POWERFUL VOICINGS: THE EXERCISE OF VOICE AT AN ANARCHIST-

INSPIRED ALTERNATIVE SCHOOL

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Date _____May 20, 2020_____

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education in
Teachers College, Columbia University

2020

ABSTRACT

POWERFUL VOICINGS: THE EXERCISE OF VOICE AT AN ANARCHIST-
INSPIRED ALTERNATIVE SCHOOL

Roy Noah Danovitch

This qualitative case study explored the development and exercise of voice at City Workshop, an anarchist-inspired alternative school for middle and high school students. Drawing from the dialogic tradition, I defined student voice as the complex and varied ways students express understanding, make themselves heard, and exercise agency over their educational experiences. In this study, I sought to move beyond traditional approaches to student voice that frame its meaning in instrumental terms and focus instead on its ontological and political dimensions. Through individual and focus group interviews, participant observations, document analysis, and a grounded theory approach to data analysis, I examined how students at City Workshop exercise their voices and how the educational practices of the school empower student voice.

This study's findings revealed the scope and power of student voice extended far beyond its practical effects. As demonstrated through the study, student voice was embodied in things students said, things they did not say, patterns of listening and dialogue, and even the environment itself. Relatedly, I learned student voice is empowered through dialogic governance and relational pedagogy, practices that invite students to play more meaningful roles as both individuals, learners, and community members. I also found City Workshop empowered voice by encouraging students to engage with issues of equity, power, and justice across a wide variety of settings and contexts, while dismantling barriers that restrict participation and engagement. Finally, the significance of this study lies in the attention it draws to the viability of experimental, dialogic approaches to schooling rooted in anarchist-inspired traditions and committed to broader educational transformation.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

To start, I want to acknowledge two individuals who helped me discover my voice. Before I had any interest in being a serious student, my sixth grade teacher, Ms. Enlow, always made me feel like what I said had value, even when my life pretty much revolved around basketball and Tom and Jerry episodes. Ms. Enlow was selfless, loving, and caring, even as cancer was taking her life. She used music to help me understand themes like friendship, identity, and love. Those conversations were some of my earliest memories of feeling heard, empowered, and enriched by a teacher.

Two decades later, when I studied literature in graduate school, Professor Victoria Silver at the University of California, Irvine helped me develop the confidence to share complex ideas about philosophy, literature, and language. The conversations we had about King Lear still resonate as some of my most potent experiences of dialogue and deep learning. She allowed me to think of myself as an intellectual partner, even when I felt such a thing was beyond me.

To Megan Laverty, it is hard to convey the impact you have had on my growth as an educator and as a person. You not only exposed me to the ethical dimensions of teaching and the importance of treating children as moral agents, but you also modeled for me what patient, attentive listening looks and feels like during our countless conversations. You are always interested in my ideas, even when they are half-baked, and you always push me to address questions of purpose, meaning, and value when I think about education.

To Sonya Horsford, taking your course on education reform was one of the best decisions I have ever made. You helped me become more attuned to the way race impacts

doctoral work was to get in your good graces and stay in New York a little longer so I could somehow win over your beautiful heart and brilliant brain. The last 5 years have been filled with so much adventure and joy. You push me as a thinker, you edit my work, you laugh at my jokes, and you love me even after I crack your precious ceramics.

Most importantly, we now have the most beautiful family imaginable. That includes Noamie Bear, who laid on my lap during many reading and writing sessions, never questioning my excessive use of commas and hyphens. And then there is the most extraordinary thing we have ever created: Noa Isabel, who was born during the late stages of this writing.

Noa, this work is dedicated to you. I will always listen to and love your voice, no matter where you go, what you do, or who you become.

R.N.D.

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I – INTRODUCTION

This qualitative case study explored the exercise of student voice at City Workshop,[1] an anarchist-inspired alternative school in an urban setting.[2] Anchored in the dialogic tradition, I defined student voice as the complex and varied ways students express their individuality, make themselves heard, and exercise agency over their educational experiences. In this study, I moved beyond traditional approaches to student voice that frame its meaning in instrumental terms and focused instead on its ontological, political, and relational dimensions. Through individual and focus group interviews, participant observations, document analysis, and a grounded theory approach to data analysis, I examined how students at City Workshop exercise their voices, and how the educational practices of the school empower student voice.

Drawing from scholarship on children's rights and progressive educational practice, this study understands children and adolescents as strong, creative, and competent. This understanding also derives from personal experience working with students in democratic school settings and researching models that position students as

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[1] I use the name City Workshop throughout this work to protect the confidentiality of the school.

[2] City Workshop's anarchist-inspired approach, which I describe in detail in Chapters III and V, is reflected first through its respect for the dignity and rights of students, and second, through its resistance to top-down forms of hierarchy, authority, and decision making. In the spirit of Francisco Ferrer's modern schools, City Workshop is small, integrated, and working class in terms of its demographic and orientation (see Avrich, 2014; Suissa, 2006 for compelling treatments of the modern school tradition, Ferrer's legacy, and anarchist-inspired education more broadly). As I explain in Chapter IV, the description "anarchist-inspired" is just one of many ways the school describes its approach. In their marketing materials, on their website, and in their documents, City Workshop's leaders also refer to themselves as progressive, humanistic, and radical, traditions they feel capture distinct but related elements of their educational approach.

protagonists, authors, and governing partners. As such, I sought to situate my study in a setting that challenged the binary framing of children/adults and promoted voice across a wide variety of settings and contexts.

Problem Statement

Over the last 20 years, student voice has gained traction as a powerful concept in discourse about school reform and transformation (Fletcher, 2017; Mitra & Gross, 2009). Scholars have highlighted the relationship between student voice and increased levels of agency, competence, and belonging (Bahou, 2011; Groundwater-Smith, 2011), while schools continue to explore practices and frameworks that engage young people directly in matters of decision making and governance (Beattie, 2012; Cook-Sather, 2006; Morrison, 2008). On an international level, the dialogue about student voice has been advanced considerably by increased attention to children's rights, which has recognized the political agency of young people and affirmed their right to speak up on their behalf—particularly on matters related to education (Kjorholt, 2007; Lansdown, 2001).

Developments in the area of children's rights have included efforts to structure schools around the political agency of children (Moss & Urban, 2010) and theoretical inquiries into engaged listening practices on the part of adults (Davies, 2011). Further, many scholars of student voice have challenged relations of hierarchy and control that position young people as passive recipients of knowledge and schooling (Giroux, 2007; McLaren, 2015). Informed by the traditions of critical pedagogy and progressivism, scholars conducting this work position young people as active agents in their own lives and highlight the value of engaging students as dialogic partners, collaborators, and co-inquirers in schools and communities (Darder, 2018; hooks, 2014; Kennedy, 2006a).

In what follows, I describe three main problems that motivate this qualitative case study into the exercise of voice at City Workshop. The first problem involves the depoliticization of voice through neoliberal discourses, which frame its meaning in terms of individual choice. The second problem, relatedly, involves the tendency to understand voice in terms of eventual participation, rather than citizenship and agency in the present. The final issue I discuss involves the social-context of schooling and the way alternative schools often ignore questions of power, equity, and representation in terms of which voices are heard.

Neoliberal Voice

Despite its growing prominence as a subject of study and a source of school change, voice remains an undertheorized concept often deployed in symbolic and radically individualistic ways. Instead of democratizing school structures to accommodate the agency of young people, educators often use voice to improve assessment practices, ensure teacher accountability, and satisfy a culture of choice and performance (Bain, 2010; Fielding, 2012). Influenced by the discourse of neoliberalism, voice has increasingly acquired a narrow, instrumental meaning, one that positions young people as individual consumers or entrepreneurial subjects seeking their own ends, rather than engaged citizens participating in "thick" forms of democratic life (Westheimer & Kahne, 2004; Zyngier, 2011). Further, neoliberal approaches to voice have done little to challenge relations of power which govern traditional schooling; instead, such reforms have sought to answer the problem of student engagement by customizing and individualizing learning, or simply reforming adult decision making process to offer

some limited discretion for voice in the disciplinary framework of schooling (Fielding, 2012).

Developmental Voice

A parallel problem attends the discourse on student voice—the tendency to structure its meaning so it corresponds with essentialized notions of the "learner" or "citizen" (Lesko & Talburt, 2012). According to developmental logic, informed by the scholarship of Piaget (1977) and Kohlberg (1981), voice is often associated with articulacy, deliberative reason, and speech. To have voice means to speak maturely in formal settings where decision-making is enacted and democratic procedure is followed (Biesta, 2007). Hence, voice often conjures the image of the charismatic public speaker or natural leader while overlooking the relational and embodied forms of agency young people express—even at the early childhood level (Edwards, Gandini, & Forman, 2011; Griffiths & Ross, 2008). These forms of agency may be expressed through nonrepresentational and symbolic languages or through relationships of care and mutual aid that position children as political equals. When student voice is framed in developmental terms, as Rollo (2016b) noted, "children are not viewed as full partners but as existentially ensnared in adult systems of symbol and reference" (p. 240). The positioning of children as passive and in need of representation ultimately restricts their ability to exercise voice and appropriate their educational experiences.

The Social Context of Schooling

The scope and power of voice is also impacted significantly by the sociopolitical context of schooling. Schools that describe themselves as free, radical, progressive, or anarchistic have been characterized as *privileged oases,* where student voice is divorced

from questions of power, equity, and politics. Such settings also include institutional and relational barriers that limit access to more diverse knowledge, cultures, and practices, thereby foreclosing opportunities for more political forms of participation and advocacy. Critics have suggested many alternative schools privilege the voices of middle-class White students, while failing to nurture solidarity across dimensions of race, class, and ethnic identity. In the process, as Schutz (2011) noted, many schools that traffic in the language of democratic education fail to develop public citizens who understand how to press their rights in public spaces. Critics have argued many such settings take a romantic approach to voice that ignores many of the issues that attend urban public schools (Morrison, 2007; Wilson, 2017).

A related problem is the tendency to view dialogue as the unproblematic answer to empowering voice. As Boler (2004) noted, the belief that dialogue supports equal treatment overlooks how dominant ideologies silence some voices at the expense of others. As Boler (2004) observed, the practice of dialogue in schools must account for how "the social hierarchies of race, class, gender, and homophobia . . . shape the larger world" (p. viii), while at the same time affirming the political power of silence and difference.

In this section, I have articulated just some of the problems that motivated this qualitative case study into the exercise of student voice at an anarchist-inspired alternative school. These problems include the depoliticization of voice because of neoliberal discourses, and the denial of agency in children because of developmental approaches to participation, citizenship, and democracy. Further, as I have argued, the reification of voice has devalued the creative forms of agency many young children

express while at the same time diminishing the role of social context and dialogue in shaping how voice is engaged and taken up by others. Finally, inquiries into student voice often fail to confront the sociopolitical context of schooling; namely, how empowering voice often privileges the interests and aspirations of middle to upper class White families while silencing the voices of underrepresented and minoritized students.

Purpose and Research Questions

This work examined the exercise of voice at City Workshop, an anarchist-inspired alternative school for middle and high school students in an urban setting. City Workshop, which I describe in detail in both Chapters III and IV, offers a compelling lens to study voice because of the school's commitment to dissolving the barriers which restrict participation and regulate behavior in more bureaucratic settings. My dialogic approach examined the complex, relational dimensions of voice, along with how the social context of City Workshop influenced its development. Thus, I analyzed how students themselves define voice, and to what degree voice is socially constituted through forms of listening, relationality, and care.

A further aspect of this study is my interest in analyzing the educational practices that empower voice. Here, my area of interest centered on questions of both pedagogy and organization. In other words, I wanted to investigate how the school worked and determine what recommendations might be made for educators interested in structuring educational environments around the scope, power, and complexity of voice. Finally, this study examined the relevancy of an anarchist-inspired model for educators invested in empowering young people and challenging hierarchical school structures that limit and regulate participation. Here, I also centered issues of race and power to address the

reputation of alternative schools as removed from social conflict and thus unable to advance the broader aims of democratic education. This study used interviews, focus groups, document analysis, and participant observation, along with a grounded theory approach to analysis that foregrounds the lived, situated experiences of middle and high school students at City Workshop.

Building on the purpose of my inquiry, this qualitative case study was anchored by the following research questions.

1. How do students at City Workshop exercise their voices?
2. How do the educational practices of City Workshop empower voice?

Theoretical Framework

In this section, I describe the theoretical framework that undergirds my understanding of student voice. First, building on the traditions of critical pedagogy and progressive education, I understand voice broadly in terms of agency, empowerment, and participation (Fletcher, 2017; Freire, 1973; Taylor & Robinson, 2009). I begin with the assumption that to empower voice, educators must first understand learning as an active process grounded in the experiences, realities, and concerns of young people, a position that challenges the traditional image of children as subordinate, dependent, and in need of representation. Voice in this way is not simply the things students say, but the particular ways students shape their environments—whether it is through formal decision-making, political advocacy, or self-directed learning.[3] At the same time, I also use the concept of voice to critique structures of power and authority that exclude children and perpetuate

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[3] Devine (2002) put the agency of children in eloquent terms when she characterized them as "social actors in their own right" (p. 305).

the social pathologies of racism, classism, and more. Thus, voice is compatible with notions of "thick democracy" (Zyngier, 2011) and participatory readiness (Allen, 2016) that stress more critical forms of engagement (e.g., examining the roots of poverty or discussing the effects of gentrification). Along these lines, I argue that affirming the value of voice necessitates analyzing and transforming structures that restrict participation, prevent self-realization, and undermine equity.

In what follows, I outline my theorization of voice, focusing on its ontological, dialogical, and political dimensions (see Figure 1 for a visual representation of these features). It is important to emphasize that I do not see these dimensions of voice as mutually exclusive or as discrete categories. Political voice, for example, may be closely linked to how students express themselves ontologically (i.e., voice as an expression of identity or difference), just as it may evoke more conventional forms or images of participation such as public speaking and voting.
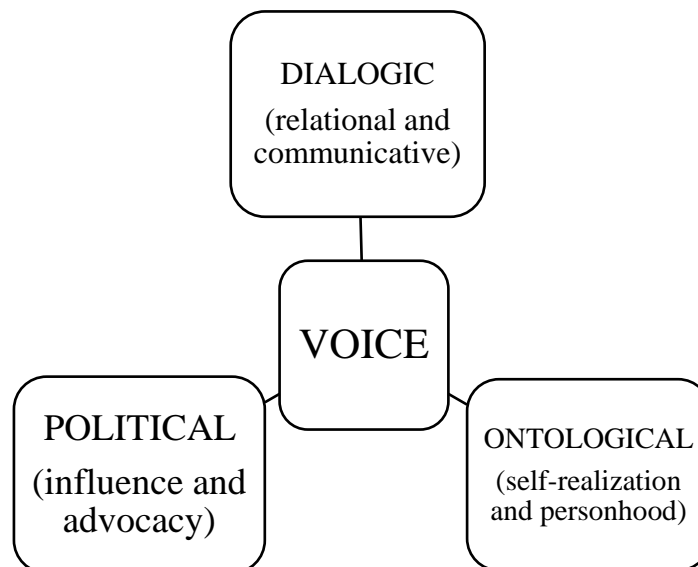
Figure 1. Visual representation of theorization of voice.

Ontological Voice

Building on the scholarship of Batchelor (2006a) and Sidorkin (1999), this study

offers an ontological reading of voice, one that foregrounds the process of being and

becoming, which characterizes identity construction and individual self-realization. As I

understand it, we realize voice when we can actively define the kind of persons we want

to be and resist those forces that aim to produce recognizable subjects for the purposes of

market, state, or economy. As Batchelor (2006a) noted, such forces limit students'

horizons and silence their capacity "to give alternative expressions of who they are what

they know" (p. 791). I also want to stress that I do not see the realization of voice in

romantic terms, as a process of turning inwards and discovering an essential self that is

singular and stable. Instead, I see the realization of ontological voice as a form of

appropriation, one that involves intentional action and choice in a social context. As

Batchelor (2006a) noted, "Developing an ontological voice invites students to let their

being enter fully unto their ideas and action, and vice versa" (p. 794). This understanding

of voice, I argue, necessitates the creation of educational environments where students

can express their diverse and complex subjectivities.

Dialogical Voice

My emphasis on ontological voice relates to another important dimension of my

theoretical framework. Drawing on the scholarship of Bakhtin (1981, 1984) and Sidorkin

(1999), I suggest who we are is a function of dialogue. Thus, when I describe voice in

dialogic terms, I am suggesting that self-realization takes place through interpersonal

relations, as such relations nurture our individuality and enable us to meaningfully

express our talents and capacities. As Sidorkin (1999) noted, "We are truly human only

when we are in dialogical relation with one another" (p. 11). Building on the importance of social context and interpersonal relations, dialogic voice presumes that who we are is not singular, and that multiple voices interact in defining the self—whether these voices interact internally (in the form of internal dialogue) or externally (through reciprocal exchanges with others).

My dialogic view of voice also relates to its political meanings and contours. When we engage students in dialogue, we invite them to "name their realities" (Giroux, 2007, p. 3) and communicate their experiences from a first-person perspective. Thus, rather than being positioned as the passive objects of an educational monologue, students emerge as active agents who exercise their voices to share their unique histories and effect meaningful change in their schools and communities. This view of voice is nicely captured by McLaren (2015), who noted, "voice is not a reflection of reality, but rather a constitutive force" (p. 154). McLaren (2015) continued, "Voice, then, suggests the means that students have at their disposal to make themselves 'heard' and to define themselves as active participants in the world" (p. 154). Viewed in this light, the concept of student voice is a powerful vehicle for social change and participatory democracy.

Political Voice

Political voice also draws attention to how students exercise influence over questions of power, governance, and equity while at school. Voice in this context may take the form of structured democratic exchanges where students make proposals, debate issues, take votes, or less formal settings where students engage issues of social and civic concern beyond the adult gaze (Biesta, Lawy, & Kelly, 2009; Devine,

2002). My rationale in expanding the meaning of political voice beyond its formal

expressions is to affirm forms of political agency that adults often ignore in our

preference for political speech and articulacy (Griffiths & Ross, 2008; Rollo, 2016b).

My theoretical framework thus attempts to engage the complex dimensions of

political voice, while also challenging the developmentalism that frames voice in

terms of future participation and eventual citizenship.[4]

The common thread among all these dimensions of voice, I argue, is their

grounding in social relations. We exercise voice in the hopes of a meaningful response,

and in the desire to have our concerns and rights cared for and acknowledged,

particularly in settings that students may experience as impersonal and alienating.

Another common thread in my theorization of voice is the importance of agency and

action. Without the capacity to act on one's interests, or exercise one's rights, voice is

only a tokenistic gesture toward child-centered pedagogy. Finally, each dimension of

voice I study has a literal and symbolic meaning. For example, voice may express itself

through what one says (i.e., the literal meaning) or the presence one exudes (i.e., the

symbolic meaning).

In this section, I sought to articulate the theoretical framing of my

understanding of voice. I ultimately suggest that the concept of voice is more complex

and varied than the reductionist view that tokenizes and essentializes student

participation. This impoverished view of voice ignores the impact of social context

(e.g., how voice is taken up and engaged by others) and agency (e.g., the capacity to

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[4] Such approaches find expression through frameworks such as Hart's (1992) ladder of participation model and Kohlberg's (1981) just community approach to schooling, which links citizenship to a stage theory of moral development.

actualize oneself ontologically, politically, or otherwise). I also suggest while voice relates to the way students interact with and discuss issues of power, equity, and conflict (both in school, and the wider society), the meaning of voice depends on the lived realities of the students and their specific modes of engagement. In other words, voice is not merely a capacity to speak in formal settings, or the ability to participate in future politics; instead, voice is an expression of rights youth have in the present and the dialogic relationships with peers, teachers, and others which make those rights meaningful.

Significance and Rationale

As Bahou (2011) observed, interest in voice has reemerged because progressive educators have started to question how the structures, practices, and values that govern school life contrast sharply with how young people live today. Students are not simply passive receptacles or citizens in the making; they are capable of producing culture and exercising agency in their own right (Kjorholt, 2007; Rollo, 2016a). On an international level, young people continue to exercise their voices and express agency in settings traditionally governed by adults. In many cases, youth voice has inspired profound social change and a deepening of consciousness on matters of education, race, climate, gun violence, and more. These talents and capacities have found expression even at the early childhood level, where the focus on empowering voice has reshaped the image of children and the geography of schooling. Meanwhile, Reggio Emilia-oriented schools continue to take a generous and expansive understanding of voice by viewing children as protagonists who express their knowledge through a broad array of symbolic languages.

Furthermore, democratic schools that engage young people in governance and real-world decision-making continue to be developed.

For these reasons, the concept of student voice offers a helpful lens through which to explore more imaginative possibilities for teaching, learning, and schooling. Engaging student voice may also help educators fulfill many of the ideals of a democratic education, which hinges on the capacity of young people to actively participate in shaping their schools and communities. Democratic education, as I understand it, is not simply an approach to learning that emphasizes a narrow set of skills and dispositions for democratic life. Instead, democratic education is a creative process of building community, deliberating over social and political issues, and transforming structures of hierarchy and exclusion. Fulfilling this aspiration, however, requires educational models committed to empowering voice and translating it in terms of pedagogical and organizational practice. By exploring one such model, then, my study has the potential to challenge approaches that are more conservative to voice, while initiating a conversation about how to reimagine school in practical terms so that educators interested in transforming education have a model from which to draw.

Another significant feature of my study is its potential to highlight the relevance of an anarchist-inspired approach to alternative schooling. It is a common critique of educational alternatives that such schools emphasize individuality and organic processes while failing to foster political awareness and social action (Delpit, 2006; Schutz, 2011). The site I am studying, given its self-described "revolutionary" approach, might be accused of something similar. Yet City Workshop also conceives of itself as a space for students to express their freedom in social terms, expressed in projects where students

adopt a political cause, interview political and religious leaders, write grants, learn new languages, and practice public speaking. Additionally, the primary demographic of the school is working class, thereby ensuring greater diversity and equity. In this sense, the school is attempting to upset the traditional view of the alternative school as abandoning its social responsibilities and limiting voice to personalized learning. Thus, my study has the potential to demonstrate how educational alternatives can help develop voice in a more creative and critical direction.

Finally, this research is attempting to synthesize diverse theoretical and philosophical traditions and illustrate how they inform educational practice. In this way, the significance of this study lies in its capacity to demonstrate how different fields of inquiry can exist in dialogue with each other while also building and sustaining a new vision for schooling rooted in the richness, complexity, and power of voice.

Definition of Terms

In this section, I briefly define some of the main concepts and terms associated with my understanding of student voice. This list of concepts and terms is meant to provide theoretical clarification for terms that surface during the course of my study, while making important distinctions between different uses and applications.

Agency

Students exercise agency when they can act on their ideas, whether through deliberation, discussion, or problem-solving, in a manner that is meaningful and purposeful (Bahou, 2011). I used the terms *meaningful* and *purposeful* to draw attention to the importance of identifying with one's actions—either cognitively or affectively

(Jaeggi, 2014). Meaningful agency, I argue, involves caring about what one does and not simply determining what one does.

Democratic Education

In defining the meaning of *democratic education*, I am relying mainly on Dewey's (1939) conception of democracy as a participatory form of association that only comes into being through inventive effort and creative skill. Dewey's (1939) view of democracy is rooted in organic governance and community life, along with the activities of collaborative inquiry and real-world problem solving. This vision of democracy shapes how I understand the concept of terms like *community* and *public*, which I suggest have to be discovered, scrutinized, and remade as individuals evaluate and assess their interests. At the same time, my understanding of democratic education is predicated on complexity, variety, and emergence, rather than a static singular and unchanging expression of a common will or voice.[5]

Dialogue

I define *dialogue* as an interactive process of communication that affirms diverse voices and cultivates shared understandings. Dialogue involves the co-construction of knowledge as participants come together to investigate shared problems and concerns. The practice is based on a reciprocity that involves participants speaking and listening to each other in an active and mutualistic way. Thus, for Greene (1995), dialogue involves

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[5] While I do not use the term democratic education frequently in this study, I think it is a relevant concept to define because the idea often evokes romanticized conceptions of community and citizenship. Drawing on Dewey and Rogers' (2012) understanding of *the public* and Hardt and Negri's (2017) notion of *assembly*, I suggest the notions of democracy and community are highly contingent phenomena whose forms are emergent, and whose identities accommodate both difference and complexity with respect to voice.

"giving voice to personal perspectives, listening to other stories, seeking agreement, and trying to expand on what is shared" (p. 68). From an ontological perspective, dialogical relations seek to resolve the dualism between self and other (Holquist, 2003) and uncover relationships that exist between ways of knowing and being in the world (i.e., cognitive/affective, child/adult, knowledge/experience).

Self-Realization

Self-realization in this study is a constitutive act, one where students come to realize themselves through actions, purposes, and projects they define as meaningful. I argue self-realization manifests in and through social relations, a position that contrasts with romantic conceptions of originality and uniqueness. I argue self-realization differs from self-determination primarily in the sense that the former involves a more profound, affective identification with the projects and purposes one undertakes, rather than just the ability to be self-governing.

Student Voice

In the context of this qualitative case study, I define student voice as the complex and varied ways students express their individuality, make themselves heard, and shape their educational environments. Informed by the dialogic tradition, I assume students discover and exercise their voices through meaningful forms of participation, association, and dialogue. I argue student voice is a complex and creative phenomenon heavily influenced by context, and the situated experiences students.

Conclusion

In my first chapter, I introduced the problems and purpose that motivated this qualitative case study into the exercise of student voice at City Workshop—an anarchist-inspired alternative school for middle and high school students located in an urban setting. I defined student voice as the complex and varied ways student express their individuality, make themselves heard, and shape their educational environments. I introduced my research questions, which engage the topic of voice both through the situated experiences of students in the school and educational practices more broadly. I also sketched out my theoretical understanding of voice, with particular attention to its ontological, dialogic, and political dimensions. These dimensions, I argued, are best understood in relational terms, rather than discrete, self-sufficing categories. Finally, I highlighted the significance of my study, focusing on its relevance for educators and researchers invested in building schools where voice can be engaged in its full complexity and power.

II – LITERATURE REVIEW

Review of the Literature

The process of composing the literature review, in keeping with my qualitative study and grounded theory approach to analysis, was an iterative and recursive exercise. Initially, my literature review offered a wide ranging survey of the field, with far less attention to the specific theoretical traditions that informed my later understandings of voice as dialogic, complex, and multi-faceted. Once I started collecting data based on research at City Workshop (see Chapters IV and V), I revised my research questions to focus more closely on the exercise of voice and the educational practices which empower it development. I then narrowed the scope of my literature review in order to highlight the issues, themes, and concerns raised by my research questions.

This literature review begins by tracking the concepts, theories, and traditions associated with student voice, while also providing a brief history of how the term has been defined and contested by educators, scholars, researchers, and philosophers. I frame voice in terms of agency, empowerment, and participation (Bahou, 2011; Bain, 2010), while at the same time evoking its more complex and dialogic meanings (Holquist, 2003; McLeod, 2011). This literature review also aims to highlight the key critiques of student voice-related initiatives, focusing on scholars who challenge tokenistic efforts to coax student participation in school (Fletcher, 2017; Taylor & Robinson, 2009) and critical theorists who center questions of race, class, and representation. I also examine the

theorization of voice as a social construction enriched through the practices of dialogue, collaborative inquiry, and listening (Greene, 1995; Kennedy, 1995). Thus, I situate the concept of voice in a larger theoretical tradition that views voice as a powerful source of knowledge, understanding, and engagement.

Second, given that this qualitative case study centers on the development and exercise of student voice in an anarchist-inspired alternative school, I focus on anarchist education and its theoretical and practical applications. Furthermore, this chapter explores how school organization might be structured to enhance student voice, which the literature associates with authenticity, inclusion, power, participation, youth culture, and activism (Allen, 2016; Bahou, 2011; Boyle & Finders, 2016; Fielding, 2011; Gordon, 2009; Rogers, Lyon, & Tausch, 2013).

My process for reviewing the literature involved researching scholarly texts, memoirs, articles, abstracts, reviews, qualitative studies, and dissertations that engaged the concept of student voice at the level of both theory and practice. Throughout this process, I searched for connections and relationships between the texts, along with gaps in the research that could provide promising avenues for further inquiry.

Historical Context for Student Voice

Scholars link the recent emergence of student voice as an animating concept in education to the Free School movement in the 1960s, which inspired the development of schools where students could shape their learning without coercion or compulsion (Miller, 2002; Morrison, 2007). Such schools often took the form of communities that stressed humanistic and holistic values in more rural settings, while others stressed democratic practices and political consciousness in urban contexts (i.e., Highlander

School, the Freedom Schools started by the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee). Student voice also emerged as a theme in the 1970s and 1980s, particularly with the inclusion of students in school governance and school boards (Giroux & McLaren, 1986), and free speech cases which affirmed the political rights of young people on school grounds (Driver, 2018; Fletcher, 2017). The growing practical and scholarly prominence of student voice also reflected an awareness that "the voices of children . . . have been missing from the whole discussion about educational reform" (Kozol, 2012, p. 17), a critique that surfaced during the reform efforts of the 1980s (McLaren, 2015). This critique was predicated on the belief that educators stood to gain valuable information about school by treating young people as capable persons whose knowledge and interests should help determine goals and objectives. By engaging student voice, critics argued, schools could also improve literacy, engagement, and graduation rates (Taylor & Robinson, 2009).

The current wave of research into student voice builds on the increasing attention to children's rights and the inclusion of their voices in areas such as decision making, responsibility, and governance. Much of this work frames children as citizens with rights in the present, rather than future citizens with full membership granted upon reaching adulthood. Thus, when referring to the United Nations Conventions on the Rights of the Child, Jones and Welch (2018) noted the agreement "gives young people the right to express views freely on all matters affecting them and that their views are given due weight, according to age and ability" (p. 17). More significantly, the focus on children's rights has also called into question the privileging of adult modes of communicating and the social exclusion of young people in the political sphere, actions that implicitly

presume children are in need of representation, and that voice equates to rational

deliberation and political speech. In this way, the attention given to children's rights has

led to fundamental shifts in the image of children, and increasing recognition that their

voices are complex, embodied, and multifaceted. Further, much of the scholarship on

children's rights continues to challenge dominant power structures that position young

people as the passive instruments of reformers and policymakers (Giroux, 2007;

McLaren, 2015). Informed by the traditions of critical pedagogy and progressivism, such

work positions young people as active agents in their own lives and highlights the value

of engaging students as dialogic partners, collaborators, and co-inquirers in schools and

communities (Darder, 2018; hooks, 2014; Kennedy, 1995).

Characterizations of Voice

Efforts to define and engage student voice have taken many different forms, from

efforts to reframe adult-child relations in early childhood settings to initiatives that

explore the ontological dimensions of voice in higher education settings. Many of these

efforts are premised on the belief that young people have unique perspectives on learning,

teaching, and schooling, and that their insights warrant the attention and responses of

adults. While in some cases, student voice is understood as a reaction to the exclusion of

certain groups, more often, it is viewed as an effort to increase youth engagement or

cultivate youth assets such as agency, competence, and belonging (Mitra & Gross, 2009).

Thus, Fielding (2011) described voice as "a range of activities that encourage reflection,

discussion, dialogue, and action on matters that primarily concern students" (p. 64), a

definition which centers the importance of agency and troubles more conservative efforts

that focus on giving students a say without the responsibility to listen. Fielding's

understanding of voice is premised on a dialogic relationship between students and teachers, one that frames schooling as a joint endeavor rather than a transactional, hierarchical exchange.

Other more complex characterizations of voice have focused on its personal and political expressions, with McLeod (2011) noting, "Voice is not simply speech; it can mean identity or agency, or even power . . . . Voice can be a code word for representing difference or connote a democratic politics of participation and inclusion" (p. 181). McLeod's broad definition captures the challenge of relying on an essentialized and reified definition of voice, one that ignores the lived realities of students and the social context of schooling. Referring to the complex and varied expressions of voice, Cook-Sather (2006) noted:

> Voice also asks us to understand sound, specifically speaking, as representative of presence, participation, and the power of individuals and/or of a collective, and in particular, to understand all these voices in terms of relationship—to other people, to institutions, to practices. (p. 4)

Cook-Sather's description reveals the personal and political dimensions of voice, while drawing attention to the challenge of encompassing students and their varied modes of expression under a single term. A related critique is posed by scholars who argue against the conflation of authentic voice with objective truth, arguing instead for an understanding of voice that is contingent, socially constructed, and saturated with power (Nelson, 2015). Building on the scholarship of Foucault, such scholars critique unproblematic accounts of authentic voice, and focus instead on the discursive and relational context that shape the exercise of voice in disciplinary regimes (Charteris & Smardon, 2019; Manning, 2016).

Theoretical Conceptions of Voice

As suggested, much of the discourse around student voice has been shaped by educational philosophies and theoretical traditions that seek a more active role for students in matters of learning, decision making, and governance. Scholars working in the traditions of critical pedagogy and progressive education, for example, frequently frame voice in terms of action, participation, and change, while recommending democratic practices that allow students to name their realities, exercise agency, and participate in social change. For educators like Freire (1973), for example, the concept of voice was linked to *conscientization*, and the ontological process in which individuals become subjects who realize they can effect change as political agents and social actors. For Freire, exercising voice was a dialogical process that affirmed the experiences of both students and teachers and produced new knowledge (Darder, 2018). Arguing along these lines, Giroux (2007) noted, "The concept of voice can provide a basic organizing principle for the relationship between knowledge and student experience, and, at the same time, create a forum for examining broader school and community issues" (p. 455). As such, voice is related to the process of empowering students to influence their destinies and participate in creating a more liberating and humane society.

Scholars working in the tradition of democratic education frequently link voice to habits of deliberation, reflection, and philosophical inquiry, arguing schools should prepare students to be active and engaged citizens who understand how to effect meaningful social, civic, and political change. Researchers have described such approaches in terms of thick democracy, deep democracy, and participatory readiness, while foregrounding the importance of social analysis, collective struggle, and justice-

oriented citizenship (Allen, 2016; Apple, 2004; Westheimer & Kahne, 2004). These practices have found expression through pedagogical practices that engage controversial issues in schools (Noddings & Brooks, 2017), foster political dialogue (Hess & McAvoy, 2014), and involve young people in action-based research that position them as producers of knowledge (Morrell, Duenas, Garcia, & Lopez, 2013). Many of these efforts can be counterposed against thin forms of democratic education that stress personal rights, individual responsibility, and civic knowledge. By framing voice in more participatory and political terms, scholars suggest, voice becomes a vehicle for social transformation.

Scholars in the tradition of critical theory have focused on the impact of instrumental rationalities on individual self-realization, arguing the neoliberal focus on performance and administration limits possibilities for alternative modes of self-expression and agency. In such settings, voice falls prey to the language of technical efficiency and performativity, with voice acting as a lubricant to ensure the smooth functioning of the organization. Scholars working in the fields of poststructuralism have centered the discursive and relational nature of voice, while challenging "a binary and finite view of power as possessed by some and not others" (Taylor & Robinson, 2009, p. 164). Understood through the lens of student voice, poststructuralists have pointed out problems with notions of empowerment that attribute sovereign power to individuals and presume a collective experience of oppression among disenfranchised groups.

A further theoretical orientation toward voice frames its meaning in ontological terms and centers the importance of being and becoming. Batchelor (2006a), for example, suggested researchers overlook *ontological voice* (i.e., a voice for self-realization) in favor of the *epistemological voice* (i.e., a voice for knowledge) and the *pragmatic* (i.e., a

voice for action). Batchelor argued ontological voice is reflected through meaningful choice, not simply over what one learns, but over who one is. Batchelor's understanding of ontological voice is emergent in nature; it involves a continual process of opening the self to new possibilities and activities, a view that challenges a more fixed and uniform understanding of identity and personhood.[1] Batchelor's theorization of voice draws on scholarship that honor its more vulnerable dimensions and problematize the way schools limit horizons for students to become who they want to be, a problem she associates with the stress on performativity and the growing influence of neoliberal discourses on educational outcomes.

My theorization of voice draws principally from the dialogic tradition. I suggest voice is embedded in social relations and constituted through forms of listening, recognition, and care. Scholars working in the dialogic tradition include Bakhtin, Greene, and Vygotsky, all of whom focus on the intersubjective nature of the self, and the socially constructed nature of knowing, learning, and being. By emphasizing the dialogic, the exercise of voice becomes linked to patterns of association between persons, rather than a capacity that exists in individuals. Voice becomes meaningful, then, through interpersonal encounters rooted in active listening and reciprocal exchange. Further, as Kennedy (2006b) suggested, understanding voice dialogically means attributing to the child the same rights, responsibilities, and privileges we presume in ourselves, while centering practices of shared governance and political autonomy that frame children as co-creators and co-inquirers of school communities. As such, dialogic voice poses a

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[1] Davies (2011) suggested the exercise of ontological voice involves a process of differentiation, whereby the self is made different by opening itself up to the resonances of the other.

challenge to hierarchical, didactic, adultist approaches to pedagogy, and argues for the interchangeability of roles and relationships in educational settings.

The most compelling feature of dialogic voice is its emphasis on the polyphonic nature of identity. According to Bakhtin (1984), the dialogic understands individuals as full subjects that can never be fully defined or exhausted. Referring to the characters in Dostoevsky's novels, Bakhtin suggested there is no single authoritative voice that communicates truth and that in each voice may be found multiple contending voices that interact, intersect, but never fully merge. Such polyphony, Bakhtin noted, is what constitutes a character's authenticity. Building on Bakhtin's conception of dialogic voice, Sidorkin (1999) noted, "Every voice within me has its own position, and can develop a convincing worldview, if only allowed to express itself. All these voices should be treated with respect; all of them are equally authentic" (p. 44). Similarly, Sidorkin stressed that the very nature of individuality requires "a mixture of the inner voices of other people, and the outer voices of other individuals" (p. 47). In this way, dialogic voice concerns a process of constant interaction, juxtaposition, and becoming. These interactions ultimately call for the creation of contexts where competing visions and voices can interact, and for approaches to listening that attend to the complex and varied meanings behind what students say.

Educational Practices that Enhance Student Voice

Concerning pedagogy, curriculum, and school culture, student voice as a practice can be located in the classroom in the form of inquiry and project-based learning (Beattie, 2012), student choice (Fielding, 2011), personalized learning (Miller, 2002; Mintz, 2016), or beyond the classroom in the form of student government or school clubs, though

scholars consider many of these efforts symbolic rather than substantive (Bragg, 2007; Fielding, 2011; Gordon, 2009). More robust student voice efforts have involved students as consultants, data sources, joint authors, and expert witnesses who, collaborating with educators but also through their own initiative, effect meaningful change on school grounds (Bahou, 2011; Fielding & Moss, 2011). Participatory action research has also emerged as a powerful platform for student voice, with studies highlighting youth efforts to investigate their experiences, social conditions, and education (Bahou, 2011; Morell, 2011). This work has also highlighted the research, inquiry, and media production skills students develop by examining their schools and communities (Mockler & Groundwater-Smith, 2015).

In an analysis of student voice and educational practice in higher education, Bain (2010) noted meaningful student voice requires space, audience, and influence. Bain argued that there must be settings for students to express their views, and these views must translate into meaningful influence with the support of educators who respect and recognize the power of young people. Bain's formulation follows in the tradition of social constructivists and scholars of dialogue who suggest that social context mediates, and to some degree constitutes, the exercise of voice. By emphasizing the social, the exercise or discovery of voice becomes linked to patterns of association between persons, rather than a capacity that exists in individuals. Referring to the philosophy of Dewey, Gregory (2011) suggested Dewey believed "a process of social inquiry—in which multiple voices are heard, meanings are clarified, sympathies are formed, compromises are considered, and new accommodations are created– was as necessary for meaningful individuality as for political solidarity" (p. 210). Gregory and Laverty (2017) suggested voice,

individuality, and citizenship must be understood in relational terms, in contrast to neoliberal understandings of voice that frame its meaning in instrumental terms—where students are understood as atomized individuals seeking their own ends.

Critiques of Voice

A significant and recurring critique in the literature on student voice is the tendency to frame its meaning in apolitical terms, as an instrument to be activated, responsibilized, individualized, or moralized (Charteris & Smardon, 2019). To conceive of student voice apolitically is to frame its meaning in terms of personalization and choice; to the center the political, in contrast, involves attending to fundamental questions of access and equity which determine which voices get heard, and what forms of knowledge we consider valuable. As scholars in the tradition of critical pedagogy and critical race theory have noted, for example, contemporary schooling in the United States continues to devalue the knowledge, experience, and culture of students of color, while privileging the voices of middle-class white families. This pattern of privilege is particularly salient at self-described progressive schools, where the professed commitment to social justice rubs against the reality of underrepresentation and tokenism. Along these lines, Fielding and Moss (2011) noted, "the stentorian tones of middle-class voices dominate the monologue of the big conversation,' while rendering inaudible the increasingly alien discourse of social justice" (p. 17), while scholars like Boler (2004) disrupted the myth of an authentic dialogue that papers over legacies of trauma, marginalization, and exclusion.

A more critical reading of voice, one advanced by scholars like hooks, Freire, Darder, and Delpit, links voice to the lived experiences and realities of the oppressed

while advancing an emancipatory vision of education. This approach emphasizes the importance of fostering continuity between home and school discourses and the value of embracing youth culture, particularly in urban schools. Scholars with a more critical orientation toward voice have emphasized the importance of dialogue as a means of embracing diverse perspectives, affirming marginalized voices, enacting new forms of democratic life, and fostering a political climate so that students can discuss controversial issues (Greene, 1995; Hess & McAvoy, 2014; hooks, 2014). Thus, McLaren (2015) argued voice must be framed around the stories people tell, the ways in which students and teachers author meaning, or "shape their voices" (p. 179), and Giroux and McLaren (1986) argued schools should help students combine "the language of critique with the language of possibility" (p. 137).[2]

In fact, the critiques of student voice generally center on the claim that student participation in school is often tokenistic, manipulative, and decorative (Fielding, 2006; Fletcher, 2017), rather than substantive, authoritative, and equitable (Mitra, 2006; Nelson, 2015). Examples of *tokenistic* student voice include students participating in school open house, student councils, and school surveys. To this end, several scholars have produced typologies that highlight varying levels of meaningful student engagement, from the symbolic to the substantive. Hart's (1992) ladder of participation model and Fletcher's (2017) ladder of student involvement model, for example, both highlight the importance of educational efforts that exemplify student–adult equity. Critiquing the individualistic, neoliberal understanding of student voice, Fielding (2001) argued for a person-centered

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[2] The limitations of critical approaches to voice have been raised by postmodern and poststructural scholars (Cook-Sather, 2006; Taylor & Robinson, 2009) who warned against the simplifying and reductionist binaries of oppressor and oppressed.

approach to understand the individual in democratic terms. At the same time, Fielding suggested treating students as joint authors and creating a school culture that supports intergenerational learning and participatory democracy.

Research into student voice has also been critiqued by scholars who argue against developmental approaches to voice and normative accounts of democracy. Such scholars have claimed young people should be able to enact politics on their own terms (Biesta, 2007; Devine, 2002; Rollo, 2016b) and express forms of agency that go beyond deliberative reason and speech. Instead, educators who are serious about empowering voice and affirming children's rights emphasize the importance of creating spaces tailored to childhood geographies where young people are positioned as political equals, and voice is interpreted through relations of care and mutual aid. This orientation positions young people as "political actors with the right to influence society, and produce their own culture" (Kjorholt, 2007, p. 32).

Such views have implications for the kinds of educational spaces that foster student voice. While it is true that many public schools restrict opportunities for political participation and dialogue, it is also the case that many educational alternatives adopt a romantic view of voice that frame students as innocent and in need of protection. Scholars have also suggested many educational alternatives enact a form of playground democracy that fail to confront social and political realities as they manifest in urban spaces. In both cases, there are constraints and boundaries imposed on student participation. In the next section, I focus on the history and practice of alternative education, with a particular emphasis on the exercise of student voice in alternative schools.

Alternative Education

In this section, I highlight the history and practice of alternative schools, with particular emphasis on their educational philosophies and approaches to student voice. In focusing on alternative schools, I am attempting to situate City Workshop's approach in the tradition of anarchist-inspired models that seek to center questions of equity, power, and social justice. I make this distinction to problematize the reputation of alternative schools as privileged settings where voice is limited to the personal freedom students exercise on school grounds. I also highlight accounts of alternative and traditional schooling that center the experiences, perspectives, and reflections of students who attended them. Finally, I explore proposals and models that structure schooling on the principles of dialogue. In such settings, as Fielding (2011), Kennedy (2017), and Sidorkin (1999) suggested, education becomes an endeavor that affords new opportunities for individual and collective life.

The more recent evolution of the alternative school movement owes its influence to Neill, Goodman, Kohl, Ayers, Illich, and other educators who inspired the creation of hundreds of small private schools across the United States and Europe. Despite their idealism, many of these schools either did not last or evolved into more traditional schools as they grew in size and complexity (Gray & Charnoff, 1986). In the book, *Free Schools*, Kozol (1972) argued many of the free schools that emerged in the 1960s were politically noncontroversial and culturally isolated, placing students in an "artificial context of contrived euphoria within a world of pain" (p. 48). This critique has been echoed by scholars who argue that many alternative schools, particularly those outside the public school system, emphasize radical individualism at the expense of political

solidarity (Morrison, 2007). Kozol's (1972) testimony is supported by scholars such as Delpit (2006) and Shor (1996), both of whom questioned progressive educational experiments that ignore questions of power and authority as they exist in urban settings. Alternative schools that embraced a more political orientation include the freedom schools that emerged during the Civil Rights movement, an educational model for African American students that emphasized political participation and grassroots activism, along with a curriculum that reflected and engaged the social realities of the students. The Highlander Folk school, for example, started by Myles Horton, played a seminal role during the Civil Rights movement, offering student, adults, and community members a space for political education through leadership development, literacy training, and grassroots organizing (Horton & Freire, 1990). Many of these educational alternatives were driven by the political necessity of liberating students from oppressive circumstances while engaging them in direct action and social change (Darder & Baltodano, 2003).

Much of the literature on alternative education has been framed through the perspectives of educators, scholars, and activists aiming to offer both an intellectual and political justification for alternative schooling. There have been fewer studies that center the personal experiences and voices of students reflecting on their own experiences in schools. The studies of alternative schools which highlight and foreground student voice include Dennison's (1969) *The Lives of Children*, a memoir that documents the lives of the working class and poor students who attended the First Street School, and Swidler's (1979) sociological study, *Organization Without Authority: Dilemmas of Social Control in Free Schools*, in which Swidler studied the school culture of two free schools in

California, focusing on how students dealt with the conflicts presented by shared governance and distributed authority. These studies center the lived experiences of students through long-form interviews and reflections, supported by in-depth ethnographic analysis. The memoirs and studies of students at Summerhill School (Neill & Lamb, 1995), along with the Sudsbury Schools (Briscoe, 2012; Gray & Charnoff, 1986), have generally focused on the reflections of alumni, and their perceptions of the value of alternative education and its impact on their personal and professional aspirations (Woods & Gronn, 2009). Another compelling account of alternative school education is by Levin and Engel (2016) in *A School of Our Own*, where he described the experience of starting a small experimental school in the basement of his public school. The text is notable for its continual reflection on the purpose and meaning of education, interpreted through the voices of a student and his mother. In the same vein, the memoir of Elizabeth Cleaners Street School (1972) in New York, a radical alternative school for politically engaged families, also foregrounds student voice, with each chapter of the book authored by individual students.

Of the more recent work which foregrounds student voice, Apple and Beane's (1995) *Democratic Schools* and McLaren's (2015) *Life in Schools* offer first-hand testimonies of students reflecting on their experience of schooling—both its promises and challenges. Both of these works offer competing portrayals of the student experience in contemporary schooling. While the students in Apple and Beane's (1995) work reflect fondly and nostalgically on the value of democratic learning, expressed through student-directed projects, collaborative-decision making, and action research, McLaren's text evocatively captures the way racism, classism, and sexism silences less privileged voices

and subjects minoritized students to a curriculum which devalues their knowledge, experiences, and cultures. Both works provide a reminder that the sociopolitical context of schooling has a determining impact on how students develop, understand, and exercise their voices.

In the following section, I explore the relationship between student voice and the structure of schooling, with a particular focus on questions of pedagogy and organization. In other words, I am interested in how educational practitioners and theorists envisage a more robust and dialogic articulation of voice, one that moves beyond more limited commitments to agency, autonomy, self-direction, and democratic decision making.

School Organization and Student Voice

The relationship between school organization and student voice has been taken up by scholars interested in democratic organizations (Shafritz, Ott, & Jang, 2015), organizations without authority (Freeman, 1972; Swidler, 1979), organic governance (Woods & Gronn, 2009), and the impact of bureaucracy on personality, self-realization, and autonomy (Bowles & Gintis, 2011; Graeber, 2015). Bowles and Gintis (2011), for example, suggested hierarchically structured schools "inhibit creativity and divergence of thought" (p. 16), while Woods (2004) argued that in their emphasis on instrumental rationalities, such schools "suppress the full potential of the affective" (p. 34). In such settings, the functional features of an organization may emphasize compliance and efficacy over the development and exercise of dialogic voice (Fielding, 2012).

The organizational structure of alternative educational forms also features in the literature, with scholars exploring how free schools regulate social life, and how the self-conscious rejection of authority often obscure other built-in inequalities, such as those

that exist between teachers and students (Freeman, 1972) and those that reflect differing

levels of charisma and influence (Wilson, 2015). This critique is particularly important

for my study, as I sought to examine the less formal ways power exerts itself and impacts

who is heard, and how the school makes decisions. In this vein, some critics have argued

leadership in alternative schools should not mask its power but instead manifest itself

transparently, mainly because students from diverse backgrounds have different

orientations toward authority (Boler, 2004; Delpit, 2006). Scholars have also critiqued

school administrators who, in their emphasis on formal democratic practices, produce

cultures that value justice over caring. This critique has animated the work of Noddings

(2005) and Gilligan (1982), both of whom argued educators must place greater emphasis

on empathy and listening to nurture more diverse forms voice and agency.

Educators and philosophers have also attempted to map out school models that

provide radical alternatives to existing progressive schools. A compelling model is

offered by Fielding and Moss (2011), who recommended a person-centered approach

modeled on the radical common school tradition. Fielding and Moss, however,

understood student voice in relational terms, as something cultivated through democratic

practices, in contrast to approaches that frame voice in idealistic, consumer-oriented

terms. Fielding and Moss argued the person-centered school is structured on the

principles of dialogue, which allow for radical relationships, intergenerational encounters,

permanent provisionality in which "you learn lose absolutely the possibility of

controlling the final result" (p. 79). Such a school moves from simple, flat relations that

characterize what they describes as the "impersonal organizations," to one that is aware

of the "pluralities that identities and difference demand, and the inclusive communal

contexts that freedom requires" (Fielding & Moss, 2011, p. 73). Fielding and Moss'

theorization of voice has also been advanced by scholars of complexity theory who have

argued against the emphasis on effectiveness and mechanization in educational and

organizational contexts, and for more open, semiotic, and recursive systems (Biesta,

2015).

Along these lines, Kennedy (2006a, 2017) entered the importance of dialogic

relations in reimagining schools to enhance student voice. Kennedy's proposal hinged

less on dialogue as a communicative practice, and more on exploring relations between

adults and children that accommodate difference and complexity. According the

Kennedy, the only way schools can properly affirm the complexity and diversity of

student voice is by emphasizing noninstrumental relations and paying attention to the

intersubjective nature of the educational encounter between adults and children. This

admittedly theoretical account of schooling is also an effort to disrupt the mechanization

of roles, structures, and spaces that govern schools, while enacting more democratic and

emergent forms of community life.

Kennedy's (2006a, 2017) formulation also has pedagogical implications for voice.

In centering the importance of dialogue, Kennedy did not recommend dissolving

structures of authority or providing full license for children to express their freedom.

Instead, Kennedy proposed the very nature of schooling should invite students and

teachers to create community in a manner that honors the distinctive differences between

children and adults.

> It is not a community that "just happens," nor is it a community that happens
> from above, by a hierarchy of power. It is a community that very consciously
> explores the possibilities of the relation between adults and children in the

> interests of individual self-actualization and social reconstruction, which are inseparable. (Kennedy, 2006a, p. 174)

Kennedy (2006a) described such a school as a *third way* or *intentional community*, while anchoring the model in the traditions of anarchism, pragmatism, and democratic education. Kennedy's model presumes that the realization of voice depends on the spaces created for dialogue, along with willingness to trouble the reification of difference in educational settings. Further, the model also addressed many of the concerns presented by students in their accounts of schooling; that their experiences lack purpose, meaning, and value. By centering the importance of philosophical reflection, and creating spaces for collaborative inquiry, Kennedy treated young people as moral agents that deserve to know why education ought to happen one way and not another.

In the same spirit, Sidorkin (1999) advanced the notion of a *dialogical school*, where "individuals are constantly asked to bring forth different aspects of their personalities" (p. 87) in the interest of creating a community that embraces the complexity of voice. It is important to emphasize while Kennedy focused on the possibilities inherent in the adult-child relations, both scholars share the assumption that voice is dialogic in its very nature. Borrowing from Bakhtin, Sidorkin suggested many of the more transgressive contours of voice that are masked in settings that are more formal may find articulation in schools that find space for *carnival*—a space where traditional hierarchies are suspended, and roles are reimagined. In such settings, voice may find expression through cursing, small talk, and chatter as individuals from diverse backgrounds are freed from formal constraints and allowed to test alternative and transgressive forms of expression. Sidorkin did not suggest carnival as the dominating motif for schooling and voice. Sidorkin also suggested schools ought to have more

centralized forms of communication and decision making so that individuals can properly hear each other and interact civilly. However, what the proposal offered instead is a respite from the monolithic identity of schooling and unfairly restrictive accounts of student voice.

In the following section, I situate City Workshop's educational approach in the tradition of anarchist-inspired schooling. As I describe in detail during Chapters III and IV, anarchist education draws from a wide array of traditions, models, and practices that seek to honor the dignity and rights of children, and structure educational settings on the principles of freedom, dialogue, and political engagement.

Anarchist-Inspired Education: History and Practice

To encourage meaningful engagement and democratic participation, a number of anarchist-inspired schools have been created that seek a more expansive role for student voice. The literature on anarchist-inspired education includes studies on democratic, radical, anarchist, and social justice-oriented schooling, along with scholarly treatments about the various traditions that inspired the creation of these schools (Apple & Beane, 1995; Miller, 2002; Suissa, 2006). These works suggest anarchist-inspired schooling assumes different forms depending on how freedom itself is conceptualized, and the political realities and local conditions which inspired their founding.

In a definitive treatment of anarchism and education in the United States, Avrich (2014) identified Ferrer as the lynchpin of a movement that inspired a wide variety of *modern schools*. Informed by libertarian and anarchist thinking, the curriculum of these modern schools emphasized self-direction, cooperative learning, and social justice, along

with a critical orientation toward authority. Launched in 1901, one of the first modern

schools was Ferrer's *Escuela Moderna* in Barcelona, where students

> were imbued with the ideals of brotherhood and cooperation and with a sympathy
> for the downtrodden and oppressed. They were taught that war is a crime against
> humanity, that the capitalist system is evil, that government is slavery, that
> freedom is essential for human development. (Avrich, 2014, p. 7)

Escuela Moderna, like many of the modern schools that followed, emphasized the

process of learning, and stressed "the dignity and rights of the child, encouraging warmth,

love, and affection in place of conformity and regimentation" (Avrich, 2014, p. 11).

The philosophers and educators that inspired Ferrer, and anarchist-inspired

education more broadly, include Rousseau, Pestalozzi, Froebel, Bakunin, and Tolstoy, all

of whom stressed the natural dignity and rights of the child, along with an integrated

approach to schooling rooted in discovery, exploration, and real-world problem solving—

qualities that inspired progressive educators' adoption of the workshop model and

experiential learning (Ferrer, 2018; Nussbaum, 2010). Tolstoy's school, *Yasnaya

Polyana*, for example, placed emphasis on equitable relations between teacher and

student, favoring an *unconscious education* (Goodman, 1977), where learning would

happen naturally, and education would lead to emancipation. The focus on unconscious

education anticipated the work of Goodman (1977) a century later, who argued *incidental

education* was a greater source of learning than the formal, teacher-driven instruction of

school.

Though Ferrer's *Escuela Moderna* was eventually shut down by the Spanish army

and Ferrer executed (as a result of his school's anti-clerical, anti-colonial teachings), the

work inspired the Modern School movement, which led to a host of small, grassroots,

collaborative learning communities and inspired anarchist, libertarian, and socialist

ideals. Many of those educational experiments are chronicled by Suissa (2006) in *Anarchism and Education*, a text in which the author reviewed the political and philosophical assumptions underlying anarchist schools, along with 20th-century models such as Neill's Summerhill School and the Walden Center School in Berkeley. An important aspect of Suissa's (2006) treatment of alternative schools was her distinction between libertarian and anarchist forms of education, the latter of which places much greater emphasis on political values and moral education, while the former, drawing on the work of Rousseau, tends to isolate the student (and the school) from society, leading to a lack of political and social engagement.

It is important to clarify that my reading of anarchist-inspired education explicitly centers questions of equity, power, and social justice. Thus, while I view the tradition of libertarianism as a helpful way of centering the importance of individual freedom, I also recognize the critique levied against alternative schools for escaping political questions in self-governing collectives. City Workshop, as I explain in detail in Chapter III, understood anarchism and alternative education as a challenge to the coercive hierarchies of traditional schooling. Yet, in contrast to many alternative schools, their view of freedom and voice was interwoven with a concern for developing class and political consciousness, or what they called *public democracy*. Thus, in the spirit of the Modern School movement, City Workshop was structured dialogically, with a particular emphasis on fostering more meaningful relations between the school and its local community and dissolving the barriers between theoretical and vocational learning. In this sense, City Workshop projected its own independent identity, while at the same time borrowing from a rich array of traditions.

Conclusion

The purpose of this literature review was to highlight my understanding of student voice and alternative, anarchist-inspired education from both a theoretical and practical perspective. I first highlighted the diverse interpretations associated with the term student voice, from those that emphasize its complex and dialogic meanings, to research that highlights the relationship between voice, choice, and personalization in schools. In this way, we can understand voice as a personal and literal expression of student interests, preferences, and perspectives, or a phenomenon that is constituted through social relations and radical forms of collegiality between children and adults. I have also provided an important history and context for anarchist-inspired schooling and alternative schooling, while keying in on key practices and conflicts at the heart of these models. I located City Workshop's approach in the anarchist-inspired tradition of the Modern School movement, which sought to challenge coercive forms of hierarchy in both schools and societies and affirm the dignity and rights of children. Finally, I described efforts to create more experimental, emergent, and dialogic contexts for voice in the context of schooling. Despite the theoretical nature of such accounts, many of their recommendations find expression in City Workshop's educational approach. In the forthcoming chapter, I describe the methodology for my qualitative case study, and provide a thick account of City Workshops' mission, vision, and culture.

III – METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this chapter is to highlight and document the research methodology that governed my inquiry into the exercise of voice at City Workshop, an anarchist-inspired alternative school for middle and high school students. As I explained in my opening chapter, the research questions governing this study focus on how students at City Workshop exercise their voices, and how the educational practices of the school empower student voice. I theorized student voice as a dialogic concept with ontological and political dimensions. In other words, I suggested student voice concerned both self-realization and political participation. I also approached voice in its broader social context by exploring whether students felt heard and listened to as individuals, students, and governing partners at City Workshop. In the sections that follow, I explain the research design for this qualitative case study, providing a "thick" description of the school and a summary of the participant sample, including relevant demographic, racial, and ethnic information. I then justify the case study approach and explain the recursive way I collected, conceptualized, and coded the data—which included field notes from observations, audio transcriptions derived from interviews, and analysis of school documents. Finally, this chapter addresses the ethical challenges involved in exploring the topic of voice in the context of a small alternative school in an urban setting. I will also pay particular attention to my positionality as a researcher and the potential limitations of a qualitative case study approach.

Qualitative Research Design

Qualitative research aims to investigate topics in all their complexity; it is grounded in the assumption that "the world is neither stable nor uniform, and therefore, there are many truths" (Bogdan & Biklen, 1997, p. 19). Considered in the context of voice, the qualitative approach enables the researcher to approach the topic as a complex phenomenon open to unique and diverse interpretations. The qualitative approach places emphasis on exploration, discovery, and description; it depends on in-depth data collection, along with an emergent design that demonstrates a concern for participants' meanings and lived experiences (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012; Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). For this reason, qualitative research has been described as a "dialogue or interplay between researchers and subjects" (Bogdan & Biklen, 1997, p. 8) in which knowledge and understanding is negotiated and co-constructed. Qualitative research proved a valuable approach for my study as a significant portion of my research involved conducting observations and interviews at the school site. Qualitative research also allowed me to track the multiplicity of voice. In other words, instead of trying to distill the essence of voice, I sought to interpret its subjective meanings in different contexts and settings.

Case Study Approach

This qualitative research endeavor was loosely guided by a case study design. The case study approach enabled me to conduct "an intensive description and analysis of a phenomenon" (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012, p. 43) that took place "within a real-life contemporary context or setting" (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012, p. 43). In this case, the school I researched was a culture sharing group that "interact . . . identify with each other,

and . . . share expectations about each other's behavior" (Bogdan & Biklen, 1997, p. 48).

Given the size of the school, which I describe in the forthcoming sections, my research

was able to closely examine how voice operates at both an individual and organizational

level. The case study was bounded by time, taking place between October 2018 and

March 2019, during a single school year.

Research Questions

As described in my opening chapter, my theoretical approach situated voice in the

dialogic tradition. Understanding student voice this way invariably focused my attention

on its relational and intersubjective meanings, along with the capacity of young people to

speak out on their own behalf. At the same time, I also understood voice through the

prism of school organization and structure. Specifically, I was interested in how students

were empowered as individuals, students, and governing partners in the context of an

anarchist-inspired alternative school. With this in mind, the core research questions

guiding this qualitative case study were:

1. How do students at City Workshop exercise their voices?

2. How do the educational practices at City Workshop empower student voice?

Research Site Context, Selection, and Participants

In this section, I describe City Workshop in more detail, focusing on the profile of

the school, student population, mission and vision, and why I selected it as a research site

for this qualitative case study. I then describe the students who participated in the study,

highlight the schools they attended prior to City Workshop, and share relevant

demographic information.

Research Site Context

The City Workshop School, a private school for students in Grades 6 through 12, is located in a diverse urban neighborhood in a large metropolitan city on the West Coast of the United States. The founders, Ndindi and Scott, launched the school in 2015, partially out of frustration with the lack of meaningful alternatives to large public schools and traditional private schools. Ndindi received her PhD in education, where she focused on curriculum development, social justice, and action research. At the same time, her partner, Scott, was a credentialed English teacher and play-based education advocate. Both founders taught full-time at the site, in addition to their administrative duties. At the time of the study, the school had a full-time capacity of 24 students and three full-time teachers. Although the founders were the primary teachers of record, the school regularly used supplementary faculty to teach electives, workshops, and core classes. Though the school is private, it offered a sliding scale tuition that made it considerably more affordable than local progressive private schools. At the time of the study, base tuition was $5,000 per year, and the ceiling tuition was $10,000. The school also offered a part-time, hybrid home school program for interested families, though as of the 2018-2019 school year, all students attended full time. The school is affiliated with the Alternative Education Resource Organization (AERO), which includes Montessori, Sudsbury, Waldorf, and Democratic Schools, along with Reggio Emilia and Quaker models. They are also formally accredited by Western Association of Schools and Colleges (WASC).

Selection of Research Site

My selection of City Workshop as a research site came from my interest in studying voice in the context of a nonhierarchical, dialogic school where students and

teachers jointly participate in decision-making, and where voice expresses itself in diverse ways. City Workshop fulfilled these criteria in a few different ways. First, the school placed great emphasis on choice and ownership by empowering students to make important decisions about the kind of learning they wanted to pursue. Even in structured settings, teachers encouraged students to pursue their distinct interests, and to do so in the context of collaboration and dialogue. In this way, the school developed voice by allowing students to exercise autonomy and direct the course of their own education. Second, the students and faculty regularly practiced shared governance, democratic decision-making, and ethical reflection. Thus, voice was not merely a means through which students exercised individual choice, but also an expression of citizenship with a distinctly social dimension. Finally, the school specifically centered questions of access and equity at the heart of their approach. This commitment was illustrated in the school's willingness to engage issue of race, power, and class throughout their program while ensuring that the demographic of the school reflected the diversity of the broader community in which it was situated. In this way, City Workshop offered an opportunity to research how diversity, equity, and inclusion affected the exercise of voice.

Mission and vision. The school's mission is "to co-manifest a learning environment that emboldens the active participants in our world and fosters analytic, self-motivated learners, engendering in them a profound love and appreciation for community, both global and local" (WASC, 2015, p. 19). The school describes itself as a "different education for inquisitive teens" (WASC, 2015, p. 13) with a student-led, application-based curriculum rooted in authentic interaction with the community. The school's anarchist-inspired approach, which I describe in detail in Chapter IV, is reflected

in its open, integrated, and democratic character, along with its emphasis on personal

freedom and political consciousness. City Workshop's core principles include a genuine

concern for public democracy, a commitment to engaging the local and global

community, and an appreciation and understanding of non-Western traditions (see

Appendix D for a complete description of City Workshop's educational principles).

Academics and school culture. The school offers core classes in the sciences and

humanities, including writing, math, literature, and other skill-based content areas.

However, many of these classes are thematic and interdisciplinary, with students given

the opportunity to self-assess based on portfolios and projects. The school accommodates

parents and students who want traditional testing and homework (including SAT support)

by offering those on an individual basis, and teachers provide college guidance beginning

in the 11th grade. The self-assessment process is a collaborative exercise where students

grade themselves based on their own progress in collaboration with teachers. These

interactions are followed up with written reflections, and the information is recorded to

help students monitor their progress. Though much of the learning is collaborative, the

school has three different grade levels, with middle school students separated into two

groups (low and high, based on age), and high school students in their division. Despite

these groupings, students are encouraged to challenge themselves and select contexts for

learning they deem most appropriate.

There are no bells at the school, but there is a weekly schedule the founders

developed with feedback from students. Core features of the schedule include a

community meeting known as the *daily forum* and interdisciplinary courses in the

humanities and the sciences framed through thematic lenses and focused-action sessions.

In these courses, students pursue projects that emerge from their interests, from city

planning and world-building to the physics of skateboarding and screenwriting. In

addition, the school engages the civic community by bringing in *experts* and *enthusiasts*,

including philosophers, scientists, activists, and faith leaders who share their specialties

and concerns with students in an open forum. These sessions are complemented by *city*

as a classroom days, where students explore galleries, neighborhoods, markets,

museums, and bookstores, while researching and exploring important urban and

environmental issues. The school describes these activities as experiential learning

opportunities that help young people become more civically engaged.

Governance. An organically defined board of stakeholders, including the

founders, parents, and students, governs the school indirectly through informal

procedures. Responsibilities and duties are delegated on an "as needed" basis. Board

members are selected based on their interests and capacities, and stakeholders volunteer

for positions when necessary. In the spirit of its philosophy and values, along with its

small size, the school leaders claim not to need an official bureaucracy or complex

system of governance (see Chapter IV). The rules, norms, and values that guide school

life are determined and discussed during the daily forum, where students and faculty

resolve conflicts, reflect on core values, and make decisions. The only rules which are

nonnegotiable are issues relating to health and safety. While students in the school have a

significant amount of freedom and choice, there is an expectation that they will attend

courses, workshops, electives, and other in-school activities.

Students. At the time of this qualitative case study, 15 students attended City

Workshop. The students were organized into three levels—iddle School A (MSA), for

students in Grade 6, Middle School B (MSB), for students in Grades 7 and 8, and High School (HS), for students in Grades 9 through 12. In practice, however, these grade-level cohorts were often redefined and negotiated depending on enrollment and the specific skill level of the students. Often students moved from one grade level cohort to another if they had demonstrated proficiency in a particular literacy area. At other times, the founders simply asked the student where they think they fit best. From what I learned, there was no formal procedure or matriculation process that governed how students progressed in the school, for several reasons. First, the school was too small to permit formalized groupings. Second, academic ability was only one small measure of how the teachers at City Workshop determined progress. Third, from a philosophical point of view, the school administration aimed to dissolve the formal boundaries, which prevent integrated and intergenerational learning. On any given visit, one could find adults and students learning together, with even the younger children of faculty and family invited to come in and learn. Yet, it is also important to emphasize that the absence of restrictive grade-level groupings or boundaries does not translate into a lack of structure. The use of self-assessment, for example, offered a ground for students and teachers to reflect upon and determine the most meaningful and appropriate educational pathway for the advancement of learning.

Space. As I discuss in detail in Chapter IV, at the time of my visits, the space of the school appeared to amplify and communicate the school's educational approach. In the spirit of the Modern School movement inspired by Ferrer (Avrich, 2014), City Workshop sought to place the theoretical and practical dimensions of learning in close relation; even when students engaged in more traditional forms of inquiry in math,

science, and writing, emphasis was placed on the application of knowledge to real

interests, problems, and concerns. For this reason, the setting was filled with

interdisciplinary resources that offered invitations to forge connections between different

areas of learning. Very little in City Workshop was fenced off or enclosed; most of the

rooms blended into one another, thus allowing a confluence of sounds (i.e., movements,

voices, media) to permeate the atmosphere.[1] Walking into the school, one got an

immediate sense of a working community organized by shared interests, one that disrupts

the segregation and isolation that characterize spaces that are more bureaucratic. Figures

2, 3, and 4 show the school's exterior and interior layout.

      Families. Most of the families associated with City Workshop had nontraditional

or alternative views about education. Some of these views originated from experiences in

big public or private schools where, as Cara's mom told me, "Students get lost so easily,

Figure 2. Street view of City Workshop.

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[1] It is important to point out the tuition of the school did act as one symbolic and literal barrier against total access to the broader community. Ultimately, entry into City Workshop depended upon the ability to pay its nominal tuition. At the same time, the general working-class composition of the school suggested City Workshop made every effort to express its "revolutionary" approach by accommodating students and families priced out of private schools or alienated by large public schools.

Figure 3. Meeting space.

Figure 4. Founders' office.

and most of the curriculum is just not interesting or relevant." This observation was

echoed by Jeremiah's mom, who complained that their child's elementary school

instituted rules about "when students could run, play, or even get a drink of water." What

appealed to them about City Workshop was its emphasis on freedom and personalization.

Some parents, however, were more drawn to City Workshop for its focus on social justice

and political education. As Arjun's mom told me, "It's so important that my son gets to

learn in a place where the teachers focus on talking about issues like race and inequality

and are not afraid to challenge the status quo," while highlighting the importance of

citizenship education, something missing from her own schooling in China. All of the

parents I spoke to felt the school's emphasis on personalization and citizenship was

equally important, with several parents describing them as the same. Further, contrary to

what I expected, the political commitments of the school were expressed not just through

its declared political values but also in its willingness to challenge the standardization and

depersonalization of traditional schooling. This in itself was a political message, as

Arjun's mom emphasized.

Participant Recruitment and Selection

To recruit students to participate in this qualitative case study, I used purposeful

sampling to highlight critical cases (Creswell, 1998) and interviewed a diverse cross-

section of students who reflected diversity in terms of race, gender, ethnicity, class, age,

and educational background. Before initiating the study, I asked Scott and Ndindi to

recommend participants who might be interested in sharing insights about their

experiences in the school. The participants would include current middle and high school

students, along with alumni. My recruitment of participants also took the form of formal

letters to families distributed by the founders, which introduced the study, the research

questions, and my background as an educator (see Appendix A). This letter also included

a consent form, for both interviews and focus groups. I also presented my research

project to students and teachers during the first week of the school year. During this

meeting, I shared my interest in learning more about the school, and alternative education

more generally, through the perspectives and voices of students. Consent to participate in

the study was codified through the IRB form, which I explained in some detail during my

initial visits to the school and participant recruitment.

Introduction to the Participants

The students I interviewed ranged from 13-20 years old, except for Jasper, an alumnus who had recently graduated from the school. The students came from public school, private school, or homeschool backgrounds, and all of them had been at City Workshop for more than 2 years, except for Arjun, who, as a sixth grader, was just beginning his tenure at the school. The descriptions listed offer compressed summaries of participants in this study.

Arjun Markez was a sixth-grade student who self-identified as a South Indian male. Arjun previously attended Play Mountain Place, a play-based alternative school that served as the informal feeder to City Workshop. Arjun, as I describe in Chapter IV, was reticent to speak publicly but comfortable expressing his feelings, views, and ideas to me in private.

Adam Drummer self-identified as a Black male. Adam was a seventh-grade student who had been at City Workshop for 2 years, but he often missed significant portions of school to travel with his mom, who was a political activist. Adam spoke with the maturity and deliberativeness of a practiced politician. Whenever the issue turned to current events, Adam made thoughtful and highly analytic observations that revealed his interest in current events and political dialogue.

Nick Fagin self-identified as a White male. Nick was an eighth-grade student who had been at City Workshop for 2 years. Like Adam, Nate was very outspoken about politics and very interested in current events. Before coming to City Workshop, Nate attended a large public school, an experience that he described as alienating and frustrating.

Yalda Yousef was a ninth-grade student who self-identified as a Middle Eastern female. She had been at City Workshop since its very first year. She was gregarious, lighthearted, and intelligent. She was one of the first students to actively seek me out and ask to participate in the study.

Caleb Moore self-identified as a White male. Caleb was in the ninth-grade, and he was previously homeschooled before coming to City Workshop. Caleb told me he was still learning to trust his voice and navigate the social challenges City Workshop presented.

Jeremiah Allen self-identified as a Black male. Jeremiah was in the 10th grade, and he previously attended Play Mountain Place. Jeremiah conveyed warmth and affection in his demeanor and voice. He had a comfortable and unaffected way of interacting with everyone in the school.

Cara Namai self-identified as a Black female. She was in the 10th grade, and previously attended a local private school. Cara was shy, introspective, and very hesitant to speak. I interviewed her near the end of my study after I noticed the way her voice expressed itself through nontraditional channels.

Remi Cosgrove self-identified a White male. Remi was in the 10th grade, and he came to City Workshop from an alternative school/homeschool background. Remi was thoughtful, reflective, and occasionally sarcastic. He said that City Workshop helped him develop his voice by getting him to reflect before he spoke and by helping him become more sensitive about what other people were thinking and feeling.

Brandon Lester self-identified as a White male. Brandon was in the 11th grade and previously attended Play Mountain Place. Brandon had a restrained demeanor, along with a capacity to put his educational experiences into a broader context.

Jasper Hill self-identified as a bisexual White male. Jasper was an alumnus of the school who came off as intelligent, thoughtful, and articulate, both about his schooling and about education more broadly. He came to City Workshop after attending a public school where he felt ignored and marginalized.

Table 1 displays the student names, ages, racial backgrounds, and previous schooling.

Data Collection Methods

Qualitative case studies allow for multiple sources of data that reveal the complexity and richness of the research topic (Bogdan & Biklen, 1997). The data for this qualitative case study included observations, interviews, focus groups, documents,

Table 1

Demographic Information of Students

Name	Age	Grade	Gender at Birth	Racial Background	Previous Schooling
Arjun	12	6th	Male	South Asian	Alternative School
Adam	12	7th	Male	Black	Alternative School
Zane	13	7th	Male	White	Public School
Nick	14	8th	Male	White	Public School
Yalda	14	9th	Female	Latina and Iranian	Public School
Caleb	15	9th	Male	White	Homeschool
Jeremiah	15	10th	Male	Black	Alternative School
Cara	16	10th	Female	Black	Private School
Remi	15	10th	Male	White	Homeschool
Brandon	16	11th	Male	White	Alternative School
Jasper	22	Alum	Male	White	Public School

archival records, and researcher field notes. Of all the data sources, I leaned most heavily on interviews.

Interviews

I engaged in approximately 11 semi-structured interviews to develop a deeper understanding of student voice through the ideas, stories, and experiences of both current and former students. Each interview lasted roughly 45 minutes and relied on probing, direct, and exploratory questions that were thematic and dynamic in nature (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). Whenever I sought more clarity or elaboration about a theme, topic, or story that surfaced during the coding process, I interviewed students again.

In line with my theoretical framework, my interview questions (see Appendix B) sought to provoke complex and dialogic accounts of voice, while at the same time allowing students the opportunity to reflect on the pedagogical and organizational practices of the school. Some questions framed voice as a metaphor for self-realization and empowerment, while others engaged voice through the prism of learning (e.g., the exercise of choice) and political engagement. My questions asked students to reflect on how the school leadership made decisions, resolved conflicts, and ensured equity in terms of whose voices were heard.

Thematically, the questions aimed to clarify concepts and meanings that were subsequently used to derive coding categories, while creating a flow that encouraged participants to share their experience and feelings openly and candidly (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). This approach was particularly important given my view of student voice as uniquely situated and highly contextual. The content of the questions themselves were intentionally crafted to shed light on the research questions and provide ample space

for follow up questions. A sample of interview questions is listed in Table 2, and the full interview protocol is included in Appendix B.

In some cases, interviews also took the form of dialogues that involved more than one participant. I adopted the view dialogues are *relational productions* (Mazzei, 2013), where meanings are constantly negotiated and perspectives are enriched through joint inquiry. Conducting interviews as dialogues allowed me to highlight the dialogic underpinnings of student voice and the way students author meaning together.

Participant Observation

Participant observation took place 3 days a week for a 7-month period during the 2018-2019 school year. During my visits, I observed interactions, conversations, daily forums, classes, city as a classroom days,[2] and other school-wide events. To focus my observations, I used a protocol adapted from the student voice scholarship of Michael Fielding (2011).[3]

Table 2

Sample of Interview Questions Matched with Corresponding Research Questions

Interview Question	Research Question
1. How would you describe the school's educational approach for someone who knows nothing about it?	R2: How does City Workshop empower student voice?
2. Do the voices of students at the school all carry equal weight?	R2: How does City Workshop empower student voice?
3. How do you spend your time at City Workshop?	R1: How do students at City Workshop exercise their voices?

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[2] City as a Classroom days offer students weekly opportunities to interact with the broader civic community by visiting museums, neighborhoods, cultural centers, and other civic spaces. The purpose of these experiences is to blur the boundaries between the school and society (as well as academic and experiential learning) while fostering a sense of civic commitment, activism, and responsibility.

[3] See Appendix C for a comprehensive description of Fielding's (2011) protocol.

1. *Speaking.* Who is allowed to speak? Who are they allowed to speak to? What are they allowed to speak of? What type of language are they allowed to use? Who decides?

2. *Listening.* Who is listening? Why are they listening? How are they listening?

3. *Skills.* What skills are students applying or developing during their learning?

4. *Attitudes and dispositions.* How do those involved regard each other? Are all voices accorded equal weight?

5. *Systems.* How often does dialogue and encounters with student voice occur? Who decides?

During observations, I took detailed field notes to preserve a record of what I saw and heard. I also complemented observations with photographs, audio recordings, and archival material. I intended to focus on how voice expressed itself during the regular course of a school day and in different situations and spatial contexts.

Focus Groups

As Bloomberg and Volpe (2012) observed, "A focus group is essentially a group discussion focused on a single theme" (p. 56), one which fosters a range of opinions and a more complete and revealing understanding of the issues at hand. I conducted two focus groups during my study. One of the focus groups was composed of students and focused primarily on the exercise of voice at the school. The second focus group included a mix of students, faculty, and families, and engaged lager questions about the meaning of alternative education in the company of all of the school's stakeholders. Each of the focus groups lasted roughly one hour in length. It is important to note in the second focus

group, the event was structured as a panel, with families primarily engaging as audience members and students and faculty featured as experts. The goal of the latter focus group was three-fold: to engage students and teachers in provocative discussions about critical issues in education, to explore possible solutions to concrete challenges facing schools, both locally and nationally, and to reflect on the purpose and meaning of education. Each focus group was audio-recorded, transcribed, and coded for critical and relevant themes.

Table 3 highlights which students participated in the interviews and focus groups I conducted.

Document Analysis

Both official and internal documents were studied to develop a deeper understanding of the school's educational mission and vision, along with its educational practices. Official documents included the school's accreditation report, minutes from board meetings, brochures, pamphlets, and statements of educational philosophy. Additional material included student artifacts, curricular artifacts, and student self-

Table 3

Student Participation in Interviews and Focus Groups

Participant	Interview 1 (45 minutes)	Interview 2 (45 minutes)	Focus Group 1 (45 minutes)	Focus Group 2 (60 minutes)
Arjun	X	X		
Adam	X			X
Zane	X			X
Nick	X			
Yalda	X	X	X	
Caleb	X			
Jeremiah	X	X	X	X
Cara	X		X	
Remi	X		X	
Brandon	X		X	X
Jasper	X	X		X

assessment reports, which were generated twice a year in a joint collaboration between student and teacher.

Field Notes

Throughout my study, I recorded field notes of my observations and interviews in my researcher notebook (Bogdan & Biklen, 1997). Although my field notes were handwritten, I typed them up electronically following each observation or interview, often expanding on them with a slew of what Richardson and St. Pierre (2005) called theoretical notes (i.e., "hunches, hypotheses . . . connections, critiques," p. 961), methodological notes (i.e., reflective notes on what to keep in mind for analysis), and personal notes (i.e., "uncensored statements about the research," p. 941). To complement my field notes, I engaged in frequent free-writes to record questions, connections, and emerging ideas. Since a chief aim of this research was to capture voice in all of its complexity and develop an understanding of how the educational practices of an anarchist-inspired alternative school shapes its development, the goal of these reflections was to widen the sphere of possible meanings and allow my research to be "alive, active, and interactive" (Dernikos, 2015, p. 116). Table 4 presents a matrix highlighting my approach to data collection.

Data Analysis and Interpretation

In this section, I describe my approach to data analysis and interpretation, with particular attention to the coding process. My grounded theory approach allowed me to center the experiences of the students at City Workshop, while developing a richer

Table 4

Data Collection Matrix Used for the Study

Name of Task or Procedure	Number of Occurrences	Activity Duration	Data Collected
Observation	10 times between Dec. 2018- Feb 2019	4 hrs. in length	Field notes based on observation protocol
Interviews	14 times between Dec. 2018-Feb 2019	45 minutes	Audio recording and transcripts
Focus Groups	4 times between Dec. 2018-Feb 2019	45-60 minutes	Audio recording and transcripts
Document Analysis	Monthly	1 hour	Document Analysis

theoretical conception of student voice. I also describe my process of analyzing the

school's educational practices.

Grounded Theory

Building on ethnographic field research traditions developed at the University of

Chicago in the early part of the 20th century, the emergence of grounded theory

represented a challenge to the hegemony of quantitative research (Charmaz, 2014).

Spurred by the work of Glaser and Strauss in their 1967 publication of *The Discovery of

Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research*, many researchers began

"developing theories from research grounded in qualitative data rather than deducing

testable hypotheses from existing theories" (Charmaz, 2014, p. 4). The logic and methods

associated with grounded theory (i.e., the recursive process of data collection and

analysis, the construction of analytic codes from data, the emphasis on theory

development at every stage of the research process, etc.) gave researchers an opportunity

to offer explanatory theoretical frameworks for real-life phenomena, in contrast to more

limited conclusions derived from descriptive studies. Many of the methods associated

with grounded theory were systematically laid out in Glaser's (1978) text, *Theoretical Sensitivity*: *Advances in the Methodology of Ground Theory*.

One of the fundamental assumptions of grounded theory is humans are active agents in their own lives, and "society, reality, and self are constructed through interaction" (Charmaz, 2014, p. 9). The emphasis on symbolic interactionism, advanced most prominently by Blumer (1986), helped focus on the process of inquiry and the way meanings, actions, and beliefs change over time. This process of change applied both to the researcher's own assumptions, and the subject or phenomena under investigation.

This study relied on a constructivist grounded theory approach to analyzing and interpreting the data. Constructivist grounded theory views analysis as an inductive, iterative exercise whose goal is "to remain open to all possible theoretical directions indicated by . . . readings of the data" (Charmaz, 2014, p. 114). Constructivist grounded theory permits the researcher to attend to the complexities of people's social worlds, along with the views, values, beliefs, feelings, assumptions, and ideologies that shape behavior. At the same time, constructivist grounded theory aims to understand participants' standpoints and situations, as well as their actions in the setting (Charmaz, 2014). These more complex understandings derive from a greater emphasis on participant observation and supplementary data from interviews, documents, diagrams, and more.

Analysis

I approached the analysis of my collected data in several ways. First, as I transcribed each interview, I paid close attention to recording their words, phrases, and reflections as accurately as possible. This meant replaying the audio recording countless times in an effort to capture the content, meaning, and intention behind what participants

were saying. For this reason, I had to listen deeply and interactively, while also trying to

remember the context in which the interview took place—what the students looked like,

how they held themselves, how they listened, the setting, etc.—particularly because my

theoretical framework (see Chapter I) suggested a close relationship between voice and

social context.

Second, I read each transcript carefully, while annotating and highlighting the

text, searching for theoretical insights, symbolic moments, and even narrative structure.

What I noticed about reading each transcript was how much my meaning and perceptions

crept into the analysis. In determining the significance of particular insights, such as

when students described voice as something they are trying to figure out, I had to learn

whether such statements were metaphorical or literal. I had to determine whether students

were unsure about how to use their voice or unsure about themselves. When these

situations arose, I often returned to the students to ask for clarification.

Coding

The coding process for this qualitative case study began with an initial shorthand

process of defining and labeling the data. This initial process was interactive, focusing on

studying statements and observed actions to better "understand participants' views and

actions from their perspective" (Charmaz, 2014, p. 115). After this initial phase, I relied

on a generic coding scheme to make sense of what I was hearing. I use the term generic

because the terms and categories I employed were not entirely specific; they spoke to

particular phenomena, rather than concrete events or descriptions. For example, I grouped

aspects of student voice that were related to participation in school governance under the

term *democratic*. In contrast, *political voice* denoted a capacity to speak out on issues of

social and political consequence, along with the knowledge and skills that help make that possible. Thus, when students presented a critique of social and political institutions, I also focused attention on where and how they acquired such knowledge.[4] Ontological voice, drawing from Bain (2010), referred to those aspects of voice which appeared related to who the students were as persons. This category of voice was difficult to map, primarily because it could not be reduced to any tangible effect. Yet it still featured prominently whenever students reflected on questions of freedom, authenticity, and self-realization.

My coding process also involved analyzing the data for those practices—educationally and organizationally—that empowered voice. Here my attention centered on what the data revealed about governance, pedagogy, relationships, and school culture. During this part of my research, I analyzed the notes I took during my observations, along with the photographs I took that helped visually evoke what these practices looked like in the field.

After the first reading of the data, I engaged in a more focused coding where I discerned which initial codes made the most analytic sense (Charmaz, 2014), and begun to highlight the theoretical centrality of certain ideas. Then, guided by a series of comparative and analytic questions, I constructed particular categories of analysis that highlighted emergent patterns and themes. These questions included:

1. What do the data indicate about how students experience the environment of the school?

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[4] Allen (2016) linked knowledge to participation in her account of "participatory readiness." Allen linked the effectiveness of voice to a critical base of humanistic learning that allow citizens to influence democratic decision-making.

2. What do the data indicate about listening, and whether the students feel recognized, understood, and valued for what they say?

3. What do the data suggest about the power and influence students exert through their voices?

4. What do the data suggest about how students view education and school?

Role of the Researcher

As a researcher, I set myself the ethically grounded task of protecting the anonymity of my participants, particularly in light of critiques about the ways voice can be used and manipulated for adult purposes (Creswell, 1998). Research is fundamentally intrusive, a problem exacerbated in contexts that are intimate, small, and personal. For this reason, it was essential to "respect and seek cooperation in the research" (Bogdan & Biklen, 1997, p. 50) and represent the data as authentically as possible. This was particularly important given the fact that my research centered on a vulnerable population who may have not fully understood what consent means. As such, to ensure understanding, I explained my interview process at numerous junctures during my research, reminding participants that they could self-select what they reported and provide feedback on the categories and themes, which emerged from my interpretations.

Another ethical challenge involved recognizing my positionality as a researcher, and how my views about student voice, and education more broadly, influenced how I conducted research. For example, I entered this study with the belief that young people were capable of expressing political agency in a manner that challenged developmental views of learning and moral development. This attitude might have compelled me to highlight only those cases that confirmed rather than challenged my assumptions. With

this in mind, I adopted "neither an advocate's nor an adversary's position" (Swidler, 1979, p. vii), while actively monitoring my preconceptions and assumptions by recording reflective field notes and keeping a journal throughout the research process (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012). Addressing this ethical challenge is also one of the reasons I used qualitative methods and the grounded theory approach, both of which acknowledge researcher subjectivity, while foregrounding the words and actions of participants.

Limitations

A qualitative case study approach to studying student voice, particularly in the context of a small alternative school, may have limited generalizability or transferability given that I conducted research on a single case. Thus, while my study may offer a rich, deep, and holistic understanding of student voice, inevitably, my findings are context-dependent and bounded in time (Yin, 2017). A further limitation of this study centers on the fact that the school is new, having been founded in 2015, and its population is small. Being able to interview and observe a larger and more diverse sample may invest the study with greater significance, while highlighting a more diverse range of ideas, perspectives, and views about student voice and anarchist-inspired education.

Another limitation of this study centers on the school itself and its profile as a private, alternative institution. Many of the studies about student voice and school reform take place in public school settings. This is true of Fielding's (2011) and Mitra's (2004) research, two of the more prominent advocates of student voice. Thus, a question arises as to whether studying student voice in the context of an alternative school can provide a framework to understand broader issues in education, particularly those which manifest in public, urban spaces where student disengagement and dropout rates are notoriously

high (Beattie, 2012; Cook-Sather, 2006). At the same time, the school's freedom and autonomy in terms of curriculum and governance gives it an opportunity to engage student voice in more creative and dynamic ways than might otherwise be possible in more regulated environments. Further, as Bogdan and Biklen (1997) observed, generalizability may be less important than "deriving universal statements of general social processes" (p. 36) and using these statements as a foundation for broader understanding. Such statements are important given the emphasis many educators place on the overarching principles of student-centered learning and democratic education.

Finally, this study was limited by the fact students themselves did not participate in the formulation of interview questions or even the definition of terms. Thus, while I made an effort to highlight their lived realities through interviews that were dialogic, I was always aware that I was structuring and constituting their voices in the framework of my study. Further, given my understanding of voice as grounded in action (i.e., voice as more than a capacity or disposition), I did not ask students to create or produce anything to provide evidence of what their voices could achieve. Ultimately, I had to rely on their reflections, and my observations, about the power of their voices and the way these voices were translated through learning, governance, and dialogue. This approach ultimately suggested that I was the one inevitably mediating, classifying, and drawing conclusions about the meaning of student voice at City Workshop.

Organization of Study

In this chapter, I described the methodology undergirding this qualitative case study into the exercise of student voice at an anarchist-inspired alternative school. I described my data collection methods, highlighted the setting where the study was

conducted, and explained my generative and grounded approach to analysis and coding. In the coming chapter, I will present my findings into how students at City Workshop exercise their voices. I will then focus on how the educational practices at City Workshop empowered student voice.

IV – VOICES AT CITY WORKSHOP

The Community Room

I walked into the community room space, a small room toward the back of City

Workshop where the school holds its daily forum.[1] The room was surrounded by

bookshelves with copies of Alexander's (2012) *The New Jim Crow* and Zinn, Konopacki,

and Buhle's (2008) *A People's History of American Empire*, a series of pamphlets on

neurodiversity, a set of DVDs on the Vietnam War, an anthology on the history of

Japanese cinema, and even a published copy of Ndindi's dissertation, which explored

how immigrant science teachers from Africa applied social justice in their curricula. The

room had a worn-in, lived-in feel to it: partially stained carpet, a low-lying black

Craftsman table in the center, and aging pillows chaotically assembled on the floor so

students can seat themselves comfortably, take a nap, or, if they wish, construct a fort. On

the whiteboard, an agenda was hastily written out, listing upcoming topics, field trips,

and presentations (see Figure 5).

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[1] The Daily Forum functions as a daily school meeting where students and teachers practice mindfulness, set the intentions for the school day, discuss current events, and reflect on core values. The Forum also serves as a setting where City Workshop practices shared governance, principally through the medium of open dialogue and face-to-face communication. The structure for the Forum varies from day to day, but it generally begins with a brief meditation exercise, followed by an agenda that attends to issues and concerns within the school and society at large. In many ways, the Forum act as a space for communal philosophical dialogue (Kennedy, 2006a) where students and teachers interrogate principles such as equity, freedom, and justice from multiple points of view. This pedagogical value of such encounters derives from the work of coordinating diverse voices and forging an intentional community, rather than a bureaucratic one.
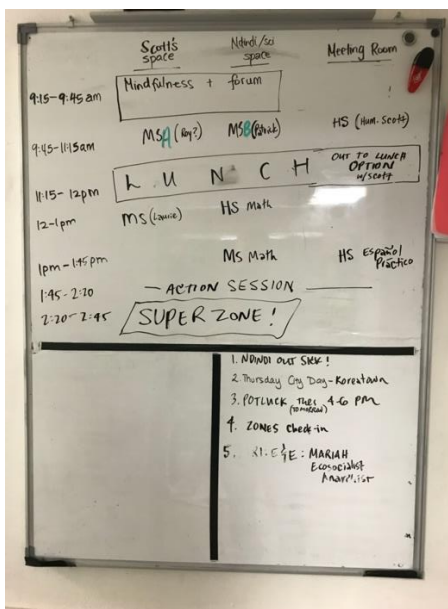
Figure 5. Picture of a weekly schedule on a whiteboard.

Students walked into the room in no particular order, some sitting among their friends, others by themselves. There appeared to be very little method to their movements; students deposited themselves wherever they could find space. As far as I could tell, there was no formal or designated seating, but some students felt comfortable wedging their bodies into particular crannies, as if they had done it a thousand times before. There was some brief chatter and crosstalk as Scott and Ndindi, co-directors and co-founders of City Workshop, walked in around 9:30 a.m., taking seats by the door.

After a few minutes, Scott rang a meditation chime to mark the beginning of mindfulness.[2] With very little prompting, students maneuvered themselves into position—some meditating, some lying down, some daydreaming. The room was perfectly still, with the only restlessness coming from me as I tried to figure out how to fit

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[2] The practice of mindfulness derives from City Workshop's emphasis on self-awareness, tolerance, and inner reflection. Instead of simply beginning with school business, mindfulness allows students and teachers to practice meditation, and quietly attend to their feelings, thoughts, and concerns before more formal activities commence.

in, literally and figuratively. After 4 minutes, Scott rang the chime again. A few students stretched their arms and returned to a seated position. With a curious and casual tone, Scott said, "So, how's everyone feeling? What's on your mind?"

After a brief silence, students gave quick reports on how they spent their weekends, interesting things they watched on television, things on their minds, and more. After some sharing, Nick, an eighth grader, gestured that he has something to say. He was frustrated that City Workshop students were failing to respect the ban on sugary soft drinks. With a gently prodding tone, Nick said, "We made an agreement, and no one's really listening, so we need to do better." Everyone generally agreed; the school had raised the issue several times before and even discussed research on the addictive qualities of soda during science class. Yalda brought up a similar concern about cell phone use; people needed to put them in the basket at the beginning of the day, unless they were calling an Uber or Yelping the reviews of some place they wanted to visit. Scott then asked students to consider the purpose of school agreements: "Why do we have chores, agreements to begin with? If we can just figure it out for you, why don't we do that?"

Brandon, a reflective and mature sophomore who later told me that he shied away from participating in group discussions, said:

> Most of us get it . . . but the middle schoolers . . . they're in their own world sometimes, they tend to leave a mess and make noise in places before the school days begins . . . and we have to clean it up . . . or it just sits there . . . maybe it makes sense that they can't come in to the school until the school day begins, at least for now?

The middle school students nodded quietly, showing very little interest in defending themselves or disputing the claims of their older classmates. Suddenly, a hand went up. Remi, a 10th grader with long hair, requested the floor:

> I just want to let everyone know that I'm gay. I've known for some time, actually, and some of my closest friends know, and you may know, but I just want to tell everyone during the meeting because a lot of people weren't here when I announced it last time.

Remi expressed himself in a calm, self-assured voice, as if he were sharing something so insignificant and mundane that no formality was required. I presumed Remi's statement would provoke a departure from business as usual; the school would come together for a guided discussion about sexuality, identity, and tolerance. However, all that followed was a quiet affirmation; a few kids said, "Cool," and Scott said, "We hear you and we care about you, and that's rad for sharing." As I soon discovered, the supportive and sincere way Scott interacted with students revealed the depth of his concern for what they experienced as adolescents—not just as learners. His tone was neither paternalistic nor cloying; instead, he was gently welcoming, always with a concern for affirming students and honoring their voices—particularly those who had overcome personal, social, and academic challenges. This sensitive and engaged disposition, as he later told me, came from his own experiences coping with autism, which used to inhibit him from speaking publicly.

After a brief calm, Remi mentioned he has something else to say, "Oh, and if anyone hasn't seen the recent remake of *Robocop*: Don't see it. It's terrible."

Arjun could barely conceal his excitement. "That's so funny! I had a dream about Robocop where he was wearing headgear. And I can't get the image out of my mind. Literally, he also had a retainer." Everyone in the room collapsed into a fit of laughter.

The last portion of the daily forum was devoted to a brief teach-in. Scott distributed some activist trading cards that he and Ndindi purchased from a recent anarchist book fair in Oakland. Students read the biographies of the individuals listed on the cards (e.g., Emma Goldman, Peter Kropotkin, and Huey Newton) and then everyone shared what they learned. Jeremiah helped explain the difference between anarchism and communism. Scott talked briefly about the Spanish Civil War and Ndindi shared some background about Marx. A brief discussion ensued.

With about 5 minutes left, Scott reviewed the agenda for the day and talked about the upcoming city day trip to the downtown library. He also asked for a few suggestions for the next week's trip. Zane stood up and wrote proposals on the whiteboard: (a) Olivera Street, (b) The Getty Museum, and (c) Venice Beach. It is almost 10:30. Scott looked at the clock, muttered something quietly to Ndindi and said, "OK, everyone, you know where to go. Go do your thing." The school day formally began.

Framing the Challenge

I begin this chapter with a vignette derived from my very first observation at City Workshop to highlight the complexity of voice in the school. In the space of the first daily Fforum I observed, the school was engaged in an open-ended dialogue that accommodated a wide variety of interests, ideas, and perspectives. Contrary to my experiences in most schools, there did not appear to be a discernible hierarchy of voices. Scott and Ndindi, the founders of the school, asked students how they were feeling and the students responded and listened to each other in a way that seemed collegial and uncontrived. There were few barriers dividing one kind of voice from another—the political merged with the personal, and the reflective quickly collapsed into the

ridiculous. At the same time, the school appeared to have a mechanism for bringing these

diverse voices into close relation, of forging a community that appeared to also celebrate

particularity.[3] While the pattern of the meeting appeared to make perfect sense to

students, I remember being flummoxed by the challenge of defining the purpose and

meaning of voice in a setting where so much appeared to happen at once. After all, the

literature has generally framed voice in terms of influence and decision making, as these

seem easier to track and identify.

Although I anticipated the challenge of narrowing down the meaning student

voice, engaging with student voice in the field presented new challenges, particularly as I

learned to suspend my initial impulse to classify voice in normative categories, or

discover its use in designated settings. This challenge was exacerbated by the fact that

City Workshop lacked many of the formal, participatory structures where student voice is

traditionally funneled: (a) town hall meetings, (b) student councils, (c) debate clubs, and

(d) advocacy groups. Instead, student voice appeared interwoven into the very fabric of

the school, shaping the very nature of the educational encounter and inspiring a constant

stream of dialogue across diverse settings. Even students themselves took for granted

their right to participate, at least formally understood. This came across in some of my

initial conversations with students:

> We have a voice. But people don't come and visit and say, oh, my gosh, it's so
> cool that you all have voices. To be quite honest, I don't even think about it, and
> even for the kids that use their voices, it doesn't entitle them to do whatever.
> (Zane, age 15)
>
> I like to participate but I don't really get that involved, really because in such a
> small school, we're all basically responsible for everything, there's no need for

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[3] In his treatment of dialogic schools, Sidorkin (1999) suggested the coexistence of diverse voices can be
maintained through mutual listening and civility.

someone to take a leadership role when we can just talk about things anyway. (Adam, age 14)

These sentiments appeared to suggest an indifference toward voice, as traditionally conceived. Zane felt it was perfectly normal to have a voice—it was not a special dispensation—and that voice by itself was not an entitlement. Likewise, Adam suggested voice related to responsibility rather than any specific act of leadership. Thus, even at the outset of my research, students were interpreting voice through their own unique experiences and defining it as something more than influence, participation, and citizenship.

Organization of the Chapter

In this chapter, I explore how students themselves perceive the meaning and importance of voice at City Workshop. As I analyzed and coded my interviews, I discovered that students generally understood voice less as a tool to exercise influence and more as a way to express themselves as persons. In this way, voice took on an ontological dimension, something which Batchelor (2006a) associated with self-realization. Many of the students I interviewed found that the rules and restrictions of their previous schools suppressed their individuality, and that City Workshop offered a setting where they could shape their learning and express themselves creatively—without judgment or censure. I also learned that the complexity of student voice could best be understood by attending to its relational and dialogic dimensions. There was no singular voice that spoke for individual students; instead, voice had pluralistic forms that took on new shapes as students engaged in dialogue, negotiated relationships, and expressed their complex identities. Finally, political voice also assumed a wide variety of forms; it was

embodied in traditional forms of participation (i.e., political speech and democratic governance) and more symbolic expressions of identity and difference. Meanwhile, the exercise of political voice took place in both formal and informal settings as students engaged with questions of power and authority in contexts where they felt most comfortable and free.

Ontological Voice

Jasper, a 21-year-old City Workshop alumnus studying psychology at a local community college, was the first participant I interviewed. Jasper is a White male who self-identifies as bisexual. I first learned about him while navigating the school website, where his reflections and insights are prominently featured on a page labeled, "Why is City Workshop a Revolutionary Education?" I decided to interview Jasper because, as an alumnus, I thought he could offer a more holistic and retrospective account of how City Workshop influenced the development of his voice over time. We spoke over coffee in Culver City, just a few blocks away from City Workshop. Jasper came to the interview meticulously dressed, donning a button-down shirt, skinny-tie, and cardigan. He looked like an artist and an academic, someone who appeared eager to discuss questions of purpose, meaning, and value.

Before coming to City Workshop, Jasper attended Redondo Public School, an experience that summoned immediate critiques and difficult memories. The school itself "shuttled you from subject to subject, where different teachers had different expectations, and you had to put aside all the things you really wanted to talk about." Elaborating on the experience, Jasper said that "the whole experience felt fragmented and impersonal,"

with students recognized principally for their academic performances rather than personal

interests, needs, and questions. One particular experience stood out for Jasper:

> I remember when I was in ninth grade, there was a big shooting threat. They had to shut the school down for a week—police and sirens everywhere. And I remember the principal sending out an email, like, how much the teachers really love the students and that this is a community. And I remember feeling really hurt by that because, like, none of the teachers knew my name. In a school that big, I mean, it's impossible to know how those events effect individual students. We weren't even given a chance to talk about it with anyone.

In contrast, what he appreciated about coming to City Workshop was the prevailing

atmosphere of caring, inclusion, and community—one that recognized students as

partners and protagonists rather than subjects of learning or depersonalized members of

the school. As Jasper remarked, "That's so important, when you're growing up is to feel

that I am personally safe here, because the teachers know me." At later junctures, Jasper

said, "City Workshop did a really good job of introducing me to the school in a way that

felt like I was home, and that I was wanted," elucidating how "Scott spoke to me in this

way that respected my voice, and treated me as an equal, which was a revelation." These

experiences proved to be critical for Jasper, as he had been struggling with his self-

identity and sexuality.

At City Workshop, Jasper told me, students were free to express themselves not

just about "big, tumultuous issues like gun violence and poverty," but critical issues of

identity and belonging. Furthermore, because of what Jasper described as the safety and

inclusivity of the community—"the fact that students knew the school and the school

knew the students"—he was able to freely and openly exercise his voice in a public

context:

> *Jasper:* You know, during my junior year, I came out to myself and to everyone else, which was a huge shift in my viewpoint, you know, just coming from, like,

> really hiding a lot, again, from myself, as well, now to being, you know, open, sort of dealing with that, and dealing with what it felt like to be open to myself, and open with others about who I am. And so that was a huge, you know, change and huge growth moment, especially . . .
>
> *Roy:* How did it feel to say that out loud, to tell everyone?
>
> *Jasper:* It was really great, you know, because of course there were a lot of LGBTQ people at City Workshop. You know, my best friend there was Trans. One of the kids in the year above me was gay. You know, so it was really, it was great to have a space to really feel safe, where you could act like yourself, and be whatever you wanted to be. Yeah, and then in terms of transition, the biggest thing was just, like, that my voice was allowed to be heard, right? Because I was always someone who, like, wanted to talk about things, wanted to learn, and the public school system really did not react well to that. It was always a sense of, like, well, no, we're just doing this so you can get a grade. And so it was less about learning and more about achieving.

As Jasper's reflections reveal, City Workshop created the type of environment where you could "act like yourself and be whatever you wanted to be."[4] This atmosphere of belonging and respect gave Jasper a sense that his personal voice had value and was heard and celebrated by others.

During my interview with Yalda, a ninth-grade student of Middle Eastern descent, she talked about being forced to take medication at her previous school, which left her feeling, as she described it, "like a diluted version of myself." She also reflected on memories of getting in trouble for not conforming to her teacher's expectations and being unable to discipline her voice to meet the shifting demands of her school:[5]

> The teachers I had just weren't working for me. I have ADHD, and over time through ups and downs, the teachers gave up on me, pushed me really hard and didn't care. I got in trouble a lot for not staying on my square of the carpet. I think I went to the principal's office once for not sitting down. And then I had a teacher who was aware of everything, was kind of like, OK, I'll leave you alone. As for me, I just didn't care. I went through the motions.

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[4] As I will discuss later, the capacity to "be whatever you want to be" is not a straightforward process. As Batchelor (2006a) noted, "the process of becoming, interpreted as coming into one's own, is unique for each student" (p. 230).

[5] Butler's scholarship is relevant here (see Mazzei, 2013), as she has suggested in her theory of performativity that institutional norms produce particular kinds of subjects through a process of interpellation or "hailing." In Yalda's case, she was able to resist these pressures, first by going through the motions, and then by exiting the school.

Yalda also talked about the school's emphasis on standardization and ranking:

> I love reading, but I did badly on a reading test, so I couldn't read the books I wanted. I was reading adult books at home but when I got to school, they put me in a second-grade level even though I was in the fourth grade. When I complained they ignored me, literally no one would listen to me or change anything.

Like Jasper, Yalda suggested that her previous school silenced her voice and compelled her to accept a reality she could not control. However, her resentment had a sharper edge than Jasper's. Yalda was far more frustrated by the transactional, one-sided nature of traditional educational encounters.

These experiences deepened her appreciation for the educational model at City Workshop. She said that the school "allows you to be so you," and that what makes the school unique "is the individuality mixed with the oneness." When I asked her to elaborate on the metaphor, Yalda said:

> You find out who you are individually. But at the time, you're so individual in this giant machine, but it's not like public school where the machine is, you're this cog, you're that cog, and these cogs go together like that. [Here] it's like you're whatever cog you wanna be. But they also just happen to work together. You get to be your own person here, but it's not just about you.

What I gathered from Yalda's observation was that City Workshop provided a setting for each child to become its own person—to choose "whatever cog you wanna be." In this context, I understood voice as an expression of individuality and difference that took place in the context of interaction and self-other relations. As Yalda put it, the cogs "also just happen to work together," and while "you get to be your own person here . . . it's not just about you," a statement that evokes the dialogic aspects of voice. The relation between self and other also suggested the boundaries between the individual and

social dimensions of voice were always being negotiated, and this interaction opened up

space for more complex and creative forms of political problem solving.[6]

Like Yalda and Jasper, Nick, an energetic and precocious student in the eighth

grade, also had trouble adjusting and adapting to the norms of his previous school. He

described himself as a "rule-breaker" who had trouble understanding the reasoning

behind some of the rules and regulations that governed student behavior:

> I was a rule breaker, that's what they thought I was, it's not what I thought . . . but they had this one rule where you weren't allowed to trade your food with anyone at lunch, and I got suspended for doing that. They called it bartering. And I couldn't do anything about it. I tried arguing but then I got in even more trouble. Who even uses the word bartering?

Yet it was more than the punitive atmosphere of the school that curbed Nathan's voice,

preventing him from contesting a rule he felt was unjust; it was also the regimentation

and compulsory rituals over which he had no control:

> Well, I mean, I remember one thing I hated. We did this thing called morning exercises. We would all line up, just like any army or military would do and they'd play the same song on the speakers. I went there for 4 years and they only added a new song once. And literally there wasn't even a person you could complain to. I tried and they kept telling me to talk to different people. It made no sense.

The experience of having his schooling dictated for him and being unable to make sense

of the school's impersonal bureaucratic rules or receive a compelling justification for its

decisions, motivated Nick and his family to explore educational alternatives where he

could exercise some control over his educational experiences. This was clearly important

to Nick—not simply going through the motions and learning a formulaic curriculum

"where you do the same mission project every year"—but being able to pursue his

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[6] In emphasizing the tension between the individual and social dimensions of voice, I am relying on the scholarship of Kennedy (2017), who noted "a willingness and ability to negotiate the boundaries between individuals and systems is . . . a key factor in democratic subjectivity" (p. 555).

interests and learn about events and ideas that relate his own life. For Nick, that interest is

politics, but, as he told me, it is not the same for everyone. Referring to the tolerance for

different passions and pursuits at City Workshop, he said, "I mean, it's so interesting, the

fact that you don't have to fit into one interest here. We're all just concentrating on

different things."

Yet it was also clear from my interview with Nick the exercise of voice involved

more than merely dictating and determining the terms of one's education. Voice, as it was

for Jasper, related to self-expression, and the communication of one's identity beyond the

role of "student":

> Well, I mean, I feel like when I first started coming here, you know, there were
> definitely two separate versions of me. Even last year, there was, but this year, I
> feel like I've been trying to be the same me across the board. See, because when
> you put on your student hat at a different school, the hat is basically just . . . . It's
> got a big helmet over it so no one can hear. Here, the hat that I'm wearing, I
> mean, I've been wearing it for a year or two now. I mean, the funny thing is
> people expect me to wear it. The teachers here know me well enough that I'm
> probably gonna wear this hat. I mean, here, teachers can notice things and learn
> about people rather than teach them.

Describing his experiences at his previous school, Nick invoked the metaphor of a helmet

he had to wear to be a functioning student. This helmet had the effect of creating a chasm

between his inner and outer voice. As I understood it, Nick's reflection was at once a

critique of the performative nature of schooling, where students have to play roles with

which they do not identify (e.g., the image of the "student hat"), and a reminder that

voice was deep and complex. As Nick put it, "here, teachers can notice things and learn

about people rather than teach them." For Nick, the ability to express himself

authentically, and correspondingly, to be noticed, is a critical reason why he felt a sense

of connection to the school. Further, it appeared from our interview the freedom to

exercise his individual voice had greater resonance than any narrowly conceived "right to be heard," which he said "occurs so often" it was barely registered as a special dispensation.

The Dimensionality of Voice

In Batchelor's (2006b) research on the vulnerability of student voices in higher educational settings, she suggested schools often overlook what she describes as ontological voice—a voice for being and becoming—in favor of more prescriptive roles and identities. She suggested ontological voice is less valued and validated then voices for knowing and doing, which she refers to as "epistemological voice" and "pragmatic voice." Instead of giving students the space to "discover [their] own way of being a student," and "become who and what they want to be" (Batchelor, 2006b, p. 791), they are pressured to pursue learning and perform roles determined for them by others. She critiqued systems of education that prescribe narrow academic pathways, thereby diminishing the space students have to realize their talents and capacities. What results is an internal division that undermines the integrity of voice and harms the ability of students to "appropriate"[7] their educational experiences. Batchelor (2006b) characterized this experience as a "dislocation between inner and outer realities, resulting in a fracture between inner and outer voices" (p. 230).

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[7] Drawing on the scholarship of Jaeggi (2014), I suggest that "appropriation" involves a process of making one's educational experiences one's own. Appropriation, as Jaeggi noted, is a process of "realizing oneself through what one does" (p. 206), which suggests a relationship between the different voices in Bain's (2006b) formulation—knowledge, action, and being. In the context of my inquiry, the students appropriated their educational experiences—and in many cases realized their voices—through the various projects and initiatives that piqued their interest. For Jasper, this was film studies, a subject he had great passion for, and for Nick, it was politics and Lego, a strange pairing, but one that that he suggested captured who he was.

Scholars in the tradition of critical theory have suggested such internal division reflects the alienated character of life under capitalism, where a lack of control over processes and outcomes inhibits self-realization. What results are powerlessness, isolation, and estrangement as individuals fail to identify with their own actions, something Yalda alluded to when they told me, "I had no ideas what the whole thing was about, I didn't even know who I was." As Yalda suggested, the ontological dimensions of voice—the capacity to exercise ownership over who one wants to be—are silenced by the one dimensional, instrumental demands of schooling. This dynamic may help explain why Nick referred to wearing a helmet as a way to describe his experiences in school, which only deepened the division between his inner and outer voices, and why Jasper spoke about the experiences of having to compartmentalize his feelings and emotions to meet the impersonal demands of his teachers and administrators. In both cases, the students were prevented from resisting the impositions of the school and becoming who they wanted to be.

In emphasizing the ontological dimensions of student voice, I am also disrupting an account of voice that is singular, stable, and reified. As hooks (2003) noted, "The engaged voice must never be fixed and absolute, but always changing, always evolving in dialogue with a world beyond itself" (p. 121). Further, as Sidorkin (1999) noted, what is important here is not a single dominant voice, but a multiplicity of voices "that maintain their peculiarities while merging into an organized unity" (p. 24). This phenomenon was evident, in varying degrees, during my interviews and observations of Jasper, Yalda, and Nick. Though they exuded confidence, there was no single voice that could accommodate their complexity and the various roles they played in the school. Yet the multiplicity of

voice was crystallized most powerfully in my conversation with Arjun; there was not one single "realized" voice, but a wide variety of representations that intersected and interacted throughout our conversation.

Polyphonic Voice

Arjun was a sixth grade student in MSA. I did not initially plan to interview Arjun, mainly because when I initiated the study, he was only beginning his tenure at City Workshop. There were other individuals I felt I needed to interview first, too: (a) the experienced alumni, (b) the politically vocal ninth grader, and (c) the student who had been there from the very day the school opened. Recognizing and engaging Arjun's voice proved to be a greater challenge, as he rarely spoke publicly and always seemed occupied and engaged by his creative whimsies. Yet what made Arjun such an interesting participant to interview was the context that precipitated our first interactions to begin with, and the particular way he defied every preconception I had about student voice, even at its richest and most complex. Our first conversations were initiated by Arjun himself. As I observed MSA students creating clay figurines to enact scenes from the epic of Gilgamesh, he turned to me and started explaining how he often daydreams about fictitious medieval worlds, describing the characters, landscapes, and adventures with a startling level of vividness and coherence. Other times, I would ask him what he was learning, and he'd immediately launch into a descriptive and layered account of how he visualizes knowledge and the way his imagination operates—"It's like this thing that I have to use, and if I don't use it, it causes pain"—almost to the point where I would forget what my initial question was; his reveries were that engrossing. Yet there were far more dominating voices at the school—voices more confident, self-assured, and vocal—

and I found myself gravitating to these students first, primarily because they seemed more immediately familiar and recognizable.

Arjun came to City Workshop from Play Mountain Place, a school he remembered with great fondness and nostalgia, so much so it seemed—at least when we first sat down for an interview—he forgot where he was. When I asked him specific questions about City Workshop, he would use Play Mountain Place as an example, and then unload a steady stream of memories about the environment and atmosphere there, from more generalized reflections—"There was just so much freedom, I mean, it was just so free"—to more specific and descriptive accounts:

> It was not an inside school, it was outside. So, this big schoolyard with sandpits, huge sandpits, a little hill which we called The Mountain, that's why it's called Play Mountain Place because there's that little hill mountain. Then there's a bridge, a small bridge coming off of the mountain, just this huge place. And then in the back, we have, like, names for everything. There's, like, the Sand Kitchen, which is in the back. There's like the Art Dome which is there. Yeah, there's these really cool domes which are made out of, like, wood things. And it's very nice. It used to be someone's home actually, and then they turned it into a school. Yeah, it's pretty crazy. But, yeah, it's big and it's nice.

Arjun's reflections were enthusiastic, colorful, and usually self-generated; they were not responses to my questions as much as they were detours into personal musings without designated beginnings and ends. He often appeared to be in dialogue with himself, posing questions to himself and reenacting scenes with teachers from his childhood, as if he were telling me a story.

However, when I shifted to specific questions about City Workshop, his new school, Arjun became more reserved and winsome. When I asked him how he would describe City Workshop so far, he said, "I like it here, but everything gets harder," and then later, "It's more academic, and I can't use my creativity as much." Suddenly,

dwelling on his new reality, his voice became more restrained, as did his general affect. When I asked him how City Workshop worked, he told me he was not quite sure, and I should ask high school students. As to what he felt about the transition into middle school, he said, "I feel like that's what happen as you get older, you lose your creativity, and that's sad." At the same, he appeared to understand he was going through a process of adaption, stating, "I have to listen to my academic voice more now, there is less freedom here, but that's not a bad thing I guess."

Returning to the challenge of interviewing Arjun, it was the polyphonic[8] nature of his voice that helped me appreciate his depth and complexity. In a sense, his voice was made more powerful through the virtual, emergent nature of his identity, which defied the "schematized categories" (Kennedy, 2017, p. 555) of formal schooling. One of Arjun's challenges lay in domesticating his imagination to meet new academic demands, demands he had not encountered at Play Mountain Place, but knew were a part of growing up. He did not like to be made to do things that did not seem exciting or worthwhile. This was corroborated by one of Arjun's teachers, Patrick, who told me when Arjun first took math at City Workshop:

> He'd say, "Why are we doing this, what's the purpose, what's this all about," because he never had to really learn in more formal contexts, but if you think about it, this was Arjun's way of expressing his more philosophical side, his desire to understand the meaning behind everything.

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[8] In using the term *polyphonic voice*, I draw from Kennedy (2017) and Sidorkin (1999), both of whom frame polyphony as the interaction of diverse voices that never achieve logical consistency or consensus. When Arjun spoke, his inner and outer voices interacted constantly, and he manifested his contradictions openly. Further, he suggested the voices inside and outside him were all competing for attention and time. The polyphonic nature of his voice made it difficult for me to classify his role within the school. Even during the course of our interview, he was engaged in a constant dialogue with me, and himself.

Much of this was also a process of self-discovery; though on the one hand, Arjun seemed

to have a fully developed inner voice, his outer voice—reflected through either formal

learning, social interactions, or public speaking—was less developed.

Arjun himself seemed to register the complicated interplay between the personal

and public dimensions of his voice, as articulated by a question in the middle of our

interview.

> *Arjun:* Do you know what an introvert and an extrovert really mean?
> *Roy:* What do they mean to you?
> *Arjun:* Well, actually, an introvert is someone who gets drained from social
> interactions, and extrovert is someone who gains energy from social interactions.
> Like, they feel drained because they were by themselves the whole day. But it's
> complicated for me, because I feel drab and kind of . . . someone comes over, I
> get drained. The more people around me, the more drained I feel, it happened at
> my own birthday party.

When the conversation shifted to the more formal uses of voice at City Workshop, Arjun

felt that while the school "empowers voice," he often feels his voice "is being snatched"

or "taken away." He said he lacks confidence at school and would only really show his

dad his work "because I feel like people will judge me." When I asked why he felt this

way, he said, "because there's teasing at the school. It's not the worst, but it can get

hostile." As to whether all voices at the school were equal, Arjun said there were

differences in terms of power, authority, and influence. He stated, "When you're talking

to someone, I feel like my voice is a lesser voice because it's not a cool voice, and they

have voice over me, and it doesn't feel good personally." When I asked him which voices

were more powerful, he said, "It's mostly students who are cool and popular or

something like that."

During our interview, Arjun never appeared to demonstrate the kind of voice

associated with traditional forms of democratic participation. His critiques of school and

society were never couched in the language of social critique, as they did with many of

the older students, who comfortably alluded to capitalism, regimentation, and inequality

during the course of our conversations. Even when I asked him what it meant to be

politically engaged, he said he did not really know what politics meant. At the same time,

he betrayed a deep sensitivity and awareness of political issues—often at a deeper and

more philosophically reflective level than many of the other students.

<div align="center">**Political Voice**</div>

In this section, I explore how students at City Workshop understood the

development and exercise of political voice. When I refer to political voice, I am

highlighting the capacity of young people to advocate for issues they care about,

participate in the governance of the school, and confront issues of power, authority, and

equity as they manifest at City Workshop and in the broader community. I should note

that while political voice focuses more closely on questions of participation and

citizenship, my interviews and observations revealed political voice was far more layered

and complex than a purely deliberative or speech-oriented approach to political

engagement. For example, some students exhibited the capacity to reflect critically on

their realities, a skill made possible by City Workshop's emphasis on questioning

structures of power, authority, and privilege in the broader society. However, students

also expressed political voice in a more relational sense; it was engaging with difference

and listening to different views that deepened their political convictions.

The Advocate

Adam was a seventh grade Black male in his first "formal" year at City Workshop. He had attended the school before, but because of financial reasons, combined with his mom's schedule of traveling and activism, he had to transfer schools and move to a different part of the city. During the last 8 years, as Adam told me, he had attended 11 different schools, which prevented him from really developing any stable connection with teachers and friends. Even attending City Workshop this year, mainly because of a generous scholarship that covers the majority of fees, produced its share of unpredictability. As the founders told me, Adam would often disappear from school for a few weeks, and then return suddenly, with little or no forewarning. My observations confirmed this trend; during at least five of my observations, Adam was not at school, yet the reasons always seemed justifiable, particularly in light of City Workshop's social justice orientation. Adam and his mom would often travel to rallies, protests, and direct actions, which the school viewed as profoundly educational and, as Ndindi told me, "We don't have a rigid attendance policy anyways. We know there's a lot of learning happening outside these walls."

Despite being only a middle school student, Adam had the intelligence, charisma, and self-confidence of a practiced politician. He wore black reading glasses and spoke in a calm, measured voice. Adam rarely looked bothered by some of the more frivolous conversations his classmates engaged in. During my observations, I noticed him diligently working on a long-term city-building project that involved plans for public transportation, affordable housing, and equitable schooling. Often, I would be preparing to return home after a day of observations and I would find Adam discussing his progress

developing the city, which he modelled after an actual city in Southern Mississippi, with

Scott, who would provide critical feedback Adam would listen to and acknowledge.

Adam described the voices of the students at City Workshop as "distinctive and

unique." When I asked him to elaborate, he told me, "some of them are bold, some of

them are loud, some of them are shy, and some of them are quiet; everyone has their own

individuality, and we just sort of embraced that." Adam characterized his voice as "kind

of articulate and advanced." When I asked him how the school has helped him develop

his voice, he pointed to its emphasis on self-direction and political literacy:

> Look, you can pursue what you're passionate about in this school; the teachers
> take us seriously, and don't plan activities or make decisions without our input.
> For me, they've helped me learn to get better at writing bills that I might be able
> to put on the ballot one day. There's this one proposition I'm interested in, called
> Prop U, which is made to limit housing density, and I want to remove that
> because it's a big reason why apartments and multifamily housing units or so
> sparse here. And I think if we were to remove it, then that would help address the
> housing crisis in LA. This school has helped me write a bill to submit to the city
> government; they've improved my writing and understanding of the process.

When I asked Adam to expand on just how the educational practices develop political

literacy, he pointed to the "daily conversations about the political state of our country,

reading books about nonviolence and civil rights, and participating in protests." For

Adam, this was a significant difference from other schools he attended, where you never

had "real conversations about real things that were happening. Nobody really cared."

Adam told me the public school system is not set up to support "social justice,

which is critical if students want to make change beyond their schools." Yet Adam did

not blame perceived problems in public schools on specific teachers, but rather,

"policymakers who think students should be, measured by their test scores, not how well

they question the world around them." City Workshop, in contrast, allowed "students to

question authority, and learn about the history of social struggle, where ordinary people make big change through their own efforts and self-education." When I asked him how he would change schools if he could, Adam said he would make them "smaller, more accessible, and more integrated." Adam also said schools "should give all kids a platform—whether it's through social media or during meetings—to "build a collective voice and make themselves heard, because that's what the BLM [Black Lives Matter] kids and Parkland [Stoneman Douglas High School] kids are doing. It's powerful."

What stood out about Adam's reflections, firstly, was how his voice, knowledge, and disposition comported with idealized portraits of political empowerment and participatory readiness. He communicated a deep and genuine interest in political issues, and I would routinely find him sharing his interests—about urban planning, gentrification, racial discrimination—with anyone who would listen. During daily forum, Adam frequently demonstrated his facility with real-world issues, marshalling facts, evidence, and knowledge to support his claims, while providing answers to arcane questions about local and national government. As I suggested, Adam was also clearly comfortable with public speaking, and using his voice to advocate for issues in the school and the community at large. In this way, Adam appeared to embody many of the features associated with thick democracy (Zyngier, 2011), a concept associated with the capacity to both analyze and act upon issues of social and civic concern. He was not simply exercising his voice; his voice was also informed, engaged, and oriented toward action.

At the same time, however, I also detected a problem or limitation in terms of how Adam's voice was "taken up" by others. That is, while the adults at City Workshop happily entered into dialogue with Adam, there was far less interaction with his

classmates. When Adam spoke, many of the other students stopped listening, occasionally casting glances of mild resentment and disinterest. I wondered why this dynamic was happening. I questioned whether Adam succeeded in leveraging the power of political voice in one context, while ignoring the interpersonal dynamics of his immediate community in another. In his maturity and articulacy, Adam appeared to ignore the often playful and informal ways young people take up political issues.

Based on my observations, I think this was partially the case. Despite the power of Adam's voice, he also appeared disinterested in the immediate issues and dynamics of his school community, which had the effect of limiting the influence of his voice in that context. He appeared so engaged about real world issues—and so practiced speaking with adults—that communicating in the context of City Workshop proved to be a greater challenge. This finding suggested the power of political voice hinged on the capacity to communicate in different ways with different audiences, rather than the maturity of one's political conceptions in a vacuum.

As I learned from speaking with other students, the exercise of political voice did not necessarily necessitate a command of political issues or a comfort speaking publicly. Jeremiah, a Black male in the 10th grade who previously attended Play Mountain Place, provided a case in point. Though Jeremiah spent most of his time huddled with some of the other high school students, he was unfailingly kind and accessible to everyone in the school. He exuded warmth, even while his size (over six feet, 200 pounds) made him significantly larger than everyone else in the school. Unlike Yalda and Nick, there was nothing fundamentally rebellious about his nature; as he described it, "I like to be there for everyone, not cause too much fuss, because I like people."

Jeremiah told me City Workshop had deepened his sensitivity toward underrepresented voices and increased his commitment to effect meaningful change. Yet Jeremiah's political voice expressed itself in terms that were relational and deeply empathic:

> There was a student here last year who's not here anymore, who didn't like being called sexist even if he was kind of sexist. We were talking about how men and women relate to each other and how a lot of women fear men. A female student said that if she was walking and there was a man walking the same direction, it's kind of like a scary situation for her and her friends. I hadn't really realized that as much and now I am a lot more aware of it. We also talked about ways to make it sort of more comfortable between men and women. But the kid was like, he wasn't having that. He was like, "It's not my fault that they are scared of me, so why do I care." He couldn't even listen to someone right in front of him . . . And I think what I took from that was the importance of talking about issues, respecting what other people go through, what they say.

The personal experience of seeing another student fail to care for the rights and experiences of another student, particularly one with less power, heightened Jeremiah's willingness to speak out about gender inequity and name discriminatory practices. Jeremiah also suggested City Workshop developed his political voice by helping him recognize those voices he failed to register in the past:

> *Roy:* How do you think the school has made you more politically aware?
> *Jeremiah:* Well, I guess like with gender and sexuality. Before here, I didn't really, not that I didn't know they didn't exist, people who are just different like that, I didn't really know anyone like that and now I do. And it's really made me like, 'Oh Wow. These people are really cool, and they are my friends, and I want them to be who they are without being scared or being attacked or not being able to fit in.' And that's kind of where I want to go.

In contrast to Adam, Jeremiah's political voice did not reflect itself through formal political interests or even the conventional application of political knowledge. Yet Jeremiah spoke with a profound and sincere awareness of what it means to engage with difference and recognize each person's intrinsic worth.

Brandon, Jeremiah's best friend, also suggested his political voice derived from a general respect for difference. As Brandon put it, "Everyone has feelings, everyone was an individual, and everybody's their own person," qualities he attributed to the school's educational approach. Yet Brandon's emphasis was less on voice—what he wanted to say and express—and more on developing an open mind and becoming educated politically to make good decisions:

> For me, normally I only really, like, care about . . . Like, if, like, I try to focus on what's right in front of me. I don't, like, try to think ahead, like, 10 years, 20 years to what might be happening because that just scares me. I'm like, "Oh, God. You know, you know what's gonna happen when I'm like 30." But, like, I think, like, going to this school has really, like, opened my mind to the idea that you can see the whole picture and then being politically informed really helps you make good. well, what I would call good decisions on what today's issues are.

As Brandon and Jeremiah's reflections indicated, political voice did not always express itself through structured forms of participation. Both Brandon and Jeremiah, unlike Nick and Adam, exercised political voice by demonstrating sensitivity toward the politics of the everyday—embracing difference, caring for the rights of others, and "seeing the big picture."

In discussing voice, students like Brandon and Jeremiah also stressed the critical nature of what they were learning, even if this learning did not translate into formal advocacy:

> The school teaches us stuff that happens rather than what X equals and Y plus X equals B. For example, today we learned about the 1968 school walk out, mainly because the teachers in LA were protesting, so we wanted to talk about different kinds of protest. And we talk about stuff that can link to today or was a problem in the past. Like, I've learned about Christopher Columbus so many times, but here we learned how he killed over nine million indigenous people, though I know that number is disputed. (Jeremiah, 10th grade)

> Before I got here, I wasn't very politically active at all. You know, I kind of had a general sense of, like, you know, I remember with the Obama elections and, like,

okay, you know, the good guy won, but, you know, beyond that I wasn't really connected or interested in much. And so then when we got to City Workshop, we really just started, like, talking about things, and it was interesting because it really opened my eyes to a lot of different things going on, and it made me speak up a lot more. (Remi, 10th grade)

The students I interviewed recognized not everyone shared the same interest in debating or discussing political issues. As Adam told me, the students at the school have different kinds of voices—"some are creative, some are innovative, and some are loud"—and these qualities shape the way students choose to engage. As my interviews suggested, the form political voice assumed was up for the students to decide, rather than for the school to shape according to its preconceived ideas. Nick was able to convey this sentiment:

> *Nick:* We agree on a lot of things but definitely, we have a lot of different perspectives. Like the other day, we were talking about politics and some of the kids knew nothing about politics or chose to know nothing.
> *Roy:* Was this a problem?
> *Nick:* You know, it was just different because you'd expect . . . because we talk about politics and current events a lot. You'd expect us to . . . everybody here to know mostly about current events, but a lot of us are just concentrating on other things.
> *Roy:* Is there an example you can think of?
> *Nick:* Although, I personally do like current events, etc. Like, you can go ahead and ask from my classmates and they would be like, "What do you mean?" They would just be like . . . I mean, they could probably name for you anything about anime, but they can't tell you anything about politics. I mean, it's so interesting, the fact that you don't have to fit into one interest up here.

As Nick observed, talking about politics was not a requirement for political voice, and students who discussed current events are not any more respected than those who talk about anime. Further, as evinced through my observations, political voice was a highly contingent and subjective phenomenon without clear boundaries and consistent applications. Students like Nick, for example, moved from the political to the playful without much provocation; in other words, his political voice was not always "turned

on." Similarly, as I will describe in the forthcoming section, political voice often emerged in informal settings, and through the lived experiences of students in the school. These experiences suggested the exercise of political voice develops in ways adults often fail to capture.[9]

Cara: The Sound of Silence

I never knew if interviewing Cara, a Black female in the 10th grade who previously attended small private middle school, would ever happen. Shy, quiet, and self-effacing, Cara actively resisted using her voice for social purposes. During daily forum, while the school discussed current events, she exhibited almost a bodily aversion to sharing her thoughts or participating in discussion. During class, she would sit by herself, at the farthest possible remove from wherever the action was. Yet despite Cara's reticence, she communicated a powerful, almost inescapable presence. While other students moved about restlessly, Cara held herself with a kind of stoic dignity—back ramrod straight, eyes fixated on whoever was speaking, her face expressing concern, frustration, or curiosity when an issue came up that piqued her attention. The founders of the school also routinely characterized her as one of the most intelligent, impressive students in the school, describing her as "brilliant, strong-minded, and very politically engaged," while Patrick, the literacy teacher, emphasized her "unique talents" as an artist and a writer.

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[9] On this topic, Biesta, Lawy, and Kelly (2009) noted "young people learn at least as much about democracy and citizenship – including their own citizenship – through their participation in the range of different practices that make up their lives, as they learn from that which is officially prescribed and formally taught" (p. 7).

When I sat down with Cara, I was struck by her deep command of political issues, and the personal interest she took on the specific issue of third-wave feminism. When I asked her what drew her to the topic, she told me she was fascinated by the intersectional dynamics that exist in the larger feminist movement—specifically, the trans-exclusionary radicals (TERFS) who were co-opting the voices of other activists:

> I think it's interesting that SJWs [social justice warriors] put down all the women who don't conform to their standards, or think it's not OK to organize with men, or to make connections with other social movements, like Black Lives Matter. There's all this stuff on social media where they also exaggerate experiences of assault, and I don't think that's productive.

Cara also said she was interested in "the way feminism sells, and how consumerism turned the movement into a brand, instead of a politically conscious struggle." When I asked her how the school helped her engage in these political issues, she pointed to the freedom she was given to conduct her own research and the close bonds that increased her motivation to learn:

> Scott and Ndindi knew I was interested in feminism, even though I didn't talk about it much, and they just kept on encouraging me to think about it and write on it or create something, but they never forced me to do anything. A lot of it really was me going on social media and reading articles. I mean, I know a lot of people my age use social media for memes and jokes if they have problems with certain things, that's the way they speak their minds or share their voice. I'm just a little different.

When I asked Cara why she did not speak up about political issues, she said she has agoraphobia, which she described as "a general fear of embarrassment," admitting "if something embarrassing happened to me, it would be the end of the world." Yet she also told me she had an alternative, creative means to express her political voice, and those outlets satisfied her and gave her a sense of agency. Those outlets included writing, social media, and drawing. Recently, she completed a graphic illustration of a biracial action

hero using just her iPad. Still, she was quick to dispel any idea that she had a special voice as a result. As to whether or not she felt her voice was undervalued or overvalued as the only Black female at the school, she told me felt equity is not about numbers, but about a culture of inclusion:

> Just because there are fewer girls than boys at the school, that doesn't mean the environment is more or less sexist . . . . It's all about whether the environment is welcoming, which it is, and we also get a chance to learn about other people's cultures, so I don't really feel ignored.

Cara's case illustrated some of the inherent limitations associated with a speech-centered conception of voice. As Rollo (2016b) argued, it is the emphasis on being heard, and gaining access to deliberative platforms, which obscures other forms of agency—particularly those expressed through artistic expression, composition, prefigurative practice, and silence.[10] Further, Cara did not view herself as passive or in need of representation. Instead, she sought out alternative modes to engage politically, express her critical views, and take action, all of which challenge essentialized conceptions of citizenship, participation, and voice.

Reflections on Political Voice

As my interviews demonstrated, political voice is far from a settled category. Even though it was certainly true some students understood how to exercise their voices more effectively to accomplish specific political goals, other students challenged a view

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[10] In his more recent work, Rollo (2017) suggested silence is an essential but overlooked political concept, one related to the agency we often associate with speech. He noted "that people often do things with silence, but they also do a great many things in silence. In our everyday lives, we establish, challenge, and modify norms through our physical interactions with others and institutions. Thus, one could argue that the concept of political silence cannot refer only to meaningful absences of speech but should also extend to the meaningful actions performed by agents" (p. 3).

of voice that develops in the context of an ideal speech community, and on terms

determined and regulated by adults. Elaborating on this problem, Jones and Welch (2018)

noted on their scholarship on children's rights:

> Voice is seen as something that is articulate only in particular ways and that articulacy is given to a certain status: the position of the adult. Children who do not communicate like 'mature,' 'articulate' adults are seen as not having a worthy contribution to make. (p. 121)

Because of this prejudicial disposition toward speech—embodied through the exercise of

judgment, maturity, capability, and power—the voices of students who exercise voice

outside of traditional channels are viewed as lacking value and legitimacy. In the process,

students become the victims of what Fricker (2007) described as a testimonial injustice—

their intelligence is overlooked because of stereotypes in the social imagination about the

credibility of children. This phenomenon may explain why I initially dismissed Arjun's

political reflections when he told me he had no idea what politics meant, only to discover,

through more careful listening, a deep sensitivity to political issues and profound anxiety

about exercising his voice publicly, a phenomenon that also held true for Cara.

A further issue centers on the issue of tokenism with regard to voice. When I

interviewed Cara, the only Black female at City Workshop, I presumed her positionality

gave her exclusive insight into the topic of equity and representation at the school. While

City Workshop was ethnically and racially diverse, it was predominantly male, so I felt

Cara's perspective could provide a counterpoint to the reflections of students who were

less "minoritized." Yet Cara herself did not feel compelled to speak on behalf of her race

and gender.[11] During several junctures in the interview, she confessed to feeling confused

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[11] Cook-Sather (2006) suggested that discourses of empowerment often reduce issues of race and class to simplistic binaries rather than complex constructions.

and uncertain about her beliefs, while suggesting her failure to speak derived from anxiety about public speaking, rather than any experience with marginalization and exclusion. In effect, what I had done was essentialize her speaking position, rather than recognize the complex and situated forces that shaped how she leveraged her political voice.

Influence and Equity

During the course of my interviews with Remi and Brandon, both students shared similar reflections about the influence of student voice in the school. They recognized City Workshop gave them opportunities to make meaningful decisions and participate in political discussions, but they did not always feel compelled to exercise these opportunities. For Brandon, this was because he trusted Ndindi and Scott, and for Remi, it was mostly because political issues did not bother him unless they roused him. Remi and Brandon shared similar thoughts about the equality of voices, noting that while all perspectives and positions were valued, certain voices are accorded more "weight," for reasons that struck them as justifiable. As Remi noted:

> I'd say that the high schoolers have more privilege than the middle schoolers, because it's a very small school, and we're older and as a result we have more accessibility to certain things and more freedom when it comes to that.

Brandon felt the influence of individual voices on decisions and governance had everything to do with "conducting yourself in serious manner," and participating in a way that "added substance to the conversation." Both of them recognized there were reasonable limits and constraints on student voice. As Brandon put it:

> We can't all influence everything or achieve some kind of consensus on every issue. Sometimes, Scott and Ndindi have to make decisions, and we have to respect it, not because they make us, but because they make sense, and we know

things have to get done. Just because all students have influence does not mean they always care about influencing things, or even know how to influence things. Also, this place would be chaos if the voices of the sixth graders were literally equal to everyone else's, honestly who I am now compared to who I was then are two completely people.

Brandon's reflections suggested the exercise of voice at City Workshop, while democratically distributed, is only a formal dispensation. In practice, there are differences in status, positioning, responsibility, and knowledge that make voices more or less powerful.

Yet it is important to distinguish disparities in influence—the fact some voices carry more weight than others—from the developmental frameworks (e.g., Hart's [1992] ladder of participation model), which presume young people, by virtue of their lack of knowledge or experience, cannot participate as equals. There were certain areas that demanded more involvement from the older students and the founders, a fact the community appeared to accept. As Caleb noted:

In terms of the power of the voices of the students, I think it's just a matter of how long you've been here, and you've seen things develop and you've seen how, like, you've seen different problems. And maybe you've been thinking of ways to fix them. So I think the longer you've been at the school, it would make sense that you would know more about how to handle things and use your voice correctly. But I don't think that means that people who are new also (a) don't have a voice, or (b) can't use their voice effectively.

Caleb's emphasis on "using your voice correctly" again suggested the development and exercise of voice was strengthened through experience and historical memory, both of which allow students to achieve a greater measure of influence through their voices.

Yet this was far from a consensus view. When I asked Arjun whether he detected a general emphasis on respect and equality in terms of voice, his account challenged those of Caleb, Remi, and Brandon:

Roy: Do you feel like your voice is valued here?
Arjun: I don't know. Sometimes I feel kind of embarrassed to show my writing or to show my books, or whatever.
Roy: Why?
Arjun: I just feel like other people will judge me and won't like it. Because of all the making fun of people, I just feel, like, very self-conscious of my work.
Roy: Do you ever get to talk about that, like, in community meetings where you feel like there's too much joking around and it makes you feel uncomfortable to share things because you might get teased for it?
Arjun: Yeah. No, I never shared that. I'm not really confident enough to share that.
Roy: So is there tolerance for everyone's perspective here?
Arjun: Not necessarily. I mean, like, everyone is okay with Remi being gay. Like, there's no problem there, you know, LGBTQ, fine. But, it's hard to explain. There's teasing here. For me, I feel like at least my voice is a lesser voice and I feel like certain other people have voice over me . . . it doesn't feel good personally. Sometimes I feel like my voice is being snatched away.

Arjun's reflection suggested a keen awareness of the power dynamics in the school; he felt his voice was "lesser" and "being snatched away" despite City Workshop's stated emphasis on tolerance and nondiscrimination. In effect, he felt as though he was being silenced, which in turn inhibited him from sharing things publicly that he was comfortable telling me. There were a few important takeaways from Arjun's reflections; first, despite his reticence to speak publicly, he was clearly sensitive to issues of power and hierarchy in the school, a fact to which many other students only casually referred. Second, the emphasis on the correct use of voice may have obscured the importance of its more relational dimensions (e.g., the importance of caring for others who felt overlooked), while overlooking the agency and value younger adolescents possess, despite their lack of size, stature, and experience.

Dialogic Voice

> *Roy:* Has this school helped you develop your voice?
> *Jeremiah:* I guess because I'm friends with other people whose voices are different than mine. Like Yalda, she has a completely different voice than me. And that makes me want to be more unique.
> *Yalda:* I really do. I'm way louder than Jeremiah.
> *Roy:* Isn't that confusing then? Being friends with people who have different voices?
> *Jeremiah:* Yeah, I guess so, but it means that you have more of a connection. But also even for me, I don't have just one voice, I have lots of different interests.
> *Yalda:* What do you mean?
> *Jeremiah:* I'm not so sure. I mean, I'm like other people here. I'm just different. But I wouldn't be who I am without them, I think. We're all really ourselves with each other.
> *Yalda:* I think about this about this stuff a lot actually. Who wants to be the same ever? Who wants boring friends?

As I suggested at the outset of this chapter, the meaning of voice extended beyond traditional forms of participation and influence. Based on my interviews, what students valued most about their experiences at City Workshop was the fact they felt recognized as unique individuals. They understood voice less as a tool to exercise influence and more as a way of expressing themselves openly and freely. Yet students also felt empowered to express their voices because City Workshop gave them permission to actualize themselves in whatever way felt meaningful and authentic. As I explain in Chapter V, this process of actualization was enhanced by the fact City Workshop dissolved many of the structural and relational barriers which restrict and regulate student voice in more traditional settings.

Yet returning to the exchange that opened this section, it is important to stress again what I mean by dialogic voice, and why it stands as a significant finding in this study. When I asked the students in my focus group how the school helped them develop their voices, they suggested it was difference rather than sameness that had the greatest

impact on their individuality. When Jeremiah referred to the fact "we're really ourselves with each other," and he enjoys his friends "because their voices are not like mine," what I took him to mean is that students recognized the diverse voices in the school enabled them to discover and exercise their own ontological voices. As I suggested, this atmosphere of reciprocity and mutuality made the development of voice a shared event, one that accommodated both resemblance (e.g., connection with peer groups) and difference (e.g., the fact they didn't all share the same interests). The dialogic is the bridge that joins self and other in a relational nexus, one that allows students to share "simultaneous but different space" (Holquist, 2003, p. 22).

Jeremiah had difficulty articulating just how this process works, but it was clear he registered its effect:

> I think just . . . I'm not really sure what connects us, but I know we have a connection...because me and Yalda don't have much in common, we don't like a lot of the same things, but we're still really good friends . . . but I think seeing her so free. . . . I don't know.
> And I remember the first couple days, first couple weeks actually, I came to City Workshop. Well first I was like, "Oh, these guys are a bunch of weirdos." And then I realized, it's not that they're weird. It's that they are so comfortable, and the teachers are comfortable, that it's like they all know each other, and they know who they are. And it really surprised me. And I was like, "Oh wait, I love it here." Makes me want to grow more.

In the opening exchange, Jeremiah also referred to the complexity and multiplicity of student voice. Hence, he explained, "I don't have one voice. I have lots of different interests, and my voice takes different forms." That much was clear from my observations; Jordan enjoyed being deeply immersed in projects, but he also loved chatting with his friends about music. He was critical in some domains, and playful in others. As he told me, these were all elements of student voice. The dynamic also played out with Arjun; he had an internal voice, an external voice, along with the voices he was

hearing from his parents and teachers, and these voices were helping him construct a

sense of who he was as an individual, a community member, and an adolescent.

What the dialogic dimensions of student voice also called attention to is the

importance of being listened to and heard in a deep and meaningful way. Without either a

response or recognition of what one says, or the opportunity to effect change, one lacks a

voice, as Arjun told me:

> *Roy:* Do people listen to each other here? Are there times when people's ideas or
> thoughts are ignored?
> *Arjun:* Think of voice like when you speak . . . . When you say something, other
> people should be able to hear that, otherwise we do not have a voice if no one
> hears you when you try to say something. Like if you have an opinion on
> something, and then someone says—And then someone just ignores you, then you
> clearly don't have a voice. But if you say something and someone . . . . If you
> share your opinion on something, and then everyone just, like, you know,
> everyone sees that and accepts your opinion and whatever, maybe uses it at as
> feedback or whatever, then, then you truly have a voice and that's what everyone
> should have, but that's not 100% true for everyone in the world.
> *Roy:* So in order to have a voice, you actually have to be listened to.
> *Arjun:* Yeah. It should be able to have an effect on whatever that you want to
> share your opinion to. That's what a voice means to me.

The complexity of Arjun's reflection was embodied in his awareness you do not have a

voice if "someone just ignores you," or if your voice has no effect on those with whom

you share opinion. Arjun's reflection can be read as recognition of the relational character

of dialogue, a point Holquist (2003) made in his analysis of Bakhtin:

>   A dialogue is composed of an utterance, a reply, and a relation between the two.
> It is this relation that is most important of the three, for without it the other two
> would have no meaning. They would be isolated . . . Insofar as my "I" is dialogic,
> it insures my existence is not a lonely event but part of a larger whole . . . it frees
> my existence from [a more] circumscribed meaning. (p. 17)

It is here the dialogic can help us avoid the tendency to compartmentalize voice into

simple binaries. While the categories I used to make sense of voice earlier in the

chapter—ontological political, and dialogic—helped me make sense of the

dimensionality of voice, in practice, there was very rarely a point where any single voice encompassed or dominated the others. They were always engaged and in some sense connected to each other.

Conclusion

I close this chapter with information about how my findings were both complicated and enriched my theoretical understanding of student voice. Despite my attempt to capture the pluralistic, and sometimes contradictory, expressions of voice, the students of City Workshop frequently transgressed whatever labels and categories I developed to make sense of their experiences in school. I may have suggested as much at the opening of the chapter, but I would like to return to the challenge once more having presented a portion of my findings. As I described in Chapter III, in line with grounded theory, the categories derived from my coding were meant to be provisional placeholders, rather than rigid analytical groupings. What I meant to suggest with the concept ontological voice is an active process through which students came to realize themselves more powerfully—as unique human beings, and not just as students. Yet self-realization did not necessarily imply the discovery of an authentic voice that was unified, singular, or unchanging. The students suggested to me they felt their voices were still unfolding and expanding, and in some cases, they felt the pressure of multiple voices pointing them in different directions.

This same complexity and variation apply to the notion of political voice. As I have suggested, the term political voice traditionally hails a particular kind of student— deliberative, rational, and participatory. Nevertheless, the students I interviewed who seemed most politically engaged had various ways of expressing agency, and the shape

and quality of their engagements depended on space, context, and experience. Cara's political voice, for example, found expression over social media and graphic design, Jeremiah's found expression through dialogue about interpersonal issues, and Adam's through public speaking and civic engagement. Just like with ontological voice, the process of becoming political was aided by a social environment that offered multiple outlets for critical inquiry: (a) lessons on colonialism and popular struggle, (b) lectures from guest speakers on the displacement of indigenous communities, (c) presentations from students on the history of Labor Day, and (d) opportunities to research local propositions and advocate for them on election day, along with an atmosphere where critical dialogue infused every aspect of school life (more on this in next chapter). This process of acquiring a political voice, however, did not mean students abandoned other voices, consistently expressed maturity, or always possessed agency. Still, a general pattern could be discerned in the general development from the first to their final years at City Workshop. The older students appeared to have a greater grasp over themselves than the younger students, many of whom were still adapting to the social dynamics of the school.

Many of these trends complicate the notion students can easily be classified into subjects and actors, or that a collective experience can be presumed among the students in the school. From my interviews, it was clear that while all students possessed a voice, not everyone chose to exercise it through deliberation, public speaking, or political advocacy. Those who were often most reserved in the Daily Forum, were incredibly engaged, articulate, and expressive when they spoke to me. Though students like Arjun

lacked the critical basis of knowledge that empowered Adam's voice, in our conversations his voice surfaced with profound clarity and distinctiveness.

Further, though aspects of critical pedagogy helped highlight the way in which students learned how to challenge oppressive practices and "name their realities" (Freire, 1973), not every student felt they were either representative of an oppressed group, or in need of liberation. Things were far more complex, and this was particularly true of the underrepresented minority students I interviewed, most of whom performed their racial identities in a way that felt authentic to them. Cara, for example, did not feel she was in need of a voice, or that her social position as the only Black female student in the school meant she was silenced. Further, Jeremiah suggested sexism rather than racism was a bigger concern for him. What these reflections revealed, again, was the need for a richer conception of voice, one that accommodates both difference and complexity with respect to political participation, and other forms of agency and engagement.

In the next chapter, I focus more closely on the educational and organizational practices that empower student voice at City Workshop, to address my second research question. In so doing, I will be placing emphasis on the social context of voice—rather than its unique and differentiated expressions. In the next chapter, I shift from a conceptual, theoretical orientation, to one that pragmatically accounts for the school's educational approach through teaching, learning, and leadership.

V – EDUCATIONAL PRACTICES AT CITY WORKSHOP

I remember traveling to City Workshop for my first day of research. I knew from my MapQuest app the school was located on a busy thoroughfare in a diverse but quickly gentrifying neighborhood in the city, one filled with small ethnic markets, mom and pop craft stores, Baha'i and Masonic temples, and boutique marijuana dispensaries. Usually, one can make out a school by the familiar trappings: traffic signs reminding commuters to lower their speeds, students yelling quick goodbyes and leaping out of cars, administrative office buildings and school flags, teachers chatting amongst themselves and pushing carts with classroom supplies, and then, a manic rush when the bell rings, signifying the start of the school day. However, City Workshop had few of these features. It was mixed in with the rest of the city, located right next to an orthodontist's office and situated inside a storefront (see Figure 6). No schedules or marketing materials highlighted upcoming school events. Instead, there was a chaotic assemblage of flyers, bumper stickers, and campaign posters chaotically assembled on a weathered black corkboard, outside a single, rickety door that marked the entrance (see Figure 2). If one did not know any better, one might think it was an anarchist bookstore, polling station, or a small cultural center, but certainly not a school in any traditional sense

Upon entering City Workshop, one is immediately confronted with a strange new educational landscape, one that feels risky, provocative, and different (see Figure 6). The front interior of the school looks like a cross between an untidy living room and a craft store, with a big black table at the center. On one side of the room is a stunning variety of

Figure 6. Corkboard of flyers.

masks from *Star Wars* (see Figure 7), all of which look handmade, yet accurately

rendered. On the other side of the room, a weathered bookshelf holds dog-eared copies of

The Autobiography of Malcolm X and *The Odyssey*. The window facing the street serves

as the view for the only administrative office in the school. As I would learn later, this

space is where Scott, one of the school co-founders, works on more formal school

business (e.g., emails to families, invitations for upcoming events, website updates),

while surrounded by a creative assortment of brushes, pens, pencils, blades, and clay

figures (see Figure 3). Amid all these resources is an old tissue box with a label that reads

"tuition." Upon close examination, one can see several checks inside, folded and piled on

top of each other.

Origins and Traditions of City Workshop

In the marketing materials, and on the website, City Workshop portrays itself in

several different ways. In one flyer (see Figure 8), City Workshop is described as a

Figure 7. Masks and figures from Star Wars.
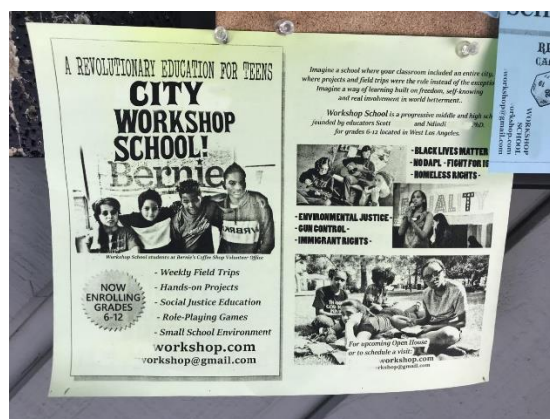
Figure 8. City Workshop flyer.

"revolutionary independent school for grades 6-12." In the background of this flyer are a

black clenched fist and a picture of four students—two Black, two White—at the

volunteer office of a Bernie Sanders political campaign in the city. On the back of the

flyer, there are pictures of Ndindi a school co-founder, speaking publicly at an event for

immigrant rights and an image of students playing guitar and hanging out. The text on the

back of the flyer reads:

> Imagine a school where your classroom included an entire city, where projects
> and field trips were the rule instead of the exception. Imagine a way of learning
> built on freedom, self-knowing, and real involvement in world betterment.
>
> Ours is a school that is founded by two teachers who bring a wealth of
> experience and energy to their calling. Scott has taught a full range of humanities
> and arts subjects for over 10 years, and [Ndindi] PhD, has taught the scope of

Sciences and Math, as well as education and social justice courses at the college level for over 13 years.

The flyer also includes testimonials from professors of critical pedagogy and equity-based education, Drs. Gloria Ladson-Billings and Peter McLaren, along with excerpts from chapters Ndindi has published: "Improving the Study of Algebra 1 in Urban Areas," "Post-Colonial Construction of the Self," and "Culturally Responsive Methodologies." Scott's accomplishments leading students to a California Student Media festival and supporting the emotional needs of gifted learners are also featured.

In another flyer (see Figure 9), a Black male student is reading a graphic Marvel magazine and the text above him says, "Geeks are cool at City Workshop." On this flyer, City Workshop emphasized role playing games and the design of three-dimensional model terrains students participate in creating—some based on old Westerns, others based on science fiction.

Flyers such as these made me think about the relationship between the educational practices at City Workshop and student voice. The purpose of this chapter is to explore this relationship by examining the school's governance structure and educational
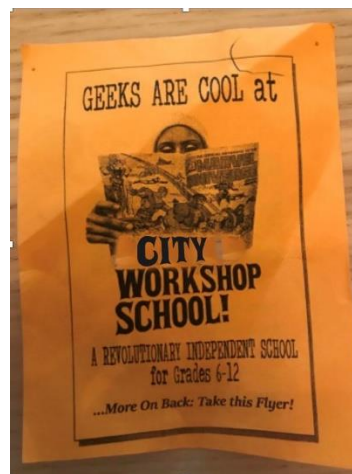
Figure 9. City Workshop flyer.

practices, along with its mission and vision. While the previous chapter focused on the way students exercised their voices, my intention here is to examine the practices that empowered voice—pedagogically and organizationally. As a reminder, one of the reasons I selected City Workshop as a site for this qualitative case study is the provocative nature of its mission and vision. The founders view City Workshop as an educational alternative, one that "provides an authentic education freed from traditional constraints." Yet perceiving what they describe as the limitations of alternative education—with its emphasis on individual self-realization and personal freedom—the school adopts a more critical approach by centering political engagement, public democracy, and dialogic relations (See Appendix D for a detailed description of City Workshop's educational principles).

How the school expresses these aspects of its mission is my central concern in this chapter. I begin by describing the mission and vision as a way to contextualize the educational practices in place at City Workshop. Following my descriptions, I describe the organic and dialogical structure that governs the school. I conclude by outlining the pedagogical practices that are enacted at the school that augment student voice.

Mission and Vision

In regard to its mission and vision, City Workshop bears some similarity to the cohort of schools traditionally viewed as alternative. These include free schools, democratic schools, Sudsbury schools, play-based humanistic schools, and anarchist schools. While specific practices may vary, the general stress in these settings is on freedom, community, and autonomy, along with a teaching approach that supports

holistic and integrated learning. Yet, in other ways, the values and practices of City

Workshop were formulated as a critique of the perceived middle-class bias of alternative

and progressive schools (Bowles & Gintis, 2011; Schutz, 2001), along with the

limitations of more individualistic interpretations of anarchist education.[1] First, the

demographic of City Workshop is primarily working class, and the composition of its

student body is racially and ethnically diverse (see Chapter III). These numbers are made

possible by the tuition model—$5,000 is the base tuition and $10,000 is the ceiling

tuition. While the tuition model in the school has generated conflict—some of the

families told me they wished the school would increase its fees to invest in better

facilities and a bigger teaching staff—the founders insist on making the school as

accessible as possible to students and families from local public schools. As Scott told

me, "if it's not accessible to the working class, it's not revolutionary," a statement that

also aligns with Ndindi's Marxist-humanist political orientation. Second, City Workshop

is situated squarely in a diverse urban context, thus allowing the school to be more

responsive to its local community and civic context.

A key feature of the school is its theoretically rich foundation. The school called

itself a "workshop" to place the vocational and the academic in close relation. Rather

than separating learning from direct experience, the school viewed both activities as

essential features of self-realization (WASC, 2015). In this way, the City Workshop

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[1] The term *anarchist education* is an umbrella term that refers to experiments in cooperative, mutualistic, self-governing schooling that stresses the dignity and rights of children. Anarchist schools have taken a variety of forms, from communities which emphasize personal freedom and autonomy in more rural settings, to those with more political identities that engage questions of power, equity and social justice in urban contexts. As described in chapters I and III, City Workshop's anarchist-inspired approach borrows from radical traditions in education that stress political voice and social reconstruction.

model drew from many of the anarchist schools created in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, which sought to bring work and play, along with co-education and mixed grouping, under the banner of integrated education (Avrich, 2014; Ferrer, 2018). The City Workshop community made a concerted effort to confront issues of power as they manifest in school and society while focusing on the acquisition of critical literacies— through writing, media production, research, etc.—that empower student voice (Morrell et al., 2013).

The students themselves characterized the mission and vision of the school in political terms. In some cases, they did not use the term "school" at all, suggesting instead City Workshop was a "movement" or a "project" for families and students that felt traditional schooling had become "way too institutionalized," as one parent told me. In my interview with Zane, a White seventh grader, he suggested that simple definitions or generic philosophies fail to capture what City Workshop stands for:

> *Roy:* What does City Workshop stand for? How would you define the mission?
> *Zane:* Yeah, well, a short, succinct statement won't cut it, because that's something I run into with a lot of schools, too, where they describe themselves, and say, we're progressive, we're this, we're that. And really, are you, though? I know Scott uses the phrase democratic education, and I think that is quite possibly the best way to describe it. Probably . . . I don't know that I'd necessarily say, like, social education or something like that, because I think that's also a huge part of it.
> *Roy:* Any other ideas?
> *Zane:* Or exploration-based education. Yeah, I mean, I would say to really distill it down, I would say it's an equitable exploration-based community. And I wouldn't even use the word school.

The thoughtful and deliberative way Zane responded to my question suggests something important about the relationship between student voice and the school. Zane was not parroting some prefabricated description of City Workshop; as he put it, "a short, succinct statement won't cut it." Instead, he attempted to figure it out for himself and did

so by employing terms more nuanced and complex than "progressive" or even "school."

Hence, Zane described City Workshop as "social education" and "equitable, exploration-

based," but suggested these terms were too simplistic and the school had a pluralistic and

polyphonic identity. In a sense, the way he took up my question suggested the school's

meaning or identity was contestable, in contrast to schools that frame their missions in

polished, finished terms.

The rich and varied descriptions of City Workshop's approach also surfaced in my

interaction with Cara and Yalda:

> *Roy:* Is this a social justice school?
> *Cara:* It has to be because the only other social justice school I've seen was just
> this public school that my friends go to. And . . . the only thing they do is, like,
> have a poll and stuff on, like, social justice. Look around you here. Our teachers
> go to protests and students sometimes take off time to go to rallies.
> *Yalda:* I just think this is a school for misfits. But the school is also a misfit. We
> all have the same story; all of us didn't fit where we were before. We were all
> bothered by something. That's the reason I hated my last school was because it
> wasn't me. It was . . . first, you go to elementary, then middle, then high school,
> then you get to college, and then you find a job for the rest of your life. You're
> learning to work, so you can work for the rest of your life. You work, to work, to
> work, to work, and then you die. Basically, it's capitalism, it's what's for dinner,
> right? But it's not like that here. You know what the next thing is. It's not such a
> surprise. And you're prepared for it, and they help you get you prepared for it.

Cara's response to my question suggested real and authentic political experience was

central to the approach of City Workshop, in contrast to the tokenism of having a poll to

simulate social justice and political participation. At City Workshop, as Cara noted, the

teachers did not view their work as politically neutral; they engaged directly in political

action. Meanwhile, Yalda described City Workshop's educational approach by critiquing

the logic of capitalism, where work has no meaning and individuals follow economic

orders until they die. Yalda also suggested many City Workshop students failed to

identify with the alienating nature of their previous schools, where they lacked ownership

over what they were doing. Finally, the fact City Workshop welcomed misfits suggested the school embraced divergent voices, instead of subjecting those voices to domestication, regulation, and censure.

Taken together, the students failed to characterize City Workshop's educational approach in the language of monologue or through the narrow, technical language of learning discourses. For them, City Workshop was composed of a wide variety of voices, traditions, and tendencies, all of which intersected to offer an education that was social and political in nature. Yet the students also understood the social and political as terms that were co-extensive and compatible with individual self-realization and authenticity. As the students told me, part of what made the school alternative was its resistance to sameness, regularity, and routine. Coming to City Workshop represented a political choice for students to learn in an environment where students could shape their realities without the pressure to conform to external standards or silence what made them different. Such an approach centered on the importance of dialogue and complexity as governing features of the school.

Dialogic Governance of City Workshop

> So how does one build a community? How does a school embody the open-heartedness and friendliness required without coming off as overly broad or shallow? I believe that to be successful, a community must remain small and genuine. Scott and Ndindi are the co-founders of the school I will graduate from in June. They have created a community that perfectly exemplifies a healthy, good school culture. A large part of this comes from their roles not just as teachers and educators, but as peers and friends. At just nineteen students, a school like mine is too small for hierarchies between students and teachers. Through a very selective application process, they have created a community that reflects the values of the school. And yes, a school must have values, something more than the trite anti-bullying and "respect others" campaigns of public high schools. My school is deeply involved in social justice programs: we make over two hundred sandwiches for the homeless every month, we patronize African-

American art exhibits, and have taken field trips to protests. This care for others permeates the community of the school and those values get directed inwards as well. We care for our own, and support teachers and students alike who need it. This collective accountability is immeasurably valuable to forming a healthy community (Jasper, Alumnus).

Jasper's reflections compelled me to consider the forces, systems, structures, and values that shape how City Workshop works. In particular, I was interested in its modes of governance and decision-making and how the school cultivated a community of distinct voices. Broadly, the school's governance is built on dialogical principles. In his description of school as a third way, David Kennedy (2006a) noted a school modeled on the principles of dialogue "is both experimental and emergent and guided by normative ideals; it is not a community that 'just happens,' nor is it a community that is determined from above, by a hierarchy of power" (p. 174). Kennedy suggested such a school is an intentional community, neither prefabricated nor without structure, but very much guided by the project of engaging children and adults in the work of social reconstruction, one that accommodates both impulse (plasticity) and habit (mechanization).

In my interview with Yalda, she suggested such a process involves "mushing your oneness with the oneness of the school, and the oneness of the teachers," in effect, finding a balance between the subjectivity of students and the subjectivity of the teachers. Part of this process is made possible by the emphasis on dialogue; in a school where teachers and students can know and understand each other, they can bring their interests and aspirations together to forge what Kennedy (2006a) described as "an ongoing social experiment, where adult meets child in the interests of mutual transformation" (p. 174). In such a setting, governance is a joint enterprise involving co-authorship and continual sensitivity toward maintaining equitable power relations.

Yet there are more pragmatic reasons for the school's structural form. As Jasper suggested in the observation that opened this section, the creation of community is made possible, first, by the fact the school is "small and genuine," a quality that obviates the need for hierarchies, or what the school describes as "conventional policymaking." Instead of delegating tasks and responsibilities to figures who make decisions on behalf of the school, the school community itself explored problems, plans, and proposals through the medium of face-to-face communication, a process that extended to procedures for supervision and evaluation, among others. There are no charters that delineate and specify rights and responsibilities, and both my analysis of documents and interviews with students provided very little insight into how the school is functionally maintained.

> We have found that authentic, direct communication with all stakeholders is not only possible in a school of our own size, but is also highly preferable, and far more effective. As most conventional written policy is created a proxy for genuine, one on one understanding, we have found that the former is unnecessary because we have the latter. We have found that dialogue allows us to think through problems and issues in a manner that welcomes diverse viewpoints; we think dialogue allows us to make better decisions because the process itself is not fixed in stone, like certain forms of parliamentary procedure. (WASC, 2015, p. 14)

> I can't really remember all the decisions we've made, but I know we've made decisions, and everyone generally agrees to them. But we all hold it down here more or less, and if you've been here for a while, you know how things go. And the good thing about the school is we always end up talking about how the school works. Literally that's how the school works is by us talking about how it works. (Brandon, 11th grade)

In this way, dialogue seems to play a central role in the governance of the school. Dialogue serves as the medium and mechanism that allows for what Fielding (2012) described as *radical collegiality*—students and teachers working together to produce shared understandings and address issues of common concern. At City Workshop,

examples of radical collegiality included students and teachers working collaboratively on assessment practices (rather than leaving the judgment of performance to teachers), collaborative proposals about how to maximize the value of city days[2] and the general willingness of community members to diversify roles, depending on the circumstance. This practice can be distinguished from efforts to engage students as researchers and consultants, where voice is used as a source of insight that adults act on to improve management and performance. The school's dialogic approach to governance also permits the school to realize many of the goals associated with anarchist-inspired education, which Fielding (2011) suggested includes an ethic of care and encounter, an emphasis on diversity and plurality, and "images such as the rich child and the school as a public space, collective workshop, and person-centered learning community" (p. 113).

The primary space for governance, though certainly not the *only* setting, is centered in the daily forum, which allocates a portion of time for anyone to discuss topics of interests or concerns at the school. The Forum is a setting for philosophical reflection, critical dialogue, and collaborative decision-making. As Patrick, one of the literacy teachers told me:

> We start off every day, of course, with a few minutes of meditative breathing, which I think is tremendous. I think that really puts out some fires before they begin. Nonetheless, after that, we begin a discussion about the day's events, our schedule for the week, different obligations that are coming up. And then we talk about, and this is very much considered class time, current events, politics in our neighborhood, globally in our nation. And these kids are aware. Just . . . I mean, this week, what a perfect timing for it. We got the teachers' strikes. I asked, "Hey, who saw the teachers striking out there?" You know, and we got answers and hands raised from students [who were from different parts of the city].

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[2] As I noted in Chapter III, city days refer to the weekly forays into the city, where students explored, researched, and interacted with their broader civic context, visiting museums, churches, neighborhoods, markets, and cultural centers.

Yet, in other cases, the forum gave students the opportunity to both advocate for and

implement policies they felt served the best interests of the school. One such example

was the school's inclusion policy, which was co-created by students, in collaboration

with Scott, to enshrine the school's commitment to equity and justice (see Figure 10).

When I talked to Scott about this process, he suggested the document itself was a

collaborative effort initiated and created by the students.

> The students—I remember Caleb specifically—felt like we needed to put
> something in writing, because a lot of the students who came to the school, at
> least in our first few years, felt really persecuted at their previous schools. I really
> mean it. Some of them felt they never had protections put in place. And so that
> Forum became a place for us to discuss the precise language we would use, with
> everyone giving their opinions until we settled on something that we now put on
> our website. But it's not something cheap, you know, it's a policy we've
> internalized, and I think it's a policy based on supporting our most vulnerable
> students.

Patrick's observation brought me back to the students' interpretations of City

Workshop's approach. Part of the school's commitment to empowering student voice

involved allowing students to shape the norms and values of the community, rather than

limiting their participation to a narrowly circumscribed realm under adult discretion, such

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Inclusion Policy

We here at City Workshop welcome, value, and support people of all races, colors,
sexual orientations, gender identities, disabilities, sexes, religions, and national origins
documented and undocumented.

Furthermore, our educational practices are highly invested in addressing the
significance of diverse peoples, working towards togetherness for all, and fostering an
egalitarian multiculturalism where all types of people can achieve self-actualization.

Simply put, acceptance for all learners is our top priority.

Figure 10. Inclusion Policy written by Caleb Hopkins and Prince Jones, high school

students at City Workshop, Class of 2016 and 2017.

as affinity groups or student councils. As Patrick suggested, City Workshop did not rely

on bureaucracy or protocol as a guide for behavior. Instead, the school relies on genuine

encounters to forge shared understandings students internalized because the process

involved them directly.

The experiences of taking responsibility, participating in dialogue, and exploring

possibilities for school improvement had the effect of extending student voice beyond the

individual and toward the collective. This collective, as suggested before, was not a

monolithic whole that collapsed into a single voice, but a multicultural community that

viewed diversity as essential for self-actualization for "all types of people." The inclusion

policy developed by students also demonstrated the importance of channeling advocacy

toward real, substantive change, rather than simply airing out problems, grievances, and

concerns.

Relational Justice

> With toddlers or with students, you know, is that there always has to be an answer
> to why. There always has to be an answer that's a satisfactory answer, not just to,
> you know, why ourselves, but to, like, why are we doing it this way? Why am I
> learning this way? Why am I, you know, sitting in a chair from 8:00 till 3:00
> being talked to? You know, why am I stressed about tests? What are we studying
> this and not that? What does it even mean? And there has to be a satisfactory
> answer, and there's not. (Jasper, Alumnus)

Jasper's reflection on the values, structures, and reasons behind schooling

foreground City Workshop's approach to relational justice, which Laden (2013)

suggested rests on a process of intersubjective justification and dialogue. Jasper's

emphasis on the need for a "satisfactory answer" for why schooling, particular the

induced passivity of "sitting in a chair from 8:00 till 3:00 being talked to," should happen

one way and not another suggests the realization of voice relates to the significance and

coherence of schooling. At City Workshop, justice was not a loose commitment to rights

or an epistemic commitment to helping students acquire critical knowledge about society.

Instead, it was relational concept that opened up space for students and teachers to

negotiate power and justify the reasoning behind particular decisions and activities.

Such an approach did not call for authority to be magically dissolved under the

influence of a romanticized and egalitarian vision of education; instead, authority was

transparently engaged and negotiated between persons, which had the effect of affirming

voice in both directions. As Caleb observed:

> What I like about City Workshop is the fact that the influence of the teachers is
> sort of out in the open; they don't use their influence to kind of determine things
> for us, but only to get us to think about why we're doing what we're doing.
> There's some things we have to do, we get it, it's a school but the things we do
> always have a kind of explanation, it's not out of the blue or anything.

In Caleb's rendering, student voice was respected through the practice of explanation and

reason-giving. This ethos extended to the practice of the daily forum:

> There's basically like a little session we hold where all the students have the
> ability to come up with rules. I think they are also allowed to come up with
> counter arguments if they disagreed with a rule. And they just all . . . it was sort of
> like a little discussion to figure out what the rules of the place would be.

Such an interaction is premised on the view that students are moral agents and

interlocutors who can actively shape a school's culture of justice.

In describing the pedagogy of schools that view justice as central to their

missions—and City Workshop certainly qualified as one—Laden (2013) suggested the

principle of equality should govern the relations between students and teachers. Laden

(2013) argued these relationships do not obviate the need for hierarchy, and that

hierarchy itself does not necessarily mean "arbitrariness of rule" (p. 73). Laden (2013)

observed hierarchy involves "having the status to make decisions or take actions that

others cannot" (p. 74), a definition Laden suggested can be tempered by the practice of

accountability and the exercise of reasonableness.

> In such cases, deference to one's authority must rest on earned trust and on the ability to justify one's decisions, neither of which requires handing authority to one's subordinate. . . . One way for an educational environment at any level both to value reasonableness would be to place the practice of intersubjective justification at the heart of its organizational structures and norms and to reward and encourage those who properly demand and offer justifications, who show the proper responsiveness to others. (p. 71)

I include Laden's analysis here because I think it illustrates the value of centering justice

in the discourse on student voice. Laden's (2013) emphasis on intersubjective

justification and the corresponding example he provides—"a student could ask a teacher

why a particular topic was being covered or why it was being taught this way, as well as

why certain work was assigned or certain facts and interpretations were presented as they

were" (p. 70)—was very similar to the kind of authoritative teaching theorized by

Kohlberg (1981). Authoritative teaching, unlike the polarities of authoritarian and

permissive teaching, is built on the premise that authority is not self-justifying. Its justice

derives from its morality, along with its receptivity to competing claims and interests.

The benefit of a relational approach to justice is the space created for what Laverty

(2007) described as philosophical dialogue, which is predicated on the contestability of

educational and political norms.

Laden's (2013) picture of relational justice found expression in many of the

practices at City Workshop. There was very little that was arbitrarily done; the decisions

about scheduling, planning, and curriculum were frequently framed in terms of reasons,

with ample room for students to evaluate the merit of such reasons and offer proposals of

their own. There were many examples where students referred to respect, power, and

authority in similar ways. Some students focused on the importance of reciprocity—

"giving up respect if you feel respected," as Cara put it—while others emphasized the

freedom teachers gave students to dissent. As Brandon told me, "I am able to talk with

my teachers here, and say, 'can I do this instead?' because I think it has more value for

me, rather than doing something that doesn't make sense to me or doesn't feel

meaningful." Patrick, the literacy teacher, suggested justice and power were distributed

features of the school environment.

> But who has authority? I'd say it's just part of the social dynamic in the school.
> But the kids have a tremendous amount of it. They self-dictate and self-police in a
> productive way more often than not. And, of course, you know, the teachers here,
> we have the authority, but I feel like it's not just handed down from God kinda,
> you know, "Listen because you have to." I feel like they respect the people that
> are educating here. And if that's the case, we're off to a good start.

Yet there is a way in which this picture of relational justice did not offer a complete

picture of how justice, authority, and power functioned at City Workshop. First, as I

discussed in Chapter IV, the students were not always interested in issues of political

concern, at least in the framework of school democracy. Some felt their connection to

Scott and Ndindi was so strong, that no justifications were necessary for what the school

chose to do, while others did not feel compelled to speak; they expressed their political

agency in other forms. Yet I think something else may explain the limitations of

deliberation and reasonableness in shaping the justice of the school. In any encounter that

empowers students to receive an explanation as to why things are happening one way or

another, they are still being treated as the subjects of education and participants "inside"

the epistemological discourse of a teacher, who invites them to share perspective on

terms already framed in advance. This tendency, I think, explains why some of the

students resisted participating in board meetings, even as the board sought their input. As

Adam told me:

> It's boring, and, you know what will happen in the end. We will smile and then
> say something interesting, and everyone will be proud of us. The students who do
> go, I mean, they just fit the bill. They like that stuff, which is cool, but not for
> everyone.

Embedded in Adam's observation was a skepticism about the uses and purposes of

student voice, which he associates with performing for adults.

As my analysis and observations suggested, student voice was both nurtured and

amplified through dialogic governance and an ethos of relational justice. These practices

encouraged engagement, reflection, and advocacy as community members exercised

responsibility for shaping school norms and values. At the same time, these educational

practices did not always lead to predictable forms of participation. Some students were

more interested in deliberation and dialogue than others. At the same time, in terms of

governance, the school's organizational form allows for an interplay between the

collective identity of the school, and the singular voices of the students. This interplay

produced tension and led to a certain element of unpredictability, but it also permitted a

more authentic form of community to surface. In this next section, I explore how the

school's pedagogical practices empowered student voice by seeking to dismantle the

barriers that undermined holistic and integrated learning.

Pedagogical Practices at City Workshop

Ndindi taught science in a small, multipurpose room that seems like a cross

between an apothecary, magic shop, and exploratorium. The shelves featured skulls,

potions, toasters, aquariums, and dated copies of *National Geographic* (see Figure 11).

On one side of the room is a relatively organized assortment of pens, scissors, and

Figure 11. Skulls, potions, toasters, aquariums, and magazines adorning shelves of Science classroom.

textbooks, while on the other, an eclectic variety of building materials, including saws, hammers, drills, and seven varieties of glue. There were no desks in her room; instead, there were metallic benches surrounding a modular table, which could be maneuvered to fit the needs of the class. Like everything at City Workshop, creative media permeated the surroundings, leading to unexpected surprises (e.g., a collection of shells waiting to be painted) and a small, bewigged mannequin wearing a NASA uniform.

When I observed her teaching, what became immediately apparent was the traditional nature of the educational encounter. Ndindi was situated at the front of the class and the students were seated on stools. There were many other settings—notably, action sessions[3]—where students were working independently on projects, from coding to woodworking to gardening and botany. However, here, there was a specific population of students, those in high school, involved in a specific kind of learning interaction (i.e., scientific understanding) that was initiated by the teacher, for the sake of meeting particular benchmarks for knowledge and understanding. In this setting, the contours for both student and teacher voice were more clearly defined. Ndindi was leading the session

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[3] In their documents, the school described *action sessions* as time for students to work on their own projects; these include "self-created individual or group activities, as well as extended work from their core classes."

and students were responding to her facilitation. Despite this more structured encounter, the class appeared organized to empower voice and encourage participation through a variety of different channels.

The students themselves had a hand in determining what the topic would be—the history of medicine—through a discussion that took place at the beginning of the semester, where they shared their interests and voted on course themes. The lesson itself engaged the topic through multiple discourses—visually, creatively, intellectually, and critically—and in a manner that appeared both culturally responsive and open to a wide variety of interpretations. In the space of one lesson, the class discussed non-Western approaches to medicine and healing, the chemistry of opioids, the history of the drug war, and controversies surrounding the pharmaceutical industry. Students shared their ideas, debated with each other, and conducted research, while Ndindi maneuvered around the class to speak with individual students, or occasionally address the class as a whole. At the same time, there were frequent digressions, moments where critical concepts collapsed into brief conversations about Cardi B along with occasional cursing and crosstalk as students talked about their weekend plans. All of these factors gave the class a spontaneous and subversive quality, while at the same time giving students an opportunity to "claim some territory for themselves" (Sidorkin, 1999, p. 103).[4]

This observation brought to the fore the centrality of relationships as a central practice that shapes educational encounters and amplifies student voice at City

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[4] In *Beyond Discourse*, Sidorkin (1999) noted "in order to create classroom dialogue, teachers would be well advised to plan for the moments when her class will erupt in spontaneous talk, with kids not taking turns, talking over each other, being funny and overcritical. Classroom activities should be structured around such possible breaking points. The breakability of classroom discourse is one of its most important characteristics. This is the way we all make sense of things. Curriculum material simply cannot be incorporated into the child's world uncorrupted" (p. 105).

Workshop. It was not simply that student voice was empowered through participation or facilitation, but that space, context, and inquiry all intersected with each other in vibrant and dynamic ways. Students were relating to the content, relating to each other, and relating to Ndindi, interactions made possible by the emergent form of the lesson and the emphasis on experiential, interdisciplinary learning. At the same time, there was a clear form to the lesson, a way in which things came together that knitted the various voices together into a cohesive, but still tenuous, whole. My purpose in the following section is to explore these voice-enhancing practices through relationality (specifically, relational pedagogy), responsive/holistic listening, and complexity (or the fostering of connections and dismantling of barriers).

Relational Pedagogy

In this section, I use relational pedagogy to highlight an approach to teaching that breaks down intellectual and interpersonal barriers, while inviting students to interact with the material through multiple modalities (visual, experiential, participatory) and conceptual lenses (intellectual, political, historical, etc.). In emphasizing the relational dimensions of teaching (such as those expressed in Ndindi's classroom), I am drawing on scholarship has suggested the meaning of any educational encounter is located in the process of interaction—between various disciplines, or through the dialogue in which participants are involved—rather than any specific constitutive element or result (Bingham & Sidorkin, 2004; Kennedy, 2006a). Relational pedagogy, as I see it, is not merely a way of fostering loose connections between diverse forms of inquiry, such as those evoked by the terms *interdisciplinary collaboration* or *STEM* (science, technology,

engineering, and math). It is instead a process of enhancing possibilities for inquiry and

voice by lifting the barriers that regulate and hierarchize knowledge.[5]

In the vignette that opened this section, it was clear the history of medicine was

mainly a launching point for critical inquiry and creative problem solving, one that

intersected with topics in science, politics, and ethics. There was no single meaning or

objective that Ndindi's class tended toward; in many ways, she was entering into "alien

territory" where the outcome could not be fully predicted in advance. Entering into this

space involves what Biesta (2015) described as risk and opportunity, a description that

aptly describes my observations. On the one hand, it was exciting to see all the various

disciplines in dialogue with each other, along with Ndindi's capacity to play multiple

roles in the course of the lesson: teacher, facilitator, peer, and learner. On the other hand,

it was hard for me to tell whether these dynamic encounters were producing better

learning, at least in the sense of measurable results. Things were clearly always coming

into being, even as their form was never precisely clear. At the same time, what was

evident during my observation was the polyphony of voices that constantly intersected

and brought forth personal, academic, and transgressive dimensions of student identity.

The students themselves, however, felt they were learning, even as they struggled

to specify how this process took place.

> *Roy:* So, I'm interested, how does the school actually help students, like, act on
> their ideas and engage in their learning? And I'm wondering if you can give me
> an example of a specific project that you worked on, that made you really excited
> and engaged?
> *Yalda:* Well, Ndindi's class had something called Vacation from Hell, and we did
> that for 2 years. I didn't do it last year. So, it started out as . . . you pick a country

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[5] I am relying on two theoretical approaches here – Dewey's Pragmatism (Westbrook, 2015), which
challenges the secure foundations we impose on knowledge for the sake of achieving certainty—and
aspects of poststructuralism, which views meaning through the lens of being and becoming, and refutes the
fixed categories established by humanistic epistemology.

that starts with the same letter as your first name. And you go online. And you find the cheapest flight. You don't buy it. You just find the cheapest flight, and then you write it down. And then you just have this budget like $2,000 or it depends on where you went. Like $2,000. You find the cheapest flight, round trip. And then you find the cheapest hotel to stay. And you go on this trip without actually going this trip, and then you'll be like, "You chipped your tooth. What are you going to do about it? You gonna keep going or are you going to go the dentist?"

Roy: What made this so unique?

Yalda: No other school ever did it. We were always too busy. But Ndindi allowed us to have some control, and to take different paths without interfering. It was a fake trip, but it's the best fake trip ever.

Roy: Do you think you discover yourself here through your learning?

Zane: Oftentimes, yeah, like different aspects of yourself. I didn't know I could like . . . I didn't know I was good at writing short stories, until I wrote a project for Scott.

Roy: What do you discover about other people?

Zane: You just make sure you are understanding what everyone else is understanding what you should be understanding. You don't really ever feel stupid because everyone's on different on everything, and it's like . . . I don't know.

What I gathered from this exchange with Zane and Yalda was an awareness on the part of students that learning was rarely remote from their interests and no strict division separated knowledge from experience. They were exercising autonomy, making decisions, and relating to the content. They were learning about themselves, while at the same time learning about others. These experiences suggest student voice found meaningful expression through immersive and experiential forms of inquiry that transgressed traditional disciplinary boundaries and stimulated new discoveries that could not be anticipated in advance. Finally, there was a sense in which the voice of the students was not a limited expression of their academic identities, but instead a much richer expression of their ontological selves.

Relational pedagogy also foregrounds the importance of equity in shaping the educational encounter. In such an encounter, student and teacher participate in dialogue

with each other and jointly partake in the construction of knowledge in a manner that affirms the perspective and subjectivities of those involved. As scholars (Boler, 2004; Darder & Baltodano, 2003) have argued, the pedagogical relation is not one that dismisses the expertise of the teacher or dissolves all forms of power. As illustrated in the opening vignette, power and authority assumed many different forms. Sometimes it was centered in Ndindi's teaching, other times in the students' inquiries. There was a clear structural foundation to the lesson, a structure that appeared to enhance, rather than restrict, the scope for inquiry. There was not an "anything goes" approach, but one with standards of accountability and governance the students appeared to internalize. Ndindi's class was a "guided session"—one that constituted a required or expected plank of the school's curriculum. I use these points to complicate any notion that the pedagogical relation ceded too much space to student voice and to suggest instead that students respected the learning precisely because of the openings provided for authentic engagement.

Steven, who taught elective classes at City Workshop, told me failing to foster authentic relations had the effect of shutting down student voice and boxing people into narrow roles.

> What happens a lot of the time, in a regular school is like, you go in there, and you're unwillingly and unintentionally shutting down a child. If a child comes in with an interest in RPGs [role playing games], and I say, "No, let's not do RPGs. Let's talk about the Revolutionary War." Well, I've not dismissed their ideas, and I've shut them down, because now I've said, "Your idea is not valid. Here's what's valid in education." But another way is to listen to the students and try to build something together, try to weave their interests in to the learning, and play the role of a facilitator.

Steven's emphasis on making what is "valid in education" a source of negotiation had the effect of creating new possibilities for inquiry, dialogue, and voice. As Jasper would tell

me later, "instead of the teacher just talking and students listening, which is the precedent, teachers and students have open dialogue, where it's more about communication and total understanding than trivia."

Throughout my observations, there were also very clear connections between the material, the lives of the students, and the broader sociopolitical context beyond the school, components I argue are crucial elements in relational pedagogy. In many classes I observed, teachers approached the subject matter through a critical lens, inviting students to reflect on the connection between learning and current affairs, while often problematizing the very nature of the knowledge itself.[6] Returning to the vignette, it was clear Ndindi's point of emphasis was not simply a history of medicine, but encouraging students to question how the practice of medicine might intersect with unique cultural practices (i.e., meditation), along with broader debates about the impact of Big Pharma on health outcomes. In Scott's humanities class, students were asked to consider why the discipline merits emphasis to begin with, and why humanistic learning might be perceived as threatening, imperialistic, or Eurocentric. In a middle school math class, student inquiry into the recent measles outbreak was used to teach statistics and foreground the connection between rates of vaccination, access to health care, and public policy. In effect, students were being invited to forge their own opinions, think critically, and connect academic knowledge to issues of political concern in spaces where meaning was negotiated, shared, and revised. In these settings, voice was amplified through the

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[6] "In a school of the third way, the dimension of collaborative philosophical inquiry will be present throughout the emergent curriculum as a form of problematization of belief – a first inquiry into the epistemology, and by implication the methodology, of any discipline that is part of that inquiry" (Kennedy, 2006a, p. 180).

acquisition of knowledge and the purposeful, relevant nature of the inquiry, which tracked real issues, and in turn, engendered genuine interest.

Responsive and Holistic Listening

Throughout my interviews and observations, listening emerged as a powerful pedagogical practice, one I initially overlooked. As I explained in Chapter IV, it was clear from what the students said that simply "having a say" was the least significant dimension of voice. As both Brandon and Caleb suggested, exercising voice did not mean anyone was listening to what you were saying and it did not guarantee a meaningful response. More important was the relational dimension of listening, the sense of care and connection that permitted open disclosure and authentic participation. As Arjun explained, "I think that being able to be listened to and to be heard as a person, is really important in education." Arjun's emphasis on being heard and listened to "as a person" were precisely the qualities that allowed Remi to publicly disclose his sexuality and Jeremiah to feel more invested in learning.

> *Roy:* How important is having a connection to you?
> *Jeremiah:* Yeah, because like if I don't like the teacher, I'm not going to be able to listen to them as well as if I do like them, if I am connected with them. I just can't open up that much with somebody I don't like.
> *Roy:* Does it go both ways?
> *Jeremiah:* It's a two-way street. They speak to us and talk to us in a way that makes us want to learn, and because they listen, we can also say "no" if we want to do something else, and they respect it generally. But if we don't listen and respect them, then it's not gonna work. But what's cool here is that we're talking to each other like people, like friends sometimes.

Listening was also related to the process that made classroom and community dialogue meaningful and critical. It was not just about hearing what students were saying, or even using this knowledge to influence the curriculum, but also allowing alternative discourses to emerge, particularly those silenced by hegemonic registers (McLeod, 2011). Thus,

when students were reflecting on the effects of mass incarceration on people of color or

reading the work of Zinn (2015), they were also practicing a form of listening that was

sensitive to the voices of the marginalized and disenfranchised. Zane spoke to this during

an interview.

> *Zane:* It's easy for us to spend a lot of time talking . . . that's what kids do…but
> what I love about this school is that we hear other people talk . . . we hear
> different stories . . . and the teachers spend a lot of time helping us understand
> why we should listen to stories that are not our own.
> *Roy:* Why do you think this is important?
> *Zane:* Because you have to allow people to speak for themselves. Like with
> history. Those are actual people. And even with current events. It's different to
> listen to someone who had an abortion than to hear about abortion as an issue, or
> to just listen to your own views.

As Zane's reflections reveal, responsive and holistic listening involved going beyond rote

hearing and toward a rich and critical understanding of different perspectives.

Rogers (1967) described listening as an immersive act that offers permission to

the speaker to reveal an authentic self, one that comes forth nondefensively, without

armor, without any attempt to be "different from what I am" (p. 73). The form of

listening Rogers described attends to the complexity and vulnerability of the student as a

person. For many of the students I interviewed, this kind of active, engaged listening is

what supported their own creative and sometimes difficult journey toward discovering

their voices. At their core, many of them wanted to be heard and recognized as capable

human beings by educators who were caring, receptive, and supportive. Thus, it was not

the simple fact they had a voice, or that they were allowed to speak their minds, but that

what they said resonated with others. When scholars talk about student voice, there

remains a tendency to privilege the act of speaking. There is far less interest on the part of

listeners to attend to voice in its complexity and understand the meaning behind what

students say. My findings suggest centering the relational dimensions of voice, and understanding young people as capable moral agents, is more important than simply stressing empowerment.

For example, when Caleb related his story of being ignored by his previous teacher, and not allowed to advocate for himself, it was clear what he wanted was to be understood as a unique individual with specific claims.

> I started writing a few ideas and things down for an assignment. And then, another kid who was sitting at my desk with me, he was on my team, he picked up the paper, erased the work that I had done on it, and blew the eraser shreds in my face. So I stood up and I was like, "Why'd you do that, dude?" And then the teacher yelled at me and basically, in his own words said, "Look at everyone working hard on their assignments. Why can't you do that too?" And I was just looking around as they were all like just talking and laughing. It was just . . . So I guess that's one thing that's really important to me about my education is having the feeling of actually like having a teacher. It doesn't just feel like I'm being given an assignment, and like being told to work on it. I actually feel like I have a teacher who's there to help and help me understand these things and help me actually learn.

What stood out about Caleb's reflections was his feeling of being judged by a teacher who failed to understand what he was experiencing, because they treated him only as the subject of certain rules and recipient of consequences. To Caleb, this was different from the obligation to listen, to understand, and to be fair. City Workshop, in contrast, had given him the impression his perspective mattered through its listening practices.

> It's like the school feels like it has open ears. They're willing to actually—If you're going through something, they're actually willing to listen to your problems and help you and give you advice, instead of just saying, "All right. Whatever." Just—I understand you're upset but go do the work.

Caleb's emphasis on "open ears" suggests what Rogers (1967) called the "creative, active, sensitive, empathic, nonjudgmental listening" (p. 77) that lies at the heart of person-centered education (p. 77). These qualities were consistently emphasized by

students as critical features of the school's educational approach—the emphasis on caring

relations, meaningful connections, and sensitivity toward each students' complex

identity.

Fostering Connections and Dismantling Barriers

The fostering of connections and the dismantling of barriers is yet another way

City Workshop augments students' voice. In their WASC accreditation documents, the

founders routinely referred to the importance of breaking down the divisions that prevent

students from appropriating their learning, and recognizing the connections that exist

between learning, being, and doing:

> Our goal is to dismiss the false dichotomy that exists between what students intuitively know from their experience and what traditional academics offer. We believe that both matter and it's our role to facilitate students understanding of both. (WASC, 2015, p. 14)

> We believe the cognitive and the affective are indivisible. Simply put, a learner's feelings and concerns, as well as their interests, are wholly tied into how effectively they think and learn. (WASC, 2015, p. 14)

> We embrace the workshop moniker to challenge the separation of the vocational and the academic. We want our school to be place of excellence for learning and doing. (WASC, 2015, p. 14)

> We regularly practice a syncretic approach to education, fusing the subjects together under our cross-curricular Values of Heart, Mind, and Hand. Our goal is to connect learning across the fields of study so wholly that divisions seem arbitrary and disappear, and subjects are comprehended more fully for their connections to all the others. (WASC, 2015, p. 14)

> Learning and action is tied to the learner's affective response to the world around them, and the impetus for studies and work should lie in the student's concerns and interests. We eschew rote memorization and what Paulo Freire called the "banking model" of education, where facts are inserted then regurgitated. Instead, students interact with ideas and content cognitively, affectively and even physically, applying learning to all parts of their being. (WASC, 2015, p. 14)

In effect, the school's co-founders believed the development of voice could not take place in a setting that placed students in a vacuum, dividing their feelings from their thoughts, and preventing them from exercising agency by acting on, or manipulating, the knowledge they acquired. Students were viewed as complex individuals with distinct needs, interests, and capacities, rather than learners who should be given a say in some narrow sphere of their education. Thus, it was not simply that students were learning about horticulture, geography, and social studies, they were also planting gardens, building robots, visiting libraries, exploring the urban environment, and meeting with experts and enthusiasts whose passion for particular disciplines translated into specific forms of fieldwork and research initiatives. During their classes and action sessions, students were also exercising choice and voice by taking on projects and tasks where they could make their own determinations, judgments, and plans. They were given opportunities to engage rationally and affectively so that what they thought was never fully separated from how they felt.

The practice of fostering connections and dismantling barriers also characterized the spatiality of the school, and the integrated nature of the grade level groupings. Except for the community room, all of the spaces in the school were interconnected, and even the areas designed for one discipline over another had common, integrated features (i.e., space for tinkering, tools for creating, resources for writing, and a general workshop-oriented vibe). During any one class, one could make out the voices and inquiries of students in other areas of the school, some involved in independent work, projects, or guided sessions. The absence of formal structures and boundaries infused the school with

a sense of openness and possibility, but at the same time, chaos and unpredictability.[7] In

centering the importance of relationships, the school also appeared to undermine its

ability to regulate learning in terms of specific outcomes and benchmarks. The students

themselves suggested as much:

> Sometimes I wonder what I'm learning here, or whether I know I'm learning. My friends will say 'you do nothing at the school,' so I'll start wondering whether I should go to another school. But then I always stop and say, this is my place, this is where I belong. (Yalda, ninth grade)

> This school teaches you to be a good person more than it teaches you Algebra. That's not what the school is for. You learn to interact with different people, you learn that it's not just all about you, and you feel good about it all. (Remi, 10th grade)

> I can't prove to you exactly what I'm learning but this place makes me feel like I'm a genius. I can't explain it. I'm around a lot of my friends and I just feel different than they do, like I see things that they can't see. (Nick, eighth grade)

These reflections suggested a relationship between voice and the affective dimensions of

the student experience at City Workshop. The students felt a sense of connection and

belonging that gave them a sense of pride and purpose that what they experienced was

the right thing.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I examined how the educational practices of the school

empowered student voice, first by examining the mission and vision of the school, and

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[7] Hickey-Moody & Malins (2007) differentiated between smooth spaces, which are open and emergent, and striated spaces, which are rigid and controlled: "Striated spaces are those which are rigidly structured and organized, and which produce particular, limited movements and relations between bodies. ... Smooth spaces, by contrast, are those in which movement is less regulated or controlled, and where bodies can interact – and transform themselves – in endlessly different ways" (p. 11). This distinction, I find, is a helpful way of characterizing the environment at City Workshop and showing how the arrangement of space can either constrain or amplify the complexity of voice.

then by exploring its pedagogical and organizational approaches to teaching, learning,

and governance. The significant themes that emerged through the analysis of the data

included dialogic governance, relational justice, and relational pedagogy, all of which

widened the scope and possibilities for student voice. Dialogic governance referred to a

form of organization and decision-making that was open and emergent, rather than fixed

and settled. Relational justice pointed to a process that invited students to reflect on the

purposes and aims of education more broadly, rather than dismissing their moral,

political, and epistemological claims. Relational pedagogy created openings for authentic

and engaged learning, one that permitted students to express their voices in unique and

varied forms. Finally, I explored City Workshop's mission and vision, demonstrating

how the school drew from a rich array of traditions to inform its educational approach

and its commitment to nurturing voice. In my final chapter, I examine the implications

and significance of this study in terms of theory and practice.

VI – LOOKING FORWARD: VOICE, EDUCATION, AND SCHOOLING

What routinely occurred during my experience researching student voice at City Workshop is a sense of disorientation and novelty. Many of the hierarchic distinctions I took for granted—teacher/student, school/society, cognitive/affective—appeared to dissolve, leaving me with very little of the security I felt I needed to define the "essence" of student voice. What started as a manageable concept had grown richer and more complex: it was embodied in the things students said, the things they did not say, the patterns of listening and dialogue, and the environment itself. The school itself brought the voices in the school into close relation, but the voices never perfectly merged into a single, unchanging whole. The result was a new kind of education, one characterized by creativity, novelty, and dialogue, rather than fixity, regularity, and determination.

As a recap, my inquiry into student voice at City Workshop sprang from two research questions:

1. How do students exercise their voices at an anarchist-inspired alternative school,

2. How do the educational practices of the school empower voice?

I began by arguing student voice reflected the unique ways students shape their educational experiences. Drawing on the dialogic tradition, I noted student voice—in its dialogic, ontological, and political forms—derived from meaningful forms of association, participation, and self-expression. Despite this theoretical grounding, I initially associated

voice with a particular effect—the ability of students to have a say in their own schooling, an assumption that proved both limiting and restrictive.

As discussed in Chapter IV, the students I interviewed understood voice as a metaphor for authenticity, an understanding that proved more powerful than traditional conceptions of voice as a tool to exercise influence. Ontological voice did not denote a singular, unchanging voice, but an ongoing process of authorship and self-definition that accommodated diverse ways of knowing and being. A further finding in Chapter IV centered on the development and expression of political voice. Through interviews and observations, I discovered students developed political voice by participating in dialogue, connecting their knowledge to real issues, and reflecting on questions of power, authority, and justice—in the school, and in the broader community. At the same time, reflections from students problematized a view of political voice that relied on adult conceptions of participation and citizenship. Many of the students expressed political voice through their interests and interpersonal experiences and in settings where they felt most comfortable and free. Finally, I suggested the complex dimensions of student voice are shaped by dialogue; it was through practices of listening, recognition, and care that students at City Workshop came to feel valued as both individuals and community members.

In Chapter V, I addressed the educational practices that augment and amplify student voice. I discovered the educational practices of the school rely on a dialogic approach to governance and a relational approach to pedagogy. The dialogic approach to governance allowed the school to create a community whose form was emergent and open-ended rather than closed and fixed. City Workshop's relational approach to

pedagogy provided students with multiple avenues to express understanding, while challenging the dominance or monopoly of any single voice through a multicultural, interdisciplinary, interest-driven curriculum. Ultimately, City Workshop's educational practices, and the traditions from which the school draws, sought to lift the barriers that undermined authentic learning and political engagement. They did so by encouraging students to exercise ownership over their educational experiences and contribute to the quality, form, and structure of the community itself.

In the forthcoming section, I highlight and discuss the implications of this qualitative case study in the areas of pedagogical practice and organizational structure. In terms of pedagogical practice, I differentiate between *using* and *engaging* voice, and highlight the importance of integrated learning experiences that empower participation. With regard to organizational structure and leadership, I focus on how student voice can be engaged in the fabric of the school itself and how dialogic relations can be established between students and teachers. Finally, I also explore the implications of my study in terms of broader efforts to create alternative students where student voice can be engaged in all of its complexity. While the recommendations I outlined are primarily geared toward alternative settings such as City Workshop, they may also bear significance for other school practitioners interested in augmenting or harnessing student voice in more traditional schools.

Implications for Practice

In this section, I examine the implications of my study for educational practitioners, researchers, and school leaders. I highlight the difference between using and engaging voice, a distinction that centers practices of listening and dialogue over

more utilitarian motivations for involving students in decision-making. I also focus on the importance of centering the social context of schooling. Finally, I discuss the importance of embracing the absurd, and creating space for students to transgress traditional roles, structures, and identities. These efforts, I argue, enhance the scope and power of student voice beyond its more traditional instrumental and personalistic uses.

Using Versus Engaging Voice

As indicated throughout this study, student voice can be conceptualized across a wide spectrum of participatory frameworks. Many of these frameworks approach voice as an instrument that can be used, engaged, or consulted to improve school performance or personalize learning (Batchelor, 2006b; Cook-Sather, 2006; Fielding, 2011). Such approaches may widen discretion for participation and engagement, while at the same time foreclose opportunities for meaningful action and change.[1] Scholars have invoked tokenism, instrumentalism, neoliberalism, and governmentality to describe the regulation and depoliticization of student voice in settings that place greater value on performance than political engagement (Gordon, 2009; McLaren, 2015; Mitra, 2004). Many of the students I interviewed alluded to these practices in their reflections on schooling before they attended to City Workshop. Routinely, students suggested their voices were ignored or marginalized by the more dominating, bureaucratic voice of the school, with its systemized procedures, incontestable rules, and compulsory rituals. In these settings, students told me they lacked agency, both in terms of shaping their learning and expressing themselves during a critical juncture of adolescence. Consequently, they

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[1] Fielding (2011) described such schools as a "high-performance learning organization," where student voice acts as a "social lubricant" for the purposes of reducing social and political conflict.

experienced a sense of alienation and frustration that ultimately precipitated their decision to attend City Workshop.

Engaging student voice requires attending to the broader social context of schooling and the importance of creating spaces and nurturing relationships where students feel listened to, recognized, and heard—not just as students, but as protagonists, meaning-makers, and moral agents (Kennedy, 2006a). As my interviews demonstrated, such experiences proved critical in helping students feel like their voices were valued, while helping them confront questions of power, equity, and authority as they manifested at City Workshop. In some cases, students were able to exercise their voices to advocate for social and political causes in the broader community, yet this capacity was not the only or primary channel for political voice.

City Workshop supported the social context of voice through the daily forum, where students engaged a diverse range of topics, shaped school norms and values, and participated in reflective dialogue, supported by teachers who made an effort to attend to the complexities of student voice. Based on these findings, two specific recommendations can be made. First, educators invested in empowering voice should focus on conferring real agency on young people, not simply as decision makers, but as co-authors of school communities. Such an approach moves beyond giving students a say and toward meaningful action in a social context. One such illustration from my findings involved students collaboratively formulating an inclusion policy to promote a sense of safety and belonging on campus. This policy served to enshrine core values in an open, transparent, reciprocal way. Such experiences, as scholars suggest (Kjorholt, 2007; Moss & Urban, 2010), may help position students as citizens with rights in the present, rather than as

future citizens with full membership granted upon reaching adulthood. Another example involves allowing students to act on the critical knowledge they acquire. This study reveals it is not enough for students to simply develop understandings if they have no room to shape their realities, both inside and outside the school, and advocate for issues about which they care. This much was clear from my interview with Adam, who developed political skills he was able to actively use to address issues of housing and urban development in the city.

At the same time, educators should also be wary of gauging the strength of student voice based on the capacity of young people to participate in deliberation, discussion, or public speaking, practices that are governed by adult rationalities and shaped by formal democratic structures, like town hall meetings. As my interviews with Arjun and Cara revealed, just because students do not speak in public settings or live up to our ideals for participation does not mean they lack voice or demand liberation. In both these cases, the students adopted alternative modes of expressing themselves and classifying their voices, a fact which suggests they were "ensnared in adult systems of symbol and reference" (Rollo, 2016b, p. 16). The impetus for educators, then, centers on recognizing the complexity of student voice, and expanding the meaning of participation beyond structured, centralized forms of speech and action.

Active Listening

This study highlights the importance of listening as a constituent feature of student voice. As scholars have suggested (Davies, 2011; hooks, 2003; McLeod, 2011), engaged listening opens the way for relinquishing the position of educators as the principal "knowers," a critical condition for authentic dialogue to take place. Further, as

the students suggested, listening is intimately related to feelings of connection, care, and respect. To this end, it is important for educators to view student voice as inherently relational, and conditioned in large part by listening, a practice that involves not simply hearing what students say but attending to what they mean. Such attention necessarily involves some kind of change, either in the form of a perspectival shift (e.g., a teacher changing their minds based on *what* they hear), or more responsive pedagogical practices that invite students to shape curricular choices. These approaches move beyond "a carefully constrained consultation" (Fielding, 2012, p. 15) toward more mutualistic, democratic form of communications, where voice is situated in a universe of shared meanings and social practices (McLaren, 2015).

Scholars have suggested various approaches to foreground the importance of listening to student voice. Fletcher (2017) proposed a model that closely attends to social context. Fletcher suggested students must be given opportunities to express a view, the view must be listened to, and the view must be acted on, as appropriate. Similarly, Jones and Welch (2018) suggested attending to questions of representation, impact, judgment, and validity, each of which grounds voice in the recognition of children's rights. Listening is not simply a technique for engaging student voice. As Greene (1995) argued, it is a process of making intersubjective sense, whereby "persons are offered the space in which to discover what they recognize together and appreciate in common" (p. 195). Such an approach transcends a one-dimensional grasping of what students mean, and instead allows for "the gradual constitution of an in between of a norm-governed world" (Greene, 1995, p. 197). Listening in this regard is a practice of co-operative human inquiry that joins children and adults in a shared quest for understanding.

Open Dialogue

Dialogue is not simply a communicative practice that relies on a superficial form of speaking and listening. Dialogue is also something that informs the very nature of the relation between students and teachers. As my interviews and observations revealed, what made the students feel like their voices were valued was not they had specified rights or formal opportunities to make an impact. Instead, it was being treated with respect by teachers that valued their perspectives and listened to them as unique individuals. Many of the students also understood themselves as equals. Equality in this context does not mean a perfect distribution of power, but rather a pattern of negotiation and engagement that attempts to "honor and deal with difference" in an open and transparent way (Fielding, 2011, p. 17). Dialogue involves a consistent pattern of openness, reciprocity, and mutuality, qualities that gave students the freedom to express themselves authentically, while also attending to the experience of fellow community members with whom they share space and construct meaning. For schools that value student voice, then, it is important to consider how to rethink educational structures, experiences, and relationships in terms of dialogue. Suggestions for centering open dialogue may take the form of engaging controversial issues, particularly those that emanated from the lived realities of students. Yet open dialogue also involves a willingness to view the boundaries between students and teachers as "mutually transgressive and thereby negotiable between persons" (Kennedy, 2017, p. 555). Such an approach allows students and teachers to play multiple roles, and see each other in new ways, a practice Fielding (2006) described as *role jumbling*.

Dialogue extends beyond the relationships between individuals and persons in a school. As I revealed in my analysis of relational pedagogy, dialogue extends to the connections forged between diverse forms of knowledge and experience, such as those embodied in the multidisciplinary literacy sessions at City Workshop. A dialogic approach, then, would dissolve those barriers that prevent the acquisition of a more holistic understanding. As Matusov, Smith, Soslau, Marjanovic-Shane, and von Duyke (2011) argued, "When endpoints of education are known in advance, any genuine dialogue in education is impossible" (p. 170). These endpoints restrict possibilities for students to further their own development and becoming, while compelling them to perform voices with which they do not identity. From a pedagogical perspective, such endpoints have the effect of separating the academic from the creative, the theoretical from the practical, the cognitive and the affective, and the heart from the hand. To this end, I argue schools ought to consider forging more meaningful and critical connections across disciplinary areas, while inviting students to express their understanding through different symbolic languages. These connections may have the effect of making education more integrated, purposeful, and relevant while problematizing barriers that compartmentalize knowledge and segregate children from adults.

Context Matters

Educators can engage student voice by attending to the significance of space. In settings that are compartmentalized and fragmented, students may find difficulty registering the purpose and relevance of their educational experiences. Such environments may privilege work over play or the theoretical over the practical an arrangement that creates an unnatural divide between the world of the child and the world

of the adult. The workshop environment at City Workshop, in contrast, emphasized

creative encounters, along with a sense of connection and variety that informed the

spatiality of the school: the presence of books, art, media, maps, graphics, resources, and

tools, along with intersecting hallways and rooms. The environment thus offered

continual invitations for students to develop and express their voices in new and dynamic

ways, while adding the elements of surprise and unpredictability. Similarly, because

voice was not limited to regulated spaces, students had a wider arena to express

themselves in official and unofficial ways. A pragmatic suggestion, then, would be to

consider how the environment of the school regulates and limits the kinds of voices that

can be expressed.

To this end, one suggestion may be to adopt the principle of what Kennedy

(2006a) described as transitional space, which aims to foster relations, provoke

interactions, and collapse the dichotomy between thought and action through the built

environment of the school. The principle motivation behind transitional space is not only

to foster creative encounters but to challenge the adultism inherent in spaces that seek to

manage learning and regulate voices under the pretext of efficiency and social control,

what Dewey (2004) described as "a willingness to follow where others point the way,

into conformity, constriction, surrender of skepticism and experiment" (p. 14). Thus,

rather than focusing on project-oriented classrooms or STEM labs, schools may want to

consider adopting a workshop-oriented approach more broadly, while creating spaces that

are integrated, intergenerational, and multipurpose.

A further justification for considering the importance of context is to support

wider and richer expressions of political voice beyond speaking and deliberation. In the

context of my study, students developed and expressed political voice across a wide variety of settings and often through informal learning. The process of becoming political also involved regular inquiry into the politics of the everyday—resolving conflicts, exercising responsibility, practicing tolerance toward others—along with the incorporation of creativity, play, and art. Based on this finding, I recommend educators committed to empowering voice should counterbalance formal political learning with a more creative range of opportunities for students to exercise political voice through role-playing games, media production, and projects. At the same time, I also recommend educators make an effort to dissolve institutional boundaries that isolate schools from communities, while encouraging students to explore their larger civic context through city days where they can connect to issues, realities, and concerns in urban spaces.

Embracing the Absurd

What also characterized voice at City Workshop was a pattern of subversion that lent an informality, even a transgressive quality, to the interactions in the school. That is, there were times where the students were joking, laughing, and making fun of anything serious and official. These moments occasionally expressed themselves during interviews, where students would respond to serious questions with a seemingly flippant and unrelated insight, or they would describe their most memorable learning experiences in terms that appeared silly. Such moments would also take place throughout the school day, during formal and informal learning. Examples include the constant chatter, the occasional foul language, and the random references to pop culture. In these moments, students were disengaged, but their behavior was not called out unless it proved genuinely disruptive. The very freedom to chat, interrupt, and even express foul language

appeared to give students a share of their own territory in the school, territory that existed independent of the adult gaze. Sidorkin (1999) suggested such behavior can be understood both as a form of resistance toward monologic authority and as a gesture of ownership. As Sidorkin (1999) described it:

> If I know something, it means I can use or discard it, at will; I can interpret it in any way I like, pull it apart, or misrepresent it. On the other hand, when knowledge possesses power over me, I become governed by it. (p. 107)

Such a description accounts for the playfulness of City Workshop's educational approach, along with its willingness to open up space for more festive, transgressive forms of communication, such as those described in Sidorkin's (1999) analysis of the carnival in Bakhtin. The implication here with respect to educational leaders is to recognize that school can also serve as a space that offers students an outlet from all the demands, expectations, and rules that characterize the social world. In granting students the liberty to just be themselves, schools and teachers may secure a more authentic commitment to more serious values that hinge on mutual respect.

Implications for Organizational Structure and Leadership

In this section, I focus on the implications of my study for both the structure and leadership of alternative schools. I focus on the creation of emergent and provisional structures that accommodate the diversity of student voice, while also supporting the development of a common identity. I focus on blurring the boundaries between the school and community to permit a wider scope for student voice and democratic participation. I then move to a discussion of political leadership, which differs from traditional management-oriented approaches in its advocacy for social and political causes.

Permanent Provisionality

Drawing from Fielding (2012), I use the term *permanent provisionality* to describe an approach to organization that emphasizes open and emergent forms rather than fixed and settled structures. Permanent provisionality also suggests "an openness to new thought and directions . . . and a particular insistence on opening up new spaces for exploration of new vistas of possibility" (Fielding, 2012, p. 37). Such a school can be said to be in constant dialogue with itself, not simply about how to advance learning, but about the purposes and aims of education more broadly. This dialogue brings different voices together—students, teachers, and administrators—to continually make meaning together. This proved to be the case at City Workshop, a school willing to challenge role boundaries and engage in dialogue about its values, intentions, and practices. This is a challenging balance to secure. Schools with open, emergent, or dialogic structural forms may find it challenging to speak in a singular voice about their educational missions. Harnessing diverse voices, traditions, and practices may sound enticing in theory, but harder to realize in practice given the pressures school face to produce quantifiable outcomes.

Sidorkin (1999) suggested the term *civility* as a mechanism to establish social coherence and prevent complexity and provisionality from becoming an "absurd theater of broken conversations . . . and meaningless encounters" (p. 126). As Sidorkin (1999) described it, civility is the way a school listens to each other and produces a shared vision or ideology that channels voice "into the moral issues of community life" (p. 129). Ideology in this context can be compared to a shared text, one that allows for multiple interpretations that can be used as a constant point of reference, around which various

voices orbit. The way civility can be achieved is through what Sidorkin (1999) described

as a *public conversation*, a practice that bears similarity to the community of inquiry

approach developed by Ann Margaret Sharp and Matthew Lipman (Gregory & Laverty,

2017). As Sidorkin (1999) described it:

> The public conversation is a situation where students and teachers actively
> engage in conversation, while keeping the fundamentals of the school ideology in
> mind. It is a public talk about the most important community issues. . . . [It is
> also] a set of habits, organizational arrangements, situations, and spaces that make
> the big dialogue possible. (p. 124)

These experiences create space for reflection, as students and teachers explore the

reasons and purposes behind the school's actions, instead of presuming that such actions

are self-justifying. Such an approach reframes the activity of administration and

leadership; rather than imposing a predetermined vision on the school and conforming

voice to that vision, leadership creates arrangements and opportunities for meaning

making that is generative, pluralistic, and restless with its achievements. In this way,

civility is a practice that allows for the coexistence of diverse voices.

Engaging the Urban

Based on my findings, I recommend alternative school educators need to consider

where they are located, the racial, ethnic, and class-based compositions of their families,

and the degree to which their programs engage issues of social and political concern.

Without considering such issues, the alternative school will be limited in its capacity to

effect meaningful social change, focusing instead on a highly romanticized and

individualized form of authenticity and democratic community (Bowles & Gintis, 2011).

The justification for engaging the urban derives from many of the traditions from which

the alternative school draws. As documented in this study, anarchist-inspired education

has politics roots and more expansive meanings beyond personal development, individual

freedom, and democratic community. Further, by being more responsive and engaged

with their communities, particularly in urban spaces, the alternative school may be able to

link its mission to the broader aspirations of democratic education (Morrell et al., 2013).

This is, of course, a significant and imposing challenge, particularly given the pressures

to adopt more performance-oriented models and root out disruptive forms of conflict.

Schools like City Workshop, however, demonstrate such models can be successful, even

as they struggle to sustain and finance their visions.

Political Leadership

I want to suggest a model of leadership that centers social justice and challenges

unequal power relationships and systems of oppression, in school and society. As

Newcomb and Mansfield (2014) argued, "Educational leaders need a vision of equitable

and just schooling formulated through a perspective of multiple perspectives and

realities" (p. 284). Such an approach was clear enough from my observations at City

Workshop; the school constantly encouraged its students and teachers to reflect on issues

of social and political concern, and Scott and Ndindi sought ways to expand the space for

participation. There was also a more robust connection between theory and practice that

made the school a space that practically enacted its humanistic-inspired vision. The

question that guided much of the work at City Workshop was how to effect change and

empower voice in such a way that students developed a sense of self-efficacy. To this

end, school leaders should consider developing richer theorizations of their educational

philosophies and leadership approaches, while centering ethical and political questions in

their decision making.[2] At the same time, they should also demystify their own status by making school a space that welcomes dialogue from diverse voices, thereby broadening responsibility for governance.

Methodological Implications

As described in Chapter III, I used a qualitative case study approach to track the exercise of student voice at City Workshop. I argued the qualitative approach would allow me to attend to participants' meanings and conduct in-depth interviews. Meanwhile, I suggested the case study approach would center my research on a culture-sharing group in a bounded period. However, as much as the qualitative approach proved helpful, particularly in terms of methods (interviews, focus groups, document analysis, etc.), I frequently found that voice eluded even the most expansive classifications, and rarely remained in one place long enough for me to provide a settled description of its meaning. As the students themselves intimated, studying and listening to voice at City Workshop meant confronting its fractiousness and multiplicity, while at the same time attending to how these varied voices to get along.

> *Roy:* How would you characterize the voice of this school?
> *Remi:* Dumbo-sized ears.
> *Yalda:* No, people that want to listen about this school have to have Dumbo sized ears.
> *Roy:* I mean, does this school speak in one voice anyway about itself?
> *Brandon:* Well there's definitely some conflicting opinions, but yes, I generally believe that we can get along.
> *Yalda:* No, do you know what it is? It's, like, 20 different people talking with different voices in that way, saying the same stuff at different times. Like, a solid 10 seconds of saying, like, the same word starting at different times. But completely mismatched.

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[2] Carr and Hartnett (1996) suggested educational leaders develop a coherent vision of the good society, a critical set of political ideals, and a substantive conception of the person. Leadership in this mold is guided by ethical rather than instrumental rationalities.

This description aptly characterizes the experience of conducting research at City Workshop, where voice was very much embedded in the social context, and rarely conformed to my initial assumptions about where it could be found, how it could be defined, and to whom it belonged.

When I employed a grounded theory approach to analyze my interviews, focus groups, observations, and documents, I formulated categories (i.e., political, dialogic, and relational) that lent order and coherence to what I found. In line with my theoretical framework, I also developed a working sense of how voice interacted with the environment, and how the school enacted its anarchist-inspired approach through pedagogy and organization. The categories I derived were only provisional placeholders. I often found myself returning to my data in an iterative and circular fashion, enriching, revising, and changing meanings in light of new evidence and insights. For example, I originally took a deficit-oriented approach when I first analyzed Arjun and Cara's interviews, interpreting their reticence to speak publicly as indicative of a problem that had to be fixed and addressed. Yet upon listening more closely to the audio transcriptions, and observing them in the field, they proved to possess an agency that my analysis failed to capture. Simply reading over the transcripts provided only an incomplete picture of the phenomenon under investigation.

There was also the further challenge of determining how I could gauge authenticity in a setting where students knew they were the subjects of study. While the students were reflective and insightful throughout the interview process, they were generally answering my questions, and thus responding to many of my assumptions, beliefs, and values. Thus, it was never completely clear whether the voice I was hearing

was their own, or one in a series of performances. Yet this returns me to the diffuse and differentiated nature of voice: There was no pure representation of the students that captured their complexity. In the end, I had to develop contingent and provisional understandings, while continually problematizing what I may have left out or ignored during the research process.

Realities on the Ground

Situating voice at the center of a school's organizational and pedagogical practices may sound enticing in theory. However, translating this approach into meaningful and sustainable change poses difficulties, given all the pressures schools face to meet performance benchmarks and accountability standards. This is a problem with no easy solution and perhaps accounts for the relative sparsity of genuinely radical educational models, particularly at the secondary school level. The clear challenge involved in amplifying voice hinges on management and control. A school that is open, emergent, and dialogic is also one with no settled and final form. Similarly, a school that embraces complexity, and adopts a syncretic mixture of traditions and practices, may find it challenging to communicate its approach in the language of the monologue. Families may also find such an approach too uncertain in an environment where particular outcomes are necessary to compete in a changing, fast-paced economy.

At the same time, as my findings suggest, such an approach to education is more intentional and pragmatic than many of the other alternative schools with whom we have come to identify with a laissez-faire attitude toward skills and outcomes. Further, the City Workshop was experimental in a manner that was rooted in current realities and challenges. It was open to constant change and transformation but also espoused a set of

universal values that gave its model a particular shape and form. Scholars have used the

terms *radical incrementalism* (Unger, 1998), *prefigurative practice* (Wright, 2006), and

speculative pragmatism (Manning, 2016) to characterize institutions and knowledge

forms that transcend rigid classifications and remain open to the relational character of

experience. Such approaches are necessary because they provide "practical instantiations

of lived alternatives" (Fielding, 2012, p. 17) and "provide an anticipatory image of

broader transformations" (Fielding, 2012, p. 19). This is what City Workshop set out to

do; it was, on the one hand, critical of the ideology surrounding traditional school and

practically committed to working toward social, educational, and political equality. This

tension is what invested the identity of the school with a clear political shape, but one that

remained open to change, interpretation, and possibility.

For this reason, I think educators interested in experimental school models,

particularly ones which center student voice, should consider how such schools fit in a

lineage of theoretical and educational traditions. As I learned from my research, City

Workshop, for all of its novelty, seemed very much related to educational models that

have centered the dignity, rights, and agency of young people, in an environment that

seeks to dissolve the barriers between the theoretical and the practical. Successful

examples include Dewey's Lab School, the Reggio Emilia approach, the Highlander

School, and many of the schools associated with what Fielding (2011) described as the

Radical Common School tradition. Fielding (2011) also provided thoughtful and

theoretically rich sketches of schools premised on the power of student voice and

dialogue. Such schools do not see themselves in one way; like City Workshop, they exist

in dialogue with radical, humanistic, critical, progressive, and democratic traditions in

education, and they seek to draw out the full implications of a wide range of scholars that are either ignored or referred to only symbolically.

Our current social and political environment also evinces clear evidence, almost daily, of young people shaping culture, participating democratically, and advocating for issues they care about, using tools and resources in creative and dynamic ways. These activities, whether they take place on school grounds or in spaces students themselves determine, help foster feelings of self-efficacy and belonging, while cultivating critical skills that may be necessary for civic agency and participatory democracy (Westheimer & Kahne, 2004).

Race, Class, and Power: Can Alternative Schools Empower?

An important consideration that affects the significance of my study is the limitations and possibilities for empowerment across different school settings. In a private alternative school context, even one with fewer barriers to entry than traditional progressive schools, there remains an expectation and presumption that students will have a voice. My interviews demonstrated the choice to attend City Workshop centered on knowing this freedom would be granted, a fact that suggests entitlement regardless of how critical and revolutionary the school claimed to be. If the scope and power of voice hinges on the capacity of children to engage with social, political, and racial conflict, then a critique can be made that City Workshop failed to empower students in a way that public schools might. This limitation lies at the heart of scholarship which questions whether progressive or anarchistic alternative schools live up to their stated ideals about engaged and participatory citizenship. As Schutz (2001) argued:

> In a democratic society it is surely critical that we discover ways to promote an expansive vision of democratic empowerment among our students, initiating them into practices that will enable them to engage with oppression and improve society for everyone. (p. 295)

The paradox of Schutz's observation is that the development of voice in a political sense derives from being exposed to social conflict and contention, the very qualities that tend to be minimized in alternative settings and amplified in public settings. Public organizing, movement building, and solidarity are cultivated when individuals lack voice and press for their rights. Many of these activities, as Gordon (2009) argued, already take place in urban public schools across the country.

Yet for all of the efforts to teach an anti-racist, culturally responsive curriculum that promoted exposure to and dialogue around inequality, City Workshop was notably missing racial and class-based conflict. The types of controversies which emerged were primarily interpersonal, even those which centered on racial misunderstandings. Further, the small size of the school meant there was less exposure to diverse voices, and more of a communitarian identity characterized by shared values and beliefs. Thus, even as the form and structure of the school was dialogic, and far more accommodating of difference and complexity than can be seen in more homogenous settings, it still stood apart from the realities that face more diverse, public settings, where the need to exercise voice is far more urgent and clear, particularly for those without the option to exit the system.

As Apple (2004) noted, because power is unequally distributed in society, then schools that seek to empower voice should address this problem through direct experience and by representing the visions and values of those without racial, economic, and social privilege. Despite the working-class character of City Workshop, it was not a space for those with the least power to have a say. The school remained a setting for

those privileged enough to exit the public schools, even as the City Workshop population was far less affluent than traditional private schools.

At the same time, the founders of the school appeared aware of this tension and contradiction. When I asked them whether an anarchist-inspired alternative school could be accurately as revolutionary, they suggested revolutionary for them means challenging the limits and constraints of both traditional private and public schools, critiquing the values of capitalism, and transparently endorsing the fight for racial, political, and economic inequality. Yet they were also pragmatists without illusions about the work involved to dismantle structures of exclusion and marginalization.

Significance

It might be said that researching a small, alternative school, no matter how politically or publicly engaged, has little relevance for broader questions of educational reform and democratic education. Students, teachers, and administrators in public schools labor under completely different conditions, and the space for experimentation in these settings is limited. This challenge brings up the question of relevance for educators working in more traditional school environments. First, if "public schools seduce students away from the recognition of social inequity, power asymmetries, and social diversity" (Fine, 1991, p. 17) while reproducing capitalist social relations (Bowles & Gintis, 2011), then educators must center the sociopolitical in their approach to transformation and change. Such an approach requires problematizing those systems and structures that depoliticize voice; this includes the power dynamics between teacher and students, the role of obedience and authority in the classroom, the hierarchical nature of the institution, and schooling practices dictated by the value systems and interests of the middle classes

that lean toward the reproduction of larger social inequalities (Gordon, 2009). These commitments were embodied in City Workshop's educational approach. Hence, they may serve as a model for educators seeking to revise systems and structures to empower voice in a more political direction. Simply consulting students is not enough, if the form of the educational encounter remains hierarchical, transactional, and apolitical.

In research on student voice, Cook-Sather (2002) suggested systemic change in education would come about by overcoming those challenges of authorizing student perspectives. These challenges include (a) changing the structures in our minds that have rendered us disinclined to elicit and attend to student voices and (b) changing the structures in educational relationships and institutions that have supported and been supported by this inclination. Thus, what Cook-Sather called for is a psychic shift in the image of students and the purpose of schooling, followed by a plan of action to change realities on the ground. I agree with Cook-Sather's proposal, but I also suggest empowering voice by making the values on which school is based eminently contestable and thinking about voice in more relational terms: as a shared event, rather than the property of any single individual. I also add systemic change in education will only come about if education is thought of in more political terms and the type of leadership that is encouraged the importance of public democracy, along with the forms of critical engagement that help young people become more critical readers of their society.

City Workshop provides one such method of making this shift, one that can be adopted incrementally in those settings that lack the freedom to enact more substantive changes. As such, schools like City Workshop can serve as a laboratory for new ideas, thinking, and practices, rather than a site for learning, narrowly understood.

Correspondingly, this study may also inspire alternative school educators to expand their

visions of voice beyond the individual person, and toward the wider sociopolitical

context of education. Given the school's willingness to engage issues of power as they

manifested in school and society, they appeared to address many critiques of alternative

education and progressive schools as insulated and removed from larger questions of

educational reform.

Afterthought

It is hard to capture the number of insights, progressions, regressions, moments of

hesitancy, and moments of clarity that attended this inquiry into student voice.

Throughout the process of conducting research, coding the data, and writing up the

results, I found myself constantly worried that I ignored or overlooked some vital piece

of evidence that might help me better address the research questions that frame this study.

What the process revealed, instead, was an ongoing dialogue in my own mind, one that

was shaped by countless conversations with students, teachers, and texts. At times, this

dialogue was unsettling, as it unmoored my sense of security and certainty that I was on

the right path and that I was doing justice to both the students I interviewed and the

school more broadly. At other points, I found it difficult to arrange one day's events in

sequential, coherent form.

However, I gradually grew more comfortable assigning meaning to what I found

and staying comfortable in the gaps between perception and reality. Anarchist-inspired

education poses an exciting but complicated challenge, that of balancing a shared,

universal vision for education, while at the same time attending to the different ways

individuals—particularly young people—make sense of the world. As I routinely

discovered, there will always be a space between the individual voice and collective voice and figuring out how these two can come together and coexist will always involve what Biesta (2015) described as a *beautiful risk*. Nevertheless, the risk—as an educator, researcher, or student—is well worth taking.

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Appendix A

Formal Recruitment Letter to Families

August 26, 2018

Dear City Workshop Community!

My name is Roy Danovitch. Last year, I had the great pleasure (and privilege) of meeting Ndindi and Scott, who shared my passion for education that empowers young people—as students and citizens. When I learned about their incredible work at City Workshop, I knew I had to visit. Here was a school where young people were happy, engaged, and free. Students were learning with purpose and passion, while forging relationships based on respect, inclusion, and care. What could be more important?

Currently, I'm working on my doctorate through Teachers College, Columbia University, where I focus on democratic education, student voice, and alternative schooling. As part of my dissertation, I'm conducting a case study that explores how students adapt to alternative learning environments and develop their sense of agency and voice. Throughout the year, I plan on immersing myself in the City Workshop community, and listening to students, faculty, and parents reflect on their experiences in the school. These conversations may take place through interviews, focus groups, community meetings, and more

As part of my research, I plan on visiting City Workshop twice a month, on Mondays and Tuesdays. I also plan on attending community events, board meetings, and other spaces where AWS comes together for planning, brainstorming, and dialogue. During this time, I hope to meet many of you (hopefully everyone), and hear your views and ideas about City Workshop, and education more broadly. Participation is completely voluntary.

Finally, I'm also interested in the questions you believe are worth exploring, as this study is all about supporting the mission and vision of this incredible community of learners, educators, and advocates.

Thank you so much for your time! Please feel free to contact me with any questions at rnd2115@tc.columbia.edu. Hope to see everyone soon!

Best,

Roy Danovitch

Appendix B

Interview Protocol

Interview Question	Research Question
1. How long have you been at City Workshop School, and how did you first hear about it?	R1: How does the humanistic inspired approach of the school influence the development of student voice?
2. What were some of the biggest differences between your previous school, and City Workshop?	R2: What can we learn about education by attending to the voices of students?
3. What is the school's educational approach, for someone who knows nothing about it?	R1: How does the humanistic inspired approach of the school influence the development of student voice?
4. Do the voices of the students here all carry equal weight?	R1: How does the humanistic inspired approach of the school influence the development of student voice?
5. How does the school help students engage in their learning?	R1: How does the humanistic inspired approach of the school influence the development of student voice?
6. What do you most value about your education here?	R2: What can we learn about education by attending to the voices of students?
7. What do you think gets students to care about their education?	R2: What can we learn about education by attending to the voices of students?
8. Has the school has made you more interested in political or social issues?	R1: How does the humanistic inspired approach of the school influence the development of student voice?
9. If you were speaking to a conference of teachers that wanted to improve their schools what specific advice would you give them?	R2: What can we learn about education by attending to the voices of students?
10. Lastly, how would you define the meaning or purpose of education?	R2: What can we learn about education by attending to the voices of students?

Appendix C

Comprehensive Description of Fielding's (2011) Protocol

Drawing on the typology of Fielding (2001) in his scholarship on student voice, my observations will draw on the following thematic clusters:

1. *Speaking*. Who is allowed to speak? Who are they allowed to speak to? What are the allowed to speak of? What type of language are they allowed to use? Who decides?

2. *Listening*. Who is listening? Why are they listening? How are they listening?

3. *Skills*. What skills are students applying or developing during their learning.

4. *Attitudes and dispositions*. How do those involved regard each other? Are all voices accorded equal weight?

5. *Systems*. How often does dialogue and encounters with student voice occur? Who decides?

6. *Organizational Culture*. Do the norms and values of the school proclaim the centrality of student voice?

7. *Spaces*. Where do these encounters occur and who controls these spaces?

8. *Action*. What action is taken? Who is responsible?

9. *The Future*. Are new structures or new ways of relating to each other needed?

Appendix D

Detailed Description of City Workshop's Educational Principles

Principle	How it is enacted
A myriad of critical theories along with their critiques	We draw from: 1. Paulo Freire who asserts that education is an act of love that educators must risk acts of love, and that education should aim at establishing a world where it would be easier to love (Darder, 2002). 2. Kanpol (1999) who urges us to move beyond "role of the cynic to overturn areas in the structure that may be oppressive and subordinative. Part of creating a critical pedagogy in teacher education is to move beyond mere critique or cynicism to a position where action can occur." 3. Poplin (2012) and her understanding of the limitations of secular humanism. We do this by: 1. Seeking an authentic education free from traditional constraints, where learners grow through real-world experience and applications, informed by a deep love and respect for themselves, each other, and the greater community as a whole. 2. Attempting to be an experiential, flexibly humanistic education-based program that promotes true ownership of the learning process and responsibility towards others. Choice and control are responsibly shared with all learners, and students self-evaluate in order to best understand and value their individual learning processes and how it contributes to others.
Merging the theoretical and the practical	We draw from: 1. Delpit (1992) who proposes that teachers acknowledge and validate students' home discourses and that these discourses are vital to their perception of self and sense. The goal here is to dismiss a false dichotomy that exists between what students intuitively know from their experience and what traditional academics offer.

	We believe that both matter and that it is our role to facilitate students' understanding of both. 2. Enriching educational theory with moral discourse as proposed by Purpel (1989). We do this by: 1. Advocating for a passion-based, rigorous education where teachers meet students where they are with regard to skills and interests, designing rich and challenging curricula around student choices. We believe that the cognitive and the affective are indivisible-- simply put, a learner's feelings and concerns, as well as their interests, are wholly tied into how effectively they think and learn. Students' experiences and prior knowledge is of great value. 2. Examining our motives and intensions with each project undertaken. Be it in mathematics, art or humanities first explores the questions: "Why are we doing this and what makes it have value?"; "What does value mean to us?"; "Who does this benefit?"; "What does this say about others and ourselves?"; "How would someone different from us perceive is project?"
A genuine concern for community and promoting public democracy (Sehr,2007). A concern for the global and local community (Welch, 1998) Finding a space where the learner's concerns are honored. Also and non-Western perspectives are very much a part of this process	We draw from: 1. SooHoo (2010) who appeals to us to "exhibit a willingness to listen, to be humble, to be cautious, to avoid flaunting knowledge, and to avoid trampling over." We do this by: 1. Hosting weekly city-as-classroom days: These are days when we take advantage of the "adopted campus"-- our great city. When our learners aren't out in the city engaging the civic community where it thrives, we are bringing its fascinating members to our school location. We believe that our community members are the experts and enthusiasts who can help us learn about how we can best contribute to our great city. 2. Students are involved in making real-life decisions about issues concerning our community (e.g.. we are participating in an ongoing project where students work with patients in a hospice). Along with the service

	components of the work, the curriculum will thematically explore health, aging, family and resources in our community. We will provide the academic support so that students are able to engage in activities like interview people, analyze budgets, write grants, meet politicians, question religious leaders, learn new languages and become public speakers.

A concern for the spiritual and the physical.	We draw from:
	     1. Parker Palmer's (1997) notion of spirituality in education, "By spiritual I mean the diverse ways we answer the heart's longing to be connected with the largeness of life—a longing that animates love and work, especially the work called teaching."
	
	 We do this by:
	     1. Partnering with faith –based institutions for interfaith community work.
	
	     2. Inviting my graduate students to host our discussions learning activities in our physical building as a means to "…talk to each other about our inner lives -- risky stuff in a profession that fears the personal and seeks safety in the technical, the distant, the abstract" (Palmer, 1997).

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