activist work in sponsoring school-wide diversity education initiatives throughout the school year

Primarily through dialogue, the students engaged others to transform their community. This initiative was an authentic learning process that activated the students'

leadership skills and their sense of responsibility for activism. As a result of this finding, the researcher believes that this educational experience for young leaders will have a lasting impact in cultivating young citizens to become activists for social justice beyond their high school years.

*Education for a more just school; education for a more just society*

In the end, this case study is about education for a more just and ethical school. As students are empowered to become the agents of school culture change, they are creating a more ethical learning environment. Starratt (1994) provides an ethical framework of justice, care, and critique as the foundation for building a more ethical school. The researcher applies his multidimensional framework to this case study to examine the benefits of this Diversity Council initiative in building a more just school environment:

To apply the *ethic of critique*, schools must challenge the institutional policies, practices, and beliefs that systematically disadvantage and/or dehumanize individuals or groups of individuals. Through the Diversity Council initiative, student leaders explored and critiqued the social/cultural character of their school. As it became clear to them that there were troubling acts of discriminatory behavior within their school community, the students' commitment to their mission to impart diversity education and to reform cultural norms became more fervent and profound.

To employ the *ethic of justice*, schools must serve the rights of both the individual and the common good. The Diversity Council initiative is a commitment to this justice, as it is a challenge to student leaders to find the commonality among a diverse group of students and to challenge themselves and others to affirm individuality as essential to

community. To sustain the *ethic of care*, the school must promote and protect an “absolute regard” for each individual in the community. Through the process of expanding the meaning and definition of diversity, the student leaders of the Diversity Council acknowledged the intrinsic dignity and worth of each human being, and the individual’s right to be authentically who they are. In keeping with Starratt’s ethical framework of critique, justice, and care, the findings of this study reveal that the Diversity Council student leadership initiative is a positive step in building a more just and ethical school.

The larger picture of this study is the use of education as a reconstruction agent for society. Dewey describes the role of education as a social function in *Democracy and Education* (1916, p. 24):

As society becomes more enlightened, it realizes that it is responsible not to transmit and conserve the whole of its existing achievements, but only such as make for a better future society. The school is its chief agency for the accomplishment of this end.

As this educational initiative fosters a more just school, it also shapes the future citizen-leaders to be activists for a more just society.

### *Recommendations*

It is the conclusion of the researcher that this leadership opportunity in diversity education prepared the student leaders for effective participation and activism in an increasingly global society. The findings suggest that many more students would benefit from this experience, and educators may consider extending this leadership curriculum to

as many as 10% of students from each grade level. Educators might seek this specific program or a similar type of leadership opportunity for students as preparation for a successful future in the 21<sup>st</sup> century; the essential component of the leadership initiative is that it is specifically tied to a mission that activates students' responsibility to their community.

The findings of this study support this researcher's hypothesis that student leadership initiatives are a worthwhile investment for the improvement of school culture and for the development of the citizen-leaders who will ultimately influence their communities beyond their high school years. The findings coalesce to inform the researcher's recommendations for educational practice:

- Involve approximately 10% of the student population in a leadership initiative.
- Connect the leadership initiative to a mission that activates the students' responsibility to their community.
- Provide intensive leadership training to students.
- Build a structural framework within the school curriculum that provides student leaders with an opportunity for continued reflection, learning, and dialogue.
- Provide opportunities for students to practice their leadership skills and to advance their mission within their school community.
- Include faculty, staff, and administrators with the knowledge, skills, roles, and responsibilities needed to support the student leaders' mission. Provide training and ongoing support to adults as necessary.
- Utilize student voice in program evaluation and in plans for improving program implementation.

- Institutionalize the student leadership effort for sustained school culture change.

### **Implications for Policy**

The student-parent handbooks of Massachusetts schools are laden with anti-bullying and harassment policies. These policies establish guidelines for reporting, investigating, and implementing disciplinary action in cases of student-on-student harassment. Yet policies and disciplinary codes are largely *reactive* by nature. Although these policies allow school communities to take a firm, public position on values and school safety, the punitive measures of the disciplinary code are an inadequate means of actually stopping incidents of student-on-student harassment.

It is the *proactive* work of reforming school culture that can change these behaviors, not the fear of school policies. The most effective means of diminishing the incidents of harassment and bullying in school is to change the cultural norms that are accepted by the members of the school community. In this case study, the student leaders discussed some of the small victories of their diversity initiative. One student leader was pleased to report that “You could probably go out and count hundreds of students with the [I don’t put up with put-downs] pin on their clothes...” Most student leaders were able to identify specific examples of friends, family members, or classroom situations where the norm of language had shifted as a result of their influence. All members of the participant sample were optimistic that with the sustained work of the Diversity Council student leader initiative, a positive shift in the social/cultural character of the school would evolve over time.

It is not more policy that it is needed to improve the social interactions within a school community. It is a sustained, whole-school commitment to improve the social/cultural character of the school. A physically and emotionally safe learning environment is one of acceptance, equity, and respect for all students in a school community. This community is built upon a foundation of individual difference.

### **Implications for Further Research**

A limitation of this study was the length of the investigation. A longer study is needed to more fully assess the impact of an anti-bias education initiative that empowers students to be the agents of school culture change. Researchers might conduct qualitative case studies at different stages of the student leadership initiative: this case study focused on the inaugural year; studies in the third, fifth, and tenth year of an initiative would provide more substantive data on the program's effect on school culture.

An illuminating study would engage young men and women who participated as student leaders five or ten years after their high school graduation. The research might focus on the lasting effects of their participation in the initiative, exploring their success in leadership or their propensity for activism in their communities. The study may also examine their perceptions of whether or not the initiative influenced their readiness to effectively participate in a diverse work force or community beyond high school.

The findings of this case study compel the researcher to believe that there is an opportunity for rich qualitative research in the investigation of diversity education as it relates to adolescent identity development. Also, there is a dearth of research on distributive leadership that extends to students as leaders in a school community. This is

an area of significant interest for this researcher, as the most promising lessons of educational leadership in this study were directly connected to this premise.

### **Educational Leadership**

When educational leaders talk about distributive leadership, why do we most often fail to include *students as leaders* in these conversations? In this case study, an initiative that empowered student leaders to become the agents of school reform, students took the lead and administrators and teachers assumed supporting roles. The perception of this researcher is that the student leadership initiative had a significant impact on the student leaders themselves, the school community, and the educational leader. The following discussion of the impact of student empowerment is a synthesis of the researcher's journal reflections on this topic.

#### *The impact of student empowerment on student leaders*

As noted earlier, the researcher is an administrator in the high school where this study took place. Through continuous interaction and observation throughout the study, the administrator worked closely with the student leaders. Their metamorphosis in leadership was profound: as the administrator entrusted them with responsibility, sought their perspective, respectfully considered their suggestions, interacted with them as partners in this school reform effort, and allowed them to lead the way in its implementation, the students responded to these high expectations with an equally high level of performance. The administrator noted that the more they were *expected* to be leaders, the more they *believed* themselves to be leaders, and they *performed* as leaders.

The administrator observed how significantly the students' belief systems were predicated upon the reflection that they saw in the mirror of the adult educator's beliefs. In one of the student interviews, a student leader spoke with uncertainty about his public speaking ability. In response, the administrator said,

You will always be a good speaker because you are very, very sincere. You just stick with that and you will always do really well because people will listen and be riveted to you because of your sincerity, Daniel.

Daniel said thank you with an appreciative smile and a swell of confidence. In the following months, the administrator noted his development as a speaker: Daniel participated more frequently and willingly in public discussion, he was more confident in verbalizing his viewpoint, and notably, he allowed his passion and sincerity to surface without reservation. Daniel emerged as a fine leader among his peers over the course of the Diversity Council initiative.

This example highlights the importance of the commitment of the adult educators in supporting student leadership. An essential element of distributing leadership to students is simultaneously *teaching* and *reinforcing* effective leadership skills. Leadership requires courage, integrity, stamina, and responsibility; it means assuming a full-time position as a role model. Leadership requires a self-intuitive view of strength and weakness, and requires the leader to manage both with equal deftness. These are new skills and understandings for young people. Administrators and teachers who support these student leaders must engage them in dialogue about leadership, encourage reflection, and provide ongoing feedback.



### *The impact of student empowerment on the school community*

The researcher noted how often other students in the community observed the interactions between the administrator and student leaders. In fact, the administrator was purposeful in engaging student leaders in front of their peers, demonstrating the respect and regard with which the administrator afforded them. It was the perception of the administrator that many other students who witnessed these interactions were eager to obtain this opportunity. They yearned to be the next student leader to have this adult-like interaction, to have the respect of the faculty and administrators as a partner in school improvement, and to exercise a significant voice in their school community. It was evident that other students made an effort to demonstrate their capacity to be future leaders, to be the next student trusted with such an important role. This dynamic was indicative of a subtle shift in the character of the student body.

The administrator also understood the powerful example that these interactions with student leaders had for members of the faculty. Teachers witnessed the administrator's respectful interactions with student leaders, the trust allocated to them to perform leadership tasks, and the high expectations imposed upon them as part of the school's leadership team. Teachers frequently remarked that they were impressed with the seriousness of purpose of the student leaders, and discussed with the administrator how they might also access the student leadership in their classes or school clubs and activities. The administrator believes that their openness to this way of thinking may also peak their willingness to activate student voice more often in their classrooms.

Educational leaders attempt to build shared values as the foundation of their school community. This administrator asserts that young leaders are open, optimistic,

and passionate about embracing these values and they are eager to activate them in their leadership work. They also have access to the deepest part of school culture – and the most difficult place for adults to reach – the social interactions between students outside of the classroom, interactions that happen in the halls, the school parking lot and the athletic fields. Distributing leadership to students is an effective way of constructing values that are truly shared by all members of the school community, as student leaders have a tremendous capacity to bring the values to life.

*The impact of student empowerment on the educational leader*

Most educational administrators began as teachers, directly connected to students in the process of learning and social development, usually with a strong desire to make a difference in their lives. Too often educational leaders move further away from the students as they move higher on the administrative ladder. Instead, this administrator believes that the educational leader must stay closely connected to students, as they are the constituents that our practice means to serve. They have a great deal to tell us and so much to offer in our efforts to build better schools.

At the conclusion of the study, the following journal reflections speak to the personal growth of this educational leader as a result of working intimately with student leaders:

Maybe what surprised me most is how much I grew *with* the student leaders. As they expanded their view of diversity, I did as well: in listening to their reflections and experiences, I began to discover *layers* of individualism in our student body, and the impact of discriminatory language on *all* students as a

result. It wasn't just an issue of race, it was an issue of the value placed on any or all individual differences that make a difference to the students' sense of safety and belonging in our school. When all kinds of talents, interests, family structures, religious beliefs, social groups, musical tastes, and choices of clothing are valued with an absolute regard for individualism, I imagine that the gay student feels safer to share his or her sexual orientation with others; I imagine that the Jewish student can proudly speak of his or her family traditions; I imagine that a METCO student who lives in Boston can talk freely about his or her neighborhood.

As an educational leader, I grew to understand that a mission of diversity education is as deeply embedded in the affirmation of individuality and adolescent identity development as it is in the search for commonality – or at least the affirmation of individualism is an important predecessor to a healthy community. It is the moral imperative of an educational leader to proactively build a learning environment that is just and equitable for all students.

I believe that I have been transformed through dialogue and interactions with the student leaders. I am reminded of Starratt's (2004) description of authenticity. He says that authenticity is reciprocal, in which one is continuously transforming another within the context of a relationship and in which one is equally influenced by the feedback of the other. How many times did they surprise me with a bit of wisdom that only a teenager might impart? How many times did I see our school

through their eyes, and acknowledge that we could do better? As an educational leader it is unlikely that I will take on any future school improvement initiative without including the voices of my students, or distribute leadership in my school without allotting leadership roles to students along with adults.

These young men and women inspired me with their passion for justice, for a better world in which to live. And I believe in them to lead the way.

## **Conclusion**

The findings of this case study contribute to a limited amount of research on student leadership initiatives. Its contribution may be that a diversity education student leadership initiative is an effective methodology to build a more just school. The study also reveals the potential of this initiative to prepare students for successful participation in a diverse society and to cultivate future citizen-leaders who have the capacity and the sense of responsibility to transform and reconstruct their world.

Imagine that Lakeview High School engages 10% of its student population in a curriculum of leadership for social justice, a practice that continues year after year, for many years. Imagine that all Massachusetts schools engage 10% of its student population in this initiative. Imagine that all American schools engage 10% of its students, and that schools world-wide employ such an initiative as well. John Lennon once asked us to imagine.

John Dewey believed that education is the most effective instrument with which to transform our society. As we seek a peaceful world, is it not an imperative to become an

aim of education as well? They may say that I'm a dreamer, but after working in partnership with these young, capable leaders, I know that I am not the only one.

APPENDIX A

Informed Consent for a Research Study on  
The Impact of Peer Leadership Programs in Teaching the Acceptance of Diversity

You are invited to participate in a research study at [our] high school. This research study is being conducted by Kimberly J. Smith, doctoral candidate at Boston College, under the supervision of Dr. Elizabeth Twomey. The research study will be submitted to the Lynch School of Education.

The purpose of the study is to examine the impact of the Diversity Council on the cultural atmosphere and learning environment of our high school. The study will focus on the effect of a student leadership program that teaches the acceptance of diversity within a school community. Those invited to participate are leaders in the Diversity Council who are willing and able to share experiences and perceptions relative to this research study.

Participants will be asked to sit in a focus group discussion on two occasions: once in the beginning stages of the study (October 2007) and once near the end of the study (May 2008). Each focus group session will last for approximately 30 minutes. In addition, participants will be asked to take part in one individual interview with Ms. Smith during the 2007 – 2008 school year. The interview will last for approximately 20 minutes. Focus group discussions and interviews will be audio taped. Participants will have an opportunity to review the written transcription of the interview for accuracy. Results of the research study will be available to interested participants.

Participation is strictly voluntary. All responses given by participants will be confidential and names of respondents will not be identified. Participants may withdraw at any time. There is no compensation for your participation, other than a debt of gratitude and appreciation. Thank you.

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I understand the conditions of this study and I agree to participate. I understand that I will be audio taped and that I have the right to review the transcriptions for accuracy. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I may withdraw at any time.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Parent

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

## APPENDIX B

### Interview Protocol

#### Focus Group, Session 1

1. What do you think would be some of the ideal outcomes of having a Diversity Council in our school?
2. Research says that a student who feels disconnected from his or her peers and school community has more difficulty performing well in school, and has a higher rate of absence from school.

In what ways could our Diversity Council make a difference in the academic life of this student?

3. What are the most important ideas, skills, or strategies that you took away from the peer leader or advisor/faculty training sessions?
4. Before the Diversity Council begins work with freshmen or implementing other activities, I am interested to know how you perceive our *existing* school environment and how you believe the Diversity Council *will or will not affect it*. Let's use the following questions to explore this information:

A. Suppose a student pushed another student in a crowded school corridor, calling him "faggot".

1. What do you think would be the reaction/response of other students?
2. If you were present, what do you think that your reaction/response would be?
3. How do you think these responses may change (for you or for other students) with an active Diversity Council in our school?

B. Suppose a student in the classroom announces "That's so retarded!" in response to another comment in class.

1. What do you think would be the reaction/response of other students?
2. If you were present, what do you think that your reaction/response would be?
3. How do you think these responses may change (for you or for other students) with an active Diversity Council in our school?

5. Some people would say that some adolescents will always be unable to accept differences among themselves, that it is the nature of this age group to be intolerant – even cruel – to one another. They would say that no program or intervention at school can make a significant difference.

What would you say? In what way, if any, did the peer leader or faculty advisor training impact your thinking?

6. Some people would say that students' attitudes and behaviors are learned in their home environment, and that there is no program or intervention at school that can make a significant difference.

What would you say? In what way, if any, did the peer leader or faculty advisor training impact your thinking?

7. *Student Leaders:* Do you believe that your participation as a Diversity Council Leader will have a lasting effect after you graduate from high school? In what way?
8. *Faculty Advisors:* What specific skills and/or understandings from your work with the Diversity Council do you believe will have a lasting effect on your teaching or administrative practice?



## APPENDIX C

### Interview Protocol

#### Focus Group, Session 2

*The following questions are based on themes that have emerged from data collection:*

9. Many of you have talked about the “ripple effect” of your Diversity Leader work (as opposed to grandiose change). How does this change or influence your thinking about any of the following:

- ❖ Leadership
- ❖ Activism
- ❖ Change
- ❖ The effects of the Diversity Council on school culture

10. Some of you remarked that you think about **diversity** much differently than you did before your participation in the Diversity Council. In what ways do you think about diversity within our school population differently? How have your ideas about diversity broadened?

You also have talked about discovering more about the **commonalities** among high school students, here and across the country. What have you learned?

11. Many of you have reported that the freshmen that you are working with are quiet during the presentations and activities, and that it is difficult to draw them into verbal participation. But you have also have speculated that we may be reaching students who are not necessarily speaking out loud. How do you perceive your presence in the classroom as it affects:

- ❖ Students of color
- ❖ Students with a disability
- ❖ Students who practice a minority religion
- ❖ Students who are gay
- ❖ Students who do not socially “fit in”

12. Do you believe that student leaders can influence the culture and character of our high school? Do you believe that peer leaders have less, as much, or more influence than adults in the building? Why? Please share any specific examples or evidence from your experiences with the Diversity Council that supports your belief.

*The following question was asked before you began work as Diversity Council Leaders. I am interested to know if your perceptions have changed:*

5. In our first focus group discussion, I asked about a scenario that takes place in school. The scenario was this: a student pushes another student in a crowded school corridor, calling him “faggot”. We discussed the reactions (if any) of other students in the hallway, and your own reaction (if any) if you happened to be there.

As a result of having a Diversity Council in our school this year, do you believe that the responses of other students in the hall would be different than in previous years? If so, how?

With your training and work as a Peer Leader, would your response be different than in previous years? If so, how?

*I am very interested in how you believe that your work and experience with the Diversity Council has impacted you.*

7. *Student Leaders:* In what ways will your work as a Diversity Council Leader influence you beyond high school?

Do you believe that you will continue to work as an activist for the acceptance of diversity? How?

8. *Faculty Advisors:* In what way has your affiliation with the Diversity Council Peer Leadership Program had a lasting effect on your teaching or administrative practice?

Has the program influenced your thinking about:

- ❖ Cultivating student leaders as agents of change
- ❖ The influence of anti-bias education initiatives on the social/cultural character of a school
- ❖ The influence of anti-bias education initiatives in creating a safe and equal learning environment for a diverse student body

## APPENDIX D

### Interview Protocol

#### **Student Interviews**

1. Tell me why you decided to become a Diversity Council student leader. Ideally, what did you hope to accomplish for your school or for yourself?
2. What were the three most significant skills or understandings that you learned during the World of Difference peer leader training? How have you used them in your work as a Diversity Council student leader?
3. Do you perceive that the work of our Diversity Council has made a difference in your peers' acceptance of diversity in our school? If so, how? Can you think of specific examples?
4. Do you perceive that the work of our Diversity Council has made our school a safer place in which to learn? If so, how? Can you think of specific examples?
5. In what ways have you personally changed or grown from your experience as a Diversity Council leader?
6. Do you perceive that your experiences as a Diversity Council leader will have a lasting effect beyond high school? In what way?

## APPENDIX E

### INCIDENT REPORT

Date \_\_\_\_\_

**1. Type of incident. Check one:**

\_\_\_ Verbal, direct: name-calling, remarks, jokes, teasing

\_\_\_ Verbal or written, indirect: gossip, rumor, social exclusion, internet, graffiti

\_\_\_ Physical, direct: pushing, shoving, fighting, intimidating

**2. Brief description of incident:**

**3. Student(s) response to perpetrator(s):**

Confronter-

Ally-

Bystander-

Ignored, walked away, acted as if they didn't notice-

**4. Faculty response?**

**5. Did you perceive that either you, as a Diversity Council Leader, or the presence and work of the Diversity Council in our school, had any influence on the response of others?**

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