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How Students and School Staff Define Meaningful Student Voice Practices in Middle and High Schools

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Abstract: Historically, students are often sidelined in school- or community-level decision making. Although many schools are making stronger efforts to include student voice, research shows that to be effective these practices need buy-in from both students and teachers. In this article, we examine student and school staff perspectives on what “meaningful” and “nonmeaningful” student voice practices look like. This study used qualitative data collected from interviews and focus groups with school staff and students in several K–12 schools. Teachers and school administrators can leverage results from this study to develop meaningful student voice practices within their schools.

Keywords: meaningful student voice, student voice practices

A movement is growing within K–12 schools to shift toward an egalitarian approach to decision making between students and school staff. Specifically, schools are increasingly considering how to provide students with opportunities to participate in and influence the decisions that shape their lives and the lives of their peers (Mitra, 2018). In the field of education, these opportunities are referred to as *student voice practices*.

Student voice practices can take many forms, including students' advocating for changes in their school, student representatives on school leadership teams, or opportunities for students to provide feedback through surveys. Research has shown that employing effective and sustainable student voice practices can improve youth development outcomes, such as agency, belonging, competence, engagement, and academic outcomes (Anderson, 2018; Caetano et al., 2020; Conner et al., 2024; Dobson & Dobson, 2021; Lyons et al., 2020; Mager & Nowak, 2012; Mitra & Serriere, 2012; Toshalis & Nakkula, 2013; Zeldin et al., 2018). Additionally, research reveals that student voice practices are beneficial for addressing systemic education inequities, with more equitable practices at the school and classroom levels reported when students are invited to collaborate with adults to improve their learning environments (Beltramo, 2017; Khalifa et al., 2016).

While schools have been increasing student voice practices, however, many students continue to feel as though they have limited opportunities to have a say (Conner, 2020). This perspective is especially true for students from historically marginalized groups (e.g., students of color, low income, LGBTQ+, recent immigrants or refugees) who appear to have fewer opportunities for student voice and are rarely asked to share ideas for how schools or teaching can be improved (Alonso et al., 2009;

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McFarland & Starmanns, 2009; Rodríguez & Brown, 2009). Students may continue to feel as though they have limited opportunities because not all student voice opportunities are done successfully. For instance, student voice opportunities may sometimes be tokenistic or feel “performative” as opposed to opportunities to create change (Biddle & Hufnagel, 2019; Mayes et al., 2021). More clarity on what students view as meaningful student voice practices is needed to establish longstanding, effective student voice and better understand the desires and needs of students.

This study explores examples of meaningful and nonmeaningful student voice practices through the perspectives of students, teachers, and school administrators. Taking a qualitative approach, we examined the following two research questions:

1. What characteristics categorize meaningful student voice practices?
2. What characteristics categorize nonmeaningful student voice practices?

Findings from this study provide insights into how teachers and school administrators can develop meaningful student voice practices in their schools.

Defining Meaningful Student Voice Practices

We define student voice as opportunities to participate in and influence the educational decisions that shape students’ lives and the lives of their peers (Mitra, 2018). Using our definition as a guide, we conducted a search for the terms both “meaningful” and “nonmeaningful” “student voice practices” to understand how academic articles conceptualize these practices within schools. However, research was very limited and was not often disaggregated into the categories “meaningful” and

“nonmeaningful.” Most research conceptualized student voice practices very generally. Our scan pulled student voice research from several scholarly search engines including ProQuest, ERIC, JSTOR, and Sage through the use of Google Scholar.

Student voice is defined in a variety of ways. Mager and Nowak (2012) referred to student voice as student participation, which was defined as “student involvement in collective decision-making processes at the school or class level that included dialogue between students and other decision-makers” (p. 40). Conner (2015) defined student voice as “a strategy that engages students in sharing their views on their school or classroom experiences in order to promote meaningful change in educational practice or policy and alter the positioning of students in educational settings” (p. 5). One framework defines “student participation” as “students are offered the possibility of forming and expressing their opinions, getting involved in decisions, and actively influencing school life” (Zala-Mezö et al., 2020, p. 3). These definitions have shared elements but do not provide a metric of “meaningful” vs. “nonmeaningful” participation.

Several articles also considered the setting in which these practices were taking place. Practices to receive youth feedback that were not in a school setting were considered under the broader umbrella of “youth voice” or “youth activism” (Augsberger et al., 2018). Some scholars use the terms “youth” and “student” voice interchangeably (Bertrand & Rodela, 2018), but in terms of our search, “youth voice” mainly refers to youth-led community-based organizing, which also occurs outside of a school context. Based on our search, existing academic research focuses more on the methods of student voice, rather than defining what meaningful change or participation looks like. When we examine “meaningful” change in this article, we are looking at both change

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that fundamentally changes systems and change that feels meaningful to both staff and students. This article sheds light on how to define meaningful practices to establish a standard of student voice practices.

Alongside these unique definitions of student voice, we identified numerous frameworks that help schools think about how to put student voice definitions into practice. Several frameworks focused on the different roles that students and school staff can play in promoting student voice. One example is the Global Student Forum (GSF) which develops a strategy for strengthening teacher-focused relationships. Their framework encourages “teacher-focused” and “student-focused” activities that determine student voice activities in which teachers should be the facilitators and activities in which students should be the facilitators (Mitra, 2003). Another framework that discusses staff and student roles is Mitra's pyramid of student voice (Mitra & Gross, 2009, p. 523), which describes three different levels of student voice practices (i.e., listening to students, collaborating with students, and supporting student leadership). Mitra's pyramid acknowledges that students and school staff have different roles in elevating student voice practices. However, this framework and the GSF framework have the same goal of supporting a more democratic process for school decision making.

Many other frameworks encourage schools to center student voice practices in dismantling discriminatory or inequitable frameworks within schools. One framework, designed by Bertrand and Rodela (2018), is centered around improving equity in student voice practices. This framework focuses on reciprocal dialogue between education decision makers and students of color. They use these dialogues for students

and school administrators to build off of each other's words, which helps identify manifestations of systemic racism in the school system. Another framework considers "insider" and "outsider" approaches to student voice (McMahon & Portelli, 2012; Mitra & Kirshner, 2012). These articles describe "insider" approaches as formal processes to gain student input within a school, such as student government, student representatives on school boards, etc. They define outsider approaches as student organizing, rallying, and general questioning of oppressive structures within a school (McMahon & Portelli, 2012; Mitra & Kirshner, 2012).

Several frameworks define "transformative student voice," which takes the Bertrand and Rodela's (2018) framework a step further (Fielding, 2004; Hipolito-Delgado et al., 2021; Pearce & Wood, 2016). Transformative student voice occurs when students are viewed as experts in the realities of schoolwide issues and are partners in developing solutions to those issues (Fielding, 2004; Hipolito-Delgado et al., 2021; Pearce & Wood, 2019). The opposite of transformative student voice is "performative student voice," in which students are given superficial opportunities to provide perspectives without opportunities to change systems (Hipolito-Delgado et al. 2021). Examples may include asking students to complete surveys to get their input but never incorporating any of their ideas or suggestions, or only asking for students' input on decisions related to school events such as homecoming, pep rallies, or prom.

Although these frameworks help describe the outcomes that student voice practices can achieve and who the key players are in student voice practices, they do not identify the factors that lead to well-perceived student voice opportunities. This

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article supplements these frameworks by providing specific examples of the practices that students and staff deem as meaningful.

Limited research addresses the factors that determine whether student voice practices are meaningful or nonmeaningful. Fletcher's (2014) definition of meaningful student involvement provides a helpful conceptual framework for understanding "meaningful student involvement": processes for engaging students as partners in every facet of school change. Although this conceptual framework is strong, our article dives more deeply into the characteristics that student and adult partners need to have to buy into student voice practices. Several definitions of student voice focus more on how student voice is conducted rather than why it is important. For example, Mager and Nowak's (2012) definition emphasizes that, for student voice practices to work, a relationship needs to exist between staff and students, but this definition does not clarify what a meaningful relationship looks like. Conner's (2015) definition says that student voice practices should lead to "meaningful change" but does not provide examples of what meaningful change looks like. The data we have collected helps to synthesize examples of what students and staff perceive to be meaningful voice practices, to further develop the definition of what "meaningful change" can mean.

Methods

This study examines how students, teachers, and school administrators characterize meaningful and nonmeaningful student voice practices. To answer our two research questions, we spoke with students, teachers, and school administrators across the United States about their experiences with student voice practices in their

classrooms and schools. The data collected for this study stems from a larger study being conducted to understand how student voice practices are implemented in classrooms and schools (Holquist et al., 2023).

Sample

Our sample included middle and high school students, teachers, and school administrators who have experience with student voice practices in their classrooms and schools. Participants for the study were identified through personal relationships with the larger study's principal investigators. Personal relationships with participants fell into one of three categories: (a) those who participated in previous studies on student voice who indicated they would like to participate in future studies; (b) those who previously volunteered alongside us in student voice work; (c) those who were friends or acquaintances of the principal investigators who were known practitioners of student voice. We began by identifying approximately 50 potential participants for the study, 30 of whom were purposefully selected based on different demographics to ensure a diverse sample, including (a) role (i.e., student, teacher, or school administrators), (b) school level (i.e., high school or middle school), (c) geographic location (e.g., state), (d) gender identity, (e) race/ethnicity, and (f) experiences with student voice practices (e.g., limited to extensive experiences with student voice in classrooms and schools; Creswell & Poth, 2016). Based on their personal connections to the participants, the principal investigators reached out to potential participants (and their parents/guardians if under the age of 18) via email to inquire if they wanted to participate in the study. Seventeen of the 30 selected participants took part in the study, including 10 students, four

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teachers, and three school administrators. Table 1 provides pseudonyms and sample demographic information for all participants.

Data Collection

The primary data sources for this study consisted of focus groups and interviews that took place via Zoom during August and September 2021. We held two 90-minute semi-structured focus groups (five participants per group) with student participants—one with students who had limited experience with student voice and another with students who had extensive experience. We also conducted 60-minute semi-structured interviews with teachers and school administrators. Originally, we intended to conduct focus groups with teachers and school administrators, but due to difficulty in scheduling these individuals at the same time, we transitioned to interviews. The focus groups and interview protocols were designed to understand student, teacher, and school administrator perceptions of and experiences with student voice practices in their classrooms and schools (Creswell & Poth, 2016). Sample questions included, “Tell us about the opportunities that students have to participate in classroom and school decision making.” and “How do adults support students in participating in decision making?” Throughout the focus groups and interviews, we used responsive interviewing to allow for flexibility in changing questions in response to what was learned (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). A research assistant, who did not have a previous relationship with the participants, facilitated a majority of the focus groups and interviews to enhance trustworthiness.

Table 1
Sample Demographics

Participant	Role	School level	Geographic location	Gender	Race/ ethnicity	Experience with student voice	Example of student voice experience
Rebecca	Teacher	High	California	Female	White	Extensive	Provided students with opportunities to decide the ways in which they would show what they learned (e.g., presentations, tests)
Ben	Teacher	High	Pennsylvania	Male	Black	Extensive	Provided students with opportunities to codesign the curriculum
Amy	Teacher	High	California	Female	White	Limited	Provided students with opportunities to vote on what they would learn each day
Mary	School administrator	High	California	Female	Black	Limited	Asked her students for feedback on school decisions
Erin	Teacher	Middle	Texas	Female	White	Limited	Allowed her students to choose the books they would read in the classroom

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Participant	Role	School level	Geographic location	Gender	Race/ ethnicity	Experience with student voice	Example of student voice experience
Shirley	School administrator	High	Minnesota	Female	Black	Extensive	Collaborated with students to create school policies
Cayla	School administrator	Middle	Oregon	Female	White	Extensive	Created a student voice club in the school
Wilma	Student	High	Kentucky	Female	Asian	Extensive	Member of her school's student council
Karen	Student	High	Kentucky	Female	White	Extensive	Participates in a student voice group outside of her school
Diane	Student	High	Oregon	Female	Asian	Extensive	Member of her school's student council
Mark	Student	High	Kentucky	Male	White	Limited	Fills out student experience surveys provided by the school
Stephen	Student	High	Kentucky	Male	White	Extensive	Member of his school's student advisory board
Sara	Student	High	Kentucky	Female	Asian	Extensive	Participates in a student voice group outside of her school

Participant	Role	School level	Geographic location	Gender	Race/ ethnicity	Experience with student voice	Example of student voice experience
Jared	Student	Middle	Pennsylvania	Male	Latino	Limited	Has been given choice in what he learned by his teachers
Allen	Student	High	Pennsylvania	Male	Black	Limited	Fills out student experience surveys provided by the school
Michelle	Student	High	Minnesota	Female	Black	Limited	Participated in a student panel to give feedback to her school
Vanessa	Student	High	Minnesota	Female	Black	Limited	Fills out student experience surveys provided by the school

Note: For teachers and school administrators, participants were categorized as having extensive experience with student voice if participants had implemented student voice practices in their classrooms and/or schools in order to include students in decision making about a problem of practice (e.g., creating a student advisory board to make changes to school disciplinary policies). For students, participants were categorized as having extensive experience with student voice if participants had opportunities to participate in decision making about a problem of practice in their classrooms and/or schools.

Coding Strategy and Data Analysis

We developed the coding structure that guided the data analysis using a grounded theory approach (Creswell & Poth, 2016; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). We drew upon the grounded theory process of data reduction to analyze the data, which included three steps: open coding, axial coding, and selective coding.

Using Dedoose to identify themes across the data, we coded all focus groups and interview transcripts. We began our analysis by open coding where we examined the ways in which participants experienced student voice practices at their school. After the first round of coding, we met to review initial codes and add new codes. From the initial open coding, we proceeded to conduct axial coding where we began to draw connections among the codes and organize them into categories. Two researchers coded each transcript separately and then met to compare their application of the schema. Discrepancies were discussed as a team until we reached 100% agreement. This process continued until we achieved saturation—until no new categories emerged and no further variations within categories could be determined. We then proceeded to selective coding to identify the central theme. For this study, two key categories emerged: meaningful and nonmeaningful student voice practices.

Positionality and Trustworthiness

Our approach to conducting this research was inherently affected by our positionality (Creswell & Poth, 2016). Yosmary identifies as a Latinx female and currently works as an education researcher. As a former elementary dual language teacher, she understands the importance of including student voice in classroom

decisions to support student learning. As a White male, Devan works as an education policy researcher and previously worked as a student organizer to advocate for change in high school and university settings. He is deeply committed to ensuring students have a seat at the table in education reform efforts. Bailey, a student researcher on the project, identifies as a Black female. As a student researcher, she aims to use her knowledge to create racial equity and facilitate the voice of minorities in the classroom. Paula, a student researcher on the project, identifies as Black female. During high school, she was incredibly passionate about addressing student equity issues through the power of student voice. Samantha currently works as an education researcher dedicated to empowering youth voices in research, school, and out-of-school time settings. She identifies as a White female who is committed to student voice in part because of problems she perceived in how youth policy was developed and implemented at the state and district level. Jerusha identifies as a White female and currently works as an education professor. Her experiences as a high school English teacher informed her interest in student voice and agency, topics on which she has focused a stream of her research agenda. As a White and Middle Eastern male, Jonathan is an education researcher whose interest in student voice stems from high school student leadership experience as well as undergraduate research on how inclusive educational settings relate to student interest and persistence.

As a research team, we are normatively committed to the potential of student voice. To help manage our individual subjectivities, we divided the work so that we each contributed our perspectives and experiences within data collection and analyses. This approach helped ensure that our collective perspectives and experiences were captured

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in the findings, and one perspective or experience did not outweigh those of others in the group. Throughout data collection and analyses, we met regularly to discuss similarities and differences in our perspectives and experiences that may influence data collected, analyses, and findings.

Results

In this section, we synthesize our findings from our analysis of similarities that cut across student, teacher, and school administrator characterizations of meaningful and nonmeaningful student voice practices. The first section summarizes findings from the first research question: *What characteristics categorize meaningful student voice practices?* We identified four characteristics that categorize meaningful student voice practices. The second section details findings from the second research question: *What characteristics categorize nonmeaningful student voice practices?* We identified two characteristics that categorize nonmeaningful student voice practices.

Meaningful Student Voice

According to participants in the study, meaningful student voice practices were broadly defined as practices in which students purposefully and usefully contribute to decisions in schools. *Purposefully* was defined as students' intentionally or deliberately participating in decision making. *Usefully* was defined as students' participation in decision making contributing to a change. Through our analyses, we identified four themes that describe what students and staff characterized as meaningful student voice practices: (a) students and staff build relationships with each other, (b) students are

empowered to take initiative, (c) students and staff partner with each other, and (d) student voice is valued and incorporated into decision making.

Students and Staff Build Relationships With Each Other. Each student, teacher, and school administrator discussed the importance of relationships between students and staff to facilitate meaningful student voice practices. For example, Amy, a high school teacher from California with extensive experience in implementing student voice practices in her classroom, shared that “when you build positive relationships with students, you create an environment where students will come and feel comfortable saying, ‘This isn’t working for me’, or ‘Why don’t we try this?’” Similarly, Stephen, a high school student from Kentucky with extensive experience participating in student voice practices, echoed the sentiment when asked what student voice would look like to him, emphasizing the importance of checking in and showing genuine interest in what students have to say. He shared:

Teachers are sitting down with their students on a regular basis and checking in to make sure that what they’re learning, at the bare minimum, is applicable and that they’re learning it in a way that feels right. They’re checking in with their students, especially ones that are struggling, and trying to find processes and solutions to make sure that they’re getting help and that they can be successful in that classroom. And, just really trying to work with the student on a person by person basis to make sure that their voice is being heard.

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By fostering relationships with students, teachers and school administrators can ensure that students feel comfortable expressing what they want and need from schools and, ultimately, purposefully and usefully participating in decision making.

Students Are Empowered to Take Initiative. In both student focus groups and in five of seven teacher and school administrator interviews, participants described the importance of students' having the opportunity to take initiative in school and classroom decision making. At the school level, participants described students' taking initiative by leading discussions to create change. For example, Jared, a middle school student from Pennsylvania with limited experience participating in student voice practices, discussed how students in his school were influential in changing the dress code policy. He explained:

In my school we have uniforms. So the dress code, like the year before, like before COVID, we couldn't wear sweaters. Every student, we all [asked] to bring sweaters and then they [school staff] said, no. And we were begging all the teachers. We were asking the principal and then he finally changed the dress code because everybody wanted to wear sweaters in class. But the dress code was that you can only wear navy blue or dark color sweaters. But [before] we could only wear sweaters at the time when it was cold, but now we can wear sweaters all the time.

By demonstrating responsiveness to student-initiated efforts to influence schoolwide decisions, school administrators create meaningful student voice practices where students can purposefully and usefully contribute to decision making.

At the classroom level, participants described students' taking initiative by leading the development of lessons or assignments. For example, Rebecca, a high school teacher from California with extensive experience implementing student voice practices in her classroom, described an instance in which a student who was younger than her other classmates approached her with an idea for an assignment. The teacher explained how the assignment turned into an extra credit opportunity that the entire class chose to complete, ultimately making the student feel empowered and more connected to her peers. By empowering students to take initiative in the classroom and their learning, teachers create meaningful student voice practices where students purposefully contribute to decision making.

Students and Staff Partner With Each Other. In the student focus group in which students had deep experiences with student voice practices and in three of seven teacher and school administrator interviews, participants described student voice practices in which staff and students partnered in decision making. Student-staff partnerships took many forms. At the school level, these partnerships included students' serving as members of the school board, partnering with school leaders to examine school climate data, and serving on school leadership committees alongside staff. For example, Amy, a high school teacher from California with extensive experience implementing student voice practices in her classroom, described the work she does with students in an advisory committee at her school. She shared:

They [students] help throughout the year [by] track[ing], monitor[ing], and provid[ing] input on our local control and accountability plan, which essentially is the district strategic plan. So, they have a lot of decision-making power. They

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also helped me dig deeper into the quantitative survey data to get a deeper understanding of why students might be responding [a certain way] and help me gather a richer lens on the survey data. Then they also present to the board of education some of the things that they are recommending.

At the classroom level, these partnerships included teachers' working with students to develop classroom norms or assignments. For example, Shirley, a high school administrator from Minnesota with extensive experience implementing student voice practices, described the way, as a former teacher, she would codevelop the grading criteria of assignments with her students. She explained:

So, say for example, we're studying Julius Caesar, and I just want to know if they [students] understand it and can understand the themes. They could choose how they wanted to show me that.... So, they chose to build a Lego display of the battle of Julius Caesar. One did a flip book. One did a comic book, one built a bridge out of Popsicle sticks. And all of those were acceptable ways to express how you understand the material.... So, I gave them the criteria, and they helped with the criteria as well. Understanding what it would be to get an A, what it would be to be a B, and if it was a C, they wanted to change their grade or improve. But really it wasn't about changing the grade. It was about again showing what they've learned.... And so we would talk about how they would do that.

By partnering with students, teachers create meaningful student voice practices where students can usefully and purposefully contribute to decision making.

In discussing these partnerships, students, teachers, and school administrators also talked about the benefits to both parties. By partnering with students, teachers and school administrators are provided with insights into students' experiences, which enable them to better understand the needs of their students. On the other hand, by partnering with staff, students can express what they want from their school with some credibility. Diane, a high school student from Oregon with extensive experience participating in student voice practices explained:

If you just had students, I feel like a lot of administrators would have pushback. They'd be like, "Oh, students don't necessarily know the best." But the fact that they're collaborating with teachers gives them some like, I don't know, almost like reputation. I don't know if that makes sense, but like there's truth to it.

At times, students may feel like their voices are not heard or taken seriously unless they have support from school staff. In these cases, student-staff partnerships allow teachers to advocate for students and, as Diane remarked, "elevate the importance and expertise that students have" so that they can purposefully and usefully contribute to change within schools.

Student Voice Is Valued and Incorporated. Each student, teacher, and school administrator shared that student voice practices exist at their school, and student input is often requested. A feature that distinguished meaningful student voice practices, however, was that this input was valued and used to make change. At the classroom level, teachers described instances of incorporation of students' ideas and/or suggestions into class procedures, assignments, activities, and lessons. For example,

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Rebecca, a high school teacher from California with extensive experience implementing student voice practices in her classroom, described how she incorporates her students' voice into her classroom curriculum and lessons. She shared:

I do these survey questions every week that they need to answer, and I change the curriculum based on what they say. I'm really open to the curriculum. So, somebody might mention a video that I should check out, or somebody might mention the idea for an activity, and I do it. I'll actually do those activities.

At the school level, various students provided examples of requests for and incorporation of their voices, such as when they get to vote on decisions related to schoolwide events like homecoming or prom. However, when reflecting on these student voice practices, many student participants agreed that they find it more valuable when their voice directly contributes to "real change" in their schools. Real change was described as students' changing policy or practice that directly impacted students' day to day experiences. For example, Michelle, a high school student from Minnesota with limited experience participating in student voice practices, discussed how students in her school were influential in changing a policy related to students' using their bookbags throughout the school day. She explained:

There was a rule where you [couldn't] have your book bag with you in the classroom, but you [had] to take all the stuff that you needed to class. So students voted that we should have our bookbags, so that it's easier to grab our stuff. And now nobody uses the lockers in our school anymore.

Similarly, Sara, a high school student from Kentucky with extensive experience participating in student voice practices, described the treasurer role for which she is running at her school, which will allow her to provide input on the school budget.

While students appreciate when school staff request their thoughts and ideas, they find more value in it when these requests enable them to purposefully and usefully contribute to change within schools. Although all student voice practices do not need to lead to “real change” to be meaningful, it is important that these practices exist so that students know their voice is valued and, when possible, can be incorporated in decision making.

Nonmeaningful Student Voice

The antithesis of meaningful student voice practices—nonmeaningful student voice practices—was defined by study participants as practices where students do not purposefully and usefully contribute to decisions in schools. In these practices, students perceive their role in decision making as nonintentional or performative. Through our analyses, we identified two themes that describe what students and staff characterize as non-meaningful student voice practices: (a) relationships between students and staff do not exist and (c) staff are unresponsive to student voice.

Relationships Between Students and Staff Do Not Exist. As mentioned in the previous section, each student, teacher, and school administrator shared the important role that relationships play in facilitating meaningful student voice. When these relationships do not exist, students and teachers indicated that it is difficult for students to engage in student voice practices. For example, Vanessa, a high school student from

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Minnesota with limited experience participating in student voice practices, explained that when relationships between students and staff do not exist, students have difficulty trusting staff and engaging with them. She explained:

I've noticed a lot in my school, the students do not trust our staff members. Our principal's favorite thing is saying that "[school name] is a family, and we're a community." But a lot of times it doesn't really feel like it. A lot of people distrust the adults. I think if they [school staff] actually listened to us, it would make us want to listen to them.

Erin, a middle school teacher from Texas with limited experience implementing student voice practices in her classroom, expressed a similar sentiment when reflecting about the drawbacks of not building relationships with students. She shared:

A lot of us [teachers and school administrators], definitely me but maybe others, too, are totally blind. We're not listening or asking the right questions, so we're missing opportunities to involve the student in that decision-making process.

When staff do not have relationships with students, student voice practices may not be structured in ways that meaningfully engage students in decision making. These practices may be viewed by students as nonmeaningful as they are not enabling them to purposefully and usefully contribute to decisions in schools that are important to students.

Staff Are Unresponsive to Student Voice. In each student voice group and in six of seven teacher and school administrator interviews, participants shared that, while student voice practices exist at their school, not all practices feel authentic. Instead, some of them referred to these opportunities as “superficial” or “performative” given that they exist, but what students have to say is rarely addressed, incorporated, or acknowledged by staff. For example, participants consistently reported that student feedback is often gathered through surveys. In some cases, however, it feels like nothing is done with the information that is collected. As Mark, a high school student from Kentucky with limited experience participating in student voice practices, explained:

I would say for my school, about 99% of the time they're asking us questions and fielding information from us. I guess they either don't really use the information, or they use the information, and they don't really tell us what solutions they've added.

Erin, a middle school teacher from Texas with limited experience implementing student voice practices in her classroom, shared a similar sentiment, noting that sometimes the process of requesting student feedback feels one sided. As she explained:

Instead of informing the students that they're [teachers and school administrators] using the feedback they got from them, they're just kind of saying, “This is what we're doing today” without showing them the process.

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While students may be provided with opportunities to share their thoughts and ideas, it is not enough to just incorporate them. When students are not provided with information about how their thoughts and ideas are used, students may feel like their voice is not purposefully or usefully contributing to decision making, making the student voice practice seem nonmeaningful and discouraging students from engaging in student voice practices moving forward.

Discussion

Through conversations with students, staff, and school administrators, this study identified characteristics of meaningful and nonmeaningful student voice practices. Characteristics of meaningful student voice practices included: (a) students and staff build relationships with each other, (b) students are able to take initiative, (c) students and staff partner with each other, and (d) student voice is valued and incorporated. On the other hand, nonmeaningful student voice practices consist of those in which students do not purposefully and usefully contribute to decisions in schools that shape their lives and the lives of their peers. Characteristics of nonmeaningful student voice practices included: (a) relationships between students and staff do not exist, and (b) staff are unresponsive to student voice.

The majority of students and staff participants often agreed on characteristics of meaningful and nonmeaningful student voice. Several data points indicated that both staff and students perceive meaningful student voice practices to be rooted in strong relationships. Students and staff agreed on the characteristics of staff that made them effective partners. Characteristics include school staff members' relying on students to

understand school policies (especially those that impact students' day to day, like discipline policies), taking time to build positive relationships with students, and providing students with opportunities to make changes they could see. Conversely, students and staff agreed that nonmeaningful student voice practices occurred when school staff did not take initiative to form relationships or formed superficial relationships. Perceptions of meaningful relationships align with the concept of "transformative student voice," where students are relied on as experts in the realities of school-wide issues and partners in solution making (Fielding, 2004; Hipolito-Delgado et al., 2021; Pearce & Wood, 2019).

Both students and staff agreed that opportunities for students to take initiative in decision making was essential to meaningful student voice practices. Most students and staff agreed that providing superficial opportunities to provide input on schoolwide decision making discouraged students from taking initiative. Regardless of the type of engagement staff had with students, both students and staff agreed that both parties needed to have buy-in to students voice practices in order to be perceived as meaningful. This concept is supported by Fletcher's (2014) framework of "meaningful student involvement," which also discusses buy-in.

Through our data analysis, we identified several factors that led to strong relationships between students and staff. Several examples showed that students preferred when staff took initiative in reaching out to them. When teachers and other school staff create space for students to advocate for themselves, that process helps students to become more engaged. Research shows that this practice is associated with positive outcomes, including improved academic success for students (Fredriksen

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& Rhodes, 2004). Additionally, strong partnerships between students and staff lead to positive behavioral changes for students, including increased confidence, academic competence, and resilience (Endedijk et al., 2021). However, research also shows that relationship building between students and staff needs to be consistent in order to be effective. As the school year goes on, student relationships with teachers tend to become less positive (Gehlbach et al., 2011). Our data reflect that collaboration between students and school staff was deemed effective when they met regularly, but many interviews did not mention the exact frequency of meetings. A limitation of our data collection is that study participants did not participate in additional interviews over time. A future study may benefit from interviewing youth at different points in the school year to understand how relationships change.

Another limitation in our study was that we did not have knowledge of the context of each participant's relationship with educators in general. Our results show that students perceive voice opportunities as nonmeaningful when teachers only provide superficial student voice opportunities, where student voice is not valued in programmatic changes. Based on our data, some instances may exist in which students perceive student voice practices to be meaningful initially and later perceive them to be superficial. Research shows that school staff tend to develop closer relationships with students who exhibit prosocial behavior and avoid close relationships with students with histories of behavioral problems (Endedijk et al., 2021). Strong student-school staff relationships benefit school staff as well. Strong relationships lower teachers' emotional fatigue in the classroom and aid in their retention (Cui, 2022). A key characteristic identified in this study that may lead to nonmeaningful student voice practices is that

teachers and staff may lose momentum supporting practices or not know how to initiate collaborations with students. The literature on the factors that encourage school staff to be driven to collaborate with students on schoolwide decisionmaking is limited (Mitra & McCormick, 2017; Nelson, 2018). A future study could review these factors.

Our data show that a strong, positive relationship between students and staff is necessary to initiate meaningful student voice practices, but student self-initiative and frequent incorporation of student ideas are essential to maintaining these relationships. Although students' individual agency is at the heart of meaningful student voice practices, our research shows that a culture of collaboration between youth and adult partners is needed to ensure students have a meaningful role in decision making.

Discussion Questions

1. How do you define meaningful student voice practices? What practices are “meaningful” to you?
2. How do you define non-meaningful student voice practices? What practices are “non-meaningful” to you?

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