THERE IS NO SUCH THING AS THE VOICELESS: LISTENING TO THE VOICES OF ELEMENTARY YOUTH TO AFFECT SCHOOL CHANGE

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ABSTRACT

THERE IS NO SUCH THING AS THE VOICELESS: LISTENING TO THE VOICES OF ELEMENTARY YOUTH TO AFFECT SCHOOL CHANGE

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Using an arts-based methodology, this dissertation project moves beyond the traditional bounds of student and leader in schools by examining how elementary-aged youth of color are positioned to affect change within their school by way of centering student voice. Further, this study examines how school leaders engage the voices of elementary-aged youth of color. While there has been emerging research on the inclusion of student voice in the field of educational leadership, there is limited literature that provides an in-depth description of how school leaders implement student voice in the elementary school setting. Drawing from a critical leadership framework and Black feminist practices and epistemologies, the aims of this study are to contribute to the literature on student voice in the educational leadership field and to examine the ways in which youth voice can influence more critically reflexive approaches to school leadership practice. Using an art-based approach in our weekly dialogue group allowed for students to create poetry, collage, and other constructed artifacts that conveyed their ideas about what leadership should encompass and the changes they desired to see in their school, society, and local community. Through a thematic analysis of field notes, artifacts composed by the youth, recorded dialogue sessions with youth and repetitive interview sessions with the school leader, this study documents both youth and school leader perceptions of student voice and leadership in the elementary school context.

For my grandmother, Ella Mae, my first teacher.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Statement of the Problem

In the wake of multiple stigmatization and the policing and silencing of youth of color in school spaces (Love, 2016), it remains imperative that schools consider the task of leadership and whose voices are included in that endeavor. While the field of educational leadership has increasingly taken up more socially just (Theoharis, 2009) and critical leadership paradigms (Dugan, 2017; Johnson, 2006; Khalifa et al., 2016; Shields, 2004) that inform leadership practice, more scholarship is needed that demonstrates the integration of youth voice in those leadership efforts to improve schools for all students. Current research has documented that youth of color have valuable insights on systemic racism in education, which encompasses rampant, institutionalized inequalities along various identity lines (Bertrand, 2014; Carter Andrews et al, 2019; Venzant Chambers, 2019). Simultaneously, the field of educational leadership has recently proposed critical questions around the ways we must must (re)imagine or (re)envision an educational leadership (Bertrand, 2014; Dantley & Tillman, 2009; DeMatthews, Edwards, & Rincones, 2016; DeMatthews & Mawhinney, 2014; Furman, 2012; Foster & Tillman, 2009; Green, 2017) that is socially just and inclusive of students and communities in ways that matter. This is not to say that school leaders need to do more but that that they need to do better (Jiménez & Yoon, 2019). As such, school leaders must problematize traditional approaches to leadership that have often placed historically marginalized groups further from the center of schooling. Khalifa (2018) labels these traditional approaches as colonizing models that originate from colonial schooling practices. He notes that because schools were meant to build good citizens that could contribute to the economic viability of the society, school leaders struggle to break free from these colonizing molds of leadership. In other words, the wielding of

power over others is very much embedded into contemporary leadership practices and thus reflected in the ways in which adults engage students in the school space. Considering the need for a paradigmatic shift in the practice of leadership, it is essential that stakeholders are redefined, that youth are a part of that definition. Most children are amazing critical thinkers before we silence them (hooks, 2015) and have critical insights into their schooling and lived experiences (Carter Andrews, 2012). Therefore, this study seeks to disrupt the historical practice of silencing that takes place in institutions like schools. Historically, U.S. schools have served as institutions that forwarded the largely assimilationist and often violent White imperial project, with students and families being asked to lose or deny their languages, literacies, cultures, and histories in order to achieve in schools (Paris & Alim, 2017). This history has demonstrated that schools continue to serve as breeding grounds for toxic power relations, displacement, and erasure of perspectives that matter. While school leaders are constantly at the mercy of various deadlines and issues of compliance, rethinking positioning and decision making structures may seem like a fruitless endeavor. Though little can be done to completely ignore the fact that these notions around voice heavily influence the ways that schools operate.

Previous research has also documented that implementing student voice efforts can lead to concrete changes (Bertrand, 2014) that enrich the educational environment and offers a way to reengage students in the school community and increase youth attachment to schools (Mitra, 2004). By shifting power in schools in equitable ways (Khalifa, 2018), which includes bringing in the voices of youth, school leaders are able to make decisions that better support the youth and community in which they lead. The notion of the engaged voice is informed by hooks' (1994) call for a paradigm shift in education; one that recognizes that, "the engaged voice must never be fixed and absolute but always changing and evolving in a dialogue with a world beyond itself

(p.11).” Certainly, if the field is to move towards more critical, liberatory or emancipatory leadership frameworks that inform both theory and practice, then the voices that dominate educational leadership research “must never be fixed.” Instead, the dialogue needed to inform leadership as a discipline and practice must take into consideration marginalized voices, in particular those voices of elementary youth of color who are being served by schooling institutions.

In its 100-year history, the educational leadership field has been engaged with traditional definitions of leadership and roles of school leaders (Lac & Mansfield, 2018). Further, emerging scholars have begun to foster a new conversation in the field. From urging educational leaders and researchers to develop ways of leading that are more humanizing and responsive to the demands of youth experiences in the 21st century (Jimenez & Yoon, 2019) to redefining who is allowed to be considered an educational leader and whose voice is made center (Bertrand, 2014; Mansfield, 2014, 2015; Mansfield et al, 2012; Mitra, 2006, 2008), the work of leadership is irrefutably connected to what happens in schools and classrooms.

The reality that adults in schools often perpetuate hierarchal relationships or opt for extremes such as “getting out of the way” altogether (Mitra et.al, 2012) when it comes to the inclusion of student voice informs the need for school leaders to have practical models of how students can be positioned as leaders in schools. Therefore, this study adds to the emerging discourse on how we better situate youth voices and incorporate a repositioning (Bertrand, 2014) of youth as leaders now, rather than solely focusing on how they can lead in the future.

Explanation of the Study

This study utilized an arts-based methodology to investigate the larger question of how elementary youth of color are positioned to affect change. My conceptualizations of affecting change are directly linked to the act of leadership. Recent studies on student leadership (Damini, 2014; Mortensen et al., 2014) affirm that youth definitions of leadership are not reflective of adult informed theories that see leadership in more positional and authoritative ways. Rather, creating change through action informs (Mortensen et al., 2014) how the youth participants in this study engaged the topic of change. Moreover, I inquired about what issues youth identify in their school and community as well as examined how the school leader engaged the voices of youth of color in the elementary school context. To answer the proposed research questions, the youth in this project who named themselves the Voice Leaders, engaged in arts-based inquiry on the topics of change, voice, and leadership. Some examples of their constructed artifacts that speak to these questions include change hand plates, illustrated leader portraits, collage portraits, and collective poetry. The artifacts were compiled into a published playbook that the youth created to have their voices engaged in ways they intended as well as to leave a legacy for future students to follow their lead. While distinct from science based methods, arts-based inquiry involves disciplined, creative and systematic exploration of problems and natural phenomena which encourages uniqueness and variation in both methods and outcomes (McNiff, 2011). And so, I sought to design a study that would allow me to understand perspectives from key stakeholders at an elementary school site, Sunflower Elementary. By working alongside, the youth and principal at Sunflower employing arts-based methods, I was able to investigate how youth voice might be engaged in the elementary school context as well as understand the

positioning of elementary youth within the current leadership context. The research questions that informed this study were the following:

1. How are elementary-aged youth of color positioned to affect change?
    a. What are the issues that students identify in their school and community?
2. How does a social justice oriented school leader engage the voices of elementary-aged youth of color?

Overview of Dissertation Chapters

This dissertation is organized into five chapters. Following the introduction, I share a review of the literature on youth voice broadly and the ways it has been taken up across fields. I examine the blossoming literature on youth voice in educational leadership, where youth of color voices are found in the literature as well as youth voice research conducted in the elementary context. I also offer a small section charting out my definition of youth of color as I use that term throughout this dissertation. Chapter 3 provides an overview of my research design which is an arts-based qualitative study and also includes a description of how I came to create the arts-based methodology used in this study, termed M.A.A.E. Chapter 4 details the findings from this project and introduces the "stories of the data." Throughout the findings chapter, I constructed stories alongside the artifacts in this study to present the answers to my research questions as well as gesture towards new understandings of student voice work in educational leadership. In Chapter 5, I re-examine the significance of student voice in educational leadership and discuss the themes and implications of my findings. I conclude this dissertation with a way forward as I think through the possibility of the inclusion of youth voice in educational leadership in meaningful and authentic ways.

CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

As introduced in the previous chapter, the intention of my research was to explore the ways in which youth voices of color are engaged in the elementary school context. Concurrently, I was interested in how elementary-aged youth of color see themselves affecting change in order to better understand how and *if* they are positioned as leaders in the elementary school context. My research questions and methodological approach are informed by epistemological understandings that name lived experience as knowledge (Collins, 2009) and invite living inquiry (Irwin, LeBlanc, Ryu, Belliveau, 2018) into research. That is, to embrace performative practices like that of leadership as having the ability to construct a new reality. Therefore, this study with youth alongside their school principal denotes a necessary exploration of where we have seen youth voices privileged, with attention to elementary youth of color.

With an emphasis on youth voice in this study, I conducted a broad review of the literature that examined youth voice, also termed as student voice in the field of educational research. Further, I thought it might be fruitful to take a critical eye towards the ways in which youth voice has been taken up in the field of educational leadership as well as the elementary context considering the contextual layers of my study.

Youth/Student Voice in Educational Research

In general, research on student voice has historically looked at two types of initiatives. There is the research involving youth organizing and/or (YPAR) where there is youth-driven research and advocacy involving working with adults (Bertrand, 2014) and there are also student voice initiatives that seek to create school structures that allow students to be "heard" (Mitra & Gross, 2009). Because of its epistemological foundations, YPAR challenges who has the right to produce and disseminate knowledge by placing students at the center of knowledge production

(Caraballo, et. al, 2017). Additionally, YPAR utilizes various critical epistemologies, positioning it as a framework that acknowledges the value of cultural entry points. Caraballo et. al (2017) highlight this in their literature review where they illuminate the interconnection between cultural knowledge, critical epistemologies, and youth inquiry. They reference studies from Indigenous scholars like Tuck (2009) who reframe YPAR through Indigenous epistemologies (p.321) utilizing vantage points from Indigeneity to allow her to make alternative meaning of the complexities and limitations she saw in her work with youth who were researching the GED system in the state of New York. To add, Cammarota and Romero (2009) center ChicanX studies for the purpose of using critical cultural knowledge to inform how youth engage in political action as well as Ayala & Torre (2009) who extend their critical cultural epistemologies by building from Gloria Anzaldua's feminist mestiza scholarship with youth. Ayla (2009) suggests that the focus on cultural knowledge fundamentally affects how YPAR is enacted (p.321). In Irizarry's (2017) two-year study learning from Latinx youth at Project FUERTE, Latinx students were able to use their platform to problematize discriminatory language policies, acknowledge pervasive racism, and center *barrio-based epistemologies*, ways of being and knowing specific to Latinx communities (Irizarry & Raible, 2011). In short, YPAR cultivates youth voice and helps the field of educational research to recognize that youth are able to engage in inquiry-based efforts to make sense of contexts that *they* experience. It also acknowledges that they are able to do so with critical epistemological understandings. Moreover, YPAR has yielded actionable results with youth. For instance, Lee and Walsh (2017) implemented YPAR in their argument for a socially just, culturally sustaining pedagogy that focuses on youths' linguistic and cultural flexibility but also stated the need for YPAR to be implemented into curriculum efforts that support immigrant youth.

In Kinloch's (2012) work with youth in Harlem, students were able to construct poetry, prose, and other projects of resistance that supported their analyses of teaching, learning, and schooling. YPAR is a transformational pedagogical project at its core, it recognizes youth as intellectual beings capable of engaging in the practice of critical investigation of community issues and the production of viable, usable knowledge (Caraballo, et. al, 2017).

Mitra (2008) posits that most schools lack the structure that can encourage students voice in these ways. As such, students end up navigating school as passive participants rather than leaders (Mitra & Gross, 2009). To illustrate how student voice might be incorporated into schooling structures, Mitra and Gross (2009) suggests a pyramid model that begins (from the bottom) with the most basic form of student voice, 'being heard.' Here, school staff listen to students to learn about their schooling experiences. The next level consists of 'collaboration with adults' where students are positioned to work with adults to make changes in the school. It is at this level where most student voice research has been conducted for the sake of academic and curricular improvement in schools (Mitra & Gross, 2009, p.524). The final and smallest level of the pyramid includes 'building capacity for leadership' which focuses on enabling youth to share in the leadership of the student voice initiative. This area of the pyramid often unearths obstacles in student voice work where educational decision makers respond negatively or trivialize the viewpoints of students (Bertrand, 2014). To add, Mansfield and colleagues (2015) reimagine the student voice pyramid as a continuum where there is room for issues of power, identity, and context to be explored considering that current student voice literature is limited in this arena. While student voice efforts have proven to lead to positive changes in schools, this change can be elusive without administrative support (Bertrand, 2014). Thus, it remains important to

consider where student voice and educational leadership might meaningfully merge in order to inform educational decision making.

Youth Voice in Educational Leadership

While much research has explored leading schools for social justice, it has rarely considered the student perspective as an integral component of leadership decision-making (Mansfield et al., 2015). Further, in educational settings, structures rarely invite students and families to participate in decision making that concerns them (Lac & Mansfiled, 2018). Even with the knowledge that African-American students who recognize social inequities based on race might disengage from school (Wasserberg, 2018), schools remain structured as sites that silence and reinforce domination (hooks, 1994). Paying particular attention to whose voices have been historically silenced is purposeful here as there is variability amongst youth voice. In fact, Gonzales and colleagues (2017) posit that there is not *one student voice*. Especially, taking into account historically marginalized groups and educational inequities experienced by these groups; youth of color perspectives are supremely important in educational decision-making. This is documented in Khalifa's (2018) case study work at UAHS (a pseudonym) where the principal's actions of centering minoritized voices and valuing community epistemologies was a source of valuable knowledge that impacted content, policy, and practice within the school. Similarly, in his study with elementary school principals, Damini (2014) assert that principals must actively seek out student perspectives rather than relying on their own assumptions about what students think and believe about school.

The field of educational leadership must critically rethink the ways that leadership practices and perspectives are informed. Scholars must continue to question who the field upholds as knowers and gatekeepers of knowledge. Most often, students of color are seen as

problems to be solved (Gutiérrez & Orellana, 2006) and framed as passive interlopers rather than viewed as leaders who are problem-solvers. Reframing these deficit notions necessitates a shift in educational research and the practice of school leaders. This is not limited to high school youth where the majority of youth voice research is conducted (Gonzalez et al., 2017). For elementary-aged youth, student voice efforts are often classroom focused where youth rarely have opportunities to participate in decision making on school wide issues (Mitra & Serriere, 2012).

For instance, Wasserburg's (2018) work points to the few examples of student voice efforts at the elementary level. And even so, these studies reflect investigations of student voice at the upper-elementary level (Mitra & Serrierre, 2012; Serrierre, Mitra & Reed, 2011) and are especially limited in exploring student voice efforts outside of the classroom. In his study with African-American elementary-aged youth, Wasserburg (2018) found that the youth had various insights related to teacher quality. The students felt that the greatest teachers were those who were helpful, did not yell, and created exciting lessons. Additionally, students spoke to the overemphasis on test preparation within their school, highlighting the emphasis placed on test-taking protocols and a tense climate within the school dominated by rules and regulations therefore limiting student engagement. Mitra & Serrierre's (2012) case study research on the emergence of student voice at an elementary school determined that for 5th graders seeking to change school and district rules around lunch offerings at Dewey Elementary, enacting student voice for students strongly impacted positive youth development outcomes like agency, belonging, competency, discourse, and efficacy. In Serriere and colleagues (2011) examination of youth and adult partnerships in elementary service learning, their findings reveal that teacher-leaders have a diverse way of implementing elementary student voice in service learning.

Ultimately, their findings demonstrate that even at the elementary level, the relationship between teachers and students must incorporate the sharing of expertise between children and adults. By doing so, student buy-in is increased for younger students leading to a more authentic student engagement.

While some educational leadership scholars have explored students of color and leadership, the educational leadership field in general has not fully embraced the concept of youth voice or student leadership (Bertrand, p.8, 2018). In her study examining how youth participatory action research (YPAR) could serve as a path to include students of color in decision making, Bertrand notes that there are few or no chapters in the literature focused on student leadership specifically. Moreover, Bertrand reviewed *Educational Administration Quarterly* in the past 10 years using the search terms associated with "youth/student voice," "youth activism", "YPAR" and "youth organizing" finding that her search only yielded two articles (Bertrand, 2014; Mansfield, 2014). These results affirm that youth of color perspectives are likely an understudied area which in turn fail to place youth of color perspectives in the wider field of educational leadership.

To highlight the ways that high school women of color engage in leadership and activism, Welton, Brock, and Perry (2014) use a hybrid of Black feminist thought and hip-hop feminism to position the voices of young women of color to initiate bridges and restore relationships with teachers and administrators. The young women of V.O.I.C.E.S. saw themselves as cultural workers (Collins, 2006) with a political agenda to transform the school by first creating improved schooling conditions for young women of color, developing young women leaders, and challenging school adults' stereotypical perceptions and interactions with students of color (p.96). In a similar fashion, Muhammad and Haddix (2016) highlight the

importance of valuing the epistemologies and voices of Black girls in a review of literature that centers Black girl knowledge within literacy research. They exclaim, "Black girls are generators and producers of knowledge, but this knowledge had been historically silenced by a dominant, White patriarchal discourse" (p. 304). Their findings affirm educational leadership scholars like Bertrand (2014) who note that youth of color are uniquely positioned in schools to reveal the multiple ways in which power structures like systemic racism are embedded in schools.

Warren & Maricano (2018) observe that student voice can be activated through methodologies like YPAR in their work as well. In their study with Center City Youth Co-Researchers, they saw YPAR as an invitation to ensure that high school youth voices were heard regularly by prominent stakeholders and moved from the periphery to the center of school improvement discourse (p.705). Similarly, in educational leadership, Bertrand (2014) utilized the concept of "third space" to explore how reciprocal dialogue between educational decision makers and students of color influenced shared decision making. She found that creating third space (an interactionally constituted site in which reciprocal dialogue occurs and hybrid ideas may arise) in isolation does not yield desired results for students of color. However, Bertrand's study demonstrated potential pathways and obstacles to decision makers and students of color engaging in future reciprocal dialogue (p.835). Collectively, the presence of student voice in the literature signals that youth of color voices are emerging but even within that larger category, there are silences in the literature. Gonzalez, Hernandez-Saca & Artiles (2017) found in their review of 49 studies on student voice published in peer-refereed journals between 1990-2010 that student voice research has centered attention on racial and ethnic historically marginalized youth with room to build efforts on other voices such as disability or LGBTQ identities.

Building on these efforts, Blackburn & McCready's (2009) review of scholarship that represented voices of urban students who self-identify as LGBTQ+ demonstrate that queer urban youth have voice and seek to use it in environments where adults exacerbate homophobia leaving these youth feeling vulnerable and unsafe thus impacting their academic performance and, in some cases, sparking youth activism. This is poignant considering that GLSEN (Gay, Lesbian, & Straight Education Network) found that 59.7 % of LGBTQ+ youth reported hearing homophobic language and biased language towards gender expression from adult school staff. Blackburn & McCready note that the voices of queer urban youth have important implications for reimagining schooling. This work and other research remind us that transforming schools and specifically educational leadership practice requires engagement of all voices of youth of color in multi-modal ways.

As I investigated the manner in which the field of educational research and the field of educational leadership has taken up youth of color perspectives, student voice is woven throughout the literature as a catalyst for positive change (Mitra, 2012) and provides opportunity to engage students as active partners in school change (Bertrand, 2014, 2018; Mitra et al., 2012). For instance, while the term, "language" is used and not "student voice" explicitly in Buscholtz, Casilla & Lee's (2017) work, they expand on the importance of language as sustenance, where "language brokering" serves a catalyst for student voice to be heard. Youth researcher, Elisa challenged her school's hegemonic monolinguism by having them change their "English only" policy as she persuasively argued for the right to read her commencement speech in Spanish so that her family could understand and celebrate with her on her graduation day. Elisa amplifying her voice to school administration paved the way for future bilingual commencement speakers to use their home language to celebrate their academic accomplishments with their family (p.54).

Contemporary fields like critical youth studies have also emerged with the belief that youth need new kinds of spaces where processes, pedagogical structures, and youth cultural practices are valued and create a movement towards social justice and equity (Akom et.al, 2008). Thus, these spaces can emerge outside of the traditional schooling space where student voice research has historically taken place. Given this direction, methodological approaches that center participatory action research with youth have begun to blend studies on youth activism (Ginwright, 2010) and youth civic participation (Irizarry & Welton, 2014) as a part of youth voice work. In *Girl Time* (2011), Maisha Winn chronicles the transformative ways in which young women utilize their voices within the juvenile detention system by way of literary practices in order to seek restoration. Recognizing that youth of color voices are intricately linked to their knowledge base, their ways of knowing must be especially centered in the school space and taken seriously by school administration.

Who are Youth of Color?

Throughout this project, I have had to reflect on the commonly used term, youth of color. I thought it important to define youth of color as a way to disentangle youth voice work writ large from that of the youth voice work done with youth who navigate schooling in ways different from their white peers. The term, youth of color has been taken up to describe non-white youth who occupy the space of the black-white binary but also have multiple histories (Santiago, in press) that involve differential treatment based on issues related to race, ethnicity, nationality, immigration, and language. In order to fully understand the nuances of what it means to be a youth of color, I apply Molina's (2013) work which uncovers the reality of how constructs like race were made in America utilizing racial scripts that have been present since the *immigration regime* that remade racial categories and currently shape how we think about race,

and racialized groups. By examining the evolution of racial identities from 1924-1965, Molina provides the policies and laws that ultimately shape how groups (specifically Mexican and Mexican American) were racialized at any given time. Most poignant is her introduction to how these racial scripts enact themselves in the forms of policy and law thus perpetuating racial projects that are built into institutional structures. When considering the roles of schools as institutions that reflect practices and policies that perpetuate the same harm, it is necessary to draw upon present day histories where these same racial scripts have been used against various groups of color to limit or deny quality educational access by way of language, racialization, citizenship and the intersections of these. Molina's contribution of racial scripts helps uncover the ways in which youth of color are categorized and re-categorized in schools to serve the needs of intended racial scripts at any given time. For students of color existing in the interstices, a space where school serves as a manufacturing site of racism, sexism, capitalism, and inequality, these "scripts" are felt, yet students of color are asked to achieve and engage in ways that don't concern them. Love (2013) calls this "spirit murder" where there is a denial of inclusion, safety, nurturance, and acceptance because of fixed, yet fluid, and moldable, structures of racism. By highlighting youth voice studies with attention to youth of color voices as well, my research is better situated to speak to why schools must fold in youth voices in meaningful and impactful ways.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

Methodological Perspectives and Research Design

In this dissertation, I set out with the overarching purpose to explore how youth of color voices might be engaged in the elementary school context. This inquiry required me to examine the perspectives of youth, which are at the heart of this study as well as those of the school leader. While I went into this project with that purpose in mind, I had no idea what would emerge, how things might shift from literacy to art or move from a proposed school showcase to the development of a playbook that would inform the school leaders' reflexive approach to centering the voices of youth at Sunflower Elementary. When I set out to do this work, I thought I might engage a YPAR approach (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008) that would see students as co-researchers who would take action on a specific issue. While change-oriented action did ultimately emerge in this project, it was a co-creation that did not stem from research with students but instead from them speaking to their lived experiences through arts-based inquiry, discourse, and reflection. Taken together, these components informed the construction of an arts-based methodology that I termed as M.A.A.E., an acronym that encompasses makerspace, a/r/tography, and arts-elicitation. I utilize M.A.A.E. as a methodology that weaves together the aforementioned visual methods which allowed me to name the communal space and engagement between myself, the Voice Leaders and Mrs. O. In addition, I use M.A.A.E. as a descriptor of space throughout the dissertation because it distinguishes between the separate dialogue group conversations with students and the times in which we were creating artifacts that stimulated further discourse about the various topics discussed.

Driven by the notion that we can reimagine an educational leadership that prioritizes student voice, in particular the voices of youth of color, I constructed research questions that

reflect my philosophical orientations to Black Feminist Epistemology (Collins, 2009) with an emphasis on the tenets that value (a) lived experience as knowledge, (b) the use of dialogue in assessing knowledge claims in one's own community and (c) the ethics of care. As such, the research questions that guide this study are the following:

Research Questions

1. How are elementary-aged youth of color positioned to affect change?
    a. What are the issues that students identify in their school and community?
2. How does a social justice oriented school leader engage the voices of elementary-aged youth of color?

Approaching this project with Black feminist epistemologies in tow also required an important shift in how I broached educational research. Recognizing that research in itself has historically been concerned with documenting damage (Tuck, 2009; 2010), I made the choice to refuse engaging in research in ways that furthered damage-centered stories where "harm must be recorded or proven in order to convince an outside adjudicator that reparations are deserved" (Tuck & Yang, 2014). Instead, I wanted to take an approach that valued the lived experiences of the youth in this study as it informed their perspectives and the possibilities raised during our time together. From these stances, I want to underscore that my writing of this chapter can not be fully realized if I were to approach it as a series of linear steps that I followed to excavate particular outcomes – these methodological traditions subtract from what I found to be beautiful and telling in constructing this study. So instead, I write this chapter detailing the process of how I arrived at my use of methods, the construction of the arts-based (M.A.A.E.) methodology, data collection, and data analysis.

I begin by first describing my research positionality and subjectivities because as Vellanki and Fendler (2018) note in qualitative research, there is an inseparability from knowing and being, just as the ingredients are not separate from the preparation. Thus, I find it important to share my story as a Black woman researcher which informs how I come to knowledge and my applications of a Black feminist lens alongside the leadership framework used in this study. Because anchoring voice in educational settings matters in several ways (Lac & Mansfield, 2018), I deploy the method of Black Feminist-Womanist Storytelling (Baker-Bell, 2017) as a way to further anchor the importance of voice and its relationship to story in this study. Further, if education is the practice of freedom (hooks, 1994), then we must begin to validate evidence being seen as story, as poetry and literature when offering provocations about our ethical obligations as researchers (Asher, 2019). In sharing this vignette, I revisit a moment of my K-12 racial and gendered schooling experiences as a source of legitimate knowledge (Haddix, 2015) that had the power to influence the leadership practice in my high school.

Positionality and Subjectivity

It was my junior year of high school. By this point I had found my place in the school. I was involved in at least seven school organizations, some based off of merit like the honor society and student council, while others were more tailored to extroverted and outgoing students. I was also working part-time to save for college and this was my year to have all of my service hours complete as well as a portfolio of articles that I could share during my college application process. The year prior, I had interviewed the Mayor of New Orleans about his response during Hurricane Katrina. This was a big deal, as he was in town visiting the city of Memphis and made time to be interviewed by a high school student who wanted to know more about his delay in relief efforts to the people of New Orleans. My school loved this. It was yet

another accolade of a student that could be boasted about as the school worked to meet its average yearly progress (AYP). We were all (students included) made privy to the concern about not making AYP and landing on the list of failing schools. This was the priority for my high school during my years of attendance. As my principal saw it, it was not an option for our school to land on the failing list. As a school comprised of what appeared to be middle class Black students and families, I was already an outsider. I got into the school via the "optional schools" route which was a merit based program for students who were zoned to schools in their district but wanted access to a school outside of that district for a "higher quality education." Further, I was no middle class black student, my bus route was a fifteen minute ride down Elvis Presley Blvd where I would craftily get off before the school stop so that other students wouldn't know I lived outside of the nice neighborhoods that surrounded the school during that time. I share this for a reason. Being an outsider and knowing it while finally feeling the safety of having found my "fit" in the school was pivotal for me. So, when I decided to write an article that would "out" my principal's practices that directly affected Black girls in the school space, I was taking a huge risk. While I didn't have the language to describe what I considered "injustice" at the time, it was clear to me that when I saw an issue or practice that needed to change, I had to speak up.

Rumors began to surface that smoking and class skipping were taking place in the bathrooms for *all* students. For some reason, this led to the bathrooms being locked to all of the girls' restrooms with the exception of one. The boys' bathrooms remained open without explanation. The one bathroom that remained open for us had no door and it was located directly next to the cafeteria. Girls from all grades were in an uproar because we did not prefer that bathroom due to the fact that everyone entering the cafeteria could hear what you were doing and could easily walk in. There was no door for privacy. However, we revered our principal and saw

him as this "cool" and level-headed guy, kind of like an uncle who listened to what you had to say because you were making good grades and had a "respectable" reputation. However, none of our complaints were truly heard and even in our school council and societies, there was no room for us to "change" any operation or practice of an adult in the school. With this in mind, I sought an alternative avenue where I could call attention to the issue. As a writer for *The Teen Appeal*, I was supported by the university that sponsored students interested in journalism. After pitching and writing the article, the paper made it to all schools in the district with my story landing on the front page. By mid-day, possibly after lunch period, I was called to the office and placed in a conference room with the principal and teachers that I'd never interacted with (looking back they may have been a part of the teacher leadership team). I was told that I had misrepresented our school and our principal, that I did not embody what we called "Tiger Pride" if I would write an article of that fashion and have it published. I was threatened with suspension and told that, "You were supposed to be a good girl – one of the good ones." This experience never left me. In fact, I was only left to feel confused and repositioned as the outsider that I was when I initially joined the school community three years prior. After member checking this story with a high school English teacher, one who advocated on my behalf, she shared with me that she told the principal, "She has a right to tell this story, if you don't want people to know what is happening here, it needs to stop." I am not sure if it was her advocacy or a combination of the coordinators of the newspaper also coming to the school to combat my suspension, but I was never suspended. The doors were also unlocked after a few weeks. My relationship with the principal however, was never the same and any other issues that arose in our school, I dared not speak on.

Significance of Study

I share the above story recognizing that storytelling is a pedagogical practice but Black Feminist-Womanist Storytelling is one that places Black feminist/womanist theories and storytelling together to create an approach that provides Black women with a method for collecting, writing, and analyzing our stories (Baker-Bell, 2017). Reentering this story makes room for analysis through both a racial and gendered lens as I consider the ways that school leaders can either silence or make space for youth voice to be actualized. While this study focused on youth voices of color and leadership, Black feminists works and epistemologies (Butler, 2018; Collins, 2009; Dotson, 2017; Holland, 2009; McKittrick, 2006) help me to understand that school space is entangled with heteronormative, racist, sexist and ableist ideologies that provoke resistance from youth. Further, Black feminist epistemologies have historically pointed to a liberation for all, where all marginalized voices are moved from the margins to the center, recognizing that our liberations are uniquely bound together (Aboriginal Activist Sisters, 1970). With this in mind, I recognize that Black feminist knowledges and Black feminist practice, which is the application of these knowledges were enacted throughout this project. These knowledges and practices were particularly salient to my development of the unit plan, the prompts in which I engaged student discourse, and my role as a conduit between the youth and principal in efforts to relay the perspectives of the students. Appreciating that Black Feminist Thought demonstrates that knowledge has no proper subject (Dotson, 2015), it was sensible to me that the youth at Sunflower should be regarded as leaders in their own right with valuable ways of knowing that were crucial to the outcomes of this study. Therefore, I took a definitive stance or Black feminist standpoint (Collins, 2000) which names the unique yet critical stance that Black women who have particular ways of knowing engage because we are able to

see reality from multiple locations (Muhammad & Haddix, 2016). To underscore this point, the practices and knowledge making that the Voice Leaders (youth) and Mrs. O (principal) engaged with me (researcher) were a direct reflection of these dimensions of Black feminist knowledge in practice. As a cultural broker or mediator between both the youth and principal, I was able to center the lived experiences of the youth with Mrs. O because I was privy to how relevant their experiences were as young people but also recognized how easily they might be dismissed or silenced. Holding fast to my commitments and stance, I pursued a project design that would allow for the youth to be introduced to contemporary Black artists, artisans, writers, and young adult leaders of color (Appendix A). This intentionality informed the dialogue amongst the Voice Leaders as well as their creative practices and critical insights offered when sharing sacred space at Sunflower. For Mrs. O, the enactment of Black feminist practice manifested by way of challenging the status-quo and learning how to better center youth of color voices in her own leadership practices. These practices embodied an ethics of care, a tenet of Black Feminist Epistemology (Collins, 2000) on Mrs. O's part as well as operating with a critical reflexivity in our sessions that allowed for her to reflect on her role in advancing student voice efforts at Sunflower Elementary.

For congruency efforts in my research, I align my study with that of an interpretive approach recognizing that it was necessary to gain an in-depth knowledge about participants' experiences, beliefs, values, and behaviors (Creswell, 2007). To that end, my methods are tailored for elements of story or narrative to emerge for both the youth and the school leader. Without this knowledge, the field of research bends towards generalizations and bounded understandings of youth of color and static definitions of leadership.

I see stories as an avenue for which youth of color have the utility of voice. In the case of M.A.A.E., these stories were amplified through their constructed artifacts using this particular methodology. By placing Black feminist epistemologies, which inform the ways that I layer and order experiences as a means to identify the stories that emerge in this project, alongside the conceptual framework of POYCEL (Principal Orientations for Critical Youth Educational Leadership) I am able see how a) youths' lived experiences inform their knowledge claims and how school leaders honor that knowledge (Key Lever 1). Additionally, I examine how the b) dialogue between myself and the school leader helps assess the knowledge claims brought forth from the youth and what this might mean for how they are positioned (Key Lever 2) in the school. And finally, I analyze the ethics of care from the school leader in affording opportunities to support youth in exercising their voice (Key Lever 3).

Toward a Leadership Framework for Youth Voice

Arriving at a framework that neatly mapped onto both the youth and the school leader in this project proved challenging for a few reasons. First, it is important to note that I landed on the conceptual framework of POYCEL after dancing around scholarly convention (Shange, 2019) that might suggest the researcher should approach the work with a framework in mind, one that helps specify a set of questions that you then examine with a particular methodology (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003) at the forefront. While this linkage is important, the order in which I arrived at a more fitting framework did not emerge in these ways. In fact, there were various frameworks that did not seem to fully frame the phenomena of what was taking place at Sunflower Elementary. The reality was that I began with a set of research questions that morphed and shifted as I began to construct a methodology to capture my approach to this study. Considering that my methodological choices were arts-based, it became even more challenging to find a

framework that might account for this additional element. It seemed that each time that I found a framework that I thought might provide new lenses, I would realize that it did not stimulate new understandings of how to make sense of the data that emerged for both units of analysis nor did it help me to clarify the relationship among the various elements at work. Similar to Decoteau Irby's racial discipline work (2018) where he applied a layered leadership approach to engage sensemaking of racial discipline disparities in a large suburban high school, I questioned if layering various leadership frameworks like culturally responsive school leadership (Johnson, 2006; Khalifa et al., 2016) or social justice leadership (Shields, 2004; Theoharis, 2007; 2011) alongside YPAR or dialogue centered frames would be advantageous. In toiling with this idea, I wrestled with what existing frameworks helped me to see and what might be missing when putting the data from the youth and principal in conversation. From here, I came to Mitra's ABCDE framework (2012) that incorporated youth development concepts for younger children when considering the outcomes of student voice efforts. However, my questions were less concerned with the development of the students at Sunflower and more focused on how they might actuate change and be positioned as leaders in their schools. Current leadership frameworks failed to guide my questions as the frameworks were hyper focused on the adult as leader and framed students as recipients of strong leadership. Adult leadership theories often emphasize adults wielding power and authority over youth or neglect youth conceptions of leadership altogether (Mortensen et al, 2014). Finally, I came across the work of Van Lac and Mansfield (2018) who constructed a contemporary leadership framework that supported student voice but also focused on principal orientations towards actualizing voice. Below, I provide more detail of why I chose POYCEL as a "fit" for this study and the ways in which I bridge Black

feminist epistemologies alongside this leadership framework to account for the leadership practices and knowledge making exhibited throughout the project.

Principal Orientations for Critical Youth Educational Leadership (POYCEL)

Lac & Mansfield (2018) introduce POYCEL as a conceptual model that centers student voice by way of educational leaders embodying three key levers that prioritize the voices of young people. These key levers include school leaders committing to youth voice, positioning students as leaders in their schools, and affording opportunities to support young people to exercise their voice (p.43). While the POYCEL framework offers guiding principles for school leaders who seek to work collaboratively and equitably with students towards social justice (p. 44), it is also worthy of putting in conversation alongside my findings as I argue the significance of the Voice Leader's perspectives and what this means for educational leadership. Research on youth leadership (Mortensen et. al, 2014) suggests that youth are aware of the issues in their community often three years ahead of adults and have important insights about how society should be different (London, Zimmerman, & Erbstein, 2003; Stoneman, 2010). With this in mind, I use the POYCEL framework to situate how youth of color perspectives, especially those of elementary youth hold value in educational decision making. While POYCEL is an adult centered leadership framework as the majority of leadership frameworks are, I use POYCEL because of its commitments to student voice and as a way to speak back to my findings. Naturally, there are parts of this framework that do not map on neatly to the leadership practices of youth. No single adult theory aligns with youth perspectives entirely, and some adult theories directly contradict youth perspectives (Mortensen et. al, 2014). POYCEL however, helps me make room for both the youth and the school leader as units of analysis in an effort to show how youth voice must play an integral role in school leadership.

Black Feminist Epistemologies

We cannot examine injustice, inequity or disenfranchisement of urban youth in any context without centering the Black woman and her epistemology, especially when the very practices employed in classrooms and schools either liberate or further oppress. As long as Black women's subordination within intersecting oppressions of race, class, gender, sexuality, and nation persists, Black feminism as an activist response will remain needed (Collins, 2000).

Black feminist knowledge then, provides a lens to understand how youth of color, especially Black youth have been historically silenced, erased or made invisible in the schooling context. Informed by Black Feminist Thought (Collins, 2000), Black feminist epistemologies (BFE) offer a liberatory way of both being and knowing. From Collins work, I place a specific emphasis on the tenets that value (a) lived experience as knowledge, (b) the use of dialogue in assessing knowledge claims in one's own community and (c) the ethics of care.

Black feminist knowledge also necessitates a different relationship between the researcher and the researched, between knowing and the production of knowledge (Dillard, 2000). Thus, my inquiry is understood from these epistemological perspectives, recognizing that what constitutes knowledge depends profoundly on the consensus and ethos of the community in which it is grounded (Dillard, 2000). I also draw on the Combahee River Collective statement which asserts that *black women are inherently valuable* (Combahee River Collective, 1977) in their Black Feminist Manifesto, while also declaring that Black womens' liberation would necessitate the eradication of all forms of oppression, they confirmed then, as our ancestors confirmed centuries ago, as we confirm now, that liberation praxis, theoretical, or otherwise, is predicated on our *Being made free*. Therefore, I look at Black Feminist Thought's contributions of Black feminist epistemology as useful for understanding historical silencing and erasure as

well as the power and utility of voice amongst young people. Finally, Because BFE makes the claim that knowledge is informed by lived experience, I felt that bridging a leadership framework like POYCEL alongside BFE affirms the notion that youth have experiences too, and are particularly experts of their own school and lived experiences. While this approach was necessary for this particular study, it remains necessary to have an offering of frameworks that draw on critical paradigms and push against status-quo conceptions of leadership by developing frameworks that center and regard youth as leaders in their schools and communities. Current progressive leadership frameworks provide a lens of where we begin. Yet, it would be a disservice to the field of educational leadership if we are not to have more in-depth understandings of how youth lead presently and the way these practices are supported or stifled in K-12 schools.

Constructing an Arts-Based Methodology

You are your own stories and therefore free to imagine and experience what it means to be human…And although you don't have complete control over the narrative – no author does, I can tell you – you could nevertheless create it.

– Toni Morrison

Working alongside the youth at Sunflower Elementary provided the opportunity to listen to the desires of the students and to be responsive to those expressions, especially if my work was to honor the intentions and possible outcomes of student voice. With the knowledge that arts and music teaching staff had been cut from district schools like Sunflower Elementary, I knew there were numerous possibilities for how we could engage the absence of these disciplines in our shared time together. Referenced throughout this dissertation, I acknowledge that the youth in this study whom affectionately named themselves the Voice Leaders, led me to a participatory design. At the onset of this study, I designed a unit plan where students would engage in

constructing short stories, poetry, and some collage work with a literacy focus. After meeting with students and hearing their desires for creating art, I chose to abandon previously planned creative forms in the unit plan and instead left this area open for the Voice Leaders to decide how they wanted to pin down topics of change, leadership, and voice when creating in our weekly sessions. In an effort to stitch together the desires of the students and the topics that spoke to my research questions, I began to reflect on how I might bring in art as a reflective tool. Initially, I thought we might take up arts-elicitation which incorporates drawing, mapping, portraits and other arts techniques that serve as reflection tools (Bagnoli, 2009). However, arts-elicitation did not fully grasp how the Voice Leaders and I spent our time. There was reflection but also inquiry operating that resembled elements of critical narrative inquiry (Rivera Maulucci, 2010a) which places an intentional focus on centering the stories of youth and marginalized communities. I found that weaving in a/r/tography (Irwin, LeBlanc, Ryu, Belliveau, 2018) was a way to engage living inquiry and to make room for constructing new realities through art processes. It was equally important for me to name the space in which we would enlist these approaches. Familiar with makerspaces from my personal creative outlets, I came to see how I engaged with the Voice Leaders as very similar to this – from our corner in the reading room to the more spacious wooden tables in the library, we cultivated our own makerspace where community is often formed and collaborative design is encouraged. Taken together, I was able to materialize the bricolage of Makerspace, Artography, and Arts-Elicitation as M.A.A.E., an acronym that supported the "how" of this study and informed the methods applied to gather insight into my proposed research questions.

Conducting a Critical Narrative Arts-Based Qualitative Study

Given the few studies that have engaged elementary-aged youth perspectives on schools, leadership or even their thoughts on instruction, I found it necessary to engage a research design that would explore a phenomenon of "how" something was done in the elementary school context but also how this might be done in intricate ways that linked my research questions, methods, and epistemological stances. In this particular case, I was interested in how elementary-aged youth of color see themselves positioned to affect change in their school, as well as how the school principal engaged the voices of youth of color at Sunflower Elementary. While case study research (Baxter & Jack, 2008) is typically reserved for investigating "how," the arts-based methodology interwoven throughout this study accompanied with the fluidity of what was happening in the context of Sunflower Elementary led me to frame this study as arts-based. I also view this study as one informed by critical narrative inquiry research (Rivera-Maulucci, 2009) *with* and *for* youth of color. In their review of arts-based dissertations, Sinner and colleagues (2006) note that tensions currently exist in the academy on what constitutes arts-based inquiry and how efforts to define what merits as creative scholarship continue to evolve. Similarly, in his paradigm analysis of the characteristics that define arts-based research, Rolling (2010) exclaims that educational researchers are still trying to define what determines arts-based research (ABR). In his work explicating the nuances of arts-based research, Rolling simultaneously offers new insights that affirm the rigor of ABR and distinguishes between arts-informed research versus research that is arts-based. Describing arts-informed research as research derived from "dabbling in the arts for a brief period (p.110)," I repeatedly assessed whether this project reflected that of an arts-based approach or research that was simply art-informed and would serve better as a case study. However, relying on my methodological approach of M.A.A.E., which goes beyond the

use of arts-based methods, I was able to forge a tailored relationship to the ways that art was used to disrupt traditional notions of schooling, voice, and leadership. Naming this study as arts-based felt akin to what Rolling describes as a proliferative practice, one that erodes pre-determinations, un-names categories, and swamps the pretense of objectivity (p.108) – all aims and outcomes of this work. Pursuing inquiry through arts and education allowed me to bring forth a practice-based methodology in conjunction with a critical narrative approach that also disrupted objectivity and centered story.

Fook & Gardner (2007) recommend that researchers who engage critical narrative approaches must also engage in their own reflexivity where they recognize the influences of their background, assumptions and expectations and outcomes of the research. Therefore, I name the application of a Black feminist lens that I utilize in my interpretation of the data. I see this study as informed by critical narrative inquiry because I do not hide this particular lens but instead I acknowledge that I am not a passive observer or unbiased researcher (Rivera-Maulucci, 2009) as I consider the layers of power and context in this study. In order to address my research question concerning how school leaders engage the voices of youth of color in the elementary schooling context, I was able to illuminate the context of the school, the ways in which student voice is engaged and the practice of leadership within the larger school context.

For congruency efforts in my research, I align this study with that of an interpretive approach recognizing that it is necessary to gain an in-depth knowledge about participants' experiences, beliefs, values, and behaviors (Creswell, 2007) so as to not rely on my own assumptions. To that end, my methods are tailored for elements of story or narrative to emerge for both the youth and the school leader. Without this knowledge, the field of research bends towards generalizations and bounded understandings of youth of color and static definitions of

leadership. The analytic focus of this study is not simply that of school leaders, but instead an intentional focus on the relationship between both the school leader and the youth. By shifting the unit of analysis from centrally focused on the school leader to including youth, I am able to make room for new knowledge that is informed by lived experience (Collins, 2009) and affirm the importance of dialogue in making knowledge claims.

While critical narrative inquiry is informed by narrative inquiry, it differs in its application because of the intentional focus on centering the stories of youth and marginalized communities (Rivera Maulucci, 2010a) which I deeply appreciated in my conceptualization of how this study might take form. More specifically, critical narrative inquiry prioritizes conducting research in a way that elicits first person narratives from participants who represent traditionally marginalized groups as well as utilizing those narratives to highlight issues of injustice, power and privilege (Rivera Maulucci, 2011). In writing about a critical narrativist perspective, Hickson (2016) states that critical reflection can be used as a two-stage method of deconstructing and reconstructing assumptions which can ultimately influence research design. In this study, I was continuously reflexive in the ways that I approached the design of the study especially considering the priority of youth voice in this work. With this in mind, I released my own expectations and outcomes of the study into the hands of the youth who had their own relevant agenda and voices worthy of being valued in this project.

By employing my chosen methods of semi-structured interviews, observation, and a form of document analysis of both the youth and school leader, I found that a more interactive and dialogical process was possible in the context of this research. Narrative researchers use various techniques to analyze an account (Hickson, 2016) such as categorical approaches to coding the data. Recognizing that an arts-based methodology informed how the youth and school leader

shared their stories, I coded their artifacts in search of identified themes and utilized those themes in my deconstruction of their artifacts to construct the stories that follow in the findings chapter.

Student Recruitment and Participation

Criteria for Participants

In order to thoughtfully address my research questions, I consulted with the school leader, Mrs. O in my recruitment of students. She assisted me in identifying 8-10 youth who were in 2nd grade and interested in aspects of storytelling and learning more about leadership. Further, I shared with Mrs. O that I was also interested in students who were non-white and culturally or linguistically diverse (i.e., speaks English as a second language, identifies with a culture other than American) because of my commitments to learning from and working with youth of color.

During this first phase of recruitment, Mrs. O along with her school improvement coordinator Mrs. Knot, selected 10 students who I began to pilot dialogue groups (May 2019) with and receive feedback on the unit plan I developed. I planned for these same 10 students, composed of mostly 2nd graders to participate in the official launch of the project in August when they became 3rd graders.

It was not until I returned to Sunflower Elementary in August that I became aware that many student transfers had taken place and more than half of our group were no longer students at Sunflower Elementary. This then resulted in a second phase of recruitment where Mrs. Knot took the lead on identifying students who might be interested in joining the group. Only three students from the original group returned, Rose, Niecey and Emma. Mrs. Knot chose an additional 7 students but only 5 of the 7 students returned their consent forms. I think it is

important to note here that during this phase of recruitment, Jewel, the only white student in the project was added to our group. While she did not identify as a person of color, I did not feel it was appropriate to remove her. In the spirit of honoring youth of color voices, I did consult with the other students to ask if they would be comfortable with our group representing a variety of backgrounds and they all agreed that Jewel should be welcomed into the group. From here, I brought together the students who returned from the previous pilot as well as newcomers like Drake, Ella, Jewel, Kelsey, and Sienna from August 2019 to January 2020. This provided a total of 8 students in the project. At this stage, my research questions had evolved to be more inclusive of centering the voices of the students. Therefore, I presented the unit plan to the group, received further feedback and made the necessary changes (inclusion of more art) to fit their interests. In total, I met with the Voice Leaders twice a week for 12 weeks conducting repetitive dialogue groups and eight (8) M.A.A.E. spaces where dialogue between myself and the Voice Leaders also naturally occurred and informed the findings in this project. Below I provide a more in-depth description of each of the youth in this project. By sharing a snapshot of their personalities, preferences, and contributions to the space, my hope is that they are humanized in the study and seen as the leaders they are.

Drake. Drake, 8-years-old and an environmentalist who will update you on the latest forest fire, water crisis and pollution issues. On occasion, Drake tells long stories about his family, friends, and extracurricular activities if given the time. Always with a smile, and always inquisitive, Drake believes change has to happen now, especially when it comes to saving the planet. Drake identifies as a Black male when presented with celebrity photos of children that reflect various genders and racial identities. He is a staunch advocate for Flint, Michigan and loves to share stories about his family.

Ella. Ella is a proud black girl who enters every room with a seriousness and a smile all at once. Ella is graceful and thoughtful with her words. She believes in helping people and loves learning a new skill like crochet. Ella is highly reflective about who she is as a person and how we could all be better. She gives us inspiration and reminds us that if we care about something, "speak loud about it!"

Emma. Although Emma is only 8-years-old, she approaches life with a playfulness and curiosity about all things, especially cosmetics, culture and language. She takes her time with her artwork, down to every unique detail and makes sure that others are cared for. Emma is passionate about the arts and believes that doing change work is hard but possible. Emma identifies as mixed with Asian, Black, and White. She expresses concern about her family in Thailand at times and the environmental impact that pollution has on her grandfather who lives there.

Jewel. Jewel transferred to Sunflower Elementary from the state of New York and cares a lot about the happiness and wellness of others. She is a thinker and learner who takes new information and applies it almost immediately. Jewel loves rainbows and speaks in a light voice but always with resolve. She is one who observes and pays close attention to the actions of others. Although Jewel presents as White, she shared with the group that she is a quarter Chinese after Emma opened up on our bus ride about her family living in Thailand.

Kelsey. Kelsey is the comedian of the group; she always has a joke prepared whenever she can insert it into the conversation. She enjoys working with her hands and is not afraid to counter the popular opinion. To Kelsey, kindness is not forgotten and helping others is equally important to her. Kelsey's honey brown eyes easily pull you in with the ways her eyes smirk before her mouth contours to deliver a comeback to other students. Kelsey is knowledgeable that

she is a Black girl and sees the differential treatment with her teacher Mr. Chuck when she performs Black girlhood in ways that are "too much" and deemed punishable in his classroom.

Rose. Rose is proud to call herself an artist and will readily share her viewpoints on how people should be treated. She is the quite the observer and believes in following the Golden Rule – treating others the way you would like to be treated. Rose is a perfectionist when it comes to her art, she finds it relaxing and is always thinking about the world around her. Rose identifies as Asian American but has never specifically stated the name of her home country although she references being from another country. She is very vocal about how hard her parents work and the character of adults and children around her.

Niecey. When you meet Niecey in the stories offered, you'll know. She is no-nonsense and will "tell it like it is." She is a passionate Black girl who is steadfast about being a leader and reflective on how she has changed over her elementary years. Niecey is thoughtful and never hesitates to pose questions back to you that you've asked of her – she cares about others' stories too. Niecey is outspoken about the experiences of Black people and will not hesitate to let people know when they need to do better, no matter if they are an adult or peer.

Sienna. The quietest of the group, Sienna is a thinker who is a master at learning with her hands. She is not afraid to ask questions and likes to poll the room before sharing her perspective. Sienna is gentle with others and believes in helping people, she is always thinking about her community and the people in it. Sienna presents as a Black girl who is deeply curious about the world but hesitates to share her thoughts and opinions unless we engage one on one where she feels more comfortable and relaxed.

My interactions with the Voice Leaders were both powerful and challenging at times. I name them powerful because of how much critical insider knowledge they had about schools and

society. Although elementary students, their insights reminded me of how much they are not listened to but should be. There is often a misnomer that younger children simply reflect the ideas of the adults around them. Yet, I witnessed the complete opposite. These youth were sure of themselves and unwavering on their perspectives about various hot topics that they brought to the forefront. It seemed that the "power over" culture that operationalizes in schools is what had been silencing them. I believe our space, which we created beyond place, felt like a reprieve for many of them. I imagine this is likely because I did not occupy the role of teacher, to them I was just there to "hang out with kids" as Niecey would say. Naturally, challenges presented themselves in the form of constrained time and resources. This aspect of the project was really hard for me. Particularly as it related to hearing students talk about absence. This was not only demonstrated in a conversation that Emma initiated about "good teachers leaving" but also the reality that as a graduate student during this study, I had very limited resources myself to support the work we were doing. Creating art under these constraints was frustrating and it did not feel fair to them, as I felt they deserved more.

Principal Participation

I approached Mrs. O, a white woman who was enrolled in the local university's Educational Leadership program after speaking with other students in her cohort who found her to be a strong elementary school leader that was social justice oriented. When we met for our first interview, I realized that I had met Mrs. O before. Early on, while taking coursework, I recall hearing someone with a blonde-haired bob offer critical perspectives on culturally responsive schooling and its importance behind me in a course one Saturday. To my surprise it was the same Mrs. O. These perspectives were typically limited to being shared by the people of color in our course, I remember developing a new respect for her that day. At the time I had no

idea what Mrs. O's background was nor that we would eventually partner together in the future. One of the most important factors that I considered in choosing Mrs. O was her orientation towards social justice which I felt might inform her approaches to student voice at her school. During the time of this project, Mrs. O was in her third-year as principal at Sunflower Elementary, the first school in which she had taken on a primary leadership role. Prior to becoming principal at Sunflower, she had taught for 9 years with some of that time being in a large urban district out of state as well as in a suburban district in the state of Michigan. Mrs. O's prior leadership experience was as a Title I Interventionist where she focused in literacy improvement in the suburban district. With Mrs. O, I conducted three 1:1 sessions that also incorporated semi-structured interviews. I termed our engagement as sessions because of the developmental aspect of these interviews. For Mrs. O and I, reciprocal dialogue (Bertrand, 2014) where collaboration and responsiveness are central to engagement, informed how we spent our time as well as incorporating M.A.A.E. to gain further insight on how Mrs. O conceptualized her role in engaging student voice in the school.

Research Timeline and Data Generation

To more fully detail how I spent my time with the Voice Leaders and Mrs. O, I present my multiple methods below used to generate the qualitative data in this project. Recognizing that I had two units of analysis in this study, I incorporated the use of M.A.A.E. for both Mrs. O and the Voice Leaders although it was more consistently embedded in my time with the students. To effectively explore how youth of color saw themselves as affecting change in the school space, I chose to conduct dialogue groups alongside our M.A.A.E. space to inquire more about students' notions around change, leadership and voice enactment at Sunflower. I also incorporated a field experience at a local art museum for two reasons. First, it had been brought to my attention from

Mrs. O in our first interview that students had no anticipated field trips on her books for the upcoming school year. This was not only disappointing for her because teachers did not submit field trip proposals in time but it was also disheartening for me to know that I was limited in the arts expertise I could provide. I felt the Voice Leaders deserved to learn from arts educators and I was aware that the local museum could sponsor payment so that students could attend. In terms of research, I knew that comparing my observations at Sunflower to how the youth interacted at the museum could help me reach a "thick description" in my meaning making and analysis of how they responded to the world around them. In addition to our M.A.A.E space, I arranged our dialogue groups with intention. Again, this project was an iterative process that allowed me to incorporate reflection and responsiveness to the needs of the students. For instance, I would meet with the Voice Leaders twice a week where dialogue groups would take place the first day of the week and M.A.A.E. space occurring the second part of the week. Naturally, with any artistic mode of inquiry, the construction of student artifacts would take more time than what we had allotted which would impede on this more structured approach I had implemented. I began to notice that during our M.A.A.E. space, students were already engaging in dialogue and reflection about what they were creating and why, they were collaborating with materials and ideas. So in this case, I recognized that the "dialogue group" method of this study transcended into our M.A.A.E. space as well. During this time, I took field notes in a small notebook jotting down my thoughts and any key observations that arose (Saldaña, 2016). Additionally, I would brain dump any key observations into my recorder immediately after my time at Sunflower that I would later transcribe to inform my analytic memos. Before adopting this approach, I attempted to take note from Auerbach and Silverstein (2003) who recommend maintaining a copy of the research concern, research questions, and goals of the study (p.44). While this approach is suggested to

help alleviate anxieties to support later coding decisions, I found that returning to these questions and pre-coding practices (Boyatiz, 1998) influenced how I interacted with the Voice Leaders. For example, I would often feel pressed for time, reinforcing parameters of what was "supposed to be" in the study and this necessity to push in ways that might get at deeper reflection for the students. Ultimately, this did not feel humanizing and felt parallel to what Yoon & Templeton (2019) identify as constrained spaces, where adults overlook the complex ways that children are navigating and interpreting their social words because of their own agendas and assumptions. In moving away from this practice, I was better able to engage in reflexivity, an inherently Black feminist practice of critiquing power and my relationality (Ohito & Nyache, 2018) to the students, the research and school context in which we were operating. Working with Mrs. O in what I termed as interview sessions in this project allowed for critical discourse and storytelling to surface in ways that provided more insight into her beliefs and values which informed her everyday leadership practices. In our first interview session, my questions were tailored to understand the background of Mrs. O and how she came to teaching and leadership (Appendix A). It was during this interview that I learned she was partnered in an interracial marriage which she felt gave her a front seat to injustice and discrimination. She shared various stories that raised her consciousness and reflected her own growth as a White woman with biracial children and a Black husband. While sharing these stories, Mrs. O would simultaneously name her privilege, her social justice commitments and the learning she was vigilant about doing. In the interview sessions that followed, Mrs. O reproduced the same transparency and vulnerability which allowed me to push deeper at her responses. This also gave her the space to share the resistance she faced from teachers and the heaviness she felt as she continued to navigate her school context with competing narratives at play about her. When I consider the relationality between

Mrs. O and I, it mattered that she was able to critique power structures and to name the ways that she was implicated within these structures as a white woman but also as the authority figure in her school. These actions were essential to encouraging how I, a Black woman was able to engage in asking the hard questions of Mrs. O and naming contradictions for her to wrestle with in her own leadership practice. Returning to the notion of Black feminist practice as present throughout this study, my awareness of the silences and erasure often placed upon students of color served as a catalyst for me to craft my methods and methodological choices to honor the voices of the youth at Sunflower and to critique power in all its forms, even with Mrs. O. Below I discuss in more detail how I engaged multiple methods that supported my data collection.

Interviews. According to Tracy (2010), demonstrations of rigor include the number and length of interviews, with an attention to the breadth of the interview given the goals of your study. Thus, I conducted three semi-structured interviews with the school leader Mrs. O with the final two interviews being more exploratory in nature because of my curiosity around how she began to see her role as an actor of engaging student voice. All interviews were recorded with the final interview incorporating M.A.A.E. as a means of engagement for Mrs. O to critically reflect on change. Reflecting on the artifacts and dialogue transcripts of the Voice Leaders informed my follow-up and open-ended questions to Mrs. O in interviews 2 and 3. This allowed me to examine how her understandings of engaging student voice might have developed over time when presented with the artifacts of students throughout the project.

Observations. By conducting observations in the school setting, I was able to construct meaning and aid my analysis by witnessing the day-to-day activities and interactions that take place in the school setting. Because I introduced a field experience component in this study, I

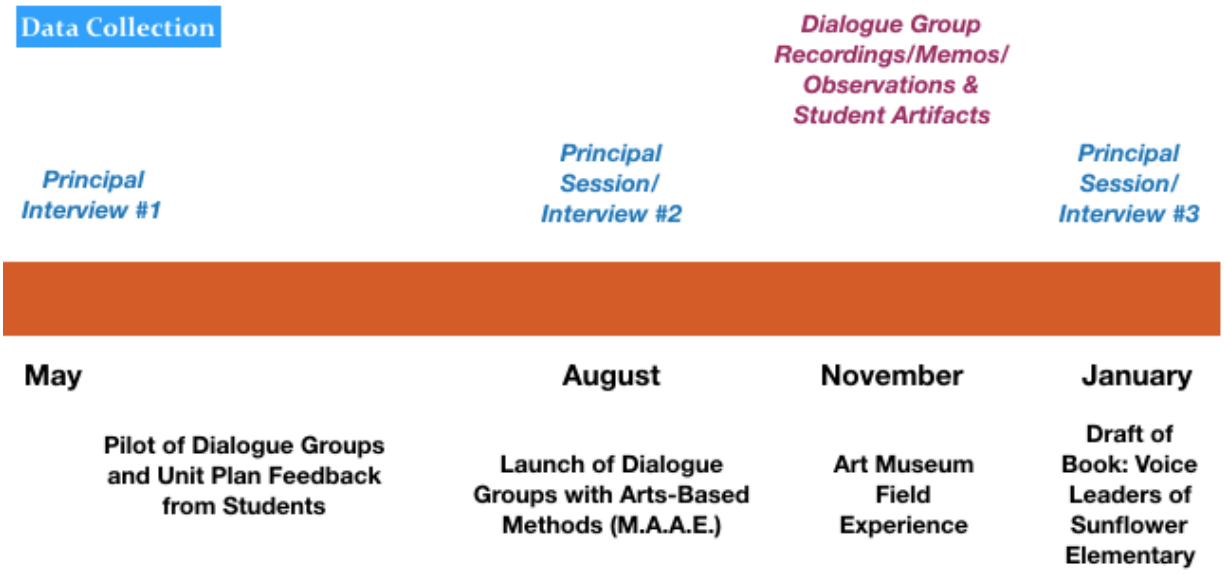
was also able to take down important field notes during my observations of the Voice Leaders at the local museum. I paid specific attention to how and what they dialogued about with one another when exploring the exhibit. Recognizing that arts-based researchers spend more time with artistic ways of working rather than just describing their observations of others (McNiff, 2011), I thoughtfully participated in experiencing the exhibits with the Voice Leaders as well as engaging in creating and constructing artifacts during our M.A.A.E. space. That said, taking on the role of a mentor and observer was difficult as I valued being "in the moment" with students and wanted to mitigate a teacher-student power dynamic as much as possible. Taking note of how Blackburn (2003a) positioned herself in her study exploring the ways LGBTQ youth used literacy to advocate for themselves and others, she named that balancing simultaneous roles can be challenging. However, every decision she made at the site, she made first as a volunteer or employee and second as a researcher. Similarly, I sought to make decisions that would value students first even if this meant placing my research agenda as secondary. While most of my observation consisted of observing the Voice Leaders, I did compose analytic memos informed by my field notes that documented my interactions with Mrs. O and commentary made within the school about the students as well as the principal. Further, my observations allowed for me to realize the fluidity of what was taking place in the school and to more closely examine how Mrs. O's actions were in alignment with the POYCEL framework.

Document analysis. I examined the various artworks which I call artifacts in this study that were created by the youth in this study as well as their principal, Mrs. O. In order to effectively comprehend the story behind the picture, I relied on the commentary made by students about their artifacts which was recorded and transcribed to support my "coding" process. It was pertinent that I did not allow my voice and viewpoints to dominate my analysis of

the students' artifacts. Therefore, I closely examined and analyzed the artifacts utilizing Mulcahey's (2009) approach to inquiry and analysis of artmaking with young children. This approach applies in the moment with artmaking by encouraging children to create without labels and boundaries (p.13). By first orienting students to think like an artist who a) looks at things closely, b) looks at things in different ways, c) takes risks and keeps and open mind, and d) dreams and imagines, I was able to capture extensive details around how the Voice Leaders made sense of their own art. Looking at artworks, helps children learn how to tell stories as they relate their own experiences to what they are seeing (p.8). I would add that creating these artworks also aids in telling the story behind the picture.

I was able to "code" for repetitive themes that told a story constructed *by* the students. These areas of focus I categorized into *school concerns, community concerns and sociopolitical issues*. Below I include two tables that document my non-traditional approach to "coding" the artifacts of the Voice Leaders. Saldaña (2016) contends that the best approach to analyzing visual data is a holistic, interpretive lens guided by intuitive inquiry and strategic questions. Therefore, my documented field notes, transcriptions of M.A.A.E. space, and analytic memos assisted in how I came to identifying themes informed by the language used from students. Blending this alongside Mulcahey's (2009) call for the adult engaged in interpretation to ask themselves "what they see" in literal form and not what they "think they see" moved me towards taking in the fine details of the artifacts and away from my own assumptions about what the students were communicating through their work.

Figure 1. Research Timeline and Data Collection



Data Analysis

Given that this study involved the creation of visual artifacts, interviews (principal) and observations, I opted to "code" the artifacts in ways that supported my sensemaking of the data. By creating the charts (Figure 2 and Figure 3) below, I was better able to look for the specific themes that were recurring in the students' dialogue transcripts within their artifacts as well. For Mrs. O's interviews, I also looked for the stories that were emerging which required the use of an analytic method informed by a critical narrative approach. The analytic process followed emic approaches where coding her actual words gave insight into her worldviews (Saldaña, 2016). This process looked like underlining, highlighting and identifying the actual stories told in Mrs. O's interviews but also a look at what "stood out" and was reoccurring for Mrs. O. This was not a grounded theory process because of my preconceived notions about Mrs. O's ideas about student voice per the voices and insights from the students. To arrive at my findings, I did also engage in a cross comparative method of examining Mrs. O's codes alongside those of the Voice

Leaders to strengthen my understandings of the differences and similarities as it related to the engagement of youth voice at Sunflower Elementary. Ultimately, interpretation include retrieving coded data, exploring relationships between combinations of codes, and examining patterns, contrasts, paradoxes, and irregularities in the data (Durdella, 2019; Glesne, 2006). By doing so, I was able to "move from parts of the information to the 'whole'" during the interpretation (Durdella, 2019, p. 272) which illustrated the story of my data.

Figure 2. Coding and Analysis Snapshot of Voice Leader Artifacts

1) Sociopolitical concerns
2) School Concerns
3) Community Concerns
-explicit mention of the community

1. How are elementary-aged youth of color positioned to affect change?

a. What are the issues that students identify in their school and community?

2. How does a social justice oriented school leader engage the voices of elementary-aged youth of color?

Themes across the artifacts

Students	Change Hands	Portrait Drawing (with script)	Leadership Collage Portrait	Megaphone Poem	School Map (and transcript)
Ella	Crime, give others things you have, helping others, community, changing attitude	None	*she did columns 1) School: art, music 2) homeless: House, food, clothes, water 3) community: safety	To get more field trips in school by speaking loud about it. Math Me La la la	Art room, music, science, and library
Drake	Change the world, no pollution,	If I was principal, I would let all	Community, safety, poverty, school, art,	Poverty Ch, ch, ch Dad	Based off a former school of his where they didn't trust the kids so

(Figure 2 cont'd)

	stop killing	people go in the library and read books and let some classes go to recess and (make) lunch longer.	music, Flint Water	My friends being there	he bolted up the doors so the kids wouldn't run out; locker room, library, computer lab (1 grade a day), playground
Emma	Some schools, some people, helping others, homelessness, more art	If I were principal for a day, I would make sure that kids would not get kicked out of school. I would make sure that more music would be in more grades and also school. I would keep people from getting trouble.	Bubble 1: Art, poverty, community, safety Bubble 2: Music, school, water	Art New York To Read Books Light Blue	Computer lab (for 2nd and 3rd), play room (is for K), art, 2 sections per grade
Jewel	Less bad kids, less people getting sad, be kind, help people,	If I were principal for a day, I would have my teacher say no	Bubble 1: schools, art, music Bubble 2: water, no	More art in school Clap, clap, clap My Mom Ask the Principal	Included the principal's office, Library, art and music room divided by two walls, lots of colors

Figure 3. Thematic Coding and Analysis of Voice Leader Artifacts

Student	Sociopolitical	School	Community	Outliers
Ella	Give others things you have (change hands + collage portrait) homelessness (collage portrait)	Art, music, field trips	Crime; safety	
Drake	Change the world, no pollution, poverty, Flint Water Crisis, poverty	Recess, making lunch longer, art, music. "We don't have much art here"	Safety	
Emma	Homelessness, water	Schools, more music, more art, music, school	Safety	Making sure kids aren't getting kicked out of school and in trouble.
Jewel	homelessness, less people getting sad, be kind, help people, no more stinky water, poverty, more stuff (resources)	School, more art, less bad kids, more art in school	Safety, I would ask that teachers could help familys (sic) that don't have money so they can stay in school.	
Sienna	helping people, giving people money, I would make sure people have books at home, poverty, city homelessness	Music, school	Helping kids, fixing houses, cleaning community,	Make no homework a rule.
Niecey	Homelessness, pollution	Schools, art, music	crime,cleaning the	Change the walls

Themes & Codes

Niecey	Homelessness, pollution control, helping others, I would let kids get rest every hour. I would make it no homework. I would kick every teacher out of the school.	Schools, art, music	crime,cleaning the community	Change the walls Free time
Kelsey	help people, homelessness poverty,	I would make sure they are all kind (the teachers). Art, music, art	Crime, safety	I would keep people from get in trouble. I would love to help people in class.
Rose	Help others, stop bullying (?), Golden Rule, help the homeless, forces, war, poverty	School	Clean the community, help someone clean the community	"Art makes me feel like relaxed"

CHAPTER 4: EXPLORING POSSIBILITY IN EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP

All paradises, all utopias are designed by who is not there, by the people who are not allowed in.

—Toni Morrison, Interview with Elizabeth Farnsworth, *PBS NewsHour*

American novelist and literary mother, Toni Morrison expressed the above sentiment in her 1998 interview surrounding the release of her bestselling novel, *Paradise*. When asked about the all-black town called Ruby in the novel, Morrison shares that the town participates in its own destruction by operating with an exclusivity and a separateness – a practice of keeping others out in order to maintain safety and a hierarchy of power. Her interrogation of this notion of paradise and utopias—as being inherently exclusionary, and as a result constructing their own downfall—prompts my initial questions around absence of voice and possibility in educational leadership. Morrison offers us a meditation on the dangers of exclusivity while also offering a metaphorical understanding of how this practice came to be. Moreover, she states,

> "[I]solation, you know, carries the seeds of its own destruction because as times change, other things seep in, as it did with Ruby. The 50's, that was one thing; the 70's, that was another, and they refused to deal with the changing times, and simply threw up their gates, like any gated community, to keep everything away. And, in fact, that was the necessary requirement for the destruction of their paradise."[1]
>
> (T. Morrison, personal communication, March 9, 1998)

Here, I find that Morrison's description of Ruby holds a mirror that reflects the ways in which I view status quo leadership practice and its embrace of exclusion and hierarchal power. This chapter seeks to trouble the notion of status quo leadership and calls the field to question whose voices are historically "not allowed in" and what might be possible when they are.

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[1] Toni Morrison. (1998, March 9). Retrieved from https://www.pbs.org/newshour/show/toni-morrison.

Therefore, I center youth voices of color in educational leadership (individual practice and the discipline) as a means to to illustrate what happens when school leaders resist exclusivity and hierarchies of power by choosing to embrace the changing times in education and to make room for possibility. When engaging the voices of youth of color, particularly younger students, I find that this must be at the center if we are to improve the schooling experiences for youth in K-12 urban schools.

I begin with Morrison's sentiments as a way of seeing this historic absence of voice, specifically the absence of youth voice in schools and embracing its actual possibilities in educational leadership. By refusing to acknowledge the current climate of volatile, challenging times and further pushing youth voices and perspectives to the margins, schools continue to participate in their own destruction. In the stories that follow, I sought to capture what might be possible if educational leaders took notes from youth on topics that concern them in their school and community. Here, I invite the reader to see with possibility – one where you are able to look at something without blinking, to see what it is like, or could have been like, and how that something has to do with the way we live now (T. Morrison, personal communication, February 3, 1998). I organize this chapter with the stories and artifacts that guide my answers to the research questions posed in this study. The point of this chapter is not to necessarily translate what the students said in our time together. Instead, it is to present the ways in which they see themselves as agents of change as well as their consciousness of larger systemic issues taking place in their school and community. Specifically, they identified school and community concerns as well as sociopolitical issues. Further, I explore student artifacts, dialogue group discussion, and a field experience component in greater depth to constellate the ways that the youth came to understand the influence of their voices in creating change. For the following

chapter, I paid particular attention to how this differed in ways than that of how the school leader engaged the voices of the youth in the elementary school setting. In sharing these moments, I introduce the data by way of artifacts and story to explore how youth of color in elementary schools see themselves affecting change and how school leaders engage youth voice in the elementary school context.

Finally, I think through the lens of possibility for each of the proposed research questions and what this might reveal based off of the findings that emerged. I approach the writing of these findings as stories with reason. Considering that this study is guided by a critical narrative approach — where I am able to explore the stories of participants by interrogating language and understanding the how and why behind the stories they tell (Fook & Gardner, 2007; Riessman & Quinney, 2005), I place the stories throughout this chapter as a way for the reader to also see with possibility and to expand the ways we think about youth of color as leaders and gatekeepers of knowledge in the school space.

Storying Moments of Possibility & Data

In this chapter and the following, I construct stories that not only illumine possibility through the eyes of the Voice Leaders and principal, Mrs. O but I also draw attention to the emerging themes laced throughout the stories that reflect the concerns of the Voice Leaders. My intention was to explore how youth of color see themselves affecting change which resulted in further investigation of what issues they identify in their school and community. It was my pursuit of this question that led me to the major themes that supported the construction of these stories. Relying on dialogue recordings from our M.A.A.E. space sessions, transcripts of those recordings as well as field notes, I was able to create coding charts that allowed me to design stories with detail that might allow the reader to enter the moment in the ways I experienced

them with the Voice Leaders. Applying a critical narrative approach allows for reporting the research as stories as a way to contextualize and convey the urgency of issues of injustice and also allows us to hear the participant voices with greater authenticity (Maulucci, 2011). As such, I compose these stories textured with the details and focal moments that were integral to the findings from the research conducted.

Towards an Arts-Based Inquiry

During the initial phase of creating the voice leader group, it was my intention to have students who would explore various creative forms as they articulated their ideas around change, leadership, and identity. In our first semester, I spent much of my time wanting to stick to the student voice unit plan I had developed. After all, I thought through every mini-lesson and artifact that students would create and present at their school assembly by the end of the study. While there was rich interaction and meaningful teaching in the moments that I did stick to the plan, there was much more to be found in the conversations that took place during and after our activities. There were also new ideas that emerged from students when working on a planned activity that would often inform our following dialogue time. Initially, I thought that students would want to write lots of poetry and short stories about change, this was reflected in my unit plan. However, by semester two, I recognized that they wanted to put their hands on something — they wanted to create, paint, and illustrate in ways that they were not able to in their classrooms.

This request wasn't incredibly surprising considering that in the Spring of 2013, the school district in which Sunflower Elementary resides made the decision to eliminate the entire art and music teaching staff in elementary schools. Coded as a redesign that would bring in community expertise, this cut left students like those at Sunflower Elementary without the

traditional art and music classes that take place with art and music teachers. Instead, monthly consultants would come in to supplement this loss and content area teachers would be expected to integrate the arts into the classroom. Needless to say, the Voice Leaders were aware of this absence and would not budge about this being an issue or area of change that they cared about. Sitting with how I wanted to structure the study and what the students voiced as their desire required me to revamp my approach. By creating a makerspace, what I call M.A.A.E. for students, we engaged in collaborative design of their artifacts and were able to engage in deeper inquiry and reflection around topics of change, leadership, and voice.

Framing Student Voice at Sunflower Elementary

The principal of the school, Mrs. O, considered herself to be a social justice leader but was careful to note herself as a more of a culturally responsive school leader because of staff resistance to the term, social justice. She was very open to supporting student voice initiatives in the school and it was central to her school improvement plan. In fact, the majority of her initiatives that could be considered as social justice oriented, like having artwork on the walls that were reflective of students' identities and a "Black Lives Matter" sign on the wall, came by way of student voice. For Mrs. O, she began the study communicating a few ideas about student voice. One of those ideas was that she wanted more student voice around developing activists and leaders. For me, it was essential that I did not go into the space with an agenda, as there is often a misnomer that students are simply reflecting that of what the adults around them think. That said, I don't think that Mrs. O could have anticipated how much the students would have to say about the absence and presence of things in their school and community. They were keenly aware that there was room for possibility. Morrison's language around possibility –

"to look at something without blinking" or "to see what it is like, or could have been like, and how that something has to do with the way we live now" points to the thinking and consciousness of the students in the Voice Leader group. Their choice words and artifacts undoubtedly reflect this. During most of the activities where students shared what they wanted to change, their vocabulary was laced with language like "more of" or "less of" such as Emma and Rose's sentiments concerning "more art" in schools or Ella's desire for "less glass and trash on the playground" when creating artifacts during one of our M.A.A.E. spaces. Over the course of the two semesters with the Voice Leaders, I was able to gather a substantial amount of what I call artifacts — art created from our M.A.A.E. space that reflected students' consciousness about leadership, change, and voice. In addition, the voice leaders and I engaged in multiple dialogues throughout the various stages of implementing the student voice initiative in the school. In this chapter, I capture the stories that come from many of these dialogues alongside the artifacts that were created from them as a way to illuminate the concerns and priorities of the Voice Leaders at Sunflower Elementary. The stories that follow then, showcase moments of possibility with the youth at Sunflower but also illumine the issues that they identify within their school, community and larger society.

Story 1. Change in Our Hands?

Drake sat in a small blue chair next to the seven other students, staring off into the distance. His fingertips tapped loudly on the table as he contemplated the environmental issues of the world.

"You know what I want? For people to stop cutting down trees. Because in the rainforest, they keep on getting wealthy and cutting down trees. Yeah, animals are dying because the rainforest is burning down." Drake would voice his knowledge on these issues during our frequent conversations, sprinkling in topics like the Flint Water Crisis or rainforest fires. Voice Leaders, Rose and Ella were also passionate about the environment. The two would often share their concerns about a lack of clean water and pollution. I thought it might be a good idea to introduce the group to Mari Copeny who is well known as Little Miss Flint for our first M.A.A.E.

session. I sat up in my chair, turned to the group and asked if they had heard of Mari. I asked if they also knew what she advocated for as a kid, considering that she too, was their age.

"She changed the water because it was bad for people and got them sick," Rose mumbled. Drake, who was still staring off in the distance suddenly sat up in excitement.

"My granny always told me about her and what she actually did was put up a fundraiser to make people from all over the world add money and send buckets of purified water to Flint cuz' they had no water. They kinda could bathe in it, but they couldn't drink it, that would have make them sick."

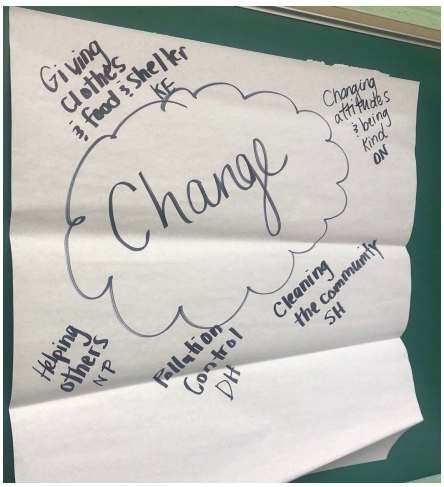
The group seemed to get excited from Drake's response. They turned to one another laughing and asking a series of questions about Little Miss Flint. I pull out my laptop and go to Mari's YouTube page. After affirming Drake and Rose's responses, I press play on her Future Women of America video that I had watched a few days before. The Voice Leaders watch in awe, taking in various details that I hadn't initially picked up.

For instance, Emma curiously asks about Mari's age to compare their ages while Niecey rocks back and forth in her blue chair affirming that "she said she wishes she could just snap and food would appear!"

I check my phone and notice that our time is running short. Sliding the phone into my bag while pulling out chart paper, we begin to brainstorm what the group defines as change.

Topics of homelessness, pollution control and the running theme of helping others seems to season their conversation.

Figure 4. Brainstorming Map on Change



I pan our little corner noticing that I still have their attention but also notice that their eyes are checking out my bag of materials. I pull out my overstretched bag loaded with paper plates,

markers, crayons and gemstones watching their faces light up. This was good, I had just a little more of their attention to give instructions on what we would do next. I go on to introduce the "change hands" activity eager to see how this will turn out in the short time we have remaining.

"So I traced my hand for a reason because when I think about change, I think about how change is in all of our hands, so take your hands out. Both of them. Okay, look at them. So you can actually change things with these same hands that you're looking at right? Like look at them closely, they have some power in them right? So what we're going to do today is have you trace your hand in the middle of the plate."

As I model thinking aloud about change and how they should plan to list one issue on each of their five fingers, I quickly mention that, "I would like to see more art in schools" while writing that alongside my other topics on my hand.

Drake, who was staring off again interjects in a disappointed tone saying that, "we don't get much art here either." Rose firmly adds, "I always feel like my mind is screaming because I'm like not relaxed. But when I'm doing art, my mind is relaxed."

I affirm their feelings with a nod, letting them know that art relaxes me too.

I hear the horns of Miles Davis' tune, Blue In Green fade into the background from my phone and I realize we're really pressing time. Drake asks me, "is that Beethoven?"

Before I can answer, I'm distracted by Kelsey's change hand. She's included "crime" on one of her fingers, a topic that didn't emerge in our whole group brainstorm.

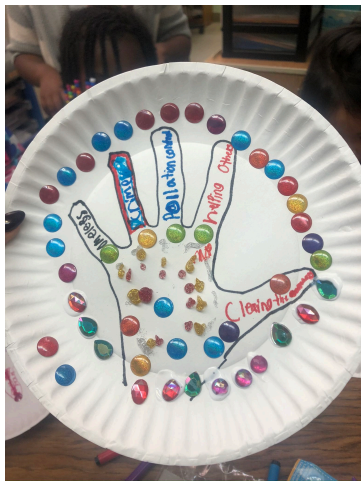
"No, this is Miles Davis, he does jazz," I say.

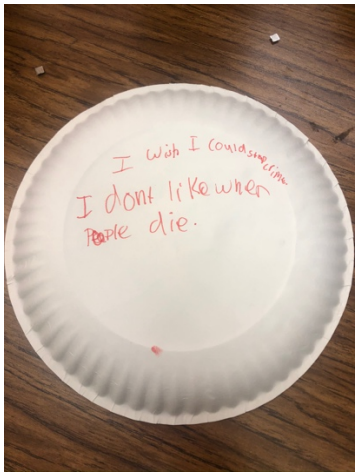
It looks as if Niecey has included crime on her hand too – although they're sitting pretty far apart. I feel like Kelsey knows I am taking this moment in because she locks her honey brown eyes with mine and says, "Don't read mine out loud. Please don't." I squat down whispering, "Do you want to talk about it?" She shakes her head "no" but slowly moves her small hand from covering what she wrote on the back for me to see. I give her a look that asks for permission to read. Her sentence references a domestic crime that she saw take place at her home. I pat her back and allow her to keep working as I can sense she doesn't want to be pushed on the topic. Kelsey continues working, now covering the back of the plate with her reasons for caring about other topics she's listed on her change hand. It's as if she's surrounding the vulnerable moment she just shared with other words as a way to cover it up.

I go on to take pictures of their final products and I see Niecey's rationale for choosing "crime" as a topic of change (Figure 5).

I pause in my footsteps, realizing this work is more urgent than I thought.

Figure 5. Front and Back of Niecey's Change Hand Artifact





Listening to Elementary Youth

In the previous semester, I structured the activity detailed in the story above with a more literacy centered focus. It was designed to introduce students to different literary genres like poetry where they would write poems about change using various miscellaneous materials. However, after the students made it clear that they wanted to engage with art during our time together, I felt it was important to honor their request and to find a way to revamp our unit plan (Figure 6) or at least merge the two areas. With this in mind, I encouraged the Voice Leaders to have full say in how the remainder of our sessions would be structured. While I may have come in with an intended focus, they would give feedback at the end of most sessions about how we could make the upcoming sessions more arts-based and hands on. Ultimately after five weeks of meeting, they began to take the lead on our sessions completely and would transform our pre-planned activities altogether. I begin with the story above as a way to highlight the recurring themes of sociopolitical, school, and community concerns that emerged across both the youth artifacts and dialogue space conversations.

These themes grew out of frequently recurring topics illustrated in the Voice Leader artifacts during our M.A.A.E. space where dialogue also took place. In the story above, I sought to position the students as knowers who are privy to the issues in larger society, their school and surrounding community. After watching the YouTube video of Mari Copeny, it was clear that the Voice Leaders were captivated by her passion and commitment to issues of injustice, particularly those affecting Flint, Michigan. However, it wasn't just Mari's social justice commitments that grabbed their attention. For leaders like Drake and Rose, Mari's passions were reflective of their own environmental and community concerns. This was especially salient for Drake who had intimate ties to Flint, Michigan because of his upbringing there and family that remains in the area. Drake's environmentalist passions are evident in the beginning of the story where he conveys his frustration with trees being cut down in the rainforest. Similarly, Rose and Ella articulate consciousness of these larger sociopolitical issues that are concerned with the environment and surrounding community. Instead of engaging in what Yoon & Templeton (2019) note as educational researchers creating conditions that curate children's words to align with our existing frameworks and viewpoints, I sought to create a space where the Voice Leaders felt supported and encouraged to communicate their ideas without my views on what was possible. This was of importance in our space so that I wasn't positioned as having all of the answers but rather they saw themselves as problem solvers and leaders. Additionally, I think that what was abundantly clear for me during this M.A.A.E. space and others was that their rationale behind why things needed to change was simple. It was because, as they saw it — people needed it. In the moment where I recognize that both Kelsey and Niecey are writing about crime being a topic of change they care about, I wondered what gave them the comfort to write this on their

change hands but it wasn't something that came up in our whole group brainstorm. Simultaneously, I wrestled with what my role might be in affirming their concerns, especially as an outsider of the community. This was troubling because in many ways I could relate to being in their position as a child of color who attended urban schools throughout my K-12 experience navigating the label of low SES (socioeconomic status) or free/reduced lunch that was code for living in poverty and experiencing all of the well researched traumas that can come with that. This was a careful negotiation for me because I recognized that even in my ability to relate to the Voice Leaders, I still occupied the space of outsider in some ways. Yet, I also knew that in offering these vulnerable parts of myself, a safer yet relatable space was created for them to share what Bertrand (2018) calls intimate knowledge. She notes that youth of color have crucial insights about their educational experiences especially as it relates to institutional racism and white supremacy in schools. While the Voice Leaders may not have used these terms explicitly, what was clear was their awareness that change was needed in more ways than one – socio-politically, school wide and in their community. Topics of crime, homelessness, poverty and pollution that they identified were issues directly tied to the influence of white supremacy and institutional racism as it relates to decision making about and in K-12 urban schools. A pretty glaring example of this was the reality that their school was one of many urban elementary schools that suffered from the district cuts of arts and music teaching staff while students in a more affluent neighborhood five to ten miles away did not have this problem.

To zoom in on Kelsey and Niecey's experiences with crime in this first session, I want to note its significance for various reasons. First, this wouldn't be the first time this concern about crime or safety arose. During our field experience that took place towards the end of

the project, there was a significant moment where we were riding the bus to the university campus museum and in the middle of me telling a story, one where I was learning to crochet a scarf, Niecey along with the other Voice Leaders freeze almost immediately. To our right, there is a police patrol car with blinking red and blue lights that alarm them in the same way it has startled me and so many other people of color who have had less than pleasant encounters with police. Bettina Love gives language to this moment that we all experience on that bus. She states that the vulnerability of being young and dark (black) alongside the multiple intersections of being human intensifies what we know to be an unfair justice system (Love, 2019, p.62). So for me, in that moment where their young faces that were previously taking in my longwinded story with full curiosity shifted to one that I can only name as fear, I knew that what Niecey and Kelsey named as "crime" and Ella, Drake, Jewel, and Sienna named as "safety" by our seventh session was all too real. I comforted the group by saying, "It's fine, it's just a traffic stop," but there was something there that lingered for the remainder of our ride – something familiar that disrupted the joy they previously had. Their songs stopped, the questions became fewer and Emma and I begin to talk one on one about makeup. When we arrive at the museum, I feel like I can finally release the breath I'd been holding.

Figure 6. Snapshot of Initial Student Voice Unit Plan with Literacy Focus

Student Voice Unit Plan

	Creative Form	Lesson Focus	Learning Artifact
Week 1	Poetry	Defining Change/Different Types of Change	Poetry Plates
Week 2	Poetry	Change Leaders	Short Poems in Journals
Week 3	Storytelling	Identity (Who Am I Stories)	Short Stories & Illustrations
Week 4	Storytelling	Identity (Who Am I Stories)	Storytelling through Collage
Week 5	Picture Collage	Leadership	Change Collage
Week 6	Picture Collage	Leadership	Blackout Poetry
Week 7	Mural	Power of Voice	Collective Mural
Week 8	Mural	Power of Voice	OPEN
Week 9	TBD	Dialogic Spiral	OPEN
Week 10	Archive	Dialogic Spiral	OPEN

Story 2. Does Your Voice Matter?

The secretary at Sunflower worked with me to ensure that we're able to use the library at least once a week now. This is a bit of a relief because the Voice Leaders had a hard time squeezing into the tight corner of the reading room to create their art last week. It has been a little hectic to say the least. Now, I'm able to better structure our time. I'm thinking we will dialogue on Wednesdays and have art-making on Fridays if this room situation continues to pan out.

Once I pick up the students from their classrooms, we form a circle chaotically on the cerulean colored carpet. "Quietly, please," I say. They're all looking at me with furrowed brows, curious about what we're doing in the library and why we're in a circle. Rose asks excitedly, "Are we going to talk about predictions?"

I share with Rose and the group that what we're actually going to do is something called a dialogue group where we will talk to eachother and Ms. Mauldin about different change topics and then we will create art related to our conversations the second time we meet during the week. I pause and mention, "We can also have Mrs. O join us so she can hear what you all think about things."

Kelsey's eyes grow large and she shakes her head while the other students grumble "nooooo" dramatically. When I ask why not, they don't give me any real answers. Niecey alludes to something about getting in trouble but doesn't offer much more explanation beyond her statement. I ease their nerves and affirm that she doesn't have to join our group. When I ask if they would be okay with me sharing their artifacts and important topics that come up, they shrug

their shoulders in agreement. Jewel and Sienna don't seem to be bothered either way but in an effort to honor the rest of the group, I decide we'll move forward differently – without Mrs. O.

To open the dialogue, I sit back in the wooden chair that marks the start of our human circle and asks the only question we seem to have time for. "How do you know your voice matters?"

I start to my left where Niecey is sitting swinging her legs back and forth in her chair. She responds, "One time she told me to come talk to her in private so the whole class wouldn't hear. That's how I knew my voice mattered because sometimes she will tell people we can talk in private." I realize Niecey is referring to Mrs. Knot, her teacher. When I shift my eyes to Rose to indicate that she can go next, she begins to tell a story about how she had to transfer to Sunflower because there were lots of mean teachers at her last school that yelled a lot.

When I ask her to tell me about her voice mattering at Sunflower, she shrugs as if she doesn't know. Ella and Kelsey enter the conversation and share about teachers as well. For Ella, she recalled someone falling outside on the sidewalk and when she asked a teacher for help, they listened. Similarly, Kelsey references a student getting into a fight on the playground, telling the teacher and then the students getting suspended. This swerved our dialogue into a new direction.

I ask the group in a pretty diplomatic tone, "Do you think that suspending kids is a good idea or a bad idea?"

The whole group mumbles, "Nooo, bad!" as Drake interjects with, "it just makes them be more badder." Niecey is almost flipping out of her chair when she shouts at Drake, "they're not bad, they're not bad!"

As Drake tries to keep the peace and rephrase, he says passionately, "They won't learn, you're just sending them home!" Rose counters with her thoughts that kids should go home and do work. As I take in each opinion, I try to repeat what I heard them all say to make sure I'm understanding them. Ella then lightly adds, "Well, our teacher doesn't suspend that much. He just makes us write." When Kelsey hears this, she says under her breath, "and suspends." I ask for Kelsey to share more and she goes on to describe how the students in their class get suspended for not doing their work, they have to write a lot and they don't get recess. When I ask them what does the principal say about all of this, Ella sighs and says, "Well, the principal has to do her job."

"What's her job?" I ask. Niecey exclaims that the principal is supposed to stay in the office and break up fights while Rose interjects that, "The principal's job is to make sure every single kid is on time and make sure every kid is learning everything they should know until they grow, and every kid is not hurt."

I smile at Rose's response careful to make sure everyone has been heard. When I ask Jewel what she thinks about suspension or the principal's job, she leans towards the group and says,

"I think the principal's job is to… to make sure that the teachers she hires are doing a good job."

Trying to stick to my protocol, I return to my planned questions while eyeing the school clock on the wall. I ask them to rub their hands together as we get ready for our last big question.

"If you could change ONE thing at this school, what would it be?"

The responses ranged. Drake preferred that kids get more recess time where he added, "A break from all the learning and stuff and actually having fun if you're learning something too."

Ella speaks more to the school environment as she describes the playground needing to change because of the broken slide and the "junk on the ground outside." Niecey then offers a response that builds from our earlier conversation on suspensions. "I want a change for the kids. Instead of getting school detention and getting more work and getting suspensions, just tell them to get it together and if they don't, just ignore em!"

Kelsey smirks as she offers that the school should change by letting all the teachers leave. While the other students respond in shock making faces and looking at eachother, she clarifies that the teachers should leave to "listen and get more knowledge." Ella nods in agreement and adds that "some teachers don't listen to kids."

As Jewel closes out our dialogue sharing that she would have more art so that kids could have a little break from their work, Rose grabs my attention when she announces, "I want to change the children's legacy."

Caught a bit off guard, I ask Rose to share what she means by legacy.

Rose explains, "change the children's legacy by helping the children that are sad to happy because some children don't know if their teacher is gonna be mean to the kids. And like how they are gonna grow up, into being smart or not."

Drake challenges Rose which has become a habit, telling her that she's not talking about changing the school. She ignores Drake and goes on to explain compassionately.

"Some kids don't know if their teacher is going to be mean or not. Soooo… sometimes teachers can be mean because when they're (students) aren't doing the work and they don't understand, they need some help. The teacher doesn't help."

I restate what Rose says to make sure I've captured her thoughts on legacy and teachers correctly.

As the students return to their tables, Rose taps me and asks if I know Mr. Hill. He's one of the two black teachers in the school. When I confirm that I do, she tells me, "He helps children."

Naming Change and Seeing with Possibility

Choosing to engage in dialogue groups alongside the M.A.A.E space presented unique opportunities. On the one hand, it gave the students a space to verbally share their ideas around change, leadership, and voice. While on the other hand, it presented me with the task of restructuring how I initially conceptualized the design of the project with Mrs. O in mind. Initially, our agreed upon structure was to have her come into the dialogue group and aim for the dialogic spiral approach where the dialogic process of listening and speaking co-creates relational trust between speakers (Kinloch & San Pedro, 2014). For Mrs. O and the Voice Leaders, this seemed like a viable option since Mrs. O was committed to student voice and additionally, I envisioned that her leadership priorities might be informed by what emerged from the dialogue space with the students. After being greeted with the grumblings of the Voice Leaders however, I shifted into somewhat of a mediator or cultural broker between both Mrs. O and the Voice Leaders. I recognized that it was possible that having an authority figure in the room might shift what they expressed and if they felt comfortable doing so. This led to designing my interviews with Mrs. O to also serve as sessions where I would present her with the youth artifacts and their talking points as reflective tools for her own leadership practice. In Story 1, the change hand activity was about students defining change and identifying issues that they associated with the notion of change based off of their lived experiences. In Story 2, we are able to hear explicitly what *school concerns* the Voice Leaders have with detailed rationale of why their proposed changes are essential to an improved school experience at Sunflower Elementary.

In my efforts to explore how the students knew their voices mattered, our conversation was swept into a different yet important direction. First, it's important to note that their understandings of their voice mattering at school were directly linked to their interactions with their teachers. For Niecey, it was important to her that if she had something personal going on, she knew that she could trust Mrs. Knot to honor that. This was reflected in Mrs. Knot's choice of language to offer talking in private rather than practices that might be dismissive or punishing to students. A seemingly simple response such as, "let's talk in private" communicated that Mrs. Knot was a safe place for Niecey. Similarly, Ella and Kelsey saw teachers as the primary factor in determining if what they had to say mattered. Depicted in the story above, Kelsey's response about suspensions led me to a follow up question to the whole group regarding suspensions as being "good" or "bad." The overwhelming response from the group demonstrated that they viewed suspensions in a negative light. Within this interaction, Drake's statement about suspensions making students "more badder" seemingly frustrated Niecey who disagreed with the label that Drake was applying to the students. This was not a surprise considering that Niecey herself had gotten into trouble a few times for fighting in the previous year. She didn't see herself as a "bad kid." It was also clear that in our very first session, Jewel highlighted on her change hand that she wanted to have less bad kids in the school and to her comment, I carefully asked if it were possible that there were no such thing as bad kids but "sometimes situations where we all mess up and make bad choices." At the time, I failed to realize how many of the students latched on to my commentary. This was evidenced in how they corrected others in our future sessions, making sure to remind the students that, "there is no such thing as bad kids, just bad choices."

Drake somewhat recognized that he'd labeled the students who get suspended as "bad" and returned to the conversation making the point that students who get suspended aren't learning.

This back and forth amongst the group resembles many of the conversations that adults in schools and communities have about suspension and specifically how suspension affects youth in urban schools. Although the Voice Leaders are in 3rd grade, their age and grade level have little to no bearing on their ability to articulate and debate hot topic school issues like suspension and teacher quality. These ideas were reflected in their dialogue even as it related to how Rose conceived the meaning of legacy. Her understanding that legacy had much to do with students' future trajectories as it related to their ability to learn and to demonstrate that learning in their academic performance is not only critical but also affirms the research that youth of color voices should be included in leadership towards social justice (Bertrand, 2018). Rose's concern about students in an urban school like Sunflower – "how they are gonna grow up, to be smart or not" is a powerful imperative that challenges status-quo leadership practices. In fact, it is a call for educational leaders to recognize that elementary youth of color have unique insight into their own schooling experiences and the schooling, teaching, and leadership practices in which they observe.

Finally, for the Voice Leaders in this project, topics of discussion that centered community, school and sociopolitical issues served as a vehicle for improving current conditions and to do so by seeing with a lens of possibility. When taking up these topics, the students often spoke and created artifacts in terms of what could be. As referenced in Yoon & Templeton's work, Custodero (2005) suggests that children's creative worlds are "characterized by a sense of wonder and ability to imagine and invent," providing "a source of artistic genesis cited by composers, performers, psychologists, and educators" (p. 36). The Voice Leaders frequently demonstrated these abilities whether in our dialogue group or M.A.A.E. space, there was always a sense of what could be possible even if they were not fully aware of the practical steps to

achieve the change they desired. What the Voice Leaders were able to do however, was to name the things that they saw as needing to change with clear reasoning for why these areas they illuminated weren't working for kids. Because adults can often overlook the critical insights that youth have to offer, a repositioning is needed. Bertrand (2018) conceives of this as a third space where students are positioned as leaders and decision makers alongside adults in the school space. Further, hooks (1994) challenges us to move beyond the traditional boundaries of teacher and student in her work, *Teaching to Transgress*. In this case, we must move beyond the traditional boundaries of *leader* and student, engaging the intimate knowledge that youth of color possess thus engaging their voices in authentic and meaningful ways.

Story 3. If I were Principal for a Day…

It is an energetic afternoon even with Rose and Ella absent today. When I arrive in the building, Mrs. O has already run a marathon from helping the new Kindergarten teacher set up her classroom to making student absentee calls in her office. The Voice Leaders are sharing what feels like three stories at a time from each student as we walk towards our shared reading room space for the day. I'm beginning to rethink our activity as I forecast their high levels of energy and the tight space we're sharing. And if I'm honest, I've also been feeling frustrated with the limited arts materials that consist of paper, markers, glue and crayons that I have for our group. They deserve more and I just don't have it. The school doesn't have it either. I'm hoping to hear back from a small grant to get more materials soon. Last week, I read The Honey Bunch Kids, a chapter book written and illustrated by an 8th grader from New Jersey. They were all brimming with laughter and it was entertaining to see them imitate the characters to say the least. As I asked their predications and opinions throughout the story, it reminded me of when I used to read this book to my 2nd grade class in Tennessee during our closeout of the day.

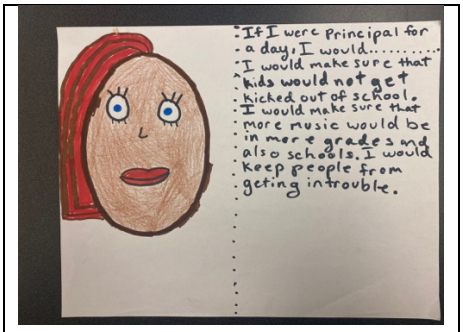
I lean back into my swivel chair trying to think on my feet about if we should stick to creating today. As Drake recounts his memory of the story from earlier this week and the other students chime in about what they would have done if they were the main character Dizzy, who was chosen to be principal for the day. Their discussion makes the choice for me. I ask if anyone knows what a portrait is and Jewel, who has on new earrings and tucks her hair behind her ear while answering emphatically says, "it's a picture." Niecey and Emma chime in sharing that a portrait is also art. As I affirm all of the girls, I go on to explain what we're working on for the day.

Ms. Mauldin: So, you're going to draw a line down the middle of your paper, it can be a zig-zag or a dashed line. However, you want it. One one side, I want you to create a portrait of yourself as principal and on this side (pointing to the opposite side), you're going to write

what you're going to do. Let's aim for 3-5 sentences. Who can repeat back to me what we're gonna do?

The group works mostly in low voices at my request until the end of our time together. I share the date of our upcoming field trip with them as I take up their portrait illustrations. They have so many questions but they want to mostly ensure that our field trip doesn't interrupt their Veteran's Day dinner that Mrs. Knot puts on every year.

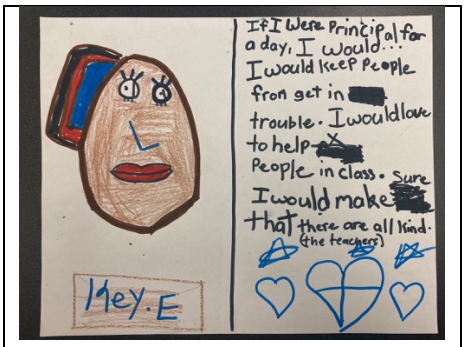
Figure 7. Emma's Illustrated Portrait



Emma's Portrait:

If I were principal for a day, I would make sure that kids would not get kicked out of school. I would make sure that more music would be in more grades and also schools. I would keep people from getting in trouble.

Figure 8. ***Kelsey's Illustrated Portrait***



Kelsey's Portrait:

If I were principal for a day, I would keep people from get [sic] in trouble. I would love to help people in class. I would make sure that there [sic] the teachers are all kind.

To shed light and what emerged from storying the activity above, I offer both Emma and Kelsey's illustrated portraits. At first glance, I pondered on whether they were just saying the same thing but after further coding and analysis, it became clearer that they were speaking to the theme of school concerns that consistently arose throughout the research project. The major themes of *school concerns* alongside *community* and *sociopolitical issues* were easily charted throughout the Voice Leaders' discourse and artifacts. I pulled in both Emma's and Kelsey's

portraits however because I find that they carve out these school concerns in ways that speak back to prior dialogue conversations but also presents new knowledge from our dialogue space. For instance, Emma's perspective on having more music at the various grade levels and in more schools is a familiar issue that she returns to in various artifacts from her change hand to her collage portrait and poetry throughout. She is clear about the lack of music and art at Sunflower Elementary and in some ways she also assumes that this must be the case at other schools. Emma's awareness of this lack is pertinent to leadership. What youth voice research shows us is that traditionally, elementary school students rarely have opportunities to participate in decision making and the student voice efforts that do take place are typically classroom focused (Mitra & Serriere, 2012). However, the focus on the lack of arts and music at Sunflower that Emma focuses on throughout is not an issue that should be contained in the classroom. Calling attention to this absence is to call attention to a school-wide and district issue. Equally, Emma demonstrates commitments to ensuring that kids are not kicked out of school or consistently getting into trouble. I call this new knowledge because prior to our group dialogue about their perspectives on suspension, this was not a sub-theme or area that was reflected in the artifacts that the Voice Leaders created. Emma's critiques are clear but within those critiques there are also solutions to be found and critical insights that might inform how school leaders like Mrs. O can begin to prioritize efforts around students' articulated needs and desires.

Kelsey's portrait heavily focused on preventing students from getting into trouble. She was interested in helping the students in the classroom and calls out the need for students to have pleasant encounters and to experience learning from teachers who are kind. Recall, during our dialogue in Story 2, Ella felt that their (her and Kelsey's) teacher Mr. Chuck did not suspend "that much" according to Ella. Although Jewel, Emma and Sienna are also in his class, they

don't confirm or deny. In that dialogue, Kelsey interjected as Ella defensively went on and on about what Mr. Chuck does warrant as punishment while Kelsey adds her viewpoint, which is that he also suspends. There is no doubt that Kelsey has different feelings about Mr. Chuck as compared Ella. I recognize that this may be due to Kelsey's own discipline experiences with Mr. Chuck. In my field notes, I document how typically when I go to pick up the students from their classrooms, Ella is often corrected more gently than Kelsey when she is taking too long to wrap up her materials to join our group. With Kelsey, Mr. Chuck seems to have less patience. Now, it may be important to note here that of the students in Mr. Chuck's class, Kelsey is pretty talkative but I am not convinced that her chatty nature should render her as deserving of colder tones from Mr. Chuck. While examining Kelsey's illustrated portrait alongside her contributions in our dialogue groups, it becomes clearer that she has strong opinions about the teachers at Sunflower. While in this particular artifact (Figure 8), she names that she would make sure all teachers are kind, Kelsey has also been explicit about needing new teachers. In our dialogue evidenced in Story 2, she shocks many of the Voice Leaders when she says that all the teachers need to leave. What is also captured in that moment is how Kelsey expands on this idea. She explicates that teachers need to, "…actually like listen and get more knowledge." During this dialogue, Ella nods and agrees sharing that, "Some teachers don't listen to kids." Returning to Kelsey's portrait, I want to hone in on how her sentiments towards teachers are also made visible in her sentence stating that, "I would love to help people in class." To me, Kelsey is no stranger to what Rose exclaimed previously when she talked about legacy where she critically questioned if teachers really are helping students to learn or simply getting frustrated with them. My take is that for Kelsey, this interest in helping students was a means of intervention for the type of teachers some students may have experienced – teachers that were more committed to discipline and

structured classrooms rather than student learning. Situating these findings in the context of the question that guided this activity, "What would you do if you were principal for a day?" concretizes that youth *are* equipped to not only identify issues within their schools and communities but when positioned as leaders, they might be able to partner alongside school leaders to help shape school decision making that offers a more whole and humanizing experience for students. Centering youth voices in these ways can serve as a catalyst for positive change in schools such as improvement in instruction, curriculum, and teacher-student relationships (Mitra, et. al, 2012). Further, even when they are not positioned in these ways – it befits us to pay attention to the ways in which they are already leading and seeing what is possible. As Mortensen and colleagues (2014) found in their study of leadership through a youth lens, youth see leadership as working in collaboration and mentoring and modeling how to create change and work towards the common good. In Emma's case, she would address the absence of arts and music in her school. For Kelsey, findings ways to help others in the classroom – what she saw as a "kind teacher" is also a leadership approach that might shift the schooling experience for youth of color. In Riley's (2018) reform work with youth, she posits that not only do principals' or school leaders have to be open to new learning but also that if young people are to find their way in a troubled world, schools need to be places of possibility and agency (p.460). I am of the belief that a first step to reimagining schools as sites of possibility and agency for youth of color especially is to begin to make the choice to listen and to authentically engage their voices so that we know what they might think about schools and their personal experiences in them.

Story 4. Because We're a Person and Not a Thing

I wonder what the Voice Leaders will remember about Mrs. O when they leave next year? I wonder if they will remember this experience?

When I asked them to describe Mrs. O in our dialogue group, they share what I fear are surface qualities – things that might not really "speak" in the research. I'm frustrated with myself for even having this concern. Jewel describes Mrs. O as loving and caring while Ella sees her as nice, beautiful, caring and helpful. In a similar fashion, Emma details Mrs. O as someone who smells good, someone who is nice, beautiful, kind and helpful. By the third "nice and beautiful," I push them to provide evidence of why they describe the principal in the ways that they do. Many of them share stories of Mrs. O helping them if they were hurt at school or sick. Niecey shares a story about a student having a seizure once and how Mrs. O made sure they were safe and takes care of them when things like this happen. Ella adds that, "she actually listens to us and she's trying to do her best to help us too." I follow up to Ella's question by asking the group how they are able to speak to the principal when she has such a big job? Rose gestures her hand at me and offers the response that sometimes there isn't much time to talk to Mrs. O.

"Sometimes you don't have time to talk to her because sometimes they're either calling someone or trying to get someone's phone number or trying to help someone if they're sick and your head hurts and your stomach hurts, or something like that. Or they're somewhere in one of the rooms unboxing something with a teacher."

Thanking Rose for her comments, I quickly turn to Jewel so as to not leave her out. She can sometimes camouflage into the group and I'm sensitive to that. I ask Jewel how she knows her voice matters to Mrs. O and she leaves me with something that I'm still processing after I drop the students off to their classrooms. To Jewel, it's simple yet clear to her why her voice matters.

She says, just above a whisper, "because we're a person and not a thing." Her tone was peppered with resolve as if it only made sense for their principal to care for them because well, they're people too.

Listening to Elementary-Aged Youth

When I initially posed my inquiry to the group, which focused on how the Voice Leaders knew their voices mattered to Mrs. O, I struggle to name what it is that I expected. At this point of the research project we had been making a lot of headway with their thoughts and perspectives on change. However, transitioning to weaving the principal's role back into our space proved to be difficult for me as I had always conceptualized Mrs. O as a critical piece of the study but not

the heart of the study. In tucking those tensions away, the purpose of this dialogue space was to really center in on the relationship between the Voice Leaders and Mrs. O as well as how they might perceive their voices to be engaged at Sunflower. As evidenced in the story above, the students had all positive reviews of Mrs. O. While they used descriptive language to describe her appearance and character initially, they were also able to provide stark examples of why they saw her as caring and helpful. When Ella insisted that Mrs. O actually listens to them and does her best to help them, I did not think to ask if this was because of the focus groups that Mrs. O said she ran with students at Sunflower in her personal interview or the placement of the affirming art on the walls that was of supreme importance to her. Instead, I inquired about their access to the principal and how they made sense of her job. Rose's commentary where she named the many things that she's seen Mrs. O do in a day's time did not seem to color her perceptions of Mrs. O's ability to support them and care for them. While the principal had a big job, they also saw themselves as a part of her job. For some of the students like Niecey and Kelsey, they were able to compare Mrs. O to previous principals' they had encountered at other schools. When Niecey discussed the seizure incident that I story above, she also ended that commentary saying, "instead of just letting them sit there like my other principal did" with disdain. For Kelsey, although this isn't captured in the story above, she felt that Mrs. O protects people and supported that idea by explaining how she had seen Mrs. O separate people during fights. Despite Mrs. O's schedule, the Voice Leaders seemed to feel that Mrs. O was in fact caring, helpful, and nice because they had witnessed how she cared for students when they were ill, hurt or in trouble. It is clear that the students were attentive to the actions of adults in the building. From their teachers where the Voice Leaders had critique about what they were not doing for students to the actions of Mrs. O, they were always watching and observing. While others drew upon their observations

of Mrs. O, Jewel's response was equally powerful based off of her own sense making. For Jewel, it just made sense to her that her voice mattered to the principal. I think that Jewel's sentiment is worth paying attention to because although she is the only white student in the project, she demonstrates a growing consciousness throughout. Her commentary reflects what I would hope all of the students could feel at Sunflower, but I can not argue that is the case. What I do feel confident interpreting here is that Jewel is keenly aware that just because they are students does not mean they are not also people who are worthy of being listened to or having their perspectives valued.

In order to thoughtfully make meaning of the Voice Leaders contributions in our dialogue space, it is a reality that I have to work against what Yoon & Templeton (2019) note as a neoliberal agenda that can constrain our abilities as researchers and teachers to thoughtfully interpret children's declarations about the world, themselves, and others (p.59). That said, I want to move away from the initial adjectives that the students used to describe Mrs. O and move towards sitting with the material ways that they were able to determine that their voices mattered to their principal. If schools are to be reimagined as sites of possibility, student voice might be a fundamental approach to foster a school culture and leadership practice that engages what matters to youth by listening to what they say is working in their schools and where there might be room for improvement. This is particularly essential in the elementary school context as student voice creates a focus on youth as assets in the school space rather than problems to be solved (Mitra, 2012). Positioning students in these ways further supports their development as problem-solvers and decision-makers in the school space. As evidenced in our dialogue group, young people like the Voice Leaders are acutely aware of what it looks and feels like to be valued in the classroom and beyond. However, as confident as Jewel and the other Voice Leaders

are about the worthiness of their voice at school, this is not the case for many youth of color who occupy school spaces and navigate school territory differently than their white or affluent peers. Thus, listening to elementary-aged youth because it fosters positive developmental assets (Mitra, 2012) is essential but it is also moot if we are to not also take those perspectives, especially those historically silenced, like youth of color into account with how we lead and transform schools.

Story 5. Are We Doing a Leadership Role Here?

As I walk into the building, I see that my friend, Libby who was a former 3rd grade teacher has beaten me to the office to check-in on the visitor log. We embrace and I share with her how I relieved I am to have her introducing crochet to the students. I share with her that they've been waiting to learn new art techniques and modalities that I don't possess at all because I'm not an arts educator. Libby taught 3rd grade in New Orleans and is an artist and craftswoman.

She laughs because she's seen me struggle with crochet before in one of her workshops. I walk her to our shared space for that day – the room with the tight corner. The teacher who normally shares the room is out today and I'm a bit relieved because I know that the kids can get a little loud when they're excited. I show Libby where to set up with her materials so that I can go and grab the group. When I arrive to Mr. Chuck's room, the kids line up and share with me that Ella is in the library for a safety patrol meeting with Dr. Crystal. This is news to me because as often as I've mentioned the work I'm doing with the students to Dr. Crystal and the principal — they didn't seem to connect student voice and leadership. I'm a little frustrated because I've been here two semesters and knew nothing about this group. This had also happened before when some of the initial students in the group had recycling club to attend. I suppose it would have been nice to have some context for how students are engaged in more formal leadership roles in the school. I get over myself and knock on the door of the library. I see Ella and about five other students in what looks like a formal training for teachers. They have papers in front of them and Dr. Crystal is in the front of the room reading from her own sheet. I knock gently, apologize for interrupting and ask if Ella can come and meet me when they are done. Ella always lights up when it's time for us to meet, I'm not surprised that she was chosen for this group. Hopefully, Dr. Crystal would be open to talking to me about the group. I think to myself that I should ask the kids about it first.

When I ask the group about the safety patrol group that is meeting in the library, Niecey begins to name various students who are a part of the group. She shares that,

> *"If somebody is being bad on their bus, like jumping on the seats, or cussing or using inappropriate words or other things like that, they write their name down and they write what*

they're doing. They put a check next to it or they can put "other" and write what they're doing (wrong) and then they put Dr. Crystal down at the bottom and then they put their name."

I ask her and the others if safety patrol is considered a leadership role and they all agree it is. Drake asks, "Are we doing a leadership role here?" and before I can answer, Niecey, Kelsey and Emma begin to share how they are, "going to become leaders too when they become peer mediators." Niecey brags, "I'm gonna write people up when they fight," her description of the job of a peer mediator.

Drake repeats, "Are we doing a leadership role here?"

Positioning Youth as Educational Leaders

While the voice leaders and I discussed change, leadership, and where their voices fit into this larger picture of affecting change, there seemed to be a disconnect that existed for not only the students but Mrs. O as well. When I used the term *leader* versus when adults in the school like Dr. Crystal used the word *leader*, the students seemed to come to two very different understandings of how this term might be actualized. Story 5 captures this instance and while it does not detail the interview sessions I had with Mrs. O, I found it surprising that these "leader groups" had not come up before. In the moment where Drake asked if we were "doing a leadership role" in our group, I took note that students seemed to have these ideas that being a leader in the school took on a more authoritative role than the definition of one who affects change in the broader sense. I recall in one of our previous M.A.A.E. sessions that I introduced the term, *leader* as someone who changes things (whatever they choose) by "doing." This definition also indicated that there was a necessary action needed to lead. By this point in the project, we had created various artifacts that spoke to issues they identified in the school, community, and society at large. The ways that I perceived our "action" was by creating various artifacts that would ultimately go into our playbook (Figure 10) that would be published and distributed to the Voice Leaders, Mrs. O, and some of the lead teachers in the school. While I

communicated this to the group on a few occasions, I am not positive that by this point in the project it landed as a product of our work towards change. It was possible that identifying the issues in our M.A.A.E space took on a different meaning than taking action on those issues in tangible ways that the students could readily see. For instance, while Drake and others spent a lot of energy and talk time on environmental issues during our sessions, collecting recyclables at school likely *felt* more action-oriented than discussing and creating art about it. For students like Drake, this became increasingly clear. For Drake, his observations of the school and community directed him to an action-oriented space where he wanted to affect change in the moment. From sharing with the group his knowledge of the Flint Water Crisis to donating $1 to plant trees over a holiday break, Drake's attitudes towards social change efforts mostly took place outside of school but was also his chosen topic of conversation when in school. Drake's desire to affect change was animated in the school space when he inquired about becoming a peer mediator after hearing Dr. Crystal describe peer mediators as "responsible" and "role models" in the school. When expressing his interest, he is quickly told by Dr. Crystal that his mom never filled out the paper work or returned it. This response doesn't seem to bother Drake past the moment as he returns the following week with more ideas about how to save the planet. When I take into account how the Voice Leaders had varying ideas about leadership and voice, I recognize that the explicit ties of change, leadership and voice may not have connected in the ways I intended. This was delicate work because at no point did I want to "tell" the students what to think. I was more interested in the "how" of things. However, I did find myself reminding students of what we were doing to explore how we could affect change each time we created an artifact. At this point in the project, it became clearer to me that although I was working to show students how they were already leaders, I was up against three years of their own K-3 socializations of

leadership. In two semesters, I could not completely undo their frame of reference for what a leader was.

Mortensen, et.al (2014) highlight that if communities hope to attract and engage youth in leadership roles, it is necessary to understand what leadership means to them. In examining the Voice Leaders' conceptions of leadership, it was necessary to think about where their models of leadership came from within the school setting. Drawing on the language used by Dr. Crystal who was in charge of the recycling club, peer mediator group and safety patrol, I observed how she described students who were eligible to become peer mediators. Her language used was akin to that of "good citizenship" curriculum that is often first introduced in elementary schooling curriculum by way of school attendance, rule following, and static definitions of character.

I found that at times, the students' beliefs about leadership within the school context reflected that of positional authority — a traditional adult approach to leadership likely demonstrated in the language and positioning of the youth in the school. Positional authority as a leadership practice suggests power or influence held by one over a group (Komives & Dugan, 2010). This positional authority was reflected in Niecey's perceptions of leadership. She expressed various sentiments throughout the project about "writing people up" or "stopping people from fighting" being what made her a leader when she served as a peer mediator. In the previous semester, she shared about her own growth in this area stating that normally she would jump into a fight but now she stops them. Niecey, who also wasn't as excited when we began the group in 2nd grade because it interrupted her free time, was now the student who offered creative ideas about how we could advance our design of artifacts and thinking about change. On many occasions, Niecey would serve me the same questions I would ask of them to hear more about who inspired me or

what I wanted to change when I was their age. To me, she was an exemplar of a leader because of these reasons.

By our next session, I had come to find out that many of the students (Niecey, Ella, Jewel) who were in the Voice Leader group were also selected to be in Dr. Crystal's groups. Research on formal group approaches like that of the peer mediator club, safety and recycling club found at Sunflower affirms that typically these formal approaches only ever cover a small minority of students (Lizzio, Dempster & Neuman, 2011) and often repositions the same students into leadership positions (Mortensen et al., 2012). With this in mind prior to the research project, I purposely sought out students who would be interested in art, storytelling and learning about change for the Voice Leader group. This was my attempt at trying to avoid the reproduction of outcomes that formal leadership approaches can engender.

Figure 9. Voice Leader Playbook

Story 6. Social Justice Warrior

So far, Mrs. O and I have had two sessions/interviews together as I work with the Voice Leaders. Her commitments are strong to the students and community at Sunflower – it's pretty evident when you walk into the building. From the affirming art on the walls that reflects a variety of people of color to how she so easily seems to engage in conversations about her whiteness and is seemingly fearless when calling out her teachers on suspending Black students at high rates, she's what some would call a social justice leader. In fact, she does call herself a "social justice warrior" but only outside of the building. When I ask her why she moves in between the terms social justice and culturally responsive, Mrs. O exclaims:

"So it's weird you know? I have like a pseudo personality. So in this building, I use the term culturally responsive. It seems to be a softer term. If you're my friend outside of this building, then you know I'm a social justice warrior."

In this first snippet of an interview with Mrs. O, I story what initially stood out in our conversation. She positions herself as a white woman with a variety of experiences that have shaped why she errs on the side of a social justice leadership agenda. In her building however, she notes that the term "social justice" makes her staff feel threatened. At the start of the year, she attempted to make the theme of the building one that was focused on social justice but was told that she should lean towards "culturally responsive" instead because it was all encompassing. As Mrs. O fleshed out her school improvement plan, student voice was one of the key areas that she wanted to improve. By her initial definition, student voice was data. She categorized student voice as behavioral referrals, social emotional data from student surveys given at the end of the year and focus groups she ran with 1st-3rd grade to "squeak by" major initiatives like the culturally affirming art on the wall. When I ask Mrs. O what she would like to see more student voice around, she talks at length about developing activists and leaders within students at Sunflower. I tuck this information away as I think about how her agenda aligns well with the unit plan on change that they will engage with. I also find myself comforted knowing that she has already begun to prioritize student voice in meaningful ways that I can build upon.

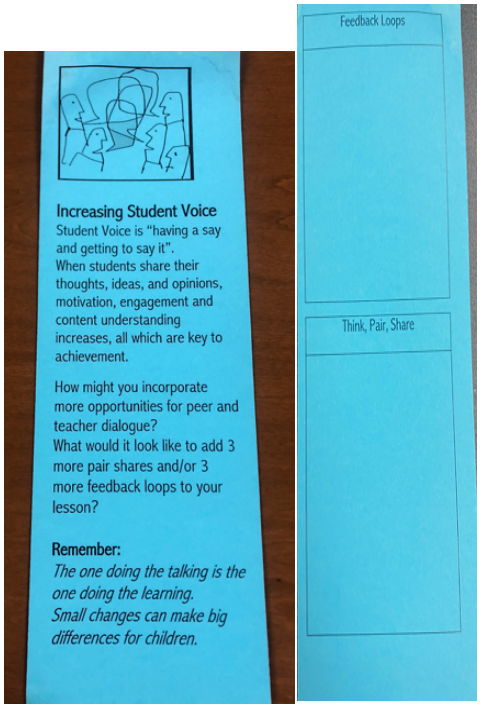
Checking for Student Voice

When I arrive at the school a few months later for Mrs. O's second interview, I notice that she has created a set of bookmarks that line her desk for teacher observations. When I ask about them, she beams proudly to tell me that she has been "checking for student voice" in classrooms. While I am interested in hearing more about what she means, I am also confused. I notice that the student voice bookmarks (Figure 11) define student voice differently than how she talked about student voice in our first interview. Student voice is woven throughout the literature as a catalyst for positive change (Mitra, 2012) and provides opportunity to engage students as active partners in school change (Betrand, 2014; 2017; 2018, Mitra et al., 2012;). The bookmark reads that student voice is "having a say and getting to say it." Further, there are a series of questions that focus on peer-peer and peer-teacher dialogue. I find this odd for a few reasons. In addition to the shift in how Mrs. O initially defined and talked about student voice with me, it also seems that in our second interview she is focusing on oral language and metacognition when she talks about student voice being "too low," with a narrowed focus on her teachers as the actors of this initiative. She begins to talk to me about teachers viewing silence as compliance and in an effort to remind her of what we first discussed around student voice, I share with Mrs. O some of the early themes that have begun to emerge with the Voice Leaders as it relates to change and issues happening in their community. She reminds me that she's very "malleable to student voice" and that to her, it is important to have students get their voice heard with their teachers. In this interview and others, Mrs. O often returns to the responsibility of the teachers. It also becomes increasingly clear that Mrs. O and the Voice Leaders have different ideas about what it means for their voices to be engaged at Sunflower. According to Mitra & Serriere (2012), student voice efforts in elementary school tend to be classroom-focused where elementary students rarely have

opportunities to participate in decision-making on school-wide issues. Ironically, Mrs. O who was committed to student voice and wanted to see students positioned as activist and leaders was conflating her understandings of student voice with student speech. This bookmark approach did not position students as decision makers on school issues like those that Mrs. identified in her first interview. While she was going into classrooms looking for think-pair-share and other discussion strategies, the true definition of student voice that she initially articulated was seemingly lost. It is well researched in the field of educational leadership that school leaders have a variety of leadership priorities with instructional leadership being one of them. School principals are exposed to multiple demands from the environment, often in the form of tacit understandings of and beliefs about what it means to be an instructional leader (Rigby, 2014). For Mrs. O, I observed that her conflation of student speech and student voice was less informed by social justice and seemed to be more concerned with her instructional priorities. Theoharis (2011) insists that social justice leaders advocate, lead, and keep at the center of their practice and vision issues of race, class, gender, disability, sexual orientation, and other historically marginalized conditions in the United States. Implementing student voice in authentic and meaningful ways that allows youth to see themselves as leaders in the school space is obstructed when instructional priorities overshadow the range of benefits that come with centering youth voice. I offer this first story of Mrs. O not as a personal critique but rather, as an exemplar of what happens in schools for principals who have the desire to do the "right" and socially just thing. This shift from Mrs. O echoed that of obstacles found in other student voice research (Mitra, 2009; Lac & Mansfield, 2018) where educational leaders seek to direct the course of an initiative rather than support youth in their leadership endeavors. I want to be clear that this re-route from Mrs. O was not one that I perceived to be done with ill intent. Perhaps, this classroom

focused approach to student voice to her was a way to mediate her instructional and school improvement priorities. In the story that follows, I chart Mrs. O's stages of growth as she came to define and redefine student voice through a social justice lens as we engaged in the dialogic process in her second and third interview.

Figure 10. Images of Mrs. O's Student Voice Bookmark Used for Informal Observations



Story 7. Mrs. O's "Agenda"

When I walk into Mrs. O's office, she's already seated and wrapping up a review of school curriculum. She seems excited to see the playbook that we've been working on. This is her chance to see many of the artifacts that I've referenced in our previous interview sessions as well as new ones from the students. She flips slowly through the virtual draft of the book, smiling and commenting that the playbook is coming at a perfect time. She shares how she's taken some time to look at previous research done in the school on teacher mindset and she now knows, "how bad it is" with some of her teachers that "don't believe in white privilege."

After a long and exasperated sigh, Mrs. O details how she's learned that there are two things that seem to shift her teachers. She states that first it's her vulnerability and secondly, when the teachers and staff see student work. She looks at me as if this book might be the ticket that opens their eyes.

I stare back at her smiling but also thinking about our last interview. Mrs. O had begun to conflate what was student talk or student speech with student voice, expressing various instructional priorities. I knew that the vision she had for student voice differed from that of the Voice Leaders and to be candid, it differed from the research supported definitions on student voice. She felt that student voice needed to happen more in the classroom and trusted that her "bright star" teachers would be the ones to implement it. At the end of that second session, I began to present her with the realities of what students were actually talking about in our dialogue group. Seeing the artifacts in the book seemed to solidify what I had mentioned in our previous session about the student concerns with the lack of arts and music in the school as well as compounding community and sociopolitical issues related to the environment and safety in their communities.

I ask Mrs. O how she feels now that she's seeing what the Voice Leaders have been working on. She pauses but enthusiastically says, "empowered" and goes on to convey how cultural responsiveness and trauma informed practices are finally starting to take effect in the district. To her, this book communicates that what she has been trying to do at Sunflower is not just a "Mrs. O social justice agenda" but instead the students are also thinking about and processing these issues.

Mrs. O: "These books are going to help me show what they're thinking and how they're feeling when I had no hand in it. And so, yeah. I'm empowered by that."

Essential to Mrs. O's leadership philosophy was social justice practice. While she was faced with a myriad of leadership responsibilities, she maintained her commitments to student voice, even if her attempts at doing so were at one time, stifled by instructional priorities. In our second and third session where I story snapshots of those sessions above, I could see her begin to think about her own thinking. This metacognitive work was reflected in what seemed like a stream of consciousness at times during our interview sessions, specifically session three. Mrs. O would jump from the topics of student voice to teachers, to the district priorities and ultimately back to the flaws of her teachers. This flow of consciousness may have very well been reflective of the multiple priorities she was balancing as principal at Sunflower.

I see Mrs. O return to conceptualizing student voice through a social justice lens after being presented with more artifacts from the Voice Leaders in their playbook. To provide an honest disclaimer, I had no real concern that she would not return to more critical understandings of how youth voices needed to be centered at Sunflower *because of* her social justice orientations.

It was evident that Mrs. O's blueprint was that of a social justice agenda. In fact, her leadership reflected social justice logic where the school principal sets out to not only facilitate action but to change beliefs (Rigby, 2014). Certainly, some of her teachers saw this as negative. Mrs. O was frustrated by this and it showed. This is reflected in her interview where she describes that the students' work will reflect what she has been saying all along and it could not be argued that it was her influence over them.

While checking for student voice via a bookmark checklist was not the most critical move for Mrs. O, what it did show was that her commitments to student voice were there. In some ways, I believe that Mrs. O saw the development of her teachers' mindsets and instructional competence as being tied to the student voice priorities. Her approach was one that appeared to be integrative — where she sought to target multiple improvement areas through one vehicle. In this case, it was as if she saw student voice being that essential vehicle that would move her teachers along instructionally and also critically. This effort did not seem to flourish at Sunflower but what did occur was a bend towards a more socially just practice and critical reflection for Mrs. O — reflection that led her to not only think through how student voice could be centered in the classroom but also recognizing that her "bright star" teachers were not the sole actors who would need to engage the voices of youth at Sunflower. In the story that follows, I compose a story that places the Voice Leaders student voice priorities in conversation with Mrs.

O's ideas around student voice. This story and analysis further details how Mrs. O developed over the course of the project to come to richer understandings and implementation of student voice at Sunflower.

Story 8. Engaging Youth Voices at Sunflower Elementary

With art materials in hand, I arrive to Mrs. O's office for what is our final interview session. Because I have been using M.A.A.E. with the Voice Leaders, I wanted to also see what might come out of having Mrs. O engage with creating a leadership portrait in the same ways that the Voice Leaders did. This arts-based approach appears to be right on time. It seems like a somber day for her but she doesn't allude too much to why in our interview.

I see how the art making is therapeutic and healing for the students so I'm relieved that this is how I'm ending with Mrs. O. As I take notes on her final interview question, she pauses, lowers her head almost to her desk and says, "It's just a process of failing. I fail all the time. And then [I]am pulling on my supports to tell me that I can't quit because the work is important."

I empathize with her and remind her that she's doing good work. When I hand her the materials to create her portrait, she jokes about my lack of multicultural crayons and perks up some.

Here, I want to put Mrs. O's leadership portrait in conversation with Voice Leader portraits like Emma and Rose who highlighted their concerns of school, community, and sociopolitical issues. During my final session with Mrs. O storied above, I was able to prompt her with the same prompt the Voice Leaders co-created. I instructed Mrs. O to create a portrait that portrayed her as a leader in her school and community with a focus on the things she wanted to see change. As depicted in Story 8, Mrs. O seemed to be carrying a lot of stress in our final interview and I wondered if that had any bearings on what emerged in her portrait (Figure 12). During my analysis of the areas she wanted to change, her concerns were split between school and community. Specifically, when she addressed changes she wanted to see in the school, she only addressed teachers. For instance, Mrs. O questioned whether her teachers would ever trust her, if teachers were ready to address their own biases and questioned how she could help teachers reflect on their own cultural lens. As it related to community concerns, Mrs. O did include the

importance of community voice and acknowledged that the students can handle social justice issues. Here, she also returned to her initial conceptualizations of student voice when writing on her portrait, "The toll is deep and intense and voice is key to raising activists!"

For Voice Leaders like Emma and Rose, their portraits reflected many of the concerns of their peers. In Emma's leadership portrait, she focused on art and music in schools, poverty as well as clean water and safety in the community. Rose's portrait communicated an explicit focus on what she described as "forces and war all around us" during our M.A.A.E. space. Further, Rose was equally concerned with poverty, school and community issues. Her school focus in our dialogue space mostly centered on having more art in school, stopping bullying and keeping the community clean. When I place Mrs. O's leadership portrait alongside those of Voice Leaders like Emma and Rose, my goal is not to speak to the ways in which they differ as much as it is my imperative to highlight how Mrs. O came to recognize that students could handle social justice issues because they were already talking about them.

Mrs. O's portrait toggles between her teacher-focused concerns and a recognition of students and the community. She notes that the students can handle social justice issues as she begins to realize in our final session that they are already talking about these issues. This moment in particular is where Mrs. O has her epiphany during our final session. When she sees the topics of the lack of art and music in the school and community and environmental concerns as the larger issues that the Voice Leaders have consistently taken up in our space, she realizes that student voice has to take on a school wide approach which starts with her as the principal. Specifically, she states that,

> "The next step is taking that data (the playbooks) and I need to start running leadership groups with students. To choose an issue and let's work on it. And then that way, that way I can support the collaborative process instructionally as well. But show them a) You are leaders and, b) Let's pick something. What are we gonna do?"

Here Mrs. O's understandings of student voice shift from a classroom focus that is placed on the responsibility of teachers to also seeing what her role as the principal might be in engaging voice alongside developing her teachers to engage student voice in the classroom. Her recognition that students already know about these issues demonstrated that there was no need to shy away from the topics that they were concerned about but to instead center them in school wide dialogue. In this final session, Mrs. O also decided that she wanted to use these playbooks as data for her teachers, to show them that it was not just a personal agenda of hers, which was often the response when she mentioned anything that was social justice centered. This transition to an action oriented space is exactly what I believe the Voice Leaders were calling for. To identify the issues was one thing, but to take action on them was another. This is not to say that youth are unable to take action without adults but in this case, the students at Sunflower were concerned with hefty topics that required adult action. By positioning youth as leaders and herself as a listener to what the youth of Sunflower had to say, Mrs. O shifted her leadership practices in ways that prioritized the needs and desires of the students.

Figure 11. Image of Mrs. O's Portrait Created During M.A.A.E. Space

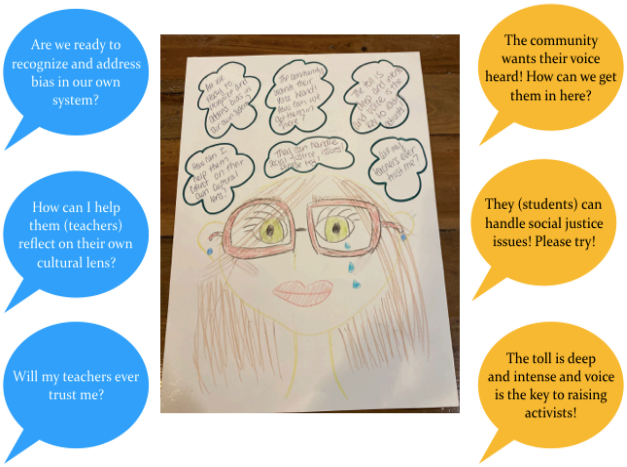
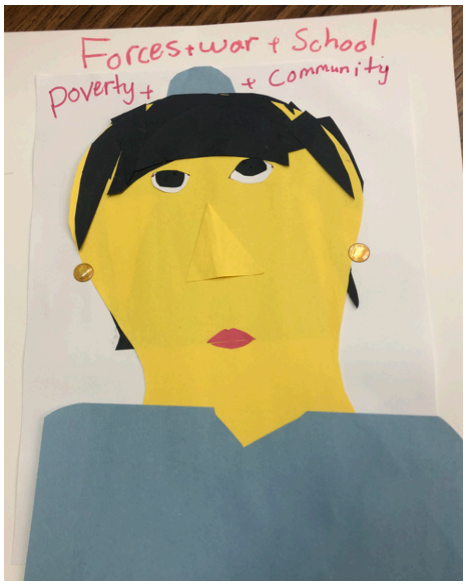


Figure 12. Emma's Portrait

Figure 13. Rose's Portrait



Story 9. "There's Always Another After"

The day is finally here! We're heading to our field trip at the local art museum. When I got to Sunflower, I noticed that Sienna and Kelsey hadn't made it to school yet and I was immediately bothered when one of the school staff members commented that some parents "just don't care" and suggested that we go ahead and board the bus. I stalled for about five more minutes realizing we might be late if we didn't board soon.

Although Sienna and Kelsey were missing, the remainder of the group seemed to be in good spirits and really happy that the trip is finally here. The bus ride over to the museum was full of singing, laughs, and random get to know you conversations.

As we exit the bus, the students' light up when they take in the outside architecture of the museum. I tell them it was featured in one of the Batman movies and their excitement peaks even more. When we enter the museum, we're paired off with two docents per pair of students and begin to learn about the work of Katrín Sigurðardóttir, an artist from Iceland who explores memory, distance, and time through her work. Her exhibit on 'Unbuilt residences' was what captured the Voice Leaders attention the most. She recreated models of 1920s homes that were intended to be built in Iceland but never were. Oddly enough, she created the models of the homes, broke them apart in different ways, then chose to rebuild them. In this particular exhibit, the students were able to experience it in somewhat of a reverse order to really spark their imaginations and ideas around the artist' purpose. They were first introduced to the models that the artist rebuilt without knowing the order in which they were seeing her work. From there, the docents lead them to the next room where the images of the original models as well as the

destroyed versions of the homes were. As new connections began to sync for them, Emma calls my name to point out her realization.

"Ms. Mauldin, this is before, this is after and there's another after."

Figure 14. "Before and After" from Unbuilt Residences, work of Katrín Sigurðardóttir

Figure 15. "Another After," work of Katrín Sigurðardóttir

After hearing Emma's take on the exhibit, I paused for a second, in awe of her choice words. They were reflective of exactly what the students began to realize during one of our M.A.A.E. spaces with the crochet activity — that there was another after. When I followed up with the different pairs at the end of the field trip to ask what they liked the most about the museum experience, Emma restated that she enjoyed looking at the houses and what they were like before, after and then in another after. For Emma, she said this connected to what we've been talking about with change in a community. Similarly, Ella shared that she enjoyed seeing what the artist created with her hands, how she "broke it and built it again and didn't give up." Ella felt that this connected to our portrait collage activity where we created a first draft and a final draft because, "we knew that we could make what we had better." Niecey also expressed that she felt the rebuilding of the homes represented not giving up. Weaving these ideas about change and persevering through difficulty showcases the ways that the Voice Leaders think with this notion of critical hope. Throughout the exhibit, they were seeing with possibility even when they might not have understood the "why" behind the issue. In the case of the exhibit, they did not understand why the artist would destroy what she created but they recognized that it did not stop her from rebuilding again. When it came to these larger social issues that the students would voice, they also did not spend their time caught up in the reasoning behind why things were the way they were but recognized that there was a reality to the situations they spoke about and sought to think about how they might fix them. I mentioned earlier that I saw similar patterns with Mrs. O. Of course, she could spend time assessing the reasons behind some of the issues in her school but she worked to be more proactive on the issues she identified in the school because she believed that there remained possibility for things to change for the better.

I find that examining these interactions through a lens of possibility assists in revealing the absence that educational leadership scholars have identified as pressing in the field. This absence has often been labeled as a need, a need for youth as active partners (Mitra, 2012), for youth inquiry (Caraballo et al., 2017), a need for reciprocal dialogue (Bertrand, 2014), critical youth educational leadership (Van Lac & Mansfield, 2018) and research that centers youth of color perspectives (Bertrand, 2018) among other researched areas that relate to youth and decision making in schools. By applying a lens of possibility, I'm able to illuminate what fails to be captured and ask the hard question of, "what's missing here?" as well as "what might be possible if it were not?" I share this to round out the purpose of the stories and dialogue included here as a way for educational leaders to better see with possibility— to understand how youth are traditionally positioned in schools and where their voices might be found.

Story 10. What's New?

It's been two months since we've wrapped our project and as I work on the final edits of the student voice playbook, I visit the Voice Leaders and Mrs. O at Sunflower to get the students feedback on the playbook before it goes to print. We gather in the library and exchange hugs and high-fives. I can't believe it has been two months. They are gregarious and bursting with energy as usual, pointing out the smallest details of my travel mug having tea instead of coffee to discussing how my hair is pulled back this day.

Reeling them in, I ask "what's new?" before diving into the draft of the playbook. All talking at once, they stumble over eachothers words to let me know that they now have more art and music in their school since we last met. When I asked them to explain what they meant, they began to talk about arts and music teachers coming into their classrooms every week and even a theatre company that they are able to run skits with. I am floored with excitement. I pause for a second and have my own aha! moment. As the Voice Leaders see my smile spread across my face, they look intrigued. I point out to them that they had everything to do with this and the light bulbs begin to go off for some of them. Emma says, "Yeah, the teachers are starting to be way more nice [sic]" while Rose adds that she and Drake are in charge of their own student groups now.

As we close with them giving me their intensive feedback on the book, sharing where I need to add more environmental badges like "save the planet" and their collective poetry – I tell them how happy I am that we were able to work together to make some changes happen in their school. After walking them back to class, I literally sprint into Mrs. O's office to confirm what the Voice Leaders were saying. She shares with me that it was true! For her, after hearing and seeing the students' perspectives in the project, she felt she had to bring in more community partners. I hug her and thank her for doing this.

Mrs. O says, "I had to, it's what makes them happy."

Throughout this project, Mrs. O demonstrated that she was quite the reflexive leader. When presented with new information, she eagerly worked to implement new knowledge into her leadership practice. While she did not always hit the mark perfectly in the case of her efforts of "checking for student voice," it became clearer that by the end of the project, Mrs. O had been ruminating on our sessions and what the Voice Leaders presented in the playbook. In her final interview, she recognizes that students are already thinking about and discussing what she terms as "social justice issues." With this realization, I am led to believe that Mrs. O thought about the issues students surfaced in the school context and how she might address them. By

bringing in community partners and positioning students to run their own student groups, the perspectives of the Voice Leaders were being honored and adult action followed those considerations.

Returning to Change

Thinking through what might be possible when we engage the voices of youth of color in K-12 schools led me to investigate how the voice leaders in this study perceive themselves as agents of change but to also investigate how the school leader engaged the voices of youth of color in the school. Their depictions of change through the practice of artmaking began with possibility and captured how the voice leaders operate with a critical hope (Duncan-Andrade, 2009) in their reflections on change and their roles in affecting it. Ironically, Mrs. O operated with a critical hope as well, one that was blossoming when we first began the project. Perhaps this is what led to the final outcomes of the project where students were able to see the impact of their voices at Sunflower. To operate from a place of critical hope is to reject despair and hopelessness when looking at what is and to instead temper that reality by seeing with possibility. I believe that is what both the Voice Leaders and Mrs. O brought to this project and their school. That is, to see the cracks of something — a system, school, classroom, or community in this case and to persists with action and belief that change remains possible. For the Voice Leaders, this was evident in not only their depictions of issues that needed to change captured in their artwork but also their solutions-oriented mindset. Naturally, some adults could call youth perspectives into question, characterizing their solutions as being seen through childlike rose-colored glasses.

However, I would argue that their solutions based mindset is exactly the mindset needed for leadership. Across activities in our M.A.A.E. Space, the Voice Leaders sought solutions but

recognized that change in any capacity is hard. As I previously noted, Mrs. O shared similarities with the Voice Leaders in her thinking. While operating with critical hope and solutions, she too felt the weight of trying to affect change, particularly at Sunflower with her teachers and limited resources. To better synchronize these points, I composed these stories and supporting artifacts to illumine these "aha!" moments for both the Voice Leaders and Mrs. O throughout. The final story, *Story 10* demonstrates what is possible when school leaders not only engage voices in the school context but also illustrates what happens when school leaders listen to those voices and leverage resources to support student desires. In sharing these stories alongside one another, I hope that I was able to better center possibility by teasing apart the ways that critical hope was present at Sunflower but also uncover the ways in which school leaders and youth can partner together in schools to affect change.

Exploring Possibility

Throughout this chapter, I have relied on possibility as a means to understand leadership, the leadership of the Voice Leaders but also that of Mrs. O. It is my hope that this chapter invites us all to see with possibility in the ways that the Voice Leaders and Mrs. O demonstrated — a way for educators to look at something without blinking, to see what it is like, or could have been like, and how that has immense bearings on what we do next.

In this particular chapter, I centered the stories and artifacts that emerged from my time at Sunflower Elementary with the hopes that this would highlight the ways in which youth of color see themselves as leaders who can affect change and that school leaders would see how a principal like Mrs. O learned what it meant to engage the voices of youth in her school. For Mrs. O, she did not begin this project as a student voice expert and neither did I. Yet, I knew what was possible and I believe the Voice Leaders did too. Mrs. O's demonstration of a reflexive

leadership practice was one step towards improving the schooling experiences of youth of color in her school and also a means of modeling what a social just leader looks like. As I return to this notion of paradise, the findings that emerged from working with Mrs. O and the Voice Leaders did more than reveal competing narratives about how they understood the engagement of voice.

Ultimately, Mrs. O transformed her leadership with the inclusion of student voice rather than perpetuating silencing and exclusionary practice. As Morrison notes in her interview referenced at the beginning of this chapter, the people "not allowed in" certainly shape what happens in "paradise." While schooling has never been a paradise or utopia for youth who have been historically marginalized, who is to say that it can't be? By design, schools were created to serve young people but have fallen short in doing so, especially for youth of color. To fold in the voices of youth engenders a leadership that is not only shared and socially just, but it fosters a "power with" relationship rather than a "power over" (Van Lac & Mansfield, 2018) which propagates the silencing and erasure of the voices that matter the most – the youth. If schools are to move away from operations of exclusivity and towards inclusivity, where the voices of key stakeholders like youth are invited in, education might become emancipatory (hooks, 1994) and in turn, develop youth who are empowered by the critical insights that they have to offer.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Taking these findings into consideration would mean that a school climate that supports student voice can not seek to only uplift the voices of the students who reflect back adult-centered approaches to leadership nor place value on authoritative practices that communicate back complicated power dynamics that young people experience in the school environment. Instead, school leaders must be compelled enough by what youth insights are already being brought to the table. A socially just educational leader must challenge the power structures that silence the voices of students, especially those who are marginalized in a particular educational context (Mansfield, Welton & Halx, 2012).

In this concluding chapter, I return to the purpose and significance of my project with the youth and principal at Sunflower Elementary. I begin with an overview of my dissertation and its purpose as well as why I gesture towards possibilities in centering youth of color voices in educational leadership. From here, I return to my research questions and respond to them reiterating my findings alongside the POYCEL framework while outlining implications for the field. My research questions were as follows:

1. How are elementary-aged youth of color positioned to affect change?
    a. What are the issues that students identify in their school and community?
2. How does a social justice oriented school leader engage the voices of elementary-aged youth of color?

Finally, I offer more in-depth conclusions which inform my recommendations for the research field of educational leadership, school leaders, and youth of color who who seek to pursue a collaborative approach to youth voice work in K-12 schools. Specifically, I address recommendations for how the field of educational leadership can move forward with youth voice

at the center when considering how school leaders are prepared in leadership preparation programs as well as how practicing principals might adopt successful practices from Mrs. O illustrated in this study. For youth who desire to have their voices made center in their schools but also recognize the need for adult action, I draw on current young leaders who are making their mark in speaking out on sociopolitical issues that affect marginalized communities the most. It is my hope that this dissertation highlights what might be possible when we listen to youth voices, value those perspectives, and center them in schools and the practice of leadership.

Overview of Dissertation

Student voice can consist of young people sharing their opinions of school problems with administrators and faculty. More extensively, it also takes on the form of collaboration between young people and adults to address problems in the school (Cook-Sather, 2006; Fielding, 2001; Mitra, 2005). While student voice efforts have increased in K-12 schools and there is a growing body of literature in the field of educational leadership as it relates to the role of school leaders increasing these efforts, many student voice initiatives remain classroom focused in the elementary school context (Mitra & Serriere, 2012). Equally, the voices of African-American youth are especially limited (Wasserburg, 2018) in these initiatives. Given this and the visibility of youth of color voices from activists like Mari Copeny (Little Miss Flint), Vanessa Nakate, climate change activist and Naomi Wadler, advocate against gun violence— there is no question about the severity of this time and the importance of listening to what youth have to say about the world around us. Depicted in the stories constructed in my findings, I illuminate the primary themes that emerged for the Voice Leaders in their dialogue and artifacts. These themes were *school and community concerns* as well as *sociopolitical issues*. I map these themed stories alongside the three key levers of the POYCEL framework.

As I write about the voices of youth of color, I bear witness to how troubling times have unraveled over the years. I recall youth like those during The Children's Crusade of the 1960s – a time where young black children were being jailed and injured by the thousands during civil rights demonstrations (Levine, 1993). For many of these children standing on the frontlines during an era that shaped and continues to inform the liberties we now have, I am reminded of their bravery, their awareness, and tenacity to fight for freedoms that were denied to them.

It would be thoughtless if I did not name the time in which I am completing this dissertation. Currently, a global pandemic that has been referred to as COVID-19[2] is increasingly affecting how we do things globally. It has wreaked havoc in many ways, resulting in high numbers of fatality, job loss, interrupted schooling for the year, and mandated state lockdowns where myself and others are required to stay home unless considered an essential worker. If an essential worker, you are then placed on the frontlines and at higher exposure of contracting COVID-19. This is what some are calling an uncertain time but is also a time where youth like Mari Copeny advocate for rent relief and water filters for people to effectively live and wash their hands in Flint and nationwide to protect themselves from this virus. This dissertation study does not provide readily available solutions nor findings for how schools and families most affected by this global pandemic might move forward during this time. Obviously, that wasn't the intention of this project. Yet, it remains a tension I find myself wrestling with when doing work that values youth and communities. I am thinking about how they are affected today and every day during this time when my life as a graduate student is minimally affected in

[2] Novel coronavirus disease that has resulted in an outbreak of respiratory illness where there is currently no cure nor vaccine as of April 5, 2020.
https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/cases-updates/index.html

comparison. Too often, the most vulnerable communities experience the harshest impact when tragedy strikes. The recovery period is equally painful.

What I find haunting and apparent from my work with youth like those at Sunflower are the signposts that were given. Granted, the youth at Sunflower did not foreshadow a global pandemic but the community and sociopolitical concerns that the Voice Leaders articulated during our time together are the same concerns our entire country is now wrestling with – what will happen to our environment? How will we remain safe in our communities? These are questions that were front of mind for the Voice Leaders and consistently emerged during our project. Mortensen and colleagues (2014) highlight in their work on youth leadership that youth are often aware of issues in their community three years ahead of adults and that youth have important insights on how society should be different. Thus, this study highlights what might be possible when we listen to youth voices, value those perspectives, and center them in schools and the practice of leadership.

As the body of work on student voice in educational leadership continues to blossom, I am intrigued by what questions and possibilities the existing literature has nurtured to the surface. For instance, Mitra & Serrierre (2012) name that there is extensive research on enabling student voice in high school settings, yet more research is needed to understand student voice in the context of elementary schools. Further, Mansfield and colleagues (2012) note that in the development of their Student Voice Continuum theory which seeks to bridge student voice and leadership, there remains undiscovered territory of student voice possibilities confirming that further study towards an inclusive model of student voice for educational leadership is needed (p. 32). Moreover, Bertrand (2018) contends that new pathways must be forged to include students or youth of color in leadership. Therefore, this discussion contributes to the task of carrying

student voice work forward in the field of educational leadership as it relates to capturing elementary youth voices of color, investigating how we better bridge leadership and student voice as well as offering new pathways like arts-based inquiry as a modality to explore how youth of color perspectives might be included in the practice of leadership in schools.

For this dissertation, I pursued two research questions. First, I sought to investigate how youth leaders of color were positioned to affect change. I was also interested in what issues they identify in their school and community. The ancillary question of this project was to examine how a social justice oriented school leader might engage the voices of youth of color in the elementary school context. I found it essential that I first understand how youth see themselves affecting change in order to better understand the ways in which students might be positioned as leaders within the elementary school space. Approaching both research questions with an arts-based methodology like M.A.A.E. served as a tool that captured student voice but also offered a space for collaborative inquiry. The use of art as a reflective tool that not only elicits response from participants but also allows for a shared inquiry proved to foster a therapeutic space for students as one of the Voice Leaders, Rose alluded. This was also evidenced in Mrs. O's final interview session.

Employing Possibility Through Art

An art-based methodology is particularly essential in facilitating projects in schools where there is limited access and exposure to create art or engage creatively in ways that speak to student interests and perspectives. Similar to many participatory engagements like that of YPAR (youth participatory action research) or PAR (participatory action research) concerned with democratizing knowledge and yielding power to ordinary people as they seek justice regarding social issues that affect their lives (Van Lac & Fine, 2018), M.A.A.E. offers the use of

visual methods to center critical issues that are front of mind for participants. As previously mentioned, the issues centered by the Voice Leaders were focused on school and community concerns as well as broader sociopolitical issues. Incorporating M.A.A.E. into my time with the Voice Leaders disrupted traditional notions of how student voices might be engaged. I introduce a lens of possibility early on in this dissertation. In part, this was due to what the Voice Leaders and Mrs. O encapsulated throughout this project. Both parties demonstrated what Morrison (1998) regards as possibility – the ability to see what something is like or what it could have been like. They considered different ways of seeing and in a similar vein, taking an approach that allowed for stories to emerge and new realities to materialize – I felt that M.A.A.E. best supported this realm of possibility.

While I value what YPAR offers to educational research and its affordances to students, I did not approach this project seeing students as co-researchers (Fielding, 2001) as YPAR does. Instead, I wanted to engage them in the project in ways that they favored. As previously noted, the Voice Leaders were vocal about how they preferred to spend our time weekly. Although I maintained a specific focus on the topics of change, leadership and voice with our proposed unit plan, it was up to the students on how they wanted to engage or partner our approach to these topics. Mitra, Serrierre & Stoicovy (2012) posit that when developing student voice initiatives, one of the greatest struggles is the role of the adult in these interactions. Therefore, I felt it necessary for me to take more of a backseat and allow authentic student voice to emerge in their artifacts and in our dialogue space. In addition, the students' resistance to having the principal, Mrs. O join our space was worthy of my attention – it illumines what Mitra and colleagues (2012) discuss as a struggle that occurs when balancing power dynamics between youth and adults in student voice efforts. Thus, I became the cultural broker or mediator between both the

Voice Leaders and Mrs. O, sharing student artifacts and important moments that arose in our dialogue space with the principal to elicit further reflection about how she might engage the voices of students at Sunflower Elementary.

While some educational leadership scholars have explored students of color and leadership, the educational leadership field in general has not fully embraced the concept of youth voice or student leadership (Bertrand, p.8, 2018). To that end, I consult a contemporary leadership framework, Principal Orientations for Critical Youth Educational Leadership (POYCEL) presented by Lac & Mansfield (2018) to understand both how youth leaders of color are positioned to affect change as well as how school leaders like Mrs. O engage the voices of youth of color in the elementary school context. By acting as a "frame" for this study, POYCEL shapes my analysis of the various data points drawn and assist in focusing the study's results (Anfara & Mertz, 2015). This particular framework was designed with both youth and school leaders in mind, with the intent to illustrate how school leaders might include students in shaping the policies and practices that inform their schooling experiences. In order to understand how student voice efforts were actualized at Sunflower and where youth of color fit into this equation, I rely on the three key levers introduced in the POYCEL framework: 1) school leaders committing to youth voice, 2) positioning students as leaders in their schools, and 3) affording opportunities to support young people to exercise their voice. While POYCEL consists of both key levers and specific orientations for the principal, I lean on the levers particularly because they emphasize the support of students. While both are important, I find the key levers useful as they provide pedestrian ways of facilitating youth voice in schools which are essential if school leaders are to access and better understand how youth voice might be incorporated school-wide.

To be clear, the authors of POYCEL adopt a Frerian approach (Friere, 1970) to conceptualize a liberatory orientation to leadership. While I embrace a liberatory approach to schooling and certainly leadership, my stance towards liberation is one informed by Black feminist epistemologies. I think it is important to name that Black feminism has historically called us to consider voices that are excluded and how those voices might provide knowledge claims from experience (Collins, 2009; Dotson 2015). Therefore, I use POYCEL as an instrument to assist in making sense of my investigated research questions but I do so with Black feminist orientations applied to how I make sense of my findings. Black feminists works and epistemologies (Collins, 2009; Holland, 2009; Dotson, 2017; Butler, 2018; McKittrick, 2006;) help me to understand that school space is entangled with heteronormative, racist, sexist and ableist ideologies that contour youth of color schooling experiences. Therefore, having students create artifacts that cultivated space for them to articulate their lived experiences was essential to this project.

For a few reasons, I recognize that POYCEL as a framework does not map easily onto a study where both youth leaders and adult leaders are units of analysis. Like most leadership frameworks and theories, POYCEL is designed with the adult as the actor in mind. In this case, the school principal. Although POYCEL does prioritize youth voice, its roots are informed by the adult positioned as leader who then supports the efforts of students. As I see it, youth are already leaders in their schools whether positioned formally or informally. Recognizing that traditional adult theories of leadership do not align with youths' perspectives on leadership (Mortensen, et.al, 2014), it remains a challenge to appropriately frame a "leadership" yet youth centered study. Because of this, I shift the analysis to center both the youth and the school leader in my applied analyses of the key levers as it relates to my data. Furthermore, I thought it

important to generate a research design that would center youth voices but also put their perspectives in conversation with adult leaders. I detail this design more in Chapter 3.

Below, I move towards explicating my findings as it relates to my research questions. I begin by first discussing the critical insights that youth have to offer in relation to their schooling experiences, communities in which they reside and the larger world around them. From here, I explicate the importance of school leaders committing to youth voice (Lever 1) recognizing these critical insights as powerful to informing leadership practice. Next, I discuss how critically listening to youth can inform how school leaders afford opportunities to support youth voice initiatives in their school (Lever 3). Finally, I consider how the youth in this study see themselves as leaders and what this might mean for how youth are positioned as leaders in their schools (Lever 2). In my discussion of the findings that provide insight into my second research question, I share about the different priorities of the Voice Leaders and Mrs. O while also utilizing POYCEL's key levers to consult how she engaged the voices of youth of color at Sunflower Elementary.

Summary of Findings

How are elementary youth of color positioned to affect change?
What are the issues that students identify in their school and community?

It is imperative that youth of color perspectives are made visible in the field of educational research. More specifically, the field of educational leadership must critically reimagine the ways that leadership practices and perspectives are informed. Relevant literature in the field of leadership points to the concern that adult-centric views on leadership seem to be the starting place from which we understand and define leadership. For this reason, scholars must continue to question who the field upholds as knowers and gatekeepers of knowledge. Most often, students of color are seen as problems to be solved (Gutiérrez & Orellana, 2006) and

framed as passive interlopers (hooks, 1994) in the school space. Reframing these deficit notions necessitates a shift in educational research and the practice of leading schools. Throughout the findings chapter, I provide data that is illustrated as story. Beginning with *Story 1*, I zoom in on the intimate knowledge that students portray as they share their insights about change and create "change hands" that amplify areas their concerns. Here, we see a focus on community issues like crime and homelessness as well as environmental concerns like pollution. In *Story 2,* the Voice Leaders share their insights on teacher quality and suspension during our dialogue that raises the question of if their voice matters at Sunflower. Key Lever 1 of POYCEL suggests that school leaders must first make the choice of committing to youth voice. In doing so, school leaders commitments must reflect the inclusion of youth voice as a natural part of school culture (Van Lac & Mansfield, 2018). By the end of the project, my data collection captured how Mrs. O demonstrated her commitments to student voice. It was crucial that Mrs. O had student voice as a part of her school improvement plan. However, student voice on the docket does not equal an authentic implementation. Drawing from Yoon & Templeton's (2019) work on critical listening, they note that research and practice of education is adult dictated with younger students having very little agency over what happens to them at school. Classrooms are riddled with accountability measures, standardization, and expectations of students to be compliant (Love, 2019) which further constrains the school space for youth. Listening is an active, engaged practice requiring adults to hear children's intentions over their own agendas and ingrained presumptions (Yoon & Templeton, 2019, p.57) Therefore, to commit to youth voice would also require the school leader and other adults in the building to truly listen to student perspectives in all settings. Mrs. O demonstrated this practice in small but important ways in her leadership. For instance, instead of suspending students when teachers sent down their students for that purpose,

Mrs. O would sit and talk with students about their behaviors, frustrations and their home lives. She worked purposefully to reduce her suspension data while listening to student perspectives, which I would argue was also reflective of her social justice leadership lens. I mention these beginner stages of committing to youth voice because while they were somewhat reflective of committing to youth voice, the commitments do not actively seek out student perspectives in ways that uplift and center the voices of students who are often unheard. For the students who had never ended up in Mrs. O's office due to threat of suspension or the high performing students typically tokenized because of their compliance in school, there were an array of voices that remained unheard. Mrs. O's actions at the end of the project provide a more useful depiction of what it means to commit to youth voice. In *Story 10,* when the Voice Leaders began to share out how things have changed at their school such as having more art and music or their teachers being "more nice" as Emma put it, Mrs. O goes even further in her commitments to youth voice by introducing student-run clubs where all students are able to have a say in a club of their interest. Here, Mrs. O was able to acknowledge what the needs were of the youth at Sunflower and to see what her role might be in fostering voice as well as producing tangible outcomes that students could see materialize.

I find that the key levers of the POYCEL framework naturally build onto one another. While I advise that critical listening is central to school leaders authentically committing to youth voice, it is also interspersed with key lever 3 where school leaders can employ critical listening to afford opportunities for youth to exercise their voice at school. When presented with the artifacts from the Voice Leaders in *Story 8*, Mrs. O comes to an awareness that the students at Sunflower are *already* talking about social justice issues. This realization informed her next steps of implementing the student-run clubs mentioned above as well as bringing in community

partners to provide more art and music outlets for students. In her final interview, Mrs. O sees where she might be implicated in actually carrying student voice forward, in ways that go beyond her teachers. By critically listening to what was presented from the student playbook, by taking in the artifacts, Mrs. O's journey takes a meaningful turn wherein her leadership practices considered the desires and perspectives of her students and adult action followed.

In environments like schools where dominant norms are at play (Dugan & Humbles, 2018) it is no surprise that youth may see leadership in formal and positional ways that communicate an authority over rather than a sharing of leadership. Refocusing my research question concerned with how youth of color saw themselves affecting change, I first consider the relationship between change and leadership. To do so, it's necessary to examine and understand how youth leaders might define leadership. Dempster & Lizzio (2007) acknowledge that of their analyses related to student leadership, there is an identifiable gap in our knowledge of student understandings of leadership. In this section, I analyze the data from the Voice Leaders to understand how they saw themselves affecting change and discuss what this might mean for how youth are positioned in schools.

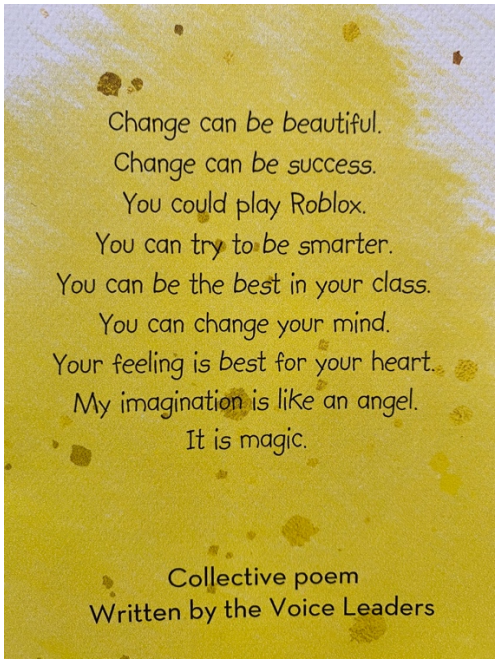
Given the historical trajectory of how youth of color have been and continue to be leaders that *do* affect change, I note a relevant link between affecting change and leadership. Taken together, change efforts and leadership inform one another based on previous youth research that gives insight to how youth might conceptualize the act of leadership. In their study focused on understanding leadership from a youth perspective, Mortensen and colleagues (2014) findings support this notion. Emphasized in their findings, youth seemed to have five prominent ideas about leadership. According to the youth (between the ages of 12 to 19) in the study, leadership was (a) available to anyone in any context, involved (b) creating change, (c) collective action, (d)

modeling and mentoring, and (e) strong character (p.453). Taking these youth conceptualizations of leadership into account, I return to my findings where in *Story 3* both Emma and Kelsey are clear about their care for other students as well as the absence of art and music in their school. Their depiction of a leader, a principal in particular, is one who focuses on the well being of the students, their families and critically listens to student needs and desires within reason. In *Story 5,* it is also evidenced that the ways in which the Voice Leaders define leader raises questions when adult theories of leadership are reflected from Dr. Crystal and her use of "leader" as a term associated with responsibility and other qualities that the Voice Leaders did not assign in their conceptions of leadership and change. Her sentiments leave Drake wondering if what we were doing as a Voice Leader group was "leadership." If school leaders and adult staff in schools are to commit to youth voice and afford opportunities for youth to exercise their voices, these commitments must manifest in ways that are not majorly influenced by adult notions of leadership. When this is the case, formal approaches are introduced which ultimately remain adult-led and informed. Lizzio and colleagues (2011) posit that formal-position based student leadership only ever covers a small minority of students whereas informal leadership opportunities have a much wider engagement. Similarly, Bertrand (2014) argues that formal student leadership alone doesn't go far enough in positioning students to reveal the multiple ways in which systemic racism (Bertrand, 2014) and other -isms are enacted in schools. As such, bridging formal leadership and other initiatives of student voice (Bertrand, 2014) could bring about more possibilities of activism and agency in schools for youth of color.

The data captured in story form, as highlighted in Chapter 4 revealed salient themes that provide insider knowledge into how youth leaders of color define change but also the valid ways that they believe change can be affected or created. Here, change is identified in the ways that

the Voice Leaders conceive of it. Below, I include a snapshot of how the students in this study defined change. Collectively, the Voice Leaders constructed a poem to target their definition of change.

Figure 16. Collective Poem on Change



In the poem shared from the Voice Leader playbook, the students initially talked about change in what could be considered whimsical, literal, and playful ways. They thought of change as beautiful. Again, an opportunity to make something better. When constructing the poem, they also felt that change could and should be successful. From their explanation, Roblox was an online game that used "imagination to design your own worlds and own games." For them, change allowed for the opportunity to design something new, your own world. As the poem reads on to where students reflect on how they as individuals can change such as "trying to be smarter" (Line 4), this later echoed Ella's sentiments that changing our own attitudes and being kind is also necessary to elicit change. Lines 5-9 of the poem demonstrate how the students built off of one another. For instance, Niecey felt that you did not have to only try to be smarter but

that you could also be the best in your class. Quite literally, students felt that you could change your mind, too. As constructing the poem came to an end, there was a thread of imagination that continued to weave through. The students described it as something that was like magic to them, that they could think of something new and reimagine their own world. Aside of this poem being creatively constructed by the Voice Leaders with very little input from me, I share it to provide how students initially broached the topic of change. From this poem construction to their brainstorming map of ideas on change (Figure 1), the Voice Leaders operated with a knowledge of the world around them and sought to reimagine it. Johnson (2017) terms this phenomenon as embracing the radical imagination. To do so, one reimagines themselves and the world in which they live. Similarly, Brown (2013) discusses the possibilities of imagination in her work with young black girls exploring Black girl creative performance and expression. Brown affirms that imagination is highly subjective and requires one to think through the role of imagination in the research process which requires the researcher to wholly deconstruct objectivity, methodology, and certainly, what is considered knowledge (p.27). Initially, I hesitated to share this poem as the way in which youth defined change. I was fearful that it may be interpreted as "cute" and not taken seriously as is often done with children's words. However, I am reminded by Yoon & Templeton's (2019) critical work with young children that listening is an active and engaged process for the adult which requires the adult to then hear children's intentions over their own agendas and ingrained presumptions (p. 57). That said, the ways that the Voice Leaders defined change throughout this study are valid and informed by their own knowledges of the world which I find to be vital in my interpretations of this central research question.

Throughout my findings, I document various stories that illumine how the Voice Leaders understood change. As illustrated, their reflections on change are less about how it is defined and

more about what they saw as needing to change with respect to their school, community and larger society. In the initial start of this project, it was not immediately visible to me if the Voice Leaders saw themselves affecting change or as agents of change. During our dialogue captured in *Story 1*, they watched the video of Mari Copeny (Little Miss Flint) and transitioned into their change hands activity where they were able to communicate their own thoughts around this notion of change. It was not exceptionally clear of how they saw themselves affecting change in the same ways Mari was able to. I recall Emma probing, "how old is she again?" when I asked the group if they thought they could affect change as a young person like Little Miss Flint. I received a resounding "yes" from the remainder of the group but their initial solutions around the topics of change proposed were focused on distributing resources for issues they identified like homelessness, clean water, and dilapidated housing in the community. To distribute these resources, they were aware that this task was not something they could do alone. They saw this type of change requiring a collective effort, similar to how the youth in Mortensen's study saw leadership requiring collective action.

To really pin down how the youth at Sunflower defined change, I chart how their definition evolved over time in my findings. While I thought that the Voice Leaders might begin to change their focal points over time, they remained consistent with the areas they identified as requiring change. The focus on more arts and music in their school seemed to be set as well as community concerns like safety and poverty alongside sociopolitical issues like that of environmental crises such as clean water and pollution.

In *Story 2*, I attempted to gauge how the Voice Leaders saw themselves positioned as leaders in the school because of the integral links that I felt were present between affecting change by having a voice and thus being placed in a position to lead change efforts. I sought to

examine if this was happening for the Voice Leaders. While the students first responses in the dialogue reflect that their voices matter because the adults in the building listened to them, there is more that begins to emerge when the topic of suspension arises. The students go on to explicitly share their perspectives about suspension where the majority of them disagree with the practice and don't find it helpful. Further, Rose's compassion is shown as she talks about the legacy of the students and her concerns about if their experiences at school are positive. While my findings here revealed that the students' perceptions of if their voice mattered was mostly based off of their interactions and observations with teachers, what cemented my understanding was examining their debate on suspension and the recurring concerns about teacher quality at Sunflower. These engagements support my argument for a repositioning of the youth in the school. Bertrand (2018) introduces this concept in her YPAR study that examined how students of color position themselves as well as how school adults position youth. She found that the students themselves engaged in their own repositioning as leaders due to how school adults positioned them in contradictory ways. For instance, while school adults would communicate that they valued student input, they would also contradict themselves by being dismissive of the students' insights as well as undermining them. In the case of Sunflower, Mrs. O did not undermine students but there were contradictory elements present. This is evidenced in *Story 7* where Mrs. O states that she would like to see student voice around youth activism but engages in actions that position students to increase their voices in the classroom instructionally. In line with POYCEL's key levers, school leaders must commit to youth voice but do so in ways that position students as knowers and values their lived and schooling experiences. This builds on lever two of POYCEL where Lac & Mansfield assert that students must be positioned as leaders in their school. At Sunflower, as presented in *Story 5*, many of the Voice Leaders served in other

leadership roles that were positional like recycling club, peer mediator and safety patrol. Although these clubs were important and meaningful to the students, their roles within them did not seemingly allow for them to affect change on issues they cared about. Recycling club was great for students who cared about the environment but even students like Drake who was an environmentalist at his core was not considered for this club. Similarly, Niecey was very passionate about students not being suspended, yet she made sense of her role as a peer mediator as one that allowed her to "write up" kids which ultimately landed them in trouble – the opposite of what she and others communicated they wanted to see change at their school. If students at Sunflower were to have their voices heard authentically, it would require for Mrs. O's orientations towards understanding student voice to shift in more critical ways. While the design of my study allowed for Mrs. O to develop these understandings along the way, this is not the structure typically taken up in student voice work.

Khalifa (2018) suggests that fostering space for student voice not only gives students a sense of fairness and belonging but it also elicits critical self-reflection for the school leader. By conducting this study in ways that allowed for Mrs. O to engage in critical self-reflection, she was able to think on what *her* role might be in centering student voice as well as recognize that students were already aware of social justice issues in the school. As the project with the Voice Leaders progressed over the weeks, they continued to define change by way of laying out the issues. In their illustrated and collage portraits included in Chapter 4, they take on the role of imagining what they would do if they were a principal. As depicted in Emma's illustrated portrait (Figure 7), she targets the areas that she has talked about the entirety of the study. For Emma, she wanted to ensure that students were not being kicked out of school (suspended), getting in trouble, and that they had access to more art and music in the school. Similar ideas are

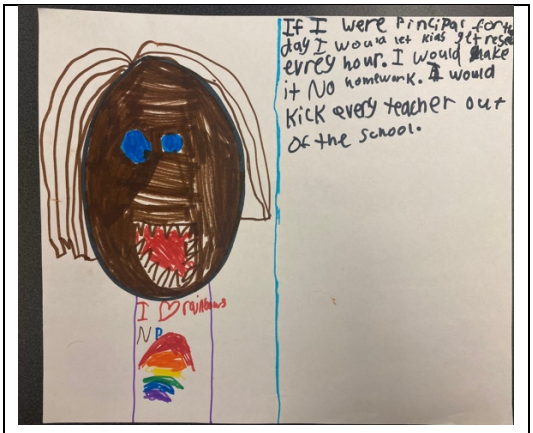
reflected in her collage portrait (Figure 13) where she places art, music, school, water, poverty, community, and safety above her head as issues that she would think about as a leader. As I coalesce these various stories and artifacts alongside one another to chart how the Voice Leaders saw themselves affecting change, I find that they were confident in identifying what Mrs. O called social justice issues. In addition, they did not "see" themselves affecting change until they saw the results of our time together demonstrated in *Story 10*. When the Voice Leaders began to share out that they now had art and music and their teachers were "more nice" as Emma put it, my epiphany in this moment seemed to inform theirs. While I know they felt proud of themselves and they were able to see a material product from our work such as the Voice Leader playbook (Figure 10), I can not confidently state that without them "seeing" the changes they articulated materialize, that they felt as if they were affecting change in our M.A.A.E. space or dialogue groups. In fact, I recall Niecey's response during one of our M.A.A.E. spaces when she found herself frustrated with her artwork. As I encouraged her to be creative and to add some color to her map design, she responded with,

"I want it to look stupid because ain't nobody gonna see it but the teachers."

At the time, I was not sure why Niecey was less than enthused by the teachers seeing the work they had accomplished. Yet after my coding and analysis, I realized that Niecey's feelings towards teachers were complicated and in one of her artifacts (Figure 18), she had previously expressed that a majority of them needed to leave. I share this detail to make the point that without the playbook and resulting changes that followed from the design of it, I do not think that the Voice Leaders saw themselves as affecting change by simply being able to have the space to identify the issues but not necessarily positioned to act on them. By seeing some of the

issues they identified within the school space be addressed, it was affirmed that their voices did matter and that they were able to affect change by using them.

Figure 17. Niecey's Illustrated Portrait



If I were principal for a day, I would let kids get recess every hour. I would make it no homework. I would kick every teacher out of the school.

How does a social justice oriented school leader engage the voices of elementary-aged youth of color?

To investigate this inquiry, I applied a POYCEL lens to examine the ways in which Mrs. O engaged the voices of youth of color at Sunflower Elementary, a K-3 school. As mentioned in Chapter 4, Mrs. O identified as a social justice leader with a social justice agenda. A part of her school improvement plan was to increase the voices of students and parents. She had historically done this by capturing survey data from parents in the car-rider line and holding some focus groups with students as well as end of year surveys. Mrs. O was comfortable addressing whiteness within herself and her teachers, demonstrative of her social justice priorities which made issues of marginalization within the school and called attention to it. That said, she was not

surprised when she faced resistance from teachers. She had previously called them out on "snap suspensions" where Black boys were overwhelmingly represented and dealt with teacher frustration when she placed affirming art that made people of color visible along the walls (see Figure 19 and Figure 20) inside the school. According to Mrs. O, it had been rumored that the art would come down if she were to leave the school. Interestingly enough, Mrs. O had brokered relationships with the community in ways that we also see benefit her response to the students of Sunflower later. While her relationship with parents and community members developed faster than those she shared with her teachers and staff, it was to her benefit. Each month parents, friends, and community members would come in to redesign bulletin boards around the school for Mrs. O on a volunteer basis. I saw my role in working with Mrs. O as not only a researcher or mediator between her and the students but I was also in a position to support her student voice initiative so that we could develop practical and sustainable steps that would help her and school leaders like her sustain student voice in their schools.

Figure 18. Bulletin Board Commissioned by Mrs. O

Figure 19. Black Lives Matter Sign Shown in Hallway of Sunflower Elementary

Applying the three key levers of POYCEL to examine how Mrs. O engaged youth voice at Sunflower allowed me to analyze her leadership journey and the actions taken to engage elementary youth voice. These findings that I deem significant, reveal that Mrs. O and the Voice Leaders had different ideas about how and *if* their voices were truly being engaged. To explicate this point, I rely on the stories included in Chapter 4 that detail the student perspective as well as Mrs. O's intentions and subsequent actions towards engaging student voice. In Chapter 4, I also present the Voice Leaders various portraits (illustrated and collage) which elucidate their priorities and issues that were front of mind for them as it related to change, voice, and leadership. In comparing the Voice Leaders portraits alongside Mrs. O, there are differences in how both the Voice Leaders and Mrs. O conceive of engaging student voice. For instance, Mrs. O's concerns are heavily teacher focused with some attention to the community whereas the Voice Leaders speak to their knowledge of larger systemic issues that they wanted to do something about but were not positioned to.

When presented with the Voice Leader playbook, we see Mrs. O's understandings of student voice shift from an instructional focus to a more in-depth understanding of the issues that youth care about as she notices that they are already taking up matters that she recognizes as

social justice issues. Upon having this epiphany, Mrs. O discusses how she wants to use the playbook as data for her teachers with the hope that teachers might be moved and "brave enough" to incorporate their voices into the classroom. Mrs. O does not immediately recognize what her role as principal might be in engaging their voices. As Key Lever 1 of POYCEL outlines, principals must be committed to youth voice which is demonstrated in a few ways at Sunflower. First, by student voice being a part of the school improvement plan, it is clear that this is a priority area for Mrs. O and her school improvement team. Additionally, her efforts at "checking for student voice" reflect her orientations of seeking to embed student voice in classrooms. While the commitments to voice are present, they do no satisfy what is needed to authentically engage the voices of students at Sunflower Elementary. As Damini (2014) found in the elementary context, principals must actively seek out student perspectives. Therefore, the second lever of POYCEL which positions students as leaders must be present in order to make valiant strides towards engaging the voices of youth of color. It is worthwhile for principals to do the work of positioning students in non-positional/formal leadership roles as well as valuing what they already contribute to the school space as knowledge that is informed by their lived experiences. This is displayed towards the end of the study where Mrs. O decides that she will take the student playbooks (data) and begin running leadership groups with students where they are able to choose an issue and she can provide support. She emphasizes the importance of showing students that they are *already* leaders and that they have agency to pick topic and then take action with her supporting them. Too often, leaders tend to adopt an approach of getting out of the way completely when positioning students as leaders (Mitra, 2012) yet POYCEL calls for students to be civically engaged and contributors to decision-making that happens alongside the school leader. Finally, the last lever in POYCEL requires school leaders to intentionally create

opportunities for student voice. By doing so, students are able to see themselves as having a voice on school matters. At Sunflower, Mrs. O's actions followed her words. Not only did she commit to youth voice and prioritize the school issues that students raised in our project, she also placed leadership back in the students' hands by allowing them to run their own student clubs that were focused on topics they cared about. While these clubs required teacher approval, it was a first step in the direction of creating opportunities for students to have their voices heard.

Implications and Conclusion

Leadership Preparation

As a way forward, educational leadership as both a discipline and practice will need to consider how to best equip school leaders to center the voices that matter most – the youth they serve. The findings from this study offer contributions to the literature on educational leadership and student voice especially as it relates to student voice in the elementary context. Certainly, leadership preparation programs could benefit from incorporating the blossoming literature on student voice in educational leadership as well as introduce case scenarios like that of Mrs. O and other elementary school principals who go beyond administering surveys and focus groups but implement new ways of seeking out student voice. Furthermore, assignments that incorporate critical self reflection of the leader and the community in which they lead are critical to growing in consciousness and understanding the importance of seeing youth as stakeholders in their schools.

The Possibilities of POYCEL

In practice, these findings model how school leaders can begin to prioritize the voices of elementary youth of color by developing student voice initiatives that center their lived experiences and critical insights. With the knowledge that there is not one student voice but

variability in youth perspectives (Gonzalez, et.al, 2017), the school leader stands to benefit by embodying the key levers that Lac & Mansfield identify to support student voice. By first, committing to youth voice in meaningful ways that require the school leader to critically reflect on their leadership actions – to critically listen and evaluate the ways that students are positioned in the school, a sense of belonging and mattering is possible for students. Simultaneously, the school leader is able to better respond to the needs of students because they have committed to the work of understanding their lived experiences and those of their students. Further, positioning students as leaders is important if the field is to truly rethink leadership in the margins.

To extend our understandings of leadership beyond the bounds of an individual leader or formal administrator (Rodela & Bertrand, 2018) is to incorporate perspectives that have historically been silenced or dismissed. By engaging in repositioning students as leaders and decision-makers in their education, students are able to be seen as leaders in the present and not how they are typically cast as leaders for a later future (Mortensen, et. al, 2014). Finally, as demonstrated by Mrs. O in her decision to run leadership groups with students and also create the space for students to run their own leadership groups, opportunities must be afforded for students to engage in the practice of leadership in ways that matter to them, not by presuppositions that adults place on how youth should lead.

Social Justice Leadership

As it relates to a social just leadership, the presence of student voice must be a non-negotiable if social justice leaders seek to make issues of injustice (Theoharis, 2007). To advance any sort of equity-oriented or socially just agenda that seeks to improve schooling outcomes for youth of color, it would be negligent to not include their voices and honor their perspectives by leading in new ways. If we create conditions under which some children feel they must hide who

they are and what their circumstances are, we are denying the importance of democratic participation and meaningful relationships (Shields, 2004). This project was developed to intentionally provide pathways forward for school leaders to engage the voices of students beyond surveys and to see their voices as more than sources of data (Fielding, 2001). For the future, we must operate in the terrain of possibility that Mitra and colleagues (2012) identify as unexplored. I especially make this case for the elementary context where there is very little research focused on how we might engage the voices of younger students. While methods and approaches like YPAR and PAR remind us that students are experts of their own experiences (Caraballo, Lozenski, Lyiscott, Morrell, 2017), implementing arts-based approaches allow for inquiry and reflection for younger students in ways that traditional approaches to student voice like survey and focus groups may not capture. In their work utilizing concept mapping, Fernandéz, Nguyen, and Langhout (2015) also found this to be true. They illuminate that concept-mapping for elementary-aged youth served as a tool to make connections between structural issues. To move beyond the traditional bounds of student and adult leader, methods that move beyond traditional bounds are also necessary and might bolster student engagement and interest in expressing their opinions about school.

To Elementary Youth Leaders of Color

For youth of color who navigate schooling in unique ways and are taught that they must engage in compliance in ways that ultimately other who they are (Kinloch, 2017), I want to affirm the possibilities in reach when *your* voices are centered. Just as young people from The Children's Crusade, Black Lives Matter, and present day youth activists have shown us, your perspectives and insights matter. They have always mattered and made a difference in the fight for justice. When Naomi Wadler and her friend led a school walk out at their elementary school

for 18 minutes to honor the lives of youth, particularly Black girls who have been harmed by gun violence, she was 11-years-old. Havana Chapman-Edwards was in first grade when she saw Naomi speak out at the March for Our Lives in Washington, DC. Havana then decided to use her voice to speak against violence also. She led her own walkout in an orange astronaut suit, alone. She reminded us that "even if you're tiny, your voice is not." As you encounter adult leaders who model leadership in ways they understand, my hope is that you will be reminded that your perspectives and your leadership matters, too. Adults don't have to have power over you but instead can have power with you (Van Lac & Mansfield, 2018). As adults like myself and many others (Bertrand, 2014; Mansfield 2014, 2015; Mansfield, Welton & Halz, 2012; Mitra, 2006, 2008), continue to push the field of education to recognize that you are already leaders, I want to leave you with something that I learned from Emma, a Voice Leader in this project. She reminded me that "there is always another after" when we are working towards change – *you* are a part of constructing that after, and because of that, we can look forward to a better world.

APPENDICES

APPENDIX A: Principal Interview Protocol

Individual Interview Protocol

The purpose of this study is to better understand how youth voice is engaged in the elementary school context by/with school leaders.

- First, I will ask you some questions about your background. These questions will include your place of birth, your age, racial/ethnic identity and socio-economic status among other identities you are open to share. From there, the questions will focus more on your teaching and leadership experiences.
- Second, I will ask you to share about your teaching and leadership experiences. In particular, I am interested in how you came to define your leadership practice.
- Third, I am interested in your own beliefs and philosophies around leadership and student voice beyond the classroom.

Additional details of the interview include: You can expect this interview to last for 45-55 minutes. To ensure your privacy, the primary researcher will treat your identity with the strictest confidence. In this case, the primary interviewer will be Courtney Mauldin. You will be given the option to choose a pseudonym for this study as well.

Segment One: General background questions

Segment One

1. Can you state your preferred pseudonym for this research study?
2. If comfortable sharing, what is your age (you can also provide a range) and level of education?
3. How would you describe your socio-economic status growing up?
4. What are your preferred pronouns?
5. How do you identify in terms of racial/ethnic identity?
6. Are there any additional identities that you possess that you find informative to your schooling experience?

Segment Two:

- What types of schools did you attend growing up? Can you describe the demographics of the students and teachers?
- What about when teaching? How would you describe the schools you have taught in?
- Tell me about your career trajectory of becoming a principal.
- In your opinion, what makes a culturally responsive principal or one who leads for social justice?
- How does your school community respond to your particular leadership practice?
- Who or what informs how you define leadership?

Now, we are going to switch to a series of questions that build from the last question.

- How have your lived experiences shaped your orientation to leadership?
- Who would you say most influences how you currently lead?
- Do you remember your school principals? What do you remember about them?
- How do you hold yourself accountable to the work of social justice/cultural responsiveness in your school? What about your teachers?
- Who informs the changes that have taken place in your school? Why?
- How do you define student voice?
- In what ways would you like to see your students' voices operate in the school?
- Is there anything that you want to share with me that I didn't cover in these questions?

Repetitive Interview Questions

1. How does seeing and hearing about the themes that emerged in the youth voice projects make you feel?
2. Were you surprised by any of the themes?
3. What changes do you think are necessary in the school context after being presented with students' school experiences?
4. How might this information influence your leadership practice moving forward?
5. In what ways might you see youth voice being engaged in the elementary schooling context?

APPENDIX B: Initial Student Voice Unit Plan

Table 1. Student Voice Unit Plan

	Creative Form	**Lesson Focus**	**Learning Artifact**
Week 1	Poetry	Defining Change/Different Types of Change	Poetry Plates
Week 2	Poetry	Change Leaders	Short Poems in Journals
Week 3	Storytelling	Identity (Who Am I Stories)	Short Stories & Illustrations
Week 4	Storytelling	Identity (Who Am I Stories)	Storytelling through Collage
Week 5	Picture Collage	Leadership	Change Collage
Week 6	Picture Collage	Leadership	Blackout Poetry
Week 7	Mural	Power of Voice	Collective Mural
Week 8	Mural	Power of Voice	OPEN
Week 9	OPEN	Dialogic Spiral	OPEN
Week 10	Archive	Dialogic Spiral	OPEN

Week 1, Session 1:

- Establish agreements/name of dialogue group with students
- Decorate notebooks with pictures, symbols, colors, words
- Students will be introduced to poetry as a form and begin to write their own poems during the "poetry plate" activity.

Poetry Plate Activity

- Instructor will model this first for students on chart paper.
- Students are to place their name in the center of the plate
- Students will fill their plate with adjectives or words that describe change.
    1. What color is change?
    2. How do you think it smells?
    3. What does it taste like?
    4. How does change make you feel?

Allow students to be creative and to come up with as many words as possible.
In the next session, students will take their words and create a short poem.

Week 1, Session 2:

- We will revisit the established agreements from last session.
- Students will not receive notebooks until consent forms have gone out?
- Instructor will introduce different ideas about *change* using the text, *Amazing Grace*. Throughout the lesson, they should be adding words that stick out to them from the story on the back of their plates.
- After reading the text aloud to students, Group 1 will watch instructor model how to create a found poem from a collection of words.
- Students will then create their own "found poetry" using the words on their poetry plates and transfer these poems into their journals. Throughout the lesson, they should be adding words that stick out to them from the story on the back of their plates.

Week 2, Session 1: CREATE
Lesson Focus: Poetry/What is a change leader or agent?

Materials:
Amazing Grace Read-Aloud
Journals
Large Art Sketch Paper
*Anchor Chart
Markers
*Templates with sentence starters

Objectives:

- SWBAT identify what a change leader/change agent is.
- SWBAT express how they see themselves as change agents through poetic form.

Activity:

- We will revisit the story Amazing Grace as a whole group discussing the character, what challenges she faced, favorite parts. (5 mins)
- Using an anchor chart, I will have students to do a character analysis of how Grace is a change agent. (5)

- After discussing the various ways in which Grace models being a change agent (words, thoughts, feelings), students will fill in a poetry template that describes how they are change agents. (20 mins)

My name is _____.
People think I am _____.
I come from _____.
I believe in _____ and _____.
One day I will _____.
Right now, I wish _____.
I feel _____.
I know_____.

My name is _____.

Students will each share their poems with the group and glue them onto construction paper, decorating the final product.

- Revisit key points about Grace being a change agent from anchor chart
- I will model writing a collective poem whole group and how a "change agent" (someone who changes the world by doing) is at the front of my brain when I fill in the blanks about how I am or how I can be a change agent.
- Students will write their own poems using the printed templates and decorate and glue to construction paper as they like.

Instructor will open with poem, "I am" on page 120.
After reading the poem, I will ask students:

1. What does Qishu mean when they say that they are a little fire in the grasslands?
2. What about when they say they are like a little star in the sky?
3. How would you describe yourself? You are like what?

- Students will revisit collective poem and their personal poems in their notebook.
- Students will see instructor model how she writes her poem thinking about how a "change agent" (someone who changes the world by doing) is at the front of my brain when I fill in the blanks about how I am or how I can be a change agent.
- Students will write their own poems using the printed templates and decorate and glue to construction paper as they like.

Week 3: Session 1 (LEARN)

Lesson Focus: Storytelling/Different Types of Change

Materials:
Destiny's Gift Read Aloud
Journals
Large Art Sketch Paper
*Anchor Chart
Markers
*Templates with sentence starters
oud
Objectives:

- SWBAT identify what storytelling is and how it can create change.
- SWBAT to storytelling through the read-aloud, Destiny's Gift.

Week 3: Session 2 (LEARN)
Lesson Focus: *Storytelling/Identity*

Since students created their “I Am” poems in the previous week, we will transition to a focus on identity to support their understandings of who they are as change agents and students with voices.

Materials:

- Printer/Notebook Paper
- Read-Aloud: Trombone Shorty
- Writing Journals for T-Chart
- Pencils

Objectives:

- SWBAT identify what storytelling is and why it is important.
- SWBAT identify the important parts of the story and what makes storytelling special to them.

Activity:
Intro to Lesson: (10 mins)

- See Screenshot below.

- Before beginning the read-aloud, have students think about what makes the main character happy.
- Ask comprehension questions throughout.
- Discuss the identity of the character and how it may have influenced their experiences.
- Have students to share who tells stories to them in their family (grandparents, parents, aunts, cousins, etc.)

Figure 20. Snowballs and Airplanes Activity from Kitchen Table Curricular Toolkit

	Pieces of construction paper or blank paper, cut into fourths	INTRO
		Snowballs and Airplanes activity:
		• Ask students to write down 1 thing about the world or their lives that causes them stress, and that they wish they could change, on small pieces of paper.
		• After writing, have students stand in a circle and crumple up the papers into "snowballs" for a class snowball fight. Explain that the act of crumpling up the papers and throwing them is representative of releasing this stress.
		• Allow students to throw the snowballs at each other for a given amount of time. After throwing their own snowball, they can pick up others, and throw them as well.
		• After students have had a chance to throw the snowballs, have each student pick up one and read it aloud to the class.
		  ○ Collect all snowballs after students have read them.
		  ○ If you would like, lead students in a conversation about the similarities and differences between the snowballs read aloud.
		• Next, have students return to their seats and think of things that make them happy. Ask each student to write down one practice, person, place, or thing that makes them happy on a piece of paper.
		• When students have finished writing, ask students to fold the papers into paper airplanes.
		• Once all students have finished writing, all students will stand in a circle and fly their paper airplanes for a given amount of time.

Read-Aloud: Trombone Shorty (10 mins)

(10 mins)
I Do: Create an t-chart on large paper.
We do: Have students to create a T-chart in their journals
One side of the T-chart should focus on James' Snowballs (what made James upset, caused stress or could have made him unhappy? The other side should focus on James' airplanes (what things/experiences, event and people made James happy?)

Closing Discussion (5 mins)
- Close with discussing with students the following Q's
- How did James persevere in the text?
- What do you do to make yourself happy when you come across a challenge?

Share with students that next class we will create our own short stories, stories that focus on our own snowballs and airplanes.

Week 4, Session 1: (CREATE)
Lesson Focus: Storytelling Through Collage /Writing our own Stories

- Open lesson with revisiting our activity of identifying our snowballs and airplanes just as we did with Trombone Shorty. Have students to share what they remember.

- As you transition into the new lesson, ask students to share what their dream title would be of their life story. (5 mins)

Materials:
- Pencils
- Journal
- Construction Paper
- Visual Images by Adjoa J. Burrowes
- Construction Paper Shapes
- Magazine pages for word cuts
- Scissors
- Glue

Objectives:
- SWBAT identify what storytelling is and why it is important.
- SWBAT identify that collages are made by overlapping multiple pieces of material or paper to create an image.
- SWBAT to tell their story through collage method.

Activity:

- Share with students that today we will look at collage images by artist Adjoa Burrowes and also create our own.
- Explain that first we have to define collage (write the word collage on chart paper and have students to write it in their journals with definition).

DEFINITION: a technique that creates a work of art where pieces of fabric and paper are overlapped to create an image.

- Show art gallery of Adjoa Burrowes to students, have them describe what they see in the art and how they think Adjoa created the collage.
- Share with students that we will take various shapes and cut out words to create our story. Explain that we shouldn't just cut out words we don't know or add shapes that don't fit the snowballs and airplanes of our story. This means that we want our collage to represent our story.

- I DO: Model which words I would choose and the shapes I would use for my collage.
- We Do: Pick 1 student to share what word they would choose to represent their airplanes and what shape?
- You DO: Have students to begin cutting out words that match the airplanes and snowballs of their stories. (6 mins)

--Have students to pick the shapes that match their story and to begin to create a collage. (15 mins)

- Close lesson with reminding students that our stories are powerful and deserve to be told. When we tell our stories, we use our voices to say who we are.

Week 4, Session 2 (LEARN)

- Students will still continue creating their story collages on this date.

Week 5, Session 1 (LEARN)

- Students will be introduced to additional collage work by various Black artists who apply different collage techniques.
- Students will discuss how they define change as a whole group.

Week 5, Session 2 (CREATE)

- Students will create their own personal change collages.

Week 6, Session 1 (LEARN)

- Students will be introduced to Blackout Poetry using Scholastic's Materials on Blackout Poetry.
- As a whole group students will create a blackout poem.

Week 6, Session 2 (CREATE)

- Students will create individual blackout poems to define change in their schools and communities.

Week 7, Session 1: (LEARN)

- Students will be introduced to mural designs via media and photos from local murals in the Midwest.
- Students will engage in discussion about how murals are community art in pairs and as a whole group.

Week 8, Session 2: (CREATE)

- Students will begin to create a collective mural, selecting former art pieces they have created in the dialogue group.

Week 9, Session 1: (CREATE)

- Students will complete murals.
- Students will also be introduced to the concept of the dialogic spiral and illustrate what that means to them and add it to the mural.

Week 10: Final Session

- Student Interviews.

APPENDIX C: Modified (with Arts) Lesson Plan

Note: The students were co-creators and co-leaders in how we spent our time after the first few weeks as noted in the dissertation. Therefore, this reflect the lessons leading up to students taking the lead in our lessons.

Week 1, Session 1: (30 mins) (PLANNED)

- Establish agreements/name of dialogue group with students
- Decorate notebooks with pictures, symbols, colors, words
- Students will be introduced to poetry as a form and begin to write their own poems during the "poetry plate" activity.

Poetry Plate Activity

- Instructor will model this first for students on chart paper.
- Students are to place their name in the center of the plate
- Students will fill their plate with adjectives or words that describe change.
    1. What color is change?
    2. How do you think it smells?
    3. What does it taste like?
    4. How does change make you feel?

Allow students to be creative and to come up with as many words as possible.
In the next session, students will take their words and create a short poem.

(5 mins) Open lesson with agreements. Share with students that in order for our group to continue, we have to create a plan for how we will participate in our space.
-Consider how we share materials, how we speak to eachother, how we listen to Ms. Mauldin and the others in the group. Introduce "bring it back"

(5 mins) Share with students that today we will define and understand change.

(5 mins) Ask students what they think change is. Write out the words that students come up with on the board/chart paper, etc.

- What color is change?
- How do you think it smells?
- What does it taste like?
- How does change make you feel?

    1. Share with students that today I want to hear from them about what changes they believe should happen in their school and community but FIRST we will listen to a story about what it means to change something in your community.

(3 mins) https://youtu.be/ML2dRP9i3FQ Students will watch 3 mins of Mari Copeny's video (Little Miss Flint).

(5 mins) First, model that I want students to draw their hand in the center of their plate. With their plate, on each finger they will write different things they would like to change. For example, my thumb may represent me changing homelessness in my community, my first finger may be changing crime, my third finger may represent me changing my attitude. (Have this done already)

(10 mins) Pass out plates, markers, paint (if time) and have students to write 2-3 sentences on the back of their plate of why they want to change one of the things they wrote on their fingers. Explain to students that I have them writing/illustrating this in a hand because change is in their hands like we saw with Little Miss Flint.

Week 1, Session 2: (30 mins)

- We will revisit the established agreements from last session.
- Instructor will introduce different ideas about *change* using the text, *Amazing Grace*. Throughout the lesson, they should be adding words that stick out to them from the story on the back of their plates.
- After reading the text aloud to students, Group 1 will watch instructor model how to create a found poem from a collection of words.
- Students will then create their own "found poetry" using the words on their poetry plates and transfer these poems into their journals. Throughout the lesson, they should be adding words that stick out to them from the story on the back of their plates.

Objectives:

- Students will revisit and sign agreements for our dialogue group.
- Students will be able to define what a change agent is (someone who changes the world by doing)
- Students will create their own word cloud by cutting and pasting words (that make them think of someone changing the world) in a timed fashion to their sheet of construction paper.
- Students will share what they think a change agent is at the end of their artifact by sharing their final product.

Materials:
Construction Paper
Glue
Magazines
Scissors
Markers

Opening (5 mins)
Share with students that earlier this week we talked about how change is in our hands and we picked different topics that we would like to change in our schools and communities. Today we will identify what makes a change agent or leader by listening to a story about a brave young person and then creating our own word clouds.

(10 mins)
Ask students to share out what they enjoyed about our last lesson.

1. Have you seen anything else this week that made you think about our activity and what you would like to change? At home? At school?

Consider the following questions: Tell me about your elementary school. What do you like about it?

2. How would you describe your principal?
3. What do you think makes a good principal?
4. What is something that you would like to see change at your school? Why?
5. What advice would you give a principal?
6. Do you think your voice is important at school? How do you know?

(10 mins) Read-Aloud

(10 mins)
After the read-aloud, I will model how to create a word cloud by picking out words that make me think of someone changing something. Words like powerful, brave, change, trees, water, money. All topics we have talked about so far.

(8 mins)
Share with students that they will have 8 mins to find as many "change agent" words as possible and they have to do this carefully. When the timer goes off you should have as many words as you can on your sheet. We will not glue them until after the timer is off and I have told us to.

(20 mins)
Students will spend the remainder of time creating their word clouds and then will share at the end what change agent words they found and why they added them to their wordcloud. Remind students to initial their sheets.

*Our last lesson organically turned into dialogue space. This reminded me that we should structure our time into half dialogue possibly once a week. While we may create one day of the week, Friday should be our discussion time.

For our next lesson, I want to build off of the momentum of reading the chapter on, "The Honey Bunch Kids" where Dizzy was able to be principal for a day. We engaged in dialogue about what they would do if they were principal for a day. For this week's lesson, we will plan to create from this portion for tomorrow's lesson.

Artifacts that we can turn into a playbook

- Change Agent Word Clouds
- If I was principal for a day, I would _____ writing and portrait.
- Build a School and everything it needs
- Map of Community change
- Change Plates (with hand)

Week 3, Session 1
Opening (5 mins)
Share with students that on Friday we read, The Honey Bunch Kids and talked in our dialogue group about how we know if your voice matters to your principal. Share that today we to create a portrait of ourselves as principal and write about what we would do if we were principal for a day.
Materials:
Cardstock Paper
Markers
Crayons
Pencils

(15 mins) Modeling

- Show students the page of Dizzy at the Principal Desk in the story, poll the group and ask them what they remember from the story.
- Share that while the author wrote her story in a funny way, we want to also think about the kinds of changes we have been talking about and how we might think about things we could change in our own school as Principal.
- Model on chart paper (split it for your portrait - landscape style) that I would start my story with the stem, If I were principal for a day, I would _____. Model 3-5 sentences.
- After modeling, illustrate a portrait of myself doing my best drawing. Share that they shouldn't rush their drawings because these may go in a hand book that we are going to print for teachers to use in the classroom to learn how to make the school better.

Week 3, Session 2: (30 mins writing and drawing time for students)

Week 4, Session 1
Students will sit in a circle with their portraits and engage with the questions below.

<u>Segment Three—Beliefs about Voice</u>
Tell me about a time when you felt your voice mattered.

1. Can you share a time where you felt that you had something important to say but no one would listen?

2. When have you spoken up about an issue? Did people listen to what you had to say?

3. Who do you feel listens to you the most? At home? At school?

4. Do you think that you would be able to change the world like the kids your age that we have learned about? Why or why not?

5. What's one thing you would change in the world if you could? Why?

Thank you for your time today. Do you have any questions about anything we talked about today?

Week 4, Session 2

Second half: CREATE
Objectives:

- SWBAT identify what a collage is and how we can use a collage to tell a story.
- SWBAT identify that collages are made by overlapping multiple pieces of material or paper to create an image.
- SWBAT to tell their story through collage method.

Activity:

- Share with students that today we will look at collage images by artist Adjoa Burrowes and also create our own.
- Explain that first we have to define collage (write the word collage on chart paper and have students to write it in their journals with definition).

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- You DO: Have students to begin cutting out words that match the airplanes and snowballs of their stories. (6 mins)

--Have students to pick the shapes that match their story and to begin to create a collage. (15 mins)

- Close lesson with reminding students that our stories are powerful and deserve to be told. When we tell our stories, we use our voices to say who we are.

Week 5, Session 1

Materials:
Various types of paper
Magazine sheets
Scissors
Pencils
Journals

Opening: Students will be introduced to change by walking a Soul Pancake video
From Kid President, 20 Things We Should Say more Often. https://youtu.be/m5yCOSHeYn4

After watching the video, instructor will discuss with students how Kid President thinks about change. Share that he thinks of change happening in small ways that have a ripple effect. This means that we can start by changing our words, how we treat eachother, how we care for other people and it has a ripple effect where people pass it on and we begin to slowly change the world.

Share with students the quote from John Lewis (who fought for the rights of African-Americans that were being treated poorly in the 1960s and now) to write in their journals.

If not us, then who? If not now, then when?
Below the quote, have students to write what this quote means to them.
Students will share out.

Tell students that on Friday we will create new collages but these collages will focus on how THEY think about change.

To help us get ready to do that and find "Change words," we are going to create our own list of 20 things we should say or do more often as a group.

On chart paper, instructor will write down what students come up with. At the end, students can come up and circle "change words" they think they might be able to find in the magazines on Friday for their collages.

Close activity with reminder quote from students. Have them to repeat it to eachother. If not us, then who? If not now, then when?

Week 5, Session 2

Materials:
Various types of paper
Magazine sheets
Scissors
Pencils

Journals

Objectives:

- SWBAT review what a collage is and how we can use a collage to tell a story.
- SWBAT review that collages are made by overlapping multiple pieces of material or paper to create an image.
- SWBAT to tell their story of change by using the collage method

Opening: Students will revisit Soul Pancake video from last session.

(5 mins) In journals, students will revisit their reflections on the John Lewis quote we discussed last session.

(5 mins) Students will share with their peers what new ideas they have about the quote.

(15 mins) Using change words from last session, students will create their own change word collage to create their own artwork image.

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