

Student Ambassadors: Creating a Venue for Middle School Students to Share their  
Voices to Improve their Social Emotional Competencies

by

Stacy E. Ellis

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Doctor of Education

Approved April 2024 by the  
Graduate Supervisory Committee:

Audrey Beardsley, Co-Chair  
Nicole Bowers, Co-Chair  
Neil Stafford

ARIZONA STATE UNIVERSITY

May 2024

## ABSTRACT

The researcher explored the impact of a student voice initiative (SVI), the Student Ambassador Council (SAC), on the social-emotional competencies (SECs) of middle school, 5th- 8th grades students. Drawing upon the principles of youth empowerment, more specifically Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR), and social-emotional learning (SEL), the SAC provided a platform for students to actively participate in decision-making processes within their school community. The researcher employed action research using a mixed methodologies approach, combining surveys, interviews, and participant observations to gather data on students' experiences and perceptions of the SAC. Quantitative analysis of pre- and post-surveys did not reveal significant improvements in students' SECs following their participation in the SAC. However, qualitative data from open-ended questions on the post-survey, interviews and observation provided further clarity demonstrating the initiative fosters growth in students' perceptions of Student Voice, Social Awareness and Self-Efficacy in addition to student development in confidence, self-directed learning and civic engagement. Moreover, the study also suggested broader implications of the SAC on school climate and administrative practices. Findings suggested that SVIs like the SAC contributed to a more positive and inclusive school environment, promoting greater collaboration between students and school staff.

## DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to all the families who have entrusted me with your most precious gifts: your children. It is a profound honor to have the opportunity to impact the future of our community. Your trust and support have been the cornerstone of this endeavor and I am deeply humbled by the privilege to work alongside our future generations.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

To all of the students who participated in the Student Advisory Council, whether you were directly involved in the study or not, your contributions have played a vital role in moving our school community forward. Your voices, insights, and dedication have helped shape our efforts to create a better learning environment for all.

I extend my deepest gratitude to the adult consultants, Alison Robinson, Ilana Dawson, Stacy Dobbins, Laura Hershberger, and Aleta Preciado. Your commitment to guiding and supporting students has been invaluable. Your willingness to dedicate time and energy to nurturing their voices is deeply appreciated. I would be remiss not to thank Sandra Becker for making space for me to work with students. Your flexibility with the schedule absolutely provided me the ability to do this work.

To my family, thank you for your unwavering encouragement throughout this journey. Your support has been a constant source of strength and inspiration. It's been 10 years since I began this journey, and you all believed, even more than I did, that I could finish. Mom and Dad, thank you for asking questions and the unnecessary bragging. Tracy Ellis, thank you for sharing your experiences and knowledge of this process and being excited about my work. Jacob Ellis, your constant enthusiasm for all things, your interest in my work every time I left my office, and your reminder that worthwhile things often start with challenges mean the world to me.

A special thanks to my person, my critical yet best friend, Radi Burbar for your patience and encouragement as I worked through each section of this study. Your support and reassurance have been instrumental in keeping doubt at bay.

To my professional mentors, Dr. Beason, Dr. C. Stafford, and Dr. Bennett Jackson, your belief in me and your push for excellence have been pivotal. Your guidance and wisdom have helped me navigate through more challenges than you'll ever know and reach the finish line. Also, Dr. Ross for taking the time to review and provide input regarding data. Your help absolutely pushed me through SPSS to finish this journey. Thank you!

Lastly, to my committee members, Dr. N. Stafford, Dr. Bowers, and Dr. Beardsley, I am deeply grateful for your edits, feedback, and support throughout this process. Your expertise and support have been instrumental in shaping this work and ensuring its quality.

Thank you to each and every one of you for your contributions, support, and belief in this endeavor. Together, we have made a difference in the school community and my professional journey.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
LIST OF TABLES .....	viii
CHAPTER	
1 INTRODUCTION .....	1
Study Setting .....	5
Problem of Practice .....	8
Innovation.....	11
2 LITERATURE REVIEW .....	17
Student Voice .....	18
Social Emotional Competencies .....	22
Social Awareness .....	24
Self-Efficacy.....	25
3 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS .....	29
Freire’s Pedagogy of the Oppressed .....	29
Theory of Psychosocial Development .....	34
4 METHODS .....	40
Research Questions .....	43
Sample .....	44
Data Collection.....	47
Data Analysis .....	56
Role of the Researcher .....	62

CHAPTER	Page
5 RESULTS .....	68
Quantitative Results .....	70
Qualitative Survey Results.....	89
Observations.....	102
Interviews .....	113
Triangulation .....	123
6 DISCUSSION .....	127
Research Question 1 and Research Question 2 .....	128
Implications of Research Question 1 and Research Question 2.....	131
Research Question 3.....	133
Implications of Research Question 3 .....	135
Study Limitations .....	136
7 CONCLUSION .....	140
Implications of Further Research.....	141
Implications of Future Practice .....	142
Final Thoughts.....	144
REFERENCES .....	146
APPENDIX	
A STAFF PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT .....	159
B YPAR CURRICULUM .....	166
C STUDENT AMBASSADOR COUNCIL YPAR IMPLEMENTATION .....	170
D PARTEN PERMISSION FOR CHILD PARTICIPATION IN RESEARCH....	182

APPENDIX	Page
E STUDENT ASSENT FORM FOR PARTICIPATION IN RESEARCH .....	186
F SAC PRE AND POST SURVEY INSTRUMENT .....	188
G OBSERVATION PROTOCOL .....	196
H INTERVIEW PROTOCOL .....	198
I INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD APPROVAL .....	200
J STAFF RECRUITMENT CONSENT LETTER .....	202
K CODEBOOK .....	205



## LIST OF TABLES

Table	Page
1. Student Participants Demographics .....	46
2. Cronbach's Alpha for Student Ambassador Council .....	51
3. Student Participant Attrition Rates .....	66
4. Pre & Post Survey Response Frequencies (Student Voice) .....	72
5. Pre & Post Survey Response Frequencies (Social Awareness) .....	75
6. Pre & Post Survey Response Frequencies (Self-Efficacy) .....	78
7. Pre & Post Survey Response Frequencies (Participation) .....	81
8. Paired-Samples T-Test Comparisons of Constructs.....	86

## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

When hearing the song, “The Greatest Love of All” by Whitney Houston as a 10-year-old, I immediately connected to the first verse. As I have grown as an educator, the line, “teach them well and let them lead the way, show them all the beauty they possess inside,” continues to be the source of inspiration that guides the decisions I make as a teacher and leader. I believe that children must learn to embrace their voices and build confidence to share their ideas and talents with others. Students must learn to be the first advocate for their education.

I began my career in education as a middle school teacher. In this role, I had the opportunity to work with a variety of students at different stages of their physical, mental, and emotional development. In one class, I could have a student who spent their afternoons playing with hot wheels or trading Pokémon cards, while others were exploring their sexuality or experimenting with drugs. The Center for Disease Control (CDC, 2021) notes that middle school is an important time for children to gain a sense of responsibility along with their growing independence. As they experience social emotional changes and become more independent from their families, they also face more academic challenges at school. Clearly, this can be a very turbulent time for children and, as also based on personal observation, this is often when they begin to express their dislike for school. It is in middle school that children start to turn inward, discovering that not all questions are easily answered. They also tend to discover their passions, and grapple with doubt (Hallman, 2019).

As a teacher, understanding the challenges students in this age group were experiencing, while acknowledging the wealth of knowledge they brought to the table, I consistently sponsored clubs such as a Student Council to provide opportunities for students to explore their leadership skills and learn to advocate for themselves and their peers. I often recruited students whom others may have perceived as challenging or disconnected from the school community. Often, these students exceeded my and the expectations of others' and embraced the challenges of leadership.

One student, we will call Matthew, for example, was the student about whom every teacher heard; teachers did not want to see his name on their rosters at the beginning of the school year. Matthew was never absent, yet he rarely participated in class discussions or completed his work. Instead, he often took the initiative to entertain his friends when the teacher's attention was diverted. I had heard about Matthew, just like everyone else, and watched him moving through the grades year after year. I never had the opportunity to work with him as a teacher because I took the position as the Dean of Students at the school by the time he reached 8<sup>th</sup> grade. However, while I was on morning duty I saw him running through the courtyard, full speed, seemingly not knowing or caring that this was against school standards and expectations. I then saw him stop, talk to a student much younger than him, and give him a high five. Later that day he was sent to my office for decisions he made in class. When he explained he made the decision to misbehave since the teacher was a "fun sucker," I knew Matthew would be my next recruit. When I informed him that instead of assigning a traditional consequence, he would be required to join the student council, he was visibly surprised and suggested

several alternatives. He reluctantly came to the next meeting and continued to attend meetings for the remainder of the year. I will not say that Matthew completely changed and became a star student, but he earned passing grades in his classes, stopped running in the courtyard, and was one of the first people to advocate for his peers. Matthew is one of several students who grew due to this opportunity.

Over the years, I have had multiple former students reach out to me after they moved past middle school to share how this opportunity (i.e., being in the Student Council) changed their views of themselves and pushed them to become better people. These occurrences have perpetually led me to believe that all students, given the opportunity, are capable of success. No exceptions.

Matthew and the feedback I have garnered from past students demonstrate how small actions can help students grow in their social emotional competencies (SECs), which for purposes of this study include increased social awareness and self-efficacy. Indeed, research findings illustrate that social emotional competence (SEC) leads to beneficial outcomes related to attitudes about self, school, and social topics (Durlak, et al., 2011; Low, et al., 2016; Oberle, et al., 2016). SEC may also lead to improved social behaviors, a reduction of negative actions, decreased emotional distress, and increased academic performance (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning [CASEL], 2007). Small actions such as providing a venue for students to share their ideas, to feel heard, and to lead in a Student Council or other student group, accordingly, are relatively easy and inexpensive ways to facilitate sustainable positive changes in today's youth.

In the United States, all children are required to spend at least 10 years of their life in school. Though it is compulsory for all citizens, the students are not treated as full citizens in our community (Brennan, 1996). Traditional schooling structures often lead to educators disregarding the circumstances in which students reside and the wealth of knowledge they bring to their education by only focusing on academic subjects, exams, and accountability (see, for example, Brenner, et al., 2019, Fletcher 2017, Valenzuela, 1999). Fletcher (2017) states that many educational environments follow practices related to students that disregard the responsibility our democracy requires of individuals to be active and effective decision-makers (p.1). Some schools, including mine, attempt to involve students in decision-making processes through student governments. However, these decisions are often related to the themes for school dances or ideas for yearbook covers, but they do not include larger decisions that have more serious implications (Fletcher, 2017). Indeed, there is a need to identify and implement practices within school settings that better embrace student voice by validating the ideas and opinions of students. Brenner et al., (2019) define student voice as students literally voicing their opinions about and providing input into their education with information ranging from their opinions regarding instructional topics, the way they learn, or the way schools are designed (p. 1). It's important to acknowledge that students are in a special stage of personal growth where they are particularly receptive to considering the moral impact of decisions made in education (Fletcher, 2017), and we must recognize that students must be heard.

Instead, traditional school-based decisions are often based on the needs of adults over the social, emotional, and developmental needs of students. Likewise, state, district, and school policies, rules, and statutes are often made for students but not with students. Student voices, as such, must be a part of the conversation when decisions are made about them and their education. As Paulo Friere (2017) stated, “One cannot expect positive results from an educational or political action program which fails to respect the particular view of the world held by the people” (p. 95). In this case, the people are the students, and their views of the world are missing.

Hence, it is vital for adults working with children to understand the developmental milestones of students in the age groups with whom they work to maintain environments which enable such students to be successful. To move closer to an educational environment that facilitates this, students must be a part of the conversations surrounding their educational success. Students must be given the opportunity to lead the way and share all the beauty they possess inside, in an educational, systematic, and safe way.

### **Study Setting**

The setting of this study was Copper Trails School, a Title I school located in the west valley city of Goodyear, Arizona. Title I, a part of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA, 1965), as amended by the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA, 2015), provides financial assistance to local educational agencies such as this Title I school (U.S. Department of Education [USDE], 2018). A school is identified as Title I if there are high percentages (i.e., greater than 40%) of children from low-income families

enrolled in the school. This is determined by the number of students who qualify for free or reduced lunches (FRL) each year.

At Copper Trails, 51.47% of students qualify for FRL. The school has an enrollment of 1,025 Kindergarten through 8<sup>th</sup> grade (K-8) students with ethnic backgrounds as follows: 60.7% identify as Latinx, 22.9% White, 10.5% Black, 2.6% Asian, .6% Native American or Pacific Islander, and 2.7% identify as being two or more races. Though neither ethnicity nor culture is a focus of the study, it is important to acknowledge that both may ultimately impact study results.

Copper Trails, more specifically, is part of the Avondale Elementary School District, which is a K-8 district with nine campuses and an annual enrollment averaging around 6,025 students. Each school in the district is designated as a neighborhood school, whereby students are assigned to attend schools within a five-mile radius. Copper Trails supports the Canyon Trails community which is a middle-income neighborhood; yet, there are several multi-family households and many families that house foster children, contributing to Copper Trails' FRL percentage. Copper Trails' FRL is 51.47%, again, indicating the number of students living in low-income homes, and 71.6% of students are identified as Black, Latinx or Native American.

Copper Trails was opened in the Fall of 2008. By the Fall of 2014, four individuals served as principal of the school. The campus not only had a high turnover rate for site leaders but also for teaching staff. During the same six-year period, the average turnover rate for teaching staff at the school was 39%. The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2014) reported that of the 3,377,900 public school teachers

who were teaching during the 2012–2013 school year, 84% remained at the same school, 8% moved to a different school, and 8% left the profession the following year. Based on these data, Copper Trails experienced a 23% higher attrition rate than the national average. One factor contributing to this rate was likely the inconsistent leadership at the school at the same time, given researchers across the nation have evidenced that the quality of leadership can have a large effect on teacher turnover (Hattie, 2016; Marks, 2013; Robinson, 2008). In fact, teachers often identify the quality of administrative support as more important to their decisions to stay in schools than their own salaries. Indeed, researchers in one recent study found that improvements in school leadership were strongly related to reductions in teacher turnover (Learning Policy Institute, 2023). At Copper Trails, important to note is that since 2013 the same administrative team has led the school. As of the Fall of 2021, the teacher attrition rate dropped to .08%, with two of the three teachers leaving due to retirement.

With the stability of the leadership team and staff in place, however, concerns regarding student attendance, engagement, and peer interactions continue to present challenges at Copper Trails, especially in terms of maintaining a positive and cohesive community, especially in the 5<sup>th</sup>- 8<sup>th</sup> grades. This lack of cohesion has seemingly had a negative effect on students, as also evidenced by the increase in student discipline and counselor referrals, as well as parent complaints. I, being the current site leader at Copper Trails, believe these issues persist due to a lack of practices in place to help meet the SEC needs of this particular age group (i.e., middle schoolers), as well as a limited set of opportunities for these students to express themselves, share their opinions, and be heard.



### **Problem of Practice**

For this study, important to note is that at Copper Trails students in 5<sup>th</sup>-8<sup>th</sup> grades are considered middle schoolers. At age 10, students are most often beginning the 5<sup>th</sup> grade, which is considered the first year of middle school. The CDC (2021) also labels students ranging in ages from 9-11 as in their middle childhood. Recall, during this phase, children begin to form more intricate and meaningful friendships and social connections with their peers, making having friends, particularly those of the same gender, increasingly emotionally significant. Healthy friendships are very important, but peer pressure can simultaneously become very important as well. According to the CDC (2021), children who have a positive self-image are better equipped to withstand peer pressure and make informed decisions for themselves. As a result, it's crucial for children to develop a sense of responsibility during this time, as they are becoming increasingly independent.

The CDC (2021) labels children ages 12-14, in the 6<sup>th</sup>-8<sup>th</sup> grades, as young teens. Young teens begin to have more control over their choices concerning friends, activities, academics, and schooling. They become more self-sufficient, discovering their unique personality and interests. Despite this growing independence, parents remain a crucial influence. Mental development during this time also prompts adolescents to reflect on their identity and potential (CDC, 2021). Young teens explore a variety of possible identities and go through cycles that are constantly changing. This is a process called identity formation and is a major activity during these years.

Erik Erikson (1959; see also 1963, 1968) stated in his development theory (in which he asserted that personality develops in a predetermined order through eight stages of psychosocial development, from infancy to adulthood) that identity development is a key process for teens and a failure to establish a personal identity may lead to role confusion and a weak sense of self later in life (see also Watson, 2022). Adolescents who do not go through this period of exploration are at greater risk of developing psychological problems, especially depression, when they are adults (USDE, 2005). Children at this age may also experience significant shifts in their personalities. They start to concentrate more on themselves and experience fluctuations between having high expectations and feeling insecure. This can be due to the growing influence of peer groups and the added stress from more demanding academic work (CDC, 2021).

The USDE (2005) adds that as young teens are experiencing several internal shifts, most also make large leaps in the ways they think, how they reason, and what they learn. These shifts may explain why adults, parents, and teachers often note an increase in defiance or other behaviors not previously present. As young teenagers' cognitive abilities improve and they gain the ability to analyze problems and consider the outcomes of various perspectives and actions, they start making more autonomous decisions that may differ from those of the adults in their lives.

If school staff, teachers, and administrators understand the characteristics of a child during this age, school can be a safe place for these students to explore new ideas and take risks as these children transition into their teen years while facing the new demands of middle school. Benner et al. (2019) states:

Students have the greatest stake in their education but little to no say in how it is delivered. This lack of agency represents a lost opportunity to accelerate learning and prepare students for a world in which taking initiative and learning new skills are increasingly paramount to success. (p. 1)

Again, processes and decisions are made for students but not with students. This idea is also supported by authors of multiple studies who discuss the need for educators to create opportunities for such students to participate in decisions about their education as a means of increasing student engagement and investment in their own educations (Bridgeland et al., 2006; Mitra, 2014; Toshalis et. al, 2013).

Accordingly, the problem of practice I addressed in this study surrounds said lack of opportunities for middle school students to express their voices within my middle school setting (i.e., Copper Trails). My goal, as such, was to provide a venue for middle school students, again, defined as students in the 5<sup>th</sup>-8<sup>th</sup> grades at Copper Trails, to share their ideas and opinions on these and other matters directly with school leaders. Not only might an increase in student voice positively impact historically marginalized populations, including students from Black, Latinx, Native American, and low-income communities, as well as students with disabilities (Benner, 2019), it might also increase the ability for my middle school students to better advocate for their needs and the needs of their peers, and cause an increase in their SECs, again, defined as increased self-efficacy and social awareness for purposes of this study (see more forthcoming). Next, I define what I planned in terms of my innovation to more specifically address my problem of practice, along with these ideals and goals.

## **Innovation**

Freire (2017) suggests that it is vital to identify ways for individuals to develop through daily activities that create opportunities for learning. This requires students to do more than accept structures that already exist or are already in place for them. They must create their own activities, opportunities, and structures that will better allow them to become more aware of their realities, also to help them better fight for their own needs. In creating a venue for middle school students to share their voices while utilizing their SECs, such as self-management, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making, again, to increase their ability to broaden their social awareness and deepen their self-efficacy, they should be able to positively impact their learning environment.

My intervention, as such, was to create a safe space for expression through a Student Ambassador Council (SAC) where students and staff (e.g., teaching, custodial, front office), collaborated to identify and address problems in our shared school setting. My intent with this innovation was to use elements of Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR; see more forthcoming) to create a venue to utilize student voice to positively impact two aspects of the participating students' SECs. These aspects are more broadly and categorically defined as the CASEL 5 (CASEL, 2023), or the processes by which children and adults apply knowledge, attitudes, and skills to understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals or self-efficacy, feel and show empathy for others or social awareness, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions. After considering various factors such as personal interest and potential impact, however, I decided to explore how such an increase in opportunities for

students to use their voice might impact students' social awareness and self-efficacy as the focus for my research. My personal interest in studying the impact of increased opportunities for students to use their voice on their social awareness and self-efficacy stemmed from a belief that these skills are crucial for success in both the personal and future professional lives of students. By understanding how to cultivate these specific SECs in students, we might more positively impact the development of future generations. The impact of researching this topic was significant, as it was to also inform educators, parents, and policymakers on how to possibly better support the development of these crucial skills in students, ultimately leading to more successful and well-adjusted individuals in society. These two skills are also important within CASEL 5 because they are crucial for the overall well-being and success of individual students.

Social awareness, or the ability to accurately perceive and understand the emotions and perspectives of others (CASEL, 2023), was also important in this study because increasing social awareness allows individuals to form and maintain healthy relationships, effectively navigate social situations, and become active contributors to their schools and communities. Self-efficacy, or the belief in one's ability to successfully complete a task or achieve a goal (CASEL, 2023), is an important factor in the development of agency, the capacity of individuals to act independently and make decisions, and the creation of self-directed learners. Individuals with high self-efficacy are more likely to set and work towards achieving their goals, to bounce back from setbacks (CASEL, 2023), and to exhibit confidence in their abilities. Confidence in one's abilities is a key characteristic of individuals with high self-efficacy. Therefore,

impacting these two areas within the CASEL 5 also helped contribute to the overall well-being and success of participating adolescents as they navigated the challenges of this developmental stage and worked towards becoming independent adults. I defined these criteria (i.e., my dependent variables), more specifically, as: (1) Student Voice and (2) SECs, including (2a) Social Awareness and (2b) Self-Efficacy, with more details on each of these in my literature review.

Notwithstanding, to design and implement my innovation, again, via my role as site leader at Copper Trails, I worked with staff during four, one-hour professional development (PD) sessions. The work done with staff during these sessions was necessary to ensure all staff were ready to support students during the research cycle. The topic of these PD sessions included age-appropriate developmental milestones, SECs with emphases on social awareness and self-efficacy, and YPAR. This work with staff is further detailed in Appendix A.

At the end of the four PD sessions, staff members took on the roles of adult consultants in the SAC for a period of five weeks. During this time, staff collaborated with participating students. It is important to note that some students who participated in the SAC were not a part of the research due to a lack of parent or student consent. Regardless, each staff member was responsible for working with a small group of students, with each group consisting of approximately five students. The groups, or research teams, were arranged based on the students' topics of interest and the staff members' areas of expertise. This means that I placed students in groups with staff members who had a strong understanding and knowledge of the subjects or areas of

concern in which the students were interested. By organizing the groups in this way, I hoped to ensure that each student had access to the support and guidance they needed to succeed in their action research (i.e., YPAR).

Indeed, each of the groups used a YPAR method, which involved empowering young people to identify, address, research, and subsequently reflect on issues that mattered to them (Mirra et al. 2016). More specifically, I utilized the iteration of the YPAR method developed by the Institute of Community Research (ICR), a nonprofit research center. The ICR framework, which was designed in 2004 for the use with young children, was created for the purpose of integrating youth development and engagement into social programs facilitated by schools, churches, or other community organizations. Informing this study, more specifically, was the ICR framework adapted for the state of Oregon (Oregon Health Authority, n.d.), created as a tool to support the authentic engagement of young people in decision-making processes that affect their lives, while helping youth serving organizations integrate youth voice into their work in a meaningful way (Oregon Health Authority, n.d.). Middle school students engaged in a series of YPAR activities, which guided them in identifying issues and selecting research questions for this study. After identifying an issue, student teams created a research plan utilizing a chosen method of data collection and the creation and adoption of research instruments, after which students collected and analyzed data and made recommendations to help address the issues they examined. They also presented potential solutions to identified stakeholders as based on results (Oregon Health Authority, n.d.).

By actively participating in said processes, adolescents were to better develop important and key SECs such as social awareness, which would enable them to become change agents or active contributors to their schools and communities, as well as self-efficacy, which would help them build confidence to become self-directed learners. Additionally, YPAR provides a model for focusing on structural stressors shaping students' emotional experiences, social interactions, and well-being while promoting SECs that build students' capacities to perceive problems, navigate emotions, collaborate towards solutions, and achieve change in their schools and communities (Ozer, et al., 2021). At the same time, as such, by working together with their peers and adults to address issues of concern, adolescents were to have learned to build and maintain positive relationships, which is also an important aspect of building their SECs (UC Berkeley, 2023).

To guide groups through the YPAR process and enhance uniformity among the research teams in terms of fidelity, participants followed the guidelines outlined in the YPAR curriculum (Oregon Health Authority, n.d.). While the curriculum contains 12 modules, I selected nine modules, taking into consideration factors such as age appropriateness, time constraints and the specific context of my setting. I also made modifications to the curricula, all of which is explained in Appendix B. Finally, I guided the students, then eventually research teams, through the initial five selected modules before pairing them with adult mentors. This deliberate approach aimed to establish a shared comprehension of the YPAR process among teams and, once again, contributed to consistency.



Using this curriculum, more generally, staff collaborated with students through the action research process to develop solutions to an identified issue that were of concern to the students involved (and, possibly, on behalf of students not involved). More specifically, during the research cycle, SAC research teams worked to identify a problem or issue of concern within the school setting. To better understand the issue at hand, teams conducted a review of relevant literature and used this information to guide the direction of their research. To collect data, teams selected an appropriate method and adopted or designed appropriate data collection instruments. Finally, team members analyzed and interpreted the data collected to make recommendations for improving their identified issues. This work with students, in terms of the actual YPAR method used and applied in the SAC is further explained in Appendix C. As per Ozer (2021), though, the ultimate goal of this action was for students participating in the SAC, while engaging with YPAR, to identify, address, and improve the underlying conditions that shaped their collective educational experiences, all while improving their individual SECs.

Next, in the literature review I review the background literature related to student voice and the SECs relevant to understanding the foundational elements of this study. Accordingly, the purpose of this literature review was to explore (1) student voice and (2) SECs, specifically in terms of (2a) social awareness and (2b) self-efficacy. This literature review was meant to lay the foundation for and support the timeliness and relevance of creating a platform, again, for students to share their voices via the SAC using YPAR, to also positively impact their SECs.

## CHAPTER 2

### LITERATURE REVIEW

Over time, educators have come up with new and innovative ways to engage students in school, which has become especially relevant nowadays (e.g., after periods of social distancing due to the COVID-19 pandemic). Engaging and (re)engaging students in school has been challenging for those who have been out of the classroom for extended periods of time and have subsequently fallen behind both socially and academically as compared to their peers. Some effective strategies that educators have implemented to address this (re)engagement issue is through instruction centered around social emotional learning (SEL) and civic or student government programs (i.e., like the SAC).

For the past three years, classroom staff at Copper Trails has facilitated weekly lessons using the Second Step Curriculum, a CASEL-endorsed SEL program, to support (re)engagement and the social emotional growth of its students (Second Step, 2011). Copper Trails leaders selected this middle school-focused curriculum because it is designed to empower students through the promotion of student voice and choice (Ozer, et al., 2021). Though researchers have proven that the effective implementation of SEL programs such as these has yielded positive impacts in terms of increasing students' SECs (Durlak, et. al., 2011; Oberle, et al., 2016; Low, et al., 2016), it is thought by some that inclusion of civic or student government programs may better promote the overall social-emotional wellbeing of adolescents (Oregon Health Authority, 2021; Ozer et al. 2021).

Related, though students at Copper Trails had opportunities to participate in civic or student government programs such as Student Council and the National Junior Honor Society, researchers have also shown that these types of activities tend to lack opportunities for students to engage in decision-making or reform-oriented processes (Kirshner, 2004, Westheimer et al., 2004). To fully (re)engage students to help them take on more active roles in school, then, educators must work more intently with student empowerment programs that foster student voice to help students feel more of a sense of ownership over their learning (Mitra et al., 2004; Oregon Health Authority, n.d.).

### **Student Voice**

Student voice is the ability for young people to share their opinions and perspectives on and in educational settings about school-related issues, and to do this with school administrators, faculty, and staff (Mitra et al. 2012). At its simplest level, activities centered around student voice can involve students sharing their opinions with school officials about issues that impact their daily lives. More extensive student voice initiatives include collaborations between students and adults to address problems in school, with some initiatives even allowing students to assume leadership roles in minor-to-major educational change efforts (Black & Mayes, 2020; Quaglia & Fox, n.d.; Wolf & Jonas, 2007). In effect, by providing youth with opportunities to participate in school decision-making that will shape their lives, as well as the lives of their peers, increasing student voice in school (re)engages students in their school communities and increases youth attachment to and ownership within their schools (Mitra, 2014). In fact, research has shown that schools in which students are able to participate in decision-making

processes using inquiry-based initiatives such as YPAR, students have demonstrated growth in student agency, defined as using one's power to control the outcome of a situation; belongingness, defined as building connections with other students and adults, as well as being actively involved in the school community; competence, defined as developing new skills and receiving recognition for one's abilities and talents; discourse, defined as collaboration and sharing different perspectives to achieve shared objectives; and efficacy, defined as recognizing how one's actions can positively impact the world while taking responsibility to do so (Mitra & Serriere, 2012; Konrad & Uhlhaas, 2013).

Indeed, utilizing the YPAR framework as a foundation in the SAC was essential due to its theoretical underpinnings. More specifically, YPAR is grounded in the principles of social justice and the belief in the transformative potential of youth engagement in research and action (Mirra, et al., 2016). It seeks to empower young people to become active participants in shaping their own futures and creating positive change in their communities (UC Berkeley, 2023). YPAR draws on critical theory, such as Critical Pedagogy, developed by Paulo Freire, which examines power dynamics and social structures to uncover underlying inequalities and injustices (Mirra, et al., 2016; UC Berkeley, 2023). Through YPAR, the students were encouraged to critically interrogate the root causes of the issues they investigated and to developed strategies for social change (Mirra, et al., 2016). Moreover, by embedding the YPAR framework within the SAC, I not only upheld the principles of social justice and youth empowerment but also prioritized amplifying student voices, ensuring that students actively contributed to

decision-making processes that directly impacted their experiences and the broader school community.

As such, current research on student voice, conducted by Hattie (2020), evidenced that promoting student voice in educational settings had a strong and positive impact on student academic growth. He found, moreover, that involving students in decision-making and giving them a voice in their education led to a positive effect size = 0.49, which was higher than the average effect size of the other 252 variables he examined that were also to have influenced student academic growth (e.g., character building, social skills programming, mentoring). The effect size that he yielded equated to one year of academic growth, which empirically but also pragmatically underscores the importance of collaborating with students and seeking their feedback (i.e., via embracing student voice).

But not only does embracing student voice lead to academic growth, student voice has also been evidenced to foster a positive and inclusive school environment. Inclusive education requires recognizing and valuing students' diverse perspectives and providing to students a fair distribution of resources to allow for equal participation in school (Ranson, 2000). Student empowerment programs, such as the SAC, not only provide an environment for students to discover and affirm their own perspectives, but also help students develop vital skills such as empathy, cooperation, and negotiation (Biddle & Hufnagel, 2019; Ranson, 2000; Rudduck & Fielding, 2006). By intentionally engaging students in school-level decision-making processes (and sometimes policies), all while recognizing the unique bases of knowledge that students bring with them to school as

rooted in their personal experiences, school communities can offer students more equitable and inclusive environments as well (Rudduck & Fielding, 2006).

Providing a medium that actively encourages and embraces student voice has also been evidenced to play a vital role in the development of students' SECs (Quaglia & Fox, n.d.). Student voice initiatives (SVIs), akin to the SAC, especially when paired with SEL, can help students acquire and increase their SECs, including responsible decision-making, as well as social awareness and self-efficacy which are of primary focus in this study. These SECs are, again, necessary for student success in school, and eventually in students' future workplaces, for students' interpersonal relationships, and in terms of students' citizenship (e.g., students' attitudes, behaviors, and actions that demonstrate their commitments to being active and responsible members of their school communities; see, for example, Howley, et al., 2021; Hytten, 2017; Jones, et al., 2017). By actively participating in SVIs, in other words, students can become confident, active, dynamic, and democratic agents within their classroom settings, adapting and developing practices and interactions to better contribute to their school and communities, all while understanding and experiencing key components of SEL (e.g., self-awareness, self-management, social awareness) in deeper ways (Azzarito, 2016; Kirk & Macdonald, 1998).

In sum, creating SVIs, such as the SAC, and collectively reflecting on perceived social challenges with students (and in this case with and as facilitated by school staff) can contribute to the development of students' SECs and provide valuable insight on SEL experiences for all students. By actively engaging students in educational decision-

making processes, school communities (such as Copper Trails) can create more equitable and inclusive school communities, all while providing a platform for students to share their voices. Doing this should not only promote increased student engagement in learning, but also foster in students essential SECs such as social awareness and self-efficacy, inside and outside of the classroom. (Ennis, 2017; Quaglia & Fox, n.d.; Rovegno and Dolly, 2006).

### **Social Emotional Competencies**

Social and emotional competence refers to a collection of skills that enable successful interactions with others such as family members, peers, and teachers (Poulou & Denham, 2022). SECs are identified as among the most important abilities supporting school success and the growth of students' academic competence throughout life (Denham & Basset, 2019). Children who possess the ability to understand and regulate their emotions tend to establish stronger, more supportive relationships with their peers and teachers, as well as actively participate in class and achieve academic success (Blankson et al., 2017; Di Maggio et al., 2016; Diaz et al., 2017; Hernández et al., 2016). In educational settings, emotions, actions, and routines are closely intertwined with the social, ethical, and established norms of the classroom, creating valuable learning environments for students to develop their SECs (Cekaite & Ekstrom, 2019).

In addition, students can learn social and emotional skills directly through their participation in classroom emotional interactions, and indirectly through the observation of peers' or teachers' social-emotional behaviors. According to Durlak et al. (2011), for example, it is important to teach social emotional skills in schools because a lack of these

skills can lead to negative outcomes such as decreased academic performance, behavioral issues, and poor health. Young adults who possess social and emotional competence, rather, are more likely to succeed in areas such as education, employment, mental health, and they are more likely to avoid criminal activities and substance abuse, regardless of their childhood, family, environmental, and other background circumstances (Denham & Basset, 2019; Jones et al., 2015). Thus, teaching and fostering social emotional skills in schools also has a significant impact on students' overall development and future success.

Though researchers have proven that the effective implementation of SEL in schools has such positive impacts regarding the increase of student use of SECs (Durlak, et. al., 2011; Oberle, et al., 2016; Low, et al., 2016), however, it is thought that inclusion of youth-empowerment programs, such as YPAR, may even promote the social-emotional wellbeing of adolescents more (Oregon Health Authority, 2021; Ozer, et al. 2021). Again, providing a safe space for youth to express themselves, youth-empowerment programs provide opportunities to both learn about (e.g., research) and engage with (and act on) important social issues which can help develop their social awareness (Mirra, et al., 2016; Mitra, 2014; Ozer, et al. 2021). These programs also place a strong emphasis on giving youth a voice in decision-making processes that affect their lives, which can help build confidence, which is a key contributor to increasing their self-efficacy, while enabling students to take more active roles in their own learning and development (Oregon Health Authority, 2021; Ozer, et al. 2021). These are clearly some of the intended outcomes of this action, again, more specifically in terms of fostering the



development of SECs such as gaining a deeper understanding of social awareness and promoting growth in self-efficacy.

**Social Awareness.** CASEL (2023) defines social awareness as the ability to understand the perspectives of and empathize with others, including those from diverse backgrounds, cultures, and circumstances. Simply stated, social awareness is the ability to perceive and comprehend the emotions and perspectives of those around you and to effectively communicate and connect with individuals from diverse backgrounds (Public Media Connect [PMC], 2022). Humans are inherently social creatures and, as such, they can understand and relate to others which plays a crucial role in building and maintaining relationships (CASEL, 2023; Lasfeto, 2020; PMC, 2022). Creating an inclusive environment where students can openly share and learn from the experiences of others helps them to consider the emotions and perspectives of others in specific scenarios, to value diversity, to discern emotions, to read and understand nonverbal cues, and to ultimately comprehend how others experience the world around them (PMC, 2021).

For this study, it was crucial to acknowledge the significance of social awareness in helping to shape students to help them better become active contributors to their schools and communities. Social awareness plays a crucial role in promoting positive relationships, creating inclusive environments, and preparing students to be responsible and active members of society (CASEL, 2023). This encompasses students' recognition of different cultures and perspectives, and increased abilities to find common ground, express themselves confidently and appropriately, and treat others with respect (CASEL, 2023; PMC, 2022). As students mature, they develop a deeper understanding of their own

unique identity and how their actions impact those around them and the world they share. It is through these experiences that they come to understand each other as humans and work towards building a healthy and functioning society (PMC, 2022).

It was, accordingly, imperative in this action that the SAC not only promotes individuals to be more conscious of their own emotions and the emotions of others, but it also plays a crucial role in enhancing self-efficacy. By developing social awareness, individuals can better understand the impact their actions have on those around them (CASEL, 2023; PMC, 2022) and create more balanced relationships both in personal and school settings. This leads to a greater belief in their own abilities to succeed, which can have a profound impact on their confidence and SEC (CASEL, 2023). Continuously refining these skills is essential for personal growth and development, as it helps to foster a more empathetic, understanding, and confident individual.

**Self-Efficacy.** Self-efficacy is not a personality trait or a general belief about oneself, but rather a subjective expectation of one's ability to succeed at a specific goal (Bandura, 2002.; CASEL, 2023; Wolf, et al., 2007). Researchers have shown that self-efficacy can be influenced by and has a strong correlation with success in tasks that require motivation and persistence (Bandura, 2002.; Morton & Montgomery, 2013). Low self-efficacy leads to avoidance behavior and can persist even when there is no conscious anxiety or negative emotional arousal; low self-efficacy can limit an individual's ability to take on challenges and pursue their goals, ultimately hindering their personal growth and development (Bandura, 2002.). Inversely, Hattie's (2008, 2020) research shows that students with a high sense of self-efficacy are more likely to approach challenging tasks

with a calm mindset, which leads to an increased willingness to try new things, and ultimately has a positive impact on their achievement (see also Lupoli, 2018). High self-efficacy, in other words, not only allows one to approach challenging tasks with a calm mindset but also enables individuals to set higher expectations for future performance and gives them the ability to express their own ideas and opinions, which is often undervalued in traditional school settings (Carroll, et al., 2008; Hamed, 2012; Lupoli, 2018). Hattie (2008, 2020) also evidenced that self-efficacy led to a positive effect size = 0.65, which in combination with student voice had a more impactful effect than other influences, again, such as peer influences, family and home dynamics, and behavior intervention programs.

Furthermore, high self-efficacy is associated with a greater sense of autonomy and control over one's own learning process, which is a key component of being a self-directed learner (Hattie, 2008, 2020). Self-directed learners take charge of their own education, setting goals that align with their personal aspirations and values, and making decisions about how to reach those goals (Schweder, & Raufelder, 2019). By developing high levels of self-efficacy, individuals become more empowered to take control of their own learning and development, leading to increased confidence and self-directedness (Schweder, & Raufelder, 2019). Thus, self-efficacy is often highlighted as an important area of focus for promoting positive change and empowering young people in the literature on youth development (Morton & Montgomery, 2013; Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2003; Sinclair, 2000). Likewise, environments that embrace youth empowerment initiatives are thought to have a positive impact because they provide young people not

only a safe space for social interaction and reflection but also the resources, skills, and opportunities they need to increase their confidence and motivation by providing tangible proof of competency (Cox, 2017; Morton & Montgomery, 2013; Nyman, et al., 2018). By participating in initiatives like the SAC, students have increased opportunities to gain real-world experiences by collaborating with their peers and adults in decision-making processes. This type of work helps to provide tangible evidence of their abilities, such as offering viable solutions to perceived problems or changes in school practices, all of which can boost students' self-efficacy and lead to growth-oriented mindsets where students may increasingly view challenges as opportunities for growth rather than sources of anxiety and enable them to become self-directed learners.

This was imperative in this action in that the SAC was designed to equip participating students with the skills, confidence, and motivation they needed to actively participate in creating positive change within their communities and beyond. By providing students with opportunities to take the lead in problem-solving and decision-making processes, they would be better prepared to meet the challenges of an ever-changing world with a growth-oriented mindset. Moreover, the knowledge gained from participating in the SAC was to further increase their self-efficacy and beliefs in their abilities to make a meaningful impact.

The theoretical framework section that follows delves deeper into how I developed this action (i.e., the SAC) to help participating students share their voices to also positively impact the development of their SECs, more specifically in terms of social awareness and self-efficacy, all while incorporating components of YPAR. Two

frameworks, those of Paulo Freire's Pedagogy of the Oppressed and Erik Erikson's Psychosocial Development were most relevant for this study. Both frameworks helped to provide additional foundational support for the identified benefits of creating such a platform for students (i.e., the SAC), again, to help them utilize their voices to express their opinions, thoughts, and experiences and more actively participate in more decision-making processes at schools.

## CHAPTER 3

### THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS

I approached this study and the creation of the SAC by contextualizing it through the lenses of two theoretical frameworks. As noted, the first framework was Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, which emphasizes the importance of empowering oppressed groups, who are defined in this study as students by giving students a voice and enabling them to express their opinions and experiences to influence change and change processes (Freire, 2017). The second framework was Erik Erikson's *Psychosocial Development*, which I used to highlight the importance of students mastering developmental stages during adolescence (Erikson, 1959, 1963, 1968).

#### **Freire's Pedagogy of the Oppressed**

Exploring Paulo Freire's work, it was essential to clarify the meaning of the oppressors and the oppressed as it pertained to this study; the oppressors were viewed as the adults in the field of education while the oppressed, as just noted, refer to the students. The adults in education (i.e., staff, such as administrators, teachers and front office) hold institutional power and decision-making authority, while students are often subject to the policies and decisions made by said adults, making students the oppressed group in these power dynamics (Freire et al., 2001). In education, accordingly, Freire's theory centers around the relationships between these two groups, the oppressor and oppressed, given the fundamental idea that it was imperative to educate students in ways and manners that empower them to become more active participants in their learning, as

well as society (Freire, 2017). This included enhancing students' SECs such as social awareness and self-efficacy (Alhabib, 2021).

For this study, more specifically, I explored two key aspects of Freire's critical theory. First, I examined the notion of epistemic curiosity (EC), characterized by individuals' persistent desires to gain knowledge and find answers through their own active engagement and investigation (Alhabib, 2021; Lindholm, 2018). Second, I explored the idea of praxis, or the principle that individuals have the power to create change in their surroundings and address the problems they observe (Freire, 2017). These concepts were relevant to the development of the SAC because these concepts underscored the importance of empowering students to take more active roles in their own learning and development, and to also use their knowledge, experiences, and skills to effect positive change in their communities.

**Epistemic Curiosity.** EC, simply described as self-driven inquiry, fosters critical thinking and a love for learning by encouraging individuals to actively seek out knowledge to better understand the world around them. This is to be done through individuals' expression of thoughts, asking questions, and imaginative connections made between information from different sources (e.g., students' homes, schools, social interactions with peers; see, for example, Lindholm, 2018; Post & van der Molen, 2021). By encouraging self-driven inquiry and expression of thoughts and questions, EC can accordingly help individuals better understand their own thoughts, feelings, and motivations, and can also provide a means for exploring and understanding the perspectives and emotions of others (Darder, 2009; Freire, 1998; McLaren, 2017). As a

result, individuals with strong EC are often better equipped to develop key SECs. These competencies, in turn, can support healthy relationships, foster a sense of belonging, and help individuals to lead fulfilling, meaningful lives (CASEL, 2023).

EC is an important aspect of adolescent development, more specifically, as it drives individuals to seek out knowledge and understand the world around them. During the adolescent stage, individuals experience significant changes in their cognitive, emotional, and social functioning (Fandakova & Gruber, 2021; Piotrowski et al., 2014; Welsh et al. 1991), and EC can play a key role in facilitating these changes. By encouraging self-driven inquiry, adolescents can develop a deeper understanding of themselves and their place in the world, and they can also gain a greater appreciation for the diversity of perspectives and experiences of others around them. Additionally, the act of asking questions, expressing thoughts, and exploring alternative answers can help adolescents build critical thinking skills and a lifelong love for learning (Fandakova & Gruber, 2021; Lindholm, 2018; Welsh, et al. 1991). These skills and attitudes can have a lasting impact on adolescents' future academic and personal success and can also help to foster in them a higher sense of purpose with greater senses of meaning.

Accordingly, EC when combined with opportunities provided by student empowerment programs such as the SAC can be powerful tools for fostering in students critical thinking and a love for learning (Lindholm, 2018), as well as increased social awareness and self-efficacy (Mitra, 2012). By encouraging self-driven inquiry and expression of thoughts and questions, the SAC is able to help students develop their EC, as such, leading them to actively seek out knowledge and make imaginative connections



between information from various sources. These empowerment initiatives not only foster EC among participating students, as per this theory, but also enable the practical application of students' newfound knowledge that can lead to change through praxis, which can also lead to growth in students' SECs. This, in turn, helps to deepen students' understanding of the world and their places in it, and this might also help students develop the critical thinking skills necessary to tackle complex problems and make informed decisions that can impact their communities (Lindholm, 2018).

**Praxis.** Freire (2017) believed that merely acknowledging and comprehending oppression was insufficient for those striving for a more equitable society. Instead, both critical examination of oppression and justice, and active engagement or praxis, are necessary (Freire, 2017). For this study, I used the definition of praxis constructed by Arnold and Mundy (2020), who define praxis as a process that involves questioning, analyzing, explaining, linking, and integrating personal values, experiences, and ethical convictions to enhance the well-being of humanity and envision new possibilities. In short, individuals should take charge of their own stories and actively participate in transforming the environments around them (Mirra, et al. 2016).

Mira et al. (2016) explained that critical praxis in youth empowerment initiatives, such as the SAC, is to work in solidarity with students. Efforts should start from students' daily experiences, addressing the topics that are most relevant to them, their school, and community (Caraballo, 2017; Mira, et al. 2016; Scott, et al., 2015). Accordingly, the SAC served as a practical manifestation of praxis in education because of the use of components of the YPAR model which emphasized the development of authoritative

voices in students and a sense of belonging and purpose (Scott, et al., 2015). The SAC, in other words, helped to enable participating students to put their knowledge, experiences, skills, and visions into practice, transforming them from passive recipients to active agents of change.

Indeed, praxis is essential for the success and effectiveness of the SAC because it provides the framework for turning knowledge and vision into concrete implementation, such as advocating for changes in school policy. Without practical application, the skills and experiences gained through such a program may not translate into meaningful change. Rather, praxis emphasizes the importance of reflection and action in equal measure (Freire, 2017), ensuring that students are equipped to not only understand their world but also play an active role in shaping it (Mira, et al. 2016; Scott, et al., 2015). By engaging in practical action, then, students develop a sense of purpose, build self-efficacy, and gain a deeper understanding of the issues they are working to address. In this way, praxis acts as the cornerstone of the SAC, better allowing students to turn their knowledge, skills, and experiences into meaningful, impactful change.

Related, it is important to be aware of where adolescents are in their psychosocial development to effectively work with them to develop their SECs. By recognizing their specific stages of development, I was better able to connect with participating adolescents and address their individual concerns. Such understandings are particularly important in the context of using components of YPAR as YPAR helps to create more supportive and inclusive environments that encourage adolescent involvement and empowerment. By being mindful of their developmental stages, in other words, I was able to ensure that

participating in the SAC is meaningful and relevant to participating students, leading to greater success in promoting their SECs and other related, positive outcomes that might impact their broader school and community.

Beyond the development of participating students' SECs, though, the SAC also provided an environment where students could develop a sense of fidelity and agency, which was to further support their psychosocial growth. The Theory of Psychosocial Development, more specifically, states that adolescents often seek to explore new ideas (Erikson, 1959, 1963, 1968) in part due to their innate EC. Children at this age also look to establish their own identity which is vital to their positive transition into adulthood. I discuss this psychosocial stage, specifically in terms of the development of fidelity and agency next.

### **Theory of Psychosocial Development**

According to Erik Erikson (1964, 1968), the formation of identity is the key psychological challenge during adolescence. He suggests that a person's identity is shaped by a combination of their own experiences, cultural and societal influences, and historical factors. Adolescence brings about not only physical changes in teenage bodies, but also significant changes in the ways young minds think and process information (Elkind, 1999). This leads to the development of new reasoning skills and the ability to handle more complex material (Elkind, 1999; Erikson, 1968), but this can also cause inconsistent thought patterns and social and emotional challenges (Elkind, 1999).

Erikson's Theory of Psychosocial Development (1968) goes further noting that during age 12-18 adolescents must develop a sense of who they are and develop an

identity for themselves. Erikson (1963) also noted that the adolescent mind during this time can be viewed as a transitional stage between childhood and adulthood, especially as adolescents grapple with moral principles they learned in childhood and ethical standards established in adulthood. Healthy passage through these transitions results in individuals who are prepared intellectually, emotionally, and socially to participate successfully in the adult world (Elkind, 1999).

For this study, I further reviewed the Identity versus Role Confusion stage of adolescent development as described in Erickson's Theory of Psychosocial Development (1968), more specifically in terms of the role of fidelity, which is the capacity to dedicate oneself to others through the acceptance of others despite any ideological differences (Mcleod, 2018), and agency, or the ability to act independently and make decisions (Mcleod, 2018). I defined these two terms and their relevance in this study next.

**Fidelity.** Fidelity, simply stated, means sticking to one's values and beliefs, even when difficult. During the adolescent stage of development, individuals form their own senses of identity and values, and fidelity plays a critical role in these processes (Erikson, 1962). Adolescents may struggle with balancing the expectations and values of their family, peers, and larger society with their own beliefs and desires (Mcleod, 2018), and fidelity is the ability to commit oneself to these values and beliefs, even in the face of peer pressure or opposition. As adolescents navigate this stage of development and make decisions that shape their future, they must be guided by their own sense of fidelity and work to establish a strong foundation of values and beliefs that will ultimately guide them throughout their lives (Erikson, 1962).

Correspondingly, fidelity is a key milestone in the developmental journey of an adolescent because it is seen as a sign that an individual has gone through the challenging stage of adolescence and emerged with a positive outcome in terms of resolving whatever identity crises they may have faced (Markstrom, et al., 1998). Fidelity further indicates that adolescents have made a commitment to their beliefs and values and have a clearer sense of self (Erikson, 1962; Markstrom, et al., 1998). Individuals who have a better understanding of themselves are more able to make informed decisions and take action aligned with their principles. Living by one's principles, in turn, can lead to a more fulfilling life and can have a profound impact on one's overall wellbeing (Erikson, 1962).

Clearly, the development of a strong sense of fidelity in adolescents is crucial for their growth and success (Erikson, 1959, 1963, 1968). Fidelity is also particularly relevant for student empowerment initiatives like the SAC, as such. With student participants having enhanced opportunities to develop stronger senses of fidelity, participating students may become better equipped to advocate for themselves and their peers, speak up about important issues, and create positive change. This not only strengthens participating students' own confidence and ethical standing but also contributes to the betterment of their communities and society at large (Erikson, 1968; Mcleod, 2018; Markstrom-Adams, et al., 1994). Through programs like the SAC, then, educators might become better equipped to help students cultivate their senses of fidelity to also empower them to make positive impacts as future leaders.

**Agency.** Agency refers to the ability of individuals to act independently, make choices, and take control of their lives (Mcleod, 2018). During the adolescent stage of

development, individuals start to gain senses of independence and assertiveness as they explore their own identities and make decisions that shape their futures (Erikson, 1962; 1968). Agency is a crucial aspect of adolescent development as it helps individuals to form a sense of self-determination and become confident and capable individuals adept at making their own choices and charting their own paths in life (Erikson, 1959, 1962, 1963, 1968).

To nurture student agency, though, educators must recognize four essential components that contribute to its development. These four components are: goal setting, which is defined as the process of adopting specific and measurable objectives that empower students to take control of their own learning and development; intentional action, which is defined as deliberate and purposeful behaviors taken by students to realize their goals; reflection, which is defined as the process of introspecting on one's experiences, thoughts, and behaviors to gain new insights, improve self-awareness, and inform personal and academic growth; and self-direction defined as the ability to take charge of one's own learning and development, while making decisions and setting goals that align with personal aspirations and values (Barnes, 2020). Mastery of each of these four components is essential for the development of agency during adolescence as adolescents help to foster self-efficacy which, again, plays a significant role in empowering students to take control of their own learning and development.

Accordingly, because student agency is a vital component of adolescent development, educators must facilitate the integration of theory and practice by guiding students in setting specific, attainable goals and empowering students to put their plans

into action through praxis. By also promoting reflection on their learning to identify areas for growth and by encouraging responsibility for directing their own journey through life with informed decision-making and resource-seeking, students can build their self-efficacy and become effective agents of change in their communities. This support can also be facilitated through student empowerment initiatives, such as the SAC, which aim to give students a voice and a sense of ownership in their education by involving them in decision-making processes and creating opportunities for them to take more active roles in their own learning (Mira, et al., 2016; Mitra, 2014; Ozer, et al. 2021). By participating in the SAC, then, participating students are better able to develop their sense of agency by taking ownership of their own education and, again, having direct impacts on their school community.

In conclusion, the pedagogy of the oppressed and the stages of psychosocial development provided two robust theoretical foundations for the development of this SAC. By incorporating the principles of liberation education and empowering students to take control of their own learning and development, this SAC, accordingly, was to serve as a catalyst for positive change within and beyond the students themselves.

As we move forward into the methods section, it is essential to recall the crucial role that student voice plays in also creating a supportive learning environment where students can thrive and reach their full potential. All things considered, via this SAC and as noted prior, educators were to be better able to foster the development of participating students' critical SECs, with emphasis on their social awareness and self-efficacy, to eventually help participating students become more confident, self-directed learners, and

active contributors to their schools and communities. These were the ultimate goals of this study.



## CHAPTER 4

### METHODS

The general methodological approach I used for this study was an action research approach to not only gain a deeper understanding of the impacts of the SAC, but to also address the problem within my practice (i.e., within my purview as Principal at Cooper Trails). As described by Mertler (2020), action research involves an ongoing, cyclical inquiry process, typically carried out by practitioners-as-researchers, where systematic investigation takes place through repetitive cycles of planning, acting, developing, and reflecting (Mertler, 2020; Plano Clark & Creswell, 2015; Sagor, 2011). This type of research is often used by educators because it allows them to truly conduct a systematic inquiry into one's own practice (Mertler, 2020), while concentrating on the distinct traits of a group with whom a procedure is used or towards whom a specific action is to be taken.

Action research also requires repetitive processes that involve continuous evaluation and revision of a particular practice or situation. It is iterative, as the findings from one cycle inform and shape the next, leading to an ongoing cycle of improvement and development (Mertler, 2020; Plano Clark & Creswell, 2015; Sagor, 2011). In fact, this is the second iteration of my research, the first via which I set out to determine the impact of adult influences on student engagement and student perceptions within this same school setting. My focus was on teacher understandings of the developmental milestones of adolescents and students, and teachers' abilities to use those understandings to create more inclusive school communities that more effectively engage students. I

found that a majority (63%) of teacher participants reported having strong understandings of the developmental milestones of middle school students; however, a closer examination yielded that there was no relationship between teachers' perceptions of their understandings and teachers' confidence in implementing social and emotional practices to foster more inclusive and engaging school communities. Here, it became clear that a more direct and participatory approach was needed, one that would involve directly working with students to better understand and address the perceived disconnects between teacher perceptions and student engagement. This led to the current innovation or creation of the SAC.

In order to examine the effects of the SAC, in addition to this being my next action research iteration, I also engaged in a mixed-methods research design that combined both qualitative and quantitative data collection and analysis techniques. Mixed-methods research utilizes both qualitative and quantitative data to generate complementary results in addressing complex research studies (Plano Clark & Creswell, 2015). Quantitative methods allow for the systematic collection and analysis of numerical data, while qualitative methods provide the opportunity to explore experiences and perspectives in depth (Mertler, 2020). When used in conjunction, these methods can provide a comprehensive picture of the research problem and a deeper understanding of the impact of the innovation (Plano Clark & Creswell, 2015).

Lingard and Levinson (2008) add that the approach to integrating mixed-methods must be clear and justified in terms of (1) the order of the methods used, meaning whether they are concurrent or start with qualitative or quantitative; (2) the importance

given to each method, such as equal weight or one method as prioritized over another; and (3) the timing of methods integration, whether complete or partial, at the data collection, data analysis, and data interpretation stages. For this study, I (1) began with the collection of quantitative data through the completion of a pre-survey. I (2) did not place higher significance on or greater weight towards either method, as I utilized the quantitative data to determine the extent of the impact of participation and qualitative data to understand how the impact on the innovation influenced student perceptions. Last, I (3) interpreted each dataset in silos, or alone, after which I integrated all data types during the analysis stage of this study (Guetterman et al., 2015; Lingard & Levinson, 2008; Plano Clark & Creswell, 2015). My use of complementary data collection methods helped me triangulate the data, all while validating and enhancing the findings obtained through the methods I used for this study (i.e., surveys, observation and interviews; see Johnson, 2012; Schmuck et al., 2006).

Ultimately, this approach provided a comprehensive and layered understanding of the effects of the SAC, including the effects of the SAC on both the subjective experiences of participants and the relatively more objective outcomes and goals measured. Recall that the primary goal of this innovation was to create a venue for students to exercise their voices to positively impact the development of their SECs, specifically in terms of social awareness and self-efficacy. The secondary goal was to help participating students become more confident, self-directed learners, and active contributors to their schools and communities. These methods consequently helped me gather valuable insights into the impact of the SAC on these dependent variables to also

determine the SAC's overall effectiveness. This information was also critical in refining and improving the SAC program for future students at Copper Trails.

### **Research Questions**

With this methodological approach in mind (i.e., action research using mixed methodologies), as also aligned with the Pedagogy of the Oppressed and Theory of Psychosocial Development explained in the prior section, I answered the following research questions (RQs).

RQ 1: How and to what extent did participation in the SAC impact students' perceptions of their SECs?

- a. How was participating students' social awareness impacted?
- b. How was participating students' self-efficacy impacted?

RQ 2: How and to what extent did participating in the SAC affect participating students' confidence to use their voice to impact change in their school and community?

RQ 3: What was the effect of participation in the SAC on the development of participating students' confidence, self-directed learning skills, and civic engagement?

The purpose of RQ 3 was to assess the anticipated secondary outcomes resulting from participation in the SAC. In the literature review, I highlighted that increased self-efficacy leads to greater confidence and improved self-advocacy among students. Similarly, heightened social awareness and confidence can drive students to become active advocates for others within their school and community. By measuring these

outcomes, I aimed to gain a deeper understanding of the broader impact of the SAC on student development.

Important to also recall before we go further, is that although I used action research as my primary method to determine the impacts of Student Participation in the SAC on the development of students' SECs, I also utilized components of the YPAR framework, again, developed by the Institute of Community Research (Oregon Health Authority, n.d.) as a key component of this innovation. I chose this approach, again, because it helped me prioritize the involvement of students as active participants in the research process and helped me place emphasis on embracing student voice to empower youth to action to effect change in their communities (Mirra et al. 2016). I did not choose this approach, in other words, as another method for me as the researcher, but as a method of engagement for students as part of my SAC innovation.

In summation, the research methods I employed in this study were mixed and action research-based, while I also used YPAR only as part of my action. I used these methods to collect and analyze both quantitative and qualitative data from and in collaboration with my study sample through a range of techniques, including surveys, observation, and interviews, all of which I discuss in more detail next.

### **Sample**

I collaborated with 24 middle-school students in grades 5 through 8 at Copper Trails who, at minimum, committed to participate in weekly meetings. Although these students did not hold official leadership positions within the school, they were encouraged to share their thoughts, ideas, and opinions on various school processes,

rules, and procedures. It was important to purposefully include a diverse group of students in this sample, and not just include students who were typically seen as leaders, in order to gain a broad range of perspectives and experiences. By including these students in the study, I hoped to better understand the views of the wider student body. Hence, I deliberately invited/selected these students by encouraging all students enrolled in grades 5 through 8 to participate with the only requirement being a commitment to consistent attendance and active engagement. I also reached out to various teachers and staff members who interacted with students from diverse backgrounds and abilities to help identify and encourage students to participate. This approach ensured that a wider range of student voices were included in the SAC, and it also helped to create a more inclusive sample; although, given my sample was not representative, I did not make any attempts to generalize from my study sample to my student body population. Keeping this in mind, Table 1, below, displays the demographics of the SAC participants.

**Table 1***Student Participant Demographics*

Grade	# of Participants	Years in Attendance	Gender	Race/Ethnicity
5th	2	1	Female	Prefer Not to Say
		3	Male	Black
6th	5	2	Female	White
		2	Female	White
		6	Male	White
		6	Male	White
		6	Female	Prefer Not to Say
7th	6	2	Female	Black
		5	Male	Hispanic or Latinx
		6	Female	Black
		7	Female	Multi-Racial
		8	Male	Hispanic or Latinx
		8	Female	Hispanic or Latinx
8th	11	2	Female	Hispanic or Latinx
		3	Male	White
		4	Female	White
		5	Female	Hispanic or Latinx
		5	Female	Hispanic or Latinx
		5	Female	Hispanic or Latinx
		6	Male	White
		9	Male	White
		9	Female	Asian
		9	Female	Hispanic or Latinx
		9	Male	Black

Please also see the assent form I gave to students, in Appendix E, and to their parents in Appendix D. This form covered all data collection methods used, as described next.

## **Data Collection**

**Survey Methods.** Survey research is a valuable methodological approach when identifying trends or patterns in behaviors or attitudes to evaluate the impact of an intervention (Mertler, 2020). Administering standardized questions on a survey instrument allows for assessing responses for one or more RQs that can be answered via survey instrument items, it permits the simultaneous collection of quantitative (e.g., Likert-scale, closed-ended) and qualitative (e.g., open-ended, free response) data, and it provides insights into observed changes in behaviors or attitudes over time, for example, on the pre- and post-survey occasions I used in this study (Fowler, 2014; Groves et al., 2009; Plano Clark & Creswell, 2015). I used pre- and post-survey instruments to, in this case, measure changes in the perceptions of students who participated in the SAC to evaluate its impacts from before to after students' involvement in my action.

The survey instrument I used was based on the Spring 2007, Grade 8 Student Questionnaire, which is a part of the ongoing Early Childhood Longitudinal Study (ECLS) which is still being conducted by the USDE and its National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) (NCES, n.d.). The purpose of this survey instrument is to collect data to inform and help parents, educators, policymakers, and other stakeholders to improve students' educational experiences and analyze relationships among a wide range of family, school, community, and individual factors on early child development,



early learning, and early child performance in school (NCES, n.d.). The original survey included six constructs and 49 items. Please click [here](#) to view the original survey instrument, noting that items from this survey instrument were used by researchers in their own studies without seeking NCES permission as this instrument is open access (NCES, n.d.). I adopted this instrument for this study, as well, also noting that the original survey instrument included items to measure students' academic and physical attributes, which I removed for the purposes of this study.

For this study, more specifically, I tailored this survey instrument to collect data that would be more directly relevant to and help me answer my RQs. My revised instrument, as such, included four constructs, 20 Likert-scale items, six open-ended items at the end of each of the first three constructs (two open-ended items per construct), and an additional four items (for the post-survey) at the end of the fourth construct, which was also the end of the instrument (before a series of four demographic items).

The first construct measured was Student Voice, which was aligned with RQ1 and was also one of the constructs of the ECLS survey instrument. There were five items in this construct, each of which was answered by student participants using a six-point Likert-scale with response options ranging from Always (6) to Not at All (1). I did not include neutral responses such as "I Don't Know" or "Not Applicable" to better ensure that participants would provide a response (Fowler, 2014). I did not force responses for any participants on any survey items.

The second construct measured was Social Awareness, which was aligned with my RQ 2 and was also one of the constructs of the ECLS survey instrument. There were

five items in this construct, each of which was answered by student participants using a different six-point, Likert-type scale with response options ranging from Completely (6) to Not at All (1). Again, I did not include neutral responses, and I did not force responses.

The third construct measured was Self-Efficacy which was aligned with my RQ 3 and was also one of the constructs of the ECLS survey instrument. There were five items in this construct, each of which was answered by student participants using the same Likert-scale and set of conditions noted above.

The final construct measured was Student Participation in the SAC. This construct was not derived from the ECLS survey instrument but was aligned with RQ 4. There were five items in this section of the survey instrument, each of which was answered by student participants using the same Likert-scale and set of conditions noted above.

Important to note here is that in recognizing the innovation's aim to provide a platform for Student Voice in the SAC, specifically through their participation in the SAC, it is crucial to acknowledge that the fourth construct, Student Participation, influenced the first three constructs: Student Voice, Social Awareness, and Self-Efficacy. Put differently, it was clear that Student Participation influenced all three of my other constructs.

See Appendix F for this survey instrument, recalling that I used this instrument on a pre and post-test occasion during the first and last SAC meeting, again, to determine if participation in the SAC impacted students' perceptions of their SECs, specifically in terms of their social awareness and self-efficacy, as well as the development of possible secondary outcomes of the study such as participating students' confidence, self-directed

learning skills, and civic engagement. To ensure that the survey data I collected yielded valid data, I held most of the items on the survey instrument constant (see, for example, all open-ended items delineated by pre- or post-survey in Appendix F) across both administrations (Fowler, 2014; Groves et al., 2009). This helped me determine the impact of Student Participation in the research cycle on their perceptions, also via participants' responses to the aforementioned open-ended items that I did not hold constant, but that I also included to gather more in-depth data on student participants' experiences, pre- and especially post-intervention.

Before administering the survey instrument, I revised it based on feedback from a panel of three educators and two school psychologists whom I invited to review the instruments to also inform edits and revisions. Then, I used Qualtrics (Qualtrics, n.d.) to pilot the revised instrument with 8th grade students who were not able to participate in the SAC or the actual study because they were not at Copper Trails during the 2024 school year. I engaged in these activities during the 4<sup>th</sup> quarter of the 2023 school year, before my study officially began. After administering the survey instrument to this latter set of pilot participants, I calculated Cronbach's alpha to assess the internal consistency of the instrument overall and each of the instrument's constructs (Salkind & Frey, 2020). Values below 0.5 are considered unacceptable, signaling a highly unreliable test. In contrast, a threshold of 0.70 or higher is sought for various types of reliability, as recommended by Salkind and Frey (2020). Keeping these criteria in mind, Table 2, below, displays my pilot survey results.

**Table 2***Cronbach's Alphas for SAC Overall Survey Instrument and Individual Constructs*

Subscale	N	Items	Cronbach's $\alpha$
Overall Instrument	20	20	0.82
Student Voice	20	5 (items 1a - 1e)	0.85
Social Awareness	20	5 (items 2a - 2e)	0.73
Self-Efficacy	20	5 (items 3a - 3e)	0.73
Student Participation in the SAC	20	5 (items 5a - 5e)	0.97

The results of the pilot survey revealed an acceptable level of reliability, bolstering my confidence to use this instrument for this study. Therefore, I administered both the pre and post survey instruments to participating students, again, before and after the intervention. Again, it is also important to note that not all SAC members chose to participate in the research; thus, I only asked those who consented to participate to complete both survey instruments.

**Observational Methods.** Observations also played a crucial role in this study, allowing me to observe and document the actions and behaviors (Mertler, 2020) of students during SAC meetings. For this study, I observed or audio recorded 21 SAC meetings, totaling approximately nine hours of data. According to Schmuck et al. (2006), careful observation and systematic recording of what might be seen and heard in a specific setting can be used as a method of collecting qualitative data. By closely observing students during each of the nine SAC meetings, then, I was able to gather more

detailed information than would have otherwise been impossible using other methods, such as via my survey or interview methods (see more forthcoming).

Likewise, observations can vary in structure, ranging from highly structured to unstructured. In structured observations, observers are required to focus solely on observing and documenting a set of predetermined behaviors or events (Parsons & Brown, 2002; Schmuck et al., 2006). Unstructured observations offer observers more flexibility to attend to other events or activities that may be taking place simultaneously in any setting (Parsons & Brown, 2002; Schmuck et al., 2006). For the purposes of this study, I conducted unstructured observations during the SAC student meetings, but I included some structured components to purposefully look out for those which may have aligned with my RQs or theoretical lenses.

While observational notes and memos are usually recorded in the form of fieldnotes, defined as written records of what is seen taking place during an observation (Johnson, 2012), in this study I employed a method of recording observation data as proposed by Leedy and Ormrod (2010). This method involved a dual-column approach to organizing research notes. The first column served as a space for recording raw observations, while the second column was dedicated to recording initial interpretations or reflections on the observed data. To ensure that the collected data aligned with my RQs or theoretical framework, I constructed an observational protocol with headers for each row that helped me categorize each of my observations, accordingly. This also helped me streamline my observational data collection process and facilitated my analyses of these data when ready. My observational protocol is in Appendix G.

Also, important to note is that as a school principal I have gained extensive experience in completing observations for teacher evaluation purposes over the years. This experience equipped me with the necessary skills and expertise to effectively collect data through observational methods such as these. Notwithstanding, I must acknowledge that additional support was required to capture observational data from research team meetings that were being conducted at the same time. Accordingly, I used audio recordings to capture conversations that took place, also during my absence, all of which I reviewed to capture interactions between participants. I was also confident in my ability to utilize shorthand techniques to script observations, which allowed me to capture a comprehensive record of the interactions of my student participants in a timely and accurate manner. However, to accurately capture research team conversations, I used a transcription software called Sonix (Sonix, n.d.). Each recording was uploaded and transcribed, furnishing a written document that I referenced while listening to each collaboration.

As Schmuck et al. (2006) notes, audio recordings can significantly enhance the ability to capture details that a researcher might have otherwise missed. By utilizing the additional tool of audio recordings to capture participant interactions, I was able to collect detailed data that enabled me to gain deeper insights into the development of the participants' SECs. Through repeated review and analysis of the recordings, I identified patterns in participants' speech and perceptions (Schmuck et al, 2006), which provided valuable insights into their social emotional development.

**Interview Methods.** As briefly mentioned prior, I also conducted five approximately 15-minute interviews, with one student per participating grade level or research team, with student participants serving as another source or means of gathering additional and much more in-depth insights from students than that which I collected via my survey and observational methods. Brinkman and Kvale (2015) state that the primary purpose of conducting interviews is to better understand participants' lived experiences from participants' own perspectives. Thus, this approach allowed for a more in-depth examination of students' perceptions about their experiences in the SAC through face-to-face conversations with student participants themselves (Brinkman and Kvale, 2015; Schmuck et al., 2006). Put differently, interviewing student participants provided me with greater opportunities to gather richer and more descriptive data, and provided a more open forum for student participants to share their perspectives, experiences, and insights in greater detail. For me as the practitioner-researcher, this permitted me to have a more in-depth understanding of the issues at hand including, for example, the benefits and challenges of being engaged with such a SAC.

Like it is with observations, interviews can also be classified as structured and unstructured (Schmuck et al., 2006). Structured interviews require the interviewer to create and use a specific set of predetermined questions. Only these predetermined questions can be used with all participants being interviewed for the purpose of consistency (Brinkman & Kvale, 2015). Leedy and Ormrod (2010) note, though, that using unstructured interviews is more desirable for researchers to have some flexibility to

be able to ask clarifying questions and to seek different information from different people. For these reasons, I used an unstructured interview format.

When developing my interview protocol as such, I considered the stages of an interview inquiry as presented by Brinkman and Kvale (2015). The first stage, thematizing, is the why and the what of the investigation. Specifically, it involves understanding the problem that the researcher seeks to address, which in this study was, again, about the limited opportunities for students to express their voice. Also important here was further understanding students' social awareness and self-efficacy, which were the key dependent variables in this study. Essentially, via thematizing I ensured that the interviews were purposeful and well-directed and that the results of these investigations would be meaningful and relevant given my RQs (Brinkman & Kvale, 2015).

The second stage in designing is interview inquiry, which was also a critical aspect of developing my interview protocol. During this stage, I considered the RQs and developed questions that were relevant and appropriate. This involved selecting the types of questions to be asked, such as open-ended or closed-ended questions, as well as determining the wording and phrasing of the questions given I, as this study's researcher, ensured that my interview questions were clear, concise, and easy to understand for, especially middle school participants (Kvale, 2006; Schmuck et al., 2006).

Finally, the ethical implications of the research when developing interview questions must be taken into account. This included avoiding questions that would cause harm, distress, or discomfort to the participants, and ensuring that the questions I asked were culturally sensitive and respectful of students' views and experiences (Kvale, 2006;



Leedy & Ormrod, 2010). I followed this design imperative as well. My interview protocol is in Appendix H.

### **Data Analyses**

**Survey Data.** I analyzed the quantitative data obtained from the pre- and post-surveys completed by the student participants in the SAC, again, to understand the impacts of SAC participation on their social awareness and self-efficacy. In addition, I conducted further analyses of my survey data to assess whether the students' self-reported abilities to express themselves through the use of their voices during SAC meetings resulted in my anticipated secondary outcomes, such as increased confidence, self-directed learning skills, and civic engagement. To conduct these analyses, I used IBM SPSS Statistics software (IBM, n.d.) to input and analyze the quantitative survey data derived via both survey instrument administrations. This involved conducting *t*-tests for dependent samples, which is an appropriate statistical test to analyze pre- and post-survey data as it allows for the comparison of two related sets of scores, measuring group differences before and after the intervention (Salkind & Frey, 2020).

To gain a more comprehensive understanding of the changes observed in the pre- and post-intervention data, though, it was important to not only conduct *t*-tests for dependent samples but also to calculate effect sizes. Cohen's *d* is a widely used effect size coefficient used for comparing the means of two dependent groups, as calculated by dividing the mean difference between the groups by their pooled standard deviation (Salkind & Frey, 2020). Interpretations of Cohen's *d* coefficients vary by discipline, but a rule of thumb is that effect sizes of 0.2, 0.5, and 0.8 are considered small, medium, and

large, respectively (Lakens, 2013; see also Salkind & Frey, 2020). Including effect sizes, as a measure of practical significance in addition to statistical significance, provided me with a more nuanced understanding of the intervention's impact and helped me better determine the intervention's meaningfulness.

In addition to examining the quantitative data obtained from both survey administrations, I analyzed the responses to the open-ended questions from the post survey instrument to examine more in-depth participants' open-ended responses to the questions posed. More specifically, I used content analysis (CA) as described by Elo and Kyngas (2008). CA is a structured and impartial approach used to categorize data such as survey responses, interviews, or observations based on research question constructs, such as student voice, social awareness or self-efficacy, relevant to this study (Elo & Kyngas, 2008) The aim of my using this technique was to provide a summary of the data and interpret patterns I identified based on the RQs (Elo & Kyngas, 2008; Schreier, 2012) given CA can be utilized to identify patterns within and across data relating to the lived experiences, views, perspectives, behavior, and practices of the participants by using a three-phase process (Elo & Kyngas, 2008).

Qualitative CA can be used in either an inductive or a deductive way. The inductive approach allows the researcher to generate new insights or theories directly from data. It is useful when there is limited existing theory and is typically utilized when researchers aim to explore new areas or gain an understanding of complex phenomena (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008; Graneheim & Lundman, 2004). In contrast, the deductive approach begins with a predefined set of concepts or theories, allowing researchers to test existing

hypotheses or theories. It provides a structured framework for analysis, ensuring that findings are grounded in established theory (Polit & Beck, 2012). Deductive approaches are often preferred when there is a well-established theoretical framework relevant to the research topic. It is suitable for studies aiming to validate or extend existing theories or concepts (Elo et al., 2014). I opted for the deductive approach due to the fact that my innovation is rooted in established theoretical frameworks, specifically drawing upon Freire's Pedagogy of the Oppressed and the Theory of Psychosocial Development.

In deductive content analysis methodology, there are three primary phases: preparation, organization, and the reporting of findings. The preparation phase consists of gathering suitable data for analysis, defining the unit of analysis and interpreting the collected information, (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008). The unit of analysis pertains to the specific element or entity under investigation in research (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008). During this phase, I collected data from the open-ended survey responses and determined the unit of analysis, which, in this study, comprised the research question constructs of Student Voice, Social Awareness, and Self-Efficacy which I recorded in a codebook detailed in Appendix K. Subsequently, I analyzed the gathered data to ensure alignment with concepts from my theoretical framework such as epistemic curiosity or agency.

The next step following data collection is its organization. This entails creating a matrix or table where all the data undergo careful examination to discern their content (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008). Subsequently, each piece of data is categorized according to its relevance to specific predefined categories (Polit & Beck, 2012). For this process to yield meaningful results, it is crucial that the categories accurately reflect the primary ideas or

concepts under investigation (Schreier, 2012). During this phase, I developed a table to capture each student's response. I then reviewed the responses and sorted them into columns within a codebook I created, corresponding to the relevant research constructs of Student Voice, Social Awareness and Self-Efficacy. This systematic approach ensured a valid analysis and interpretation of findings, as the data are appropriately organized and ready for the final phase of CA, reporting the findings. In the reporting phase, results are presented based on the content of the categories describing the themes. I have completed this stage and will include the outcomes in the forthcoming

Overall, the three-step process I used was to ensure that my themes accurately represented the data and provided insights into patterns and meaning. This approach allowed for a systematic and organized analysis of these data and enabled me to identify connections and relationships between different aspects of my quantitative and qualitative survey data as well (Clarke & Braun, 2017; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). For the qualitative items I held constant from the pre- to post-survey occasion, I also analyzed changes in student participants' responses over time.

**Observational Data.** I continued to use the CA as described by Clarke and Braun (2017) to analyze the data I obtained through my observations. This involved utilizing the same codes that I developed during my survey analyses. I also used a priori codes, or other predetermined codes that were informed by the RQs and theoretical framework as the starting points for identifying and interpreting patterns in the data (Clarke & Braun, 2017; Crosley, 2023). My observation protocol can be found in Appendix G and an excerpt of my completed code book is further detailed in Appendix K. By using the same

coding method, I ensured consistency and coherence in the analysis, while also building on the insights gained via my survey data (Brinkman & Kvale, 2015; Castleberry & Nolen, 2018). I applied a similar three-step process of CA to the observation data to ensure additional rigor and accuracy. The use of a priori codes, for example, helped me ensure that my analyses remained focused on the RQs and theoretical framework, and that the themes that I identified were relevant to my study goals (Brinkman & Kvale, 2015; Crosley, 2023). Through this approach, I also obtained deeper insights into the patterns and meaning of the observational data and gained a more comprehensive understanding of the impact of Student Participation in the SAC.

**Interview Data.** Again, I gathered my interview-based data through the student interviews I conducted at the end of my intervention. I used Zoom (Zoom, n.d.) to record these interviews in an audio-only format, which enabled me to obtain a computer-generated transcript of each of my conversations. This approach provided me with a clear and comprehensive record of the interview data that I could analyze thereafter (Brinkman & Kvale, 2015). Next, I used the same coding approach described for my qualitative survey and observational data above to analyze these data. For my interview data, though, I recognized that I needed to account for the differences in these versus my observational data to ensure that using the same coding scheme still helped me appropriately capture findings via both similar albeit different qualitative data. More specifically, given that the CA of the interview responses were not directly informed by my theoretical framework, unlike the CA completed with the observation data, I ensured that both sets of data were aligned to the constructs of the RQs. This strategy enabled me to maintain coherence with

the overarching coding structure. By aligning the codes through comparison to the research constructs, I ensured the analysis remained constant and yielded meaningful insights that complemented those from the survey and observational data. I ultimately reached a saturation point where no new insights or interpretations could be derived from further coding, indicating a comprehensive understanding of my data (Brinkman & Kvale, 2015).

### **Triangulation**

Validity and reliability are two key aspects of research methodology that are critical for ensuring that a study's findings are accurate, trustworthy, and can be used to draw meaningful conclusions (Fowler, 2014; Mertler, 2020; Salkind & Frey, 2020). Validity refers to the extent to which a researcher measures what the researcher intends to measure, and whether the conclusions drawn from the study are justified (Fowler, 2014). Reliability, on the other hand, refers to the consistency and stability of the research findings over time and across different settings (Fowler, 2014). To enhance the validity of my study, given I was not able to assess reliability over time or across different settings (but I was able to assess the internal reliability of my survey instrument), I opted to triangulate my data by collecting and analyzing my data from and across my surveys, observations, and interviews. Doing this strengthened the overall validity of my findings as I cross-verified the information obtained from these diverse sources, leading to a more comprehensive understanding of my findings (Mertler, 2020; Salkind & Frey, 2020).

To achieve this, more specifically, I implemented an across-method methodological triangulation approach which has been established as an effective means

of validating research findings (Bekhet & Zauszniewski, 2012). This approach involved integrating both quantitative and qualitative data collection techniques, as also documented in prior research by Brannen (2017) and Thurman (2018), by obtaining a broad range of data, examining working themes across data sources, and ultimately improving the validity of the findings drawn. This approach is also supported by scholars such as Johnson (2012) and Schmuck et al. (2006) who emphasize the importance of using multiple sources of data to validate and enhance research findings.

This across-method methodological triangulation approach required me to first, thoroughly review all of the analyzed data gathered from the pre/post surveys, observations, and interviews. Next, I compared and contrasted the results from the different sources of data all while looking for areas of agreement or divergence. Finally, I considered any potential limitations or sources of bias that may have skewed the data.

Again, by using this approach I was able to cross-check my results and obtain a more accurate and holistic understanding of answers to my RQs, as well as the effects of my intervention, to help me draw more accurate conclusions (Bekhet & Zauszniewski, 2012). Doing this also provided me with a more comprehensive understanding of how Student Participation in the SAC impacted student participants' SECs, specifically in terms of their social awareness and self-efficacy after all was said and done.

### **Role of the Researcher**

Not only was I the lead researcher in this study, I was (and continue to be) a passionate educator who is committed to empowering students to become leaders and advocates for their own learning. This made me a practitioner-researcher in this study,

who was also a leader-researcher, all of which is important to note in an action research study such as this (Mertler, 2020). It is crucial, however, to acknowledge the potential biases that arose due to my dual role as a practitioner-researcher.

As the principal conducting this study with students from my own school, there were several biases to consider. One such bias was social desirability bias, which can lead to false data and inaccurate findings because student participants could have given answers to questions that they believed would make them look good, for example, to me (i.e., as their principal, who they might have perceived as having at least a perceived sense of power over them) or others (e.g., their adult consultants, who student participants might have also perceived as having power), concealing their true opinions or experiences and yielding responses that students may have believed were more socially acceptable or pleasing (Krumpal, 2011).

To minimize possible impacts of desirability biases, I administered both the pre- and post-survey instruments anonymously. When responses are collected anonymously, participants are more likely to provide honest and genuine feedback, leading to more accurate data collection and analyses (Fowler, 2014). Anonymity in my study helped to ensure that participants felt less pressure to conform to socially desirable responses or to present themselves in a favorable light (falsely inflating the validity of my inferences). Ensuring anonymity for both survey instrument administrations also helped me, as best as possible, gain insights into the students' true attitudes and behaviors (contributing to the validity of my study findings).



A self-selection bias could have also impacted the results of this study. A self-selection bias may have occurred when students decided to participate in the SAC based on their own unique characteristics, beliefs, or behaviors, which may have led to a group of participants who may not have accurately represented the middle school student population (Smith & Glass, 1987). For instance, students who already considered themselves 'leaders' with high efficacy and SECs may have disproportionately volunteered to participate. Students may also have only volunteered to participate if they felt strongly about a specific rule or policy, or if their peers were also involved, rather than due to having a genuine interest in sharing their voice. With that being said, I had to also acknowledge a possible ceiling effect. The ceiling effect, described by Meier (2022), refers to a set of scores clustering toward the top of the range for an item. Students who joined the SAC with high SECs or efficacy or a predetermined agenda may score themselves high on the pre-survey and would not have the opportunity to increase their ratings on the post. As a result, the SAC may disproportionately represent the perceptions of students who fit into these categories, potentially skewing the findings and leading to an incomplete understanding of the broader student population.

Given my goal in this study was not to make generalizations, though, I only kept this threat in mind and, at best, minimized the impact of self-selection bias by doing my best to ensure that all students had equal opportunities to participate, making the study recruitment process as objective and systematic as possible (Smith & Glass, 1987). More specifically, I used the daily morning announcements to invite all students, 5th-8th grades, to participate in the SAC. Students were informed that the only criteria for

participation was their grade levels and their commitments to consistently attend meetings.

Another potential bias was mortality, which is also known as attrition and refers to the loss of participants during the course of the study (Smith & Glass, 1987). Middle school students may have chosen to not continue their participation or may have had other responsibilities that prevented them from completing the study. Attrition can bias results if the participants who drop out of a study differ significantly from those who remain in the study, particularly if the reasons for their attrition are related to the study's variables or outcomes (Smith & Glass, 1987). Thus, keeping attrition in mind as I proceeded was crucial for ensuring my study's results were as valid as possible. To help minimize the adverse impacts of attrition, I organized weekly meetings on Wednesdays, during the school day to accommodate the students involved. Copper Trails' students have the option to arrive on campus as early as 7:45 AM for breakfast or extracurricular activities. Accordingly, I opted for morning sessions to help avoid conflicts with after-school sports activities and minimize the class time students would miss. Leveraging this routine, I ensured that student participation did not feel like an extra demand on involved students' time.

Even these efforts, however, did not prevent attrition. Table 3 displays the level of attrition realized during this study's cycle.

**Table 3***Student Participant Attrition and Growth Rates by Grade Level*

Grade Level	Starting Attendance (n=20)	Ending Attendance (n=24)	Attrition Rate	Growth Rate
5th	0/20 (0%)	2/24 (8%)	0%	200%
6th	5/20 (25%)	5/24 (21%)	0%	0%
7th	7/20 (35%)	6/24 (25%)	-14.29%	-14.29%
8th	8/20 (40%)	11/24 (46%)	0%	25%
Total	20	24	0%	15%

Table 3 illustrates that attrition was not a factor in this study, as only one 7<sup>th</sup> grade student exited the study early. In fact, four additional students joined the study after the pre-survey was given. See the growth rate data also included in the table.

Finally, it was important to acknowledge the potential for observer bias, defined as where my expectations or preconceived notions about my study's outcomes could inadvertently influence my observations or interpretations (Putman, 2016; Salvia & Meisel, 1980). This, for example, was of particular pertinence in the observational component of my study's methods.

To minimize observer bias, I framed my observations around my RQs (i.e., as per observed instances of epistemic curiosity, praxis, fidelity, agency, social awareness, and self-efficacy). Doing this helped me maintain focus on the topics of interest and helped prevent me from swaying my attention away from that on which I was intent (Putman, 2016; Salvia & Meisel, 1980).

In sum, it was crucial to recognize these biases to minimize their potential impacts on study outcomes and maintain the integrity of my study, and its findings, especially as I also hope to continue this intervention and share this process with my peers and colleagues, as also situated in and informed by study findings forthcoming.

## CHAPTER 5

### RESULTS

To review, the purpose of this study was to address the lack of opportunities for middle school students to express their voices within our middle school setting by identifying a venue—an SAC. Through the SAC, middle school students could directly share their ideas and opinions regarding perceived school-level challenges with school leaders. I administered pre and post online survey instruments to gauge the impact of Student Participation in the SAC. Additionally, I conducted approximately nine hours of observations during 22 group discussions, and I held five interviews with five student participants. The data that I collected during this study addressed the overarching RQs, also noted prior:

RQ 1: How and to what extent did participation in the SAC impact students' perceptions of their SECs?

- a. How was participating students' social awareness impacted?
- b. How was participating students' self-efficacy impacted?

RQ 2: How and to what extent did participating in the SAC affect participating students' confidence to use their voice to impact change in their school and community?

RQ 3: What was the effect of participation in the SAC on the development of participating students' confidence, self-directed learning skills, and civic engagement?

Before I continue, though, it is important to recall that SAC student participants undertook their own research projects utilizing the YPAR process. Working in five research teams, students, in collaboration with adult consultants, identified challenges within the school community and devised and implemented innovations addressing these challenges. Two research teams identified a lack of respect from teachers towards students as their focus, while the remaining three chose to investigate issues such as the lack of school spirit, limited student recognition, and insufficient opportunities for social interaction among peers.

Although I did not include the student-led research as part of my research study, as also previously discussed in my methods section, this component of this study is crucial to highlight. I theorized that students' journeys, when completing their own work, would influence their overall perceptions of their participation. For instance, the research team that pinpointed a lack of school spirit as a prevailing issue within our school community proposed that expanding opportunities for students to showcase school pride through spirit wear (i.e., school shirts or hats) and increasing the frequency of Spirit Days (i.e., by adding a Pajama Day) would bolster school spirit. Following a pre and post survey of approximately 120 5th-8th grade students, the data that they collected revealed an unexpected result: the addition of three spirit days to the monthly calendar did not yield a noticeable increase in overall school spirit, as the students expected. Understandably, this student research team expressed disappointment in these findings, and this sentiment may have influenced their overall responses to this intervention as their projects were integral to this study but, again, not directly examined (i.e., I did not

systematically analyze their projects or projects' effects). However, it is also important to note that three out of the five teams perceived their innovation as successful; hence, these students may have had an (appropriately) inflated sense of success in their own projects that bled into their perceptions of the SAC writ large.

Notwithstanding, this section presents the culmination of my study's quantitative and qualitative analyses, again, as rooted in a mixed-methods, action research-based approach. Data that I collected from student participants I derived via diverse methodologies, including survey instruments, observation, and interviews. First, key findings from my quantitative analysis of my pre- and post-intervention survey instruments are detailed. Following this, I present my qualitative analyses of and findings from my open-ended survey responses, observations and interviews, each of which I organized by my study's constructs: Student Voice, Social Awareness, Self-Efficacy, and Student Participation in the SAC.

### **Quantitative Results**

During the fall semester of the 2024 school year, I administered a pre-survey instrument to 20 students from grades 5 through 8 at Copper Trails School. The survey included 24 questions defined as follows: I used questions 1–5 (1a-1e) to address Student Voice, 6–10 (2a-2e) to explore social awareness, 11–15 (3a-3e) to delve into self-efficacy, and 16–20 (4a-4e) to examine students' participation in the SAC. I used the remaining questions, 21–24, to solicit demographic information, including gender, grade level, race, and years of attendance at the school. I collected all responses anonymously.

At the conclusion of the SAC intervention, I administered a post-survey to study participants ( $n=24$ ). The items that I presented within the post-survey were the same as those that I included in the pre-survey, including the anonymous submission of participant responses with the addition of five open-ended reflection questions. The purpose of the post-survey was to measure how the perceptions and experiences students had changed after their participation in the innovation. More specifically, my intention when analyzing the post-survey results was to determine how and to what extent participation in the SAC impacted the development of students' SECs, Social Awareness, and Self-Efficacy. Again, my innovation took place during the winter semester of the 2024 school year, and it lasted a total of approximately nine weeks. Students took the post-survey within a week after completing their own action research project during which, again, student research groups identified a challenge, implemented an innovation they developed, and saw the results of their work. This practical experience played a crucial role in shaping their perceptions and experiences, as also just noted (Mirra, et al., 2016).

### **Pre- and Post-Survey Frequency Item Analyses**

The results displayed in Table 4 represent the frequency distribution of survey responses for items 1–5 (1a-1e) under the construct of Student Voice prior to students' participation in the SAC. The response scale consisted of a six-point Likert scale with Always=6, Almost Always=5, Often=4, Sometimes=3, Rarely=2, and Not at All=1 options.



**Table 4***Pre- and Post-Survey Response Frequencies (Student Voice)*

Survey Item	Response Frequencies											
	Always		Almost Always		Often		Sometimes		Rarely		Not at All	
	Pre	Post	Pre	Post	Pre	Post	Pre	Post	Pre	Post	Pre	Post
<i>Pre-Survey n=20</i> <i>Post-Survey n=24</i>												
<i>1a. My opinions and ideas are valued and taken into consideration by staff at my school</i>	0/20 (0%)	3/24 (13%)	7/20 (35%)	7/24 (29%)	9/20 (45%)	4/24 (17%)	0/20 (0%)	7/24 (29%)	4/20 (20%)	2/24 (8%)	0/20 (0%)	1/24 (4.2%)
<i>1b. I have opportunities to share my thoughts and ideas in school.</i>	4/20 (20%)	5/24 (21%)	5/20 (25%)	6/24 (25%)	3/20 (15%)	6/24 (25%)	7/20 (35%)	5/24 (21%)	1/20 (5%)	2/24 (8%)	0/20 (0%)	0/24 (0%)
<i>1c. I am able to participate in discussions and decision-making processes at school.</i>	4/20 (20%)	5/24 (21%)	7/20 (35%)	8/24 (33%)	5/20 (25%)	5/24 (21%)	2/20 (10%)	5/24 (51%)	2/20 (20%)	0/24 (0%)	0/20 (0%)	1/24 (4.2%)
<i>1d. I feel that I have a say in decisions that affect my education.</i>	1/20 (5%)	2/24 (21%)	5/20 (25%)	6/24 (25%)	5/20 (25%)	8/24 (33%)	5/20 (25%)	0/24 (0%)	3/20 (15%)	5/24 (21%)	1/20 (5%)	0/24 (0%)
<i>1e. I feel my input is considered when decisions are made at my school.</i>	0/20 (0%)	5/24 (21%)	7/20 (35%)	3/24 (12%)	6/20 (30%)	5/24 (21%)	4/20 (20%)	5/24 (21%)	2/20 (10%)	5/24 (21%)	1/20 (5%)	1/24 (4.2%)

Results from both the pre-survey and post-survey indicated that a proportion of respondents felt their opinions and ideas were valued and considered by staff at the school. In the pre-survey, 35% of respondents “Almost Always” agreed with this statement, while in the post-survey, this percentage increased to 41.7%. Similarly, the pre-survey revealed that 45% of respondents either “Always” (20%) or “Almost Always” (25%) had opportunities to share their thoughts and ideas in school, a proportion that remained consistent in the post-survey at 45.8%. Over half of all respondents in both surveys (55% in the pre-survey and 54.2% in the post-survey) agreed they were able to participate in discussions and decision-making processes at school. Furthermore, 30.0% of pre-survey respondents and 45.8% of post-survey respondents felt they had a say in decisions affecting their education, with 35.0% and 33.3%, respectively, indicating their input was considered when decisions were made at the school. These findings suggest a consistent perception among students regarding their opportunities for engagement and participation in school decision-making processes across both survey periods.

Overall, I observed an increase in participating students' self-reported levels of agreement with three out of the five items aligned with my Student Voice construct. Specifically, items 1a and 1d showed an increase in agreement, indicating that student participants acknowledged the opportunity to express their ideas and opinions and participate in school decisions. However, it is interesting to note that there was either minimal change or a decrease in agreement for the other items in this construct. For example, while students expressed feeling able to participate in school decisions, a slightly lower percentage of them felt these decisions directly impacted their education

after their involvement in the SAC. Based on this information, I concluded that participation in the SAC did have some impact on the student participants' self-reported perceptions of their abilities to use their voice to affect change within our school; however, it is notable that these perceived changes were not consistently linked to decisions directly related to their education.

Next, Table 5 summarizes the frequency distribution of pre-survey responses for items 6-10 (2a-2e) under the construct of Social Awareness. The response scale consisted of a six-point Likert scale with Completely=6, Mostly=5, Fairly=4, Sometimes=3, Slightly=2, and Not at All=1 as options.

**Table 5***Pre- and Post-Survey Response Frequencies (Social Awareness)*

<i>Pre-Survey n=20</i> <i>Post-Survey n=24</i>	Response Frequencies											
Survey Item	Completely		Mostly		Fairly		Sometimes		Slightly		Not at All	
	Pre	Post	Pre	Post	Pre	Post	Pre	Post	Pre	Post	Pre	Post
2a. I understand the perspectives of others in my school community.	8/20 (40%)	7/24 (29.2%)	5/20 (25%)	12/24 (50%)	4/20 (20%)	4/24 (16.7%)	1/20 (5%)	1/24 (4.2%)	2/10 (10%)	0/24 (0%)	0/20 (0%)	0/24 (0%)
2b. I am aware of the diversity of cultural experiences in my school community.	9/20 (45%)	15/24 (62.5%)	6/20 (30%)	9/24 (27.5%)	5/20 (25%)	0/24 (0%)	0/20 (0%)	0/24 (0%)	0/20 (0%)	0/24 (0%)	0/20 (0%)	0/24 (0%)
2c. I am able to understand and respect different perspectives in my school community.	15/20 (75%)	14/24 (58.3%)	1/20 (5%)	7/24 (29.2%)	3/20 (15%)	2/24 (8.3%)	1/20 (5%)	1/24 (4.2%)	0/20 (0%)	0/24 (0%)	0/20 (0%)	0/24 (0%)
2d. I consider the impact of my actions on others in my school community.	8/20 (40%)	10/24 (41.7%)	10/20 (50%)	12/24 (50%)	2/20 (10%)	2/24 (8.3%)	0/20 (0%)	0/24 (0%)	0/20 (0%)	0/24 (0%)	0/20 (0%)	0/24 (0%)
2e. I have a positive impact on my school community through my actions and words.	10/20 (50%)	10/24 (41.7%)	9/20 (45%)	11/24 (45.8%)	1/20 (5%)	2/24 (8.3%)	0/20 (0%)	0/24 (0%)	0/20 (0%)	1/24 (4.2%)	0/20 (0%)	0/24 (0%)

For this construct, my analyses of both pre- and post-surveys revealed intriguing patterns regarding students' social awareness. While students generally believed they understood the various perspectives of others, and felt they positively impacted the school community, there was a notable lack of intentional consideration regarding the impact of their interactions on those of different cultures or beliefs. In the post-survey, there was an increase in the percentage of respondents agreeing with items 2a-2d. For example, 79.2% of respondents reported “Completely” or “Mostly” understanding others' perspectives, a 14% increase from the pre-survey for item 2a. Remarkably, 100% of students selected “Completely” or “Mostly” agreeing that they were aware of cultural diversity in their school community (item 2b), showing a 25% increase. Similarly, 87.5% of students chose “Completely” or “Mostly” for item 2c, indicating that they understood and respected different perspectives, compared to 80% on the pre-survey. However, the post-survey results for item 2d, students considered the impact of their actions on others in my school community, showed a slight decrease in respondents selecting “Completely” or “Mostly”, with 87.5% compared to 95% on the pre-survey.

Comparing the pre-survey data with the post-survey results revealed that participation in the SAC positively influenced the social awareness of most student participants. While there was a notable increase in items related to self-reported personal growth, items 2a-2d, following the study's innovation, I observed that students did not perceive this growth as having an impact on their school community.

Next, I discuss the findings regarding the Self-Efficacy construct, which included survey items 7-15 (3a-3e). Table 6, displays the frequency distribution of student

responses before their participation in the SAC. Similar to the Social Awareness construct, the response scale also consisted of a six-point Likert scale with Completely=6, Mostly=5, Fairly=4, Sometimes=3, Slightly=2, and Not at All=1 as options.

**Table 6***Pre- and Post-Survey Response Frequencies (Self-Efficacy)*

Survey Item	Response Frequencies											
	Completely		Mostly		Fairly		Sometimes		Slightly		Not at All	
	Pre	Post	Pre	Post	Pre	Post	Pre	Post	Pre	Post	Pre	Post
<i>3a. I have the knowledge needed to effectively participate in the Student Ambassador Council.</i>	8/20 (40%)	14/24 (58.3%)	10/20 (50%)	10/24 (41.7%)	0/20 (0%)	0/24 (0%)	2/20 (10%)	0/24 (0%)	0/20 (0%)	0/24 (0%)	0/20 (0%)	0/24 (0%)
<i>3b. I am confident in my ability to work with others to achieve a common goal in my school community.</i>	13/20 (65%)	11/24 (45.8%)	5/20 (25%)	9/24 (37.5%)	1/20 (5%)	4/24 (16.7%)	1/20 (5%)	0/24 (0%)	0/20 (0%)	0/24 (0%)	0/20 (0%)	0/24 (0%)
<i>3c. I am capable of expressing my opinions and ideas in group settings.</i>	5/20 (25%)	7/24 (29.2%)	8/20 (40%)	8/24 (33.3%)	3/20 (15%)	6/24 (25%)	2/20 (10%)	2/24 (8.3%)	2/20 (10%)	1/24 (4.2%)	0/20 (0%)	0/24 (0%)
<i>3d. I believe in my ability to make a difference in my school community.</i>	8/20 (40%)	9/24 (37.5%)	5/20 (25%)	6/24 (33.3%)	4/20 (20%)	6/24 (33.3%)	2/20 (10%)	2/24 (8.3%)	1/20 (5%)	1/24 (4.2%)	0/20 (0%)	0/24 (0%)
<i>3e. I am confident in my ability to stand by my ideas or opinions in the face of disagreement with my peers.</i>	8/20 (40%)	11/24 (45.8)	7/20 (35%)	8/24 (33.3%)	2/20 (10%)	5/24 (20.8%)	3/20 (15%)	0/24 (0%)	0/20 (0%)	0/24 (0%)	0/20 (0%)	0/24 (0%)

Upon reviewing the frequencies from both the pre- and post-surveys, a notable trend emerged. Initially, 90% of students rated themselves as “Completely” or “Mostly” having the knowledge for effective SAC participation, a figure that increased to 100% post-survey. In terms of confidence in working with others (item 3b), there was a rise from 65% in the pre-survey to 83.3% post-survey. However, concerning beliefs in their abilities to make a difference in the school or community (item 3d), students’ levels of agreement decreased from 77.5% in the pre-survey to 62.5% post-survey. These findings highlight the layered nature of students' perceptions. For instance, while they felt confident in their ability to contribute to a group, many did not feel capable of expressing their opinions. This trend or, rather, the discrepancies or varied responses to these survey items, were also evident throughout other sets of data analyses. I discussed this further in a later section.

Overall, though, I observed growth in two out of five self-efficacy items. More participants chose the “Completely” or “Mostly” agree category regarding their to effectively participate in the SAC, item 3a, and their ability to uphold their ideas during disagreements, item 3e, post-SAC participation. However, there was a slight decrease in the majority of questions within this construct, contrasting with the positive trends observed in the other items. The contradiction arises from the fact that despite a decrease in the perceived ability to express ideas, there's an increase in confidence in defending those ideas. This may have been due to student participants’ confidence in speaking one-on-one with peers as compared to speaking in group settings. From this analysis, accordingly, I inferred that SAC participation did not uniformly enhance all aspects of



students' perceptions of achieving goals despite obstacles within the school setting such as challenging assignments or negative peer interactions.

The final frequency distribution from the pre-survey was aligned to the construct of Student Participation in the SAC. Results are displayed in Table 7. Pre-survey items 16-20 (4a-4e) are unique from previous items because I used them to capture data from the student participants' perceived outcomes of participation; I used the other items to measure how students reportedly felt at the time of completing the survey instrument.

Replicating the previous two constructs, the response scale consisted of a six-point Likert scale with Completely=6, Mostly=5, Fairly=4, Sometimes=3, Slightly=2, and Not at All=1 as options.

**Table 7***Pre- and Post-Survey Response Frequencies (Student Participation in the SAC)*

<i>Pre-Survey n=20</i> <i>Post-Survey n=24</i>		Response Frequency Percent											
Survey Item	Completely		Mostly		Fairly		Sometimes		Slightly		Not at All		
	Pre	Post	Pre	Post	Pre	Post	Pre	Post	Pre	Post	Pre	Post	
<i>4a. My involvement in the Student Ambassador Council will/has increased my ability to have a voice in my school community.</i>	7/20 (35%)	11/24 (45.8%)	5/20 (25%)	6/24 (25%)	5/20 (25%)	5/24 (21%)	1/20 (5%)	1/24 (4%)	2/20 (10%)	1/24 (4%)	0/20 (0%)	0/24 (0%)	
<i>4b. My involvement in the Student Ambassador Council will/has impacted my confidence in my ability to make a positive impact in my school community.</i>	8/20 (40%)	12/24 (50%)	6/20 (30%)	4/24 (17%)	4/20 (20%)	6/24 (25%)	0/20 (0%)	1/24 (4%)	2/20 (10%)	1/24 (4%)	0/20 (0%)	0/24 (0%)	
<i>4c. My involvement in the Student Ambassador Council will/has improved my awareness of the diverse perspectives of others in my school community.</i>	6/20 (30%)	11/24 (46%)	10/20 (50%)	11/24 (46%)	4/20 (20%)	2/24 (8%)	0/20 (0%)	0/24 (0%)	0/20 (0%)	0/24 (0%)	0/20 (0%)	0/24 (0%)	
<i>4d. My involvement in the Student Ambassador Council will/has influenced my ability to work effectively with others to achieve common goals in my school community.</i>	8/20 (40%)	12/24 (50%)	5/20 (25%)	7/24 (29%)	4/20 (20%)	5/24 (21%)	1/20 (5%)	0/24 (0%)	2/20 (10%)	0/24 (0%)	0/20 (0%)	0/24 (0%)	
<i>4e. My involvement in the Student Ambassador Council will/has helped me to respect different perspectives of others in my school community.</i>	13/20 (65%)	13/24 (54%)	3/20 (15%)	9/24 (37%)	2/20 (10%)	1/24 (4.2%)	0/20 (0%)	1/24 (4%)	2/20 (10%)	0/24 (0%)	0/20 (0%)	0/24 (0%)	

My analyses of pre-survey responses for items 4a-4d revealed that many students either lacked confidence in the impact of their participation or were unaware of the purpose of their involvement. However, I observed shifts in student perceptions after SAC participation. For instance, in the pre-survey, 35% of students “Completely” agreed that their involvement in the SAC would increase their ability to have a voice in the school community. This percentage increased to 45.8% in the post-survey, reflecting a 10% increase. Similarly, for item 4b, there was a 10% increase in the number of respondents “Completely” agreeing, from 40% in the pre-survey to 50% in the post-survey, indicating an enhanced confidence in students’ abilities to make a positive impact on the community. Additionally, 50% expressed agreement that SAC participation would enhance their ability to work effectively with others toward common goals (item 4d), representing a 10% increase from the pre-survey. Nevertheless, the percentage of respondents who “Completely” agreed that participation would help them respect the different perspectives of others in their school community decreased from 65.3% in the pre-survey to 54.2% in the post-survey, reflecting an approximately 11% decrease.

The data I presented in the frequency distribution analysis for items 16-20 (4a-4e) provides insights into the impact of Student Participation in the SAC. I illustrated a notable change in student perceptions and attitudes. While initial apprehensions and uncertainties were evident, post-survey results indicated a clear shift towards increased confidence and respect for differing viewpoints within the school community. The data support the importance of SAC participation as a

catalyst for empowering students to voice their opinions, collaborate effectively, and contribute positively to their school environment. By highlighting these shifts, the data inform us of the influence that student involvement in SAC activities might have on fostering a more inclusive and engaged school community.

#### Pre- and Post-Survey Analysis of Mean Scores

Table 8 displays the means and standard deviations from student participants' pre- and post-survey responses, as well as a series of paired-samples t-tests, also known as repeated-measures t-tests that I conducted using SPSS Statistics Software (IBM, n.d.). This analysis allowed me to assess the statistical significance of the difference between two measures within the same group (Salkind & Frey, 2020). Specifically, I examined my pre and post survey data, for the items within each of my survey constructs, concerning students' perceptions of the impact of participation in the SAC intervention on their Student Voice, Social Awareness and Self-Efficacy. Recall, I recognized that the Student Participation in the SAC construct impacted the others. My objective was to determine whether to reject the null hypotheses of my study, which suggested there would be no difference between the pre- and post-survey results for each survey construct (i.e., Student Voice, Social Awareness, Self-Efficacy, and SAC Participation). If I was to reject the null hypothesis, I was to accept the alternative hypothesis, indicating that a statistically significant difference between the pre- and post-study constructs existed.

In collecting my pre- and post-intervention survey data, I ensured that my sample size remained consistent to conduct my paired-samples t-tests. While more students completed the post-survey, carefully matching these data using unique IDs allowed me to

pair seventeen participants, at first. For the three participants whose IDs did not match, I matched them by comparing demographic data collected from both survey instruments. Consequently, my final sample for this stage of my analysis was comprised of  $n=20$  paired samples.

First, illustrated in Table 8 are my mean and standard deviation (SD) scores. The mean scores for all four constructs decreased post-intervention compared to the pre-intervention means. It is important to recall that each construct was designed to measure the growth in students' perception of the impact of their participation in the SAC on their SECs. The decrease in each construct may, accordingly, suggest that there were additional factors influencing the growth of SECs beyond the opportunity to share their opinions and ideas in an SVI. I will further explore this in my forthcoming discussion, particularly in light of the results obtained from triangulating my quantitative and qualitative data.

It is noteworthy that the SD scores on the post-survey were smaller than those on the pre-survey for three out of the four constructs. This reduction in variability suggests that after the intervention participants' responses became more consistent or clustered closer to the mean. This suggests a greater consensus or agreement among participants regarding their perceptions or experiences. Such a reduction in variability could reflect a more homogenous response pattern, potentially indicating a clearer understanding or more uniform impact of the intervention on participants' perceptions (Salkind & Frey, 2020).

Illustrated next were my t-values and degrees of freedom (*df*). The t-values, obtained from conducting a paired samples t-test, help to assess the variation between pre- and post-survey results within the same group of students. This statistical analysis compares the means of two sets of scores obtained from the same participants before and after an intervention or treatment. The t-values indicate whether the observed differences between the pre- and post-survey scores were statistically significant (Salkind & Frey, 2020). In this context, the variation between the groups refers to the differences in responses observed between the pre-survey and the post-survey, reflecting the impact of participation in the SAC. My degrees of freedom ( $df=19$ ) represent the number of independent student respondents in the study who were free to vary without being constrained by any fixed value (Salkind & Frey, 2020). Being free to vary means that each student's response is independent of the others, allowing for unique perspectives and experiences to contribute to the overall dataset. I set my significance value at  $p < .05$ , as also defined by Salkind & Frey (2020), as the typical significance level or threshold commonly set by social science researchers to help them prevent rejecting a null hypothesis when it is true. Recall that I also calculated and evaluated each mean's effects' effect size (i.e., using Cohen's *d*) for each construct's mean difference pre- and post-intervention across the constructs of Student Voice, social awareness, self-efficacy, and SAC participation.

**Table 8***Paired-Samples t-Test Mean Comparison of Survey Constructs*

<i>n</i> =20	Pre-Survey		Post-Survey		<i>Mean Difference</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p-value</i>	<i>Cohen's d</i>
	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>						
Student Voice	2.99	.93	2.77	1.23	-.22	1.20	-.821	19	.42	.26
Social Awareness	1.75	.57	1.54	.48	-.21	.81	-1.16	19	.26	.19
Self-Efficacy	1.97	.77	1.72	.61	-.25	.85	-1.29	19	.21	.16
Participation in the SAC	2.03	.99	1.74	.75	-.30	1.17	-1.19	19	.25	.18

Survey items 1–5, forming the Student Voice construct, yielded an overall mean score of 2.99 in the pre-survey, which was higher than the post-survey mean score of 2.77. This suggests a decrease (i.e., -.22) in students' perception of their ability to share opinions and provide input after participating in the SAC. What this suggests is that after participating in the SAC intervention, participating students may have perceived a decrease in their sense of empowerment or influence over decision-making processes within the school community.

Similarly, survey items 6-10, related to Social Awareness, resulted in a pre-survey mean score of 1.75, higher than the post-survey mean score of 1.54, indicating a decline (i.e., -.21) in students' perception of their ability to notice and care about others' well-being. What this suggests is that after participating in the SAC intervention, participating students may have experienced a decrease in their awareness of and empathy towards the well-being of others within the school community.

For the self-efficacy construct, survey items 11-15, the pre-survey mean score was 1.97, slightly higher than the post-survey mean score of 1.72, suggesting a slight decrease (i.e., -.25) in students' beliefs in themselves and their abilities to achieve goals after participating in the SAC. What this suggests is that after participating in the SAC intervention, participating students may have perceived a slight decline in their confidence and belief in their abilities to accomplish tasks and achieve their goals.

Finally, participation in the SAC construct, survey items 16-20, showed a pre-survey mean score of 2.03 and a post-survey mean score of 1.74, or a decrease of -.30, indicating students did not reportedly perceive that participation in the SAC had a positive effect. What this suggests is that after participating in the SAC intervention, participating students may have experienced a perceived decline in the effectiveness or impact of their participation in the SAC.

Again, the decline in all four constructs suggests that there were additional factors influencing the growth of SECs beyond the opportunity to share their voice through participation in the SAC. These findings underscore the importance of further analysis of data collected related to the impact of SAC interventions on Student Voice, social awareness, and self-efficacy. I delve deeper into this potential in my forthcoming discussion, particularly through the examination of the qualitative data I obtained from students' responses to my survey instrument's open-ended questions, research team meeting observations, and student interviews.

Upon further analysis, however, it is important to note that both the *p*-values and effect sizes (i.e., Cohen's *d*) for each of the measured constructs indicated a lack of any



statistical significance or practically meaningful differences. *P*-values determine the statistical significance of any observed results while effect sizes provide information about the magnitude of the observed effects. Both are important in interpreting the findings of any statistical analysis (Sullivan & Feinn, 2012; Salkind & Frey, 2020).

The *p*-values for each construct were greater than the significance level I set at  $p < 0.05$ , meaning there was insufficient evidence to reject the null hypothesis for any of these constructs. Consequently, accepting the null hypothesis given the lack of statistical significance that I observed across all four constructs implies that participation in the SAC did not apparently impact students' SECs in either direction in a statistically significant way. That is, even though I observed mean losses across constructs, because they were not statistically significant, there was insufficient evidence to conclude that participation in the SAC significantly impacted students' SECs. These findings suggest that any observed changes in the survey constructs may have been, rather, due to random variation versus any direct effects of my SAC intervention.

In terms of practical significance, again, I used Cohen's *d* to compute effect sizes for the same four constructs, using Cohen's *d* as a measure of any size of any effect which provides insight into the magnitude of the differences observed between pre- and post-intervention scores and highlights the extent of any intervention's practical or real-world impact on the constructs measured (Salkind & Frey, 2020). Using the effect size categorizations that I previously outlined in my data analyses section,  $d = 0.2$  are considered small effects,  $d = 0.5$  are considered medium effects, and  $d = 0.8$  are considered

large effects. All of the effects that I observed were small. What this means is that the intervention may have had a minimal real-world impact on the measured constructs.

In conclusion, despite observing a numerical decline across all four survey constructs and identifying a small degree of practical significance in my observed effect sizes, it is crucial to emphasize that my quantitative analyses did not reveal any statistically significant differences in participating students' perceptions regarding the impact on their SECs, Student Voice, Social Awareness and Self-Efficacy, following their engagement in the SAC. My analyses of these data suggest that factors beyond a SVI, more specifically through participation in the SAC, may have influenced the students' perceptions of the growth of SECs. As such, while my quantitative analyses do offer some insights, integrating additional qualitative data from the post-survey instrument, as well as other forthcoming data collection methods, will further enhance understanding about the SAC's impact on participating students.

### **Qualitative Survey Results**

Based on the findings from the quantitative data, as just noted, it was evident that a deeper exploration of my post-survey, student responses to open-ended questions were necessary to better grasp the impact of participating students' perceptions of their involvement in the SAC. Recall, SAC participants wrote one to two sentence responses to ten open-ended questions on the post-survey. I wrote each question to align to one of the research constructs. Utilizing a qualitative approach to analyze my post-survey qualitative data, accordingly, enabled me to uncover additional insights gleaned from

student participants that may not have been captured by the quantitative data that I solicited via my pre- and post-survey instruments.

Recall that when examining the data from the student responses to these open-ended questions in my post-survey, I employed the CA approach described prior (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008). I selected this approach, again, because CA allows for the identification of patterns within and across data, shedding light on the experiences and perspectives of student participants. Next, and as such, I analyze results by survey construct, using the same constructs defined prior.

**Student Voice.** The quantitative analysis of scores for items 1-5, representing the Student Voice construct, indicated a perceived decrease in students' ability to utilize their voice. To gain deeper insights, I conducted a CA on the student responses to the open-ended survey questions for this construct, uncovering five themes that expanded upon participating students' self-reported perceptions about sharing their voice through participation in the SAC.

The first theme revolved around whether students felt comfortable expressing their opinions. Students expressed varying degrees of comfort, with some stating, "I am confident about my voice as a student" or "I feel comfortable and able to share my opinions because student ambassadors allowed just that and made me feel like if there was something that I thought should've been different I had a chance to change it." However, another admitted, "I don't always feel comfortable sharing my opinions and providing input in the way I learn." These student statements illustrated the spectrum of comfort levels they experienced and suggested that there may be opportunities for

adjustments in how students share their opinions within the SAC structure. For instance, students could be given the option to write their answers anonymously instead of answering in front of their peers or staff members.

A second theme focused on the differing comfort levels students experienced when sharing their opinions with different staff members. For instance, one student mentioned,

Sometimes [when I feel comfortable sharing my opinion], usually it depends on what teacher I'm talking to about [sharing my opinions]. For example, if I am talking to my homeroom teacher, Mrs. [X], the Principal, Mrs. [Y], the Assistant Principal, etc., it is very easy for me to voice my opinion.

Similarly, another student stated, "I do feel comfortable [sharing my ideas and opinions], although I wouldn't go to some staff to share my ideas." These statements exemplify the importance of positive interactions between students and staff. It was evident that students were willing to share their ideas or opinions, but only with those they felt would listen.

Third, and additionally, some students expressed feeling comfortable discussing learning methods, but less so when it came to providing suggestions regarding school rules or class procedures due to perceived strictness from teachers, as expressed by one participant:

I do feel comfortable and able to share my opinions and provide input about the ways I learn but not that much about school rules. Teachers and staff are very

strict about the rules and don't really listen to students in my opinion. Once they have their mind set, they don't really care.

A second student shared, "I feel like some teachers often don't care about the input [about classroom rules and procedures] from students so I just don't share." These statements further support the sentiment that some teachers may not prioritize student opinions, particularly regarding rules and procedures. This was reinforced by the fact that two of the five research teams identified a lack of respect from staff towards students within the learning environment as a key issue, as noted prior in my description of my SAC innovation.

My analysis of student statements revealed a fourth theme regarding the fluctuation of students' comfort levels that were dependent on certain situations, with some students feeling confident in smaller settings but less so in larger crowds. This was evidenced via student statements such as,

I do and can [share my opinions], but it matters on the situation. Some teachers want to keep the same [rules and procedures] and don't want to change [their practices], which I respect. Although, I wish I could change [teachers' willingness to change] sometimes.

Another student shared, "I feel confident and I can share my opinion, but I was scared at our [student recognition] assembly [hosted by a student research-team] or in large groups [given approximately 650 students attended this recognition assembly]."

My fifth and final theme emphasized how individual personality traits, such as students' reported levels of shyness influenced their willingness to share their opinions

about the school rules or their learning. For example, one student stated, “I do mostly feel comfortable although I am shy when it comes to talking,” and another stated, “Yes, mostly, but I am a little shy.” One student expanded on the idea by sharing the following statement:

I feel like I could [share my voice] if I wasn't as shy as I am, but I do only because I'm in NJHS [i.e., National Junior Honor Society] and I am a member of the SAC. If I was just a regular student with decent grades and no clubs, I wouldn't be able to share my opinions as much as I'm able to right now.

These statements highlight the influence of individual personality traits on students' comfort levels in expressing their opinions. This may suggest that initiatives such as the SAC serve as safe spaces, allowing students to extend themselves beyond their comfort zones. This may also accentuate the significance of fostering supportive environments where students feel empowered to voice their opinions, irrespective of their inherent traits.

Contrary to my quantitative analyses, my analyses of these qualitative data indicated that most students *did* feel comfortable expressing their voices, given nuanced perspectives. Before proceeding, it is important to recall that  $n=24$  students completed the post-intervention survey. When I counted the student responses to the questions for the Student Voice construct, 50% (12/24) of respondents noted that they felt comfortable sharing their voice, with eight of these 12 students specifically citing their involvement in the SAC as a reason. Specific examples of students' responses to support that they felt comfortable sharing their voice included, “Yes, because the student ambassador program

has helped me have more of a say and makes me more comfortable,” “Ever since student ambassadors started, I do feel more comfortable about saying my opinions,” and “I feel comfortable saying my opinions when I am with my [research-team] working on respect.”

In conclusion, these qualitative data support the notion that factors beyond students' participation in the SAC influenced their perceptions. Themes derived from my analyses suggest that contributing factors may include personality traits, interpersonal communications with others, and students' audiences. Therefore, it is crucial to adapt to accommodate the needs of the students, also in terms of continuing to create safe spaces for students to share their voices. For instance, limiting the number of audience members or forming heterogeneous groups based on students' self-perceived abilities to speak in front of large audiences or groups of staff members could be beneficial.

**Social Awareness.** In alignment with the Student Voice construct, my quantitative analyses of scores for items 6-10, representing the Social Awareness construct, suggested a perceived decline in students' awareness of and concern for the well-being of others, as well as their understanding of how their actions and words impacted them. However, my analyses of the qualitative data from the open-ended questions about social awareness revealed a contrasting perspective, again. For this construct, I counted the student responses and determined that most students (20/24, or 83%) expressed a strong sense of social awareness, acknowledging their impact on others within the school community.

More specifically, I identified three content codes from student participants' responses. The first theme I discovered was that while students acknowledged their social awareness, they admitted to occasional lapses in practice when interacting with others. For instance, one student noted, "Yes, I do. Sometimes I act without considering the impact on people, but I've recently become more aware." Another confessed, "I feel like sometimes I can be quite rude to people when I'm angry. To answer the question, I do feel how my words impact others, but sometimes I don't really care depending on the person." These students' responses emphasized that simply being aware of others and their perspectives does not necessarily translate into actively demonstrating understanding or acceptance through words or actions. These student statements, indicative of their young teen stages of development, reveal a common theme of navigating the intricacies of social awareness. While they show a budding understanding of how their words and actions affect others, their admissions of occasional lapses align with them being in their developmental phase, characterized by them exploring their identities as well as navigating social dynamics typical of young teens (CDC, 2021).

The second theme I found was that some students associated social awareness with kindness, believing this personality trait made them more socially aware. For instance, a student wrote, "I feel like I'm able to notice and care for others' well-being because I see myself as a kind person." Another wrote, "Yes, I feel able because I am a very friendly person." Similarly, one student expressed believing they must be socially aware by writing, "I know that some of the kids I talk to say that I am a nice, yet cool person, they learn from me and also see me as a role model so yes [to having social



awareness].” While student responses indicated a potential lack of comprehensive understanding of social awareness, they did seem to recognize that being respectful, kind, and courteous to others was important.

Before discussing the next theme, it is important to recall that social awareness is encompassed not only by empathy towards others' emotions but also an appreciation for diverse cultural backgrounds and societal contexts (CASEL, 2023). With this in mind, the third and final theme I uncovered here was that some students viewed social awareness narrowly as the recognition of others' feelings, rather than understanding broader cultural perspectives. For example, one student stated, “I understand that the way I act and speak every day in front of others can affect not only the way they feel but how they may act or respond to others.” Another explained, “I personally do believe that I am really good at recognizing others' feelings, and I care for them by asking what I can do to help. I am very aware of how my actions and words affect others.” Another shared, “Yes, I feel like I am able to notice and care about the feelings of others because I mostly keep my thoughts to myself in order not to hurt anyone's feelings.”

It was evident, as such, that there existed a limited conceptualization of social awareness among the student participants, with many predominantly viewing social awareness as an emotional trait. Rather than recognizing social awareness as a multifaceted construct encompassing cognitive, behavioral, and empathetic dimensions, participating students primarily associated this competency with kindness and friendliness. As further encapsulated by one student's reflection:

It is not a choice of power or because of your power. You can impact many people with your words and actions. Everyone has to recognize the world around them and know each person matters. Just treat others the way you want to be treated.

In summary, participating students' limited understanding of social awareness suggests that they may overlook important aspects of understanding others' perspectives and communicating effectively in diverse social settings. By mainly focusing on emotional traits for social awareness, students might also miss out on the need for critical thinking and cultural sensitivity, which are crucial for truly understanding others (CASEL, 2023).

**Self-Efficacy.** The mean rating for the Self-Efficacy construct on the post-survey was 1.72, suggesting that students possessed a modest belief in themselves or their ability to navigate challenges and achieve goals. However, the qualitative analyses of student responses to the open-ended questions related to the Self-Efficacy construct revealed a more complex understanding of these data. In fact, only three respondents expressed doubts about their confidence levels.

More specifically, two themes emerged. Students felt confident, and other students did not. However, within these categories, varying degrees of confidence were evident, discernible through students' choice of language. Examples of these varying degrees included phrases such as "fully confident," "not as confident," "very confident," and "confident enough."

After categorizing students' statements, it was noted that 20 of the 24 participating students provided a response to the question presented in the post-survey for the Self-Efficacy construct. Among these respondents, 16 (80%) conveyed a sense of self-efficacy, albeit at different levels. Many of these students expressed their confidence, succinctly stating, "Yes, I feel confident in my ability to achieve my goals despite all the challenges and obstacles," "I do feel confident in myself because I know what I'm capable of and am able to do things really well," or "Yes, I do feel confident in my ability to achieve goals because I am great at overcoming obstacles." Such statements demonstrated a strong sense of self-efficacy among these individuals, illustrating not only confidence but also a belief in their capacity to surmount obstacles and accomplish goals.

Another group of students demonstrated confidence while acknowledging opportunities for growth or the importance of collaboration for success. For example, one student shared, "I think I can overcome obstacles with others to achieve a common goal." Another shared, "I have more confidence in myself when I have others supporting me." Yet another reflected, "I'm not as confident as I would like to be, but I feel like after joining the Student Ambassadors my confidence has increased." These statements, again, help to stress the importance of creating venues for students to work together.

Conversely, students who expressed a lack of confidence in achieving their goals attributed this sentiment to various reasons. One student admitted, "I'm not the most confident person. I'm afraid to share my opinions sometimes, and I don't like trying new things that I think will be too hard." Another revealed, "I'm not a confident person and I have trouble speaking in front of others, but it really just depends on my mood and

who[m] I'm with [sic].” Lastly, a student attributed their lack of confidence to group dynamics, stating, “I don't feel confident about achieving my goals because of my group.”

The diverse reflections of students expressing a lack of self-efficacy showcases the multifaceted nature of their concerns, ranging from personal insecurities to challenges with public speaking and apprehensions regarding group interactions. In other words, these varied perspectives highlight the complexity of the factors contributing to students' feelings of self-doubt and emphasize the importance of addressing individual needs and circumstances in fostering confidence and empowerment.

**Participation in the SAC.** Finally, I presented students with three questions on the post-survey regarding their involvement in the SAC. The purpose of these additional inquiries was to gather information about potential secondary outcomes associated with their participation (e.g., participants becoming more confident, self-directed learners, and active contributors to their schools and communities), as well as to understand how participation impacted students' perspective on Student Voice, Social Awareness, and Self-Efficacy. Recall, I hypothesized that by engaging in the SAC, students would experience increased confidence and see themselves as self-directed learners as active contributors to their school community.

During my CA of these responses, students overwhelmingly expressed positive impacts resulting from their participation in the SAC. When I questioned them about the effect of their SAC involvement on their Student Voice, all 24 students (100%) responded positively. For instance, students articulated that the SAC “helped me to share

my voice and have confidence in my beliefs,” or the SAC “impacted my confidence by helping me feel like I can say stuff without feeling judged by teachers. I feel I am more open with my voice now.” Another remarked, “when we were first talking about what we wanted to change or improve about our school, it made me think that we were actually able to improve our school from the students’ eyes.”

Out of the 24 students, 22 (92%) also conveyed a positive impact of SAC participation on their Social Awareness. Two students indicated that they were already socially aware, and participation had no additional impact on them in this regard. One student stated, “I have always respected peoples’ differences so I do not feel there has been a difference [after participation in the SAC]. While the second one shared,

There are no particular ways [my social awareness was impacted by participating in the SAC], my parents taught me to be respectful of others and to treat people how I want to be treated. Conducting a study did cause me to need to get everyone's voice and opinion, I guess that made me feel as if I should [practice social awareness] more often.

In contrast, most students expressed realizing positive impacts from participating by writing, “I realized that there are two sides and point of views to every situation” or “Understanding how people feel helped me realize that everyone thinks differently and needs different things.” Additionally, several students emphasized, “I’ve learned that people have all sorts of backgrounds and may not have it as easy as other people. Treating everyone with respect can make the community a better place,” “Being in the Student Ambassador program has made me reflect on what others are going through,” or

“[Participation in the SAC] helped me recognize people who had hard times and people with different cultures. It helped me speak up for myself and others.” These responses underscored a broader understanding of student participants’ social awareness beyond merely avoiding hurting others’ feelings, contrary to the themes observed from the direct responses to the questions related to Social Awareness construct (e.g., students viewed social awareness as the recognition of others’ feelings rather than understanding broader cultural perspectives). These student responses showcased that students believe social awareness encompasses a deeper appreciation for diverse perspectives and respect within the community.

When specifically asked about how participation in the SAC impacted their confidence, ability to be self-directed learners, and civic engagement, all 24 statements (100%) supported that participating in the SAC had a positive impacts. Students shared, “During the meetings, talking with the other people, really made me feel like I could make a change in the school community,” “My participation has impacted my confidence in talking to people and my belief that I can make a change,” and “Understanding what students think about themselves and the ability for me to give others help, boosted my confidence.” The unanimous affirmations of the positive impact expressed by student participants suggests confirmation of the secondary impacts of participating in the SAC. More specifically, participants reported feeling more confident, becoming self-directed learners, and actively contributing to their schools and communities.

Overall, despite the declines observed via my quantitative analyses, my qualitative analyses of student responses on the post-survey with regards to the impact of

Student Participation in the SAC demonstrated that providing a venue for students to share their voices had a positive impact on their SECs. Again, this suggests that additional factors, such as personality traits or parent influence, need to be considered.

One student's response summarized this best:

Being a part of the Student Ambassador has helped me see other perspectives by letting us do surveys and see the impact of what we did. It also helped me talk about my perspective on things at the same time. My confidence has grown, and I know I can make a difference. I really enjoyed being a Student Ambassador.

In summary, my analyses revealed a variety of responses from students for each construct, indicating diverse confidence levels influenced by factors such as experiences, backgrounds, and personal attributes. Despite these indicators of students' diverse perspectives, important to recall is that another consistent trend emerged, whereby students consistently rated themselves in the "Slightly" range on these Likert-type items on the post-intervention survey. These contradictions prompt further inquiry into potential factors, including the nuances of the Likert-type scale I used in and of itself (e.g., students not recognizing the impact of selecting "Always" versus "Almost Always"), which may have influenced how students reported their perceptions and contributed to their ratings. I will also explore this further in my forthcoming section of the triangulation of my qualitative and quantitative data.

### **Observations**

Recall that I conducted approximately nine hours of SAC meeting observations during the intervention's implementation phase. Students participated in seven weekly

meetings led by their adult consultants, utilizing the YPAR protocol. During these sessions, students identified and devised implementation strategies for interventions aimed at addressing various student identified challenges within the school community. Recall, two research teams focused on addressing a lack of respect from teachers towards students, while the remaining three investigated issues such as the lack of school spirit, limited student recognition, and insufficient opportunities for social interaction among peers. Subsequently, the research teams developed data collection methods, with all five teams opting for pre- and post-surveys distributed to designated groups of 5th-8th grade students. Following each team's intervention implementation, meetings concluded with research teams analyzing the collected data to assess their interventions' effectiveness and to determine next steps, (e.g., recommendations for integrating the intervention into the school's practices or adjusting it for a second round of research.)

It is also important to recall here that all meetings occurred at the same time each week, allowing me to create audio recordings for each session. I then uploaded the recordings to be transcribed using Sonix (Sonix, n.d.), providing a written document that I referenced while analyzing each collaboration. I listened to each recording at least three times to conduct a CA, similar to my qualitative analyses of my open-ended survey questions. As also detailed in the methods section, I created and used an observational protocol to categorize observations in alignment with my RQs and theoretical framework. I finished my analyses by reviewing each category to identify themes related to my same constructs: Student Voice, Social Awareness and Self-Efficacy; although, I opted not to analyze the data for the Student Participation in the SAC construct since the observations



were conducted during their active involvement. Moreover, I recognized, again, that the Student Participation construct influenced the others, and analyzing participation during the observations themselves would not provide additional insights. Next, I share my findings per construct.

**Student Voice.** In completing a CA of student statements, I identified connections to student voice through expressions of EC and fidelity (Darder, 2009; McLaren, 2017). Recall from the literature review, EC, as defined by Freire (1998), encompasses self-driven inquiry that fosters critical thinking and a passion for learning, empowering individuals to actively seek knowledge to better understand the world. This curiosity propels students to ask questions, explore topics, and critically evaluate information, thus enabling them to express their voices by actively engaging in the learning process by sharing their perspectives. Similarly, fidelity, as described by Erikson (1962), entails adhering to one's values and beliefs, even in challenging circumstances. Fidelity involves honoring students' voices by valuing their perspectives and experiences, thereby upholding the authenticity of their contributions within the learning environment. Using these lenses, as I examined student statements, two overarching themes emerged for this construct.

The first theme I identified was, students value relationships and respect. Conversations throughout the observations involved discussion of respect between students and teachers, as well as among peers. For example, one student stated,

I think the reason why we choose the topic of respect is because a lot of students here really want to figure out why teachers don't get respect or try to see that we are feeling that we don't get the respect we want from them [the teachers].

Another shared, “So then it's like, if [students and teachers are] aware [that respect is important], then why are there so many people being disrespected?” A third student shared, “Sometimes little kids look up to the higher grades and see how [older students] act and treat teachers. Then [students in] the younger grades will think it is okay and also act and treat teachers the same way.” Though indirectly, these statements addressed the dynamics of respect and relationships within the student body and between students and teachers. The recurring discussions on respect and relationships among students also emphasized how these factors influence students' comfort level with using their voice within the school community. These insights, moreover, highlighted the role of fostering a culture of mutual respect and understanding in empowering students to express themselves confidently, and to contribute meaningfully to the learning environment.

The second theme I identified here was the importance of student well-being and engagement. When identifying challenges at the school, students often referred to problems that involved respect, which was discussed in the first theme, or their overall feelings throughout the school day. This was also evident in the research topics selected by the students. Here, three of the five groups selected topics related to this theme (i.e., school spirit, student recognition, and the need for more time to socialize with their peers). Beyond the selection of the research topics, student statements or questions

collected throughout the meetings also supported this theme. One student asked, “If we were to add or extend recess, do you think or do you feel that your attitude and behavior will be better or worse? Another student wrote, “I think that if we get a longer break then we will have more energy to do all the class work and won’t try to speak with our friends when the teacher is talking.” Though these statements were originally about the need for more time to socialize, a member of another research-team shared their experience by stating, “So I felt more heard and recognized after hosting [student recognition assembly] which emphasized that being actively engaged in a school activity had a positive impact on the students’ well-being.” These statements collectively emphasized the significance of promoting student well-being and engagement in the school environment. They also underscored the importance of proactive measures, such as creating SVIs such as the SAC, to enable students to identify solutions to address their needs, foster inclusivity, and promote student empowerment to better help all students thrive.

In fostering an environment where EC and fidelity are valued, students are empowered to articulate their perspectives and actively contribute to their learning community, laying the foundation for critical thinking, open dialogue, and a culture of mutual respect (Mirra et al. 2016). This suggests that providing students with a platform such as the SAC to advocate for their needs, address challenges, and shape the direction of their educational experiences, also in collaboration with school staff, may positively impact the development of students’ SECs, specifically in terms of Student Voice for this part of my analyses. This also aligns with my qualitative analyses of my open-ended survey questions and supports my hypothesis that additional factors, beyond Student

Participation in the SAC, may influence student perceptions on the impact participation had on their SECs.

**Social Awareness.** Similar to the analysis I conducted on Student Voice, retrieved from student statements made during research team meeting observations, my CA of Social Awareness began by linking the construct to the theoretical framework. Social Awareness, like Student Voice, also shares an inherent connection with EC, as both concepts nurture critical thinking. Through EC, students were able to consider societal dynamics, which included influences from their homes, schools, and interactions with peers (Lindholm, 2018; Post & van der Molen, 2021). Furthermore, Social Awareness also included civic engagement, as it involved actively participating in the community and advocating for social change, thereby promoting awareness of social issues and eliciting action to address them (APA, 2009). By acknowledging these connections, my subsequent analysis revealed three themes.

The first theme I identified was student empowerment through communication. Mirra et al. (2016), discussed how YPAR empowered young people to become active agents in their own learning and in the process of social change. Students' statements demonstrated this, like in the following:

I feel like when teachers think students do something, the teacher's automatic response would be to yell at [the students] instead of understanding what happened. Teachers need to take a moment to let students talk and explain where they came from.

This statement suggests a desire for teachers to better understand students' perspectives and behaviors, indicating a call for increased student empowerment in shaping disciplinary approaches and communication. Another student shared, "Maybe [teachers] can be more respectful, like hearing [students] out? Because sometimes they just start yelling and not listen[ing] to what [students] have to say about their side of the story."

This statement highlights a desire for respectful communication and a plea for teachers to listen to students' perspectives, suggesting an empowerment of students to advocate for fair treatment and respectful dialogue. A third statement that supports this theme is,

I know on the [daily morning announcements hosted by the school administration team] there's like the birthdays [when student birthdays are announced] and then there's like the book readers [where students who have read 50, 75 or 100 books are announced]. I realized that a lot of the sixth-grade teachers don't do that [share the names of the book readers] anymore. We don't know why, but they don't tell [student names] for announcements anymore.

This statement reflects an awareness of changes in school practices and a willingness to question and advocate for improvements, indicating an empowerment of students to voice concerns and seek accountability from school staff.

Overall, these student statements exemplify the importance of empowering students to actively participate in shaping their educational experiences and advocating for respectful communication within the school environment. As highlighted in Hattie's (2016) research, a positive classroom climate, characterized by trust, respect, and support, is foundational for promoting student engagement and motivation.

As I progressed with my CA, a noticeable trend, the second theme, regarding environmental influences emerged. It became increasingly apparent that students' perceptions and experiences were not solely shaped by interpersonal communication but were also influenced by various environmental factors, including the location where interactions occurred and the tone or atmosphere present within a classroom. One student shared, "I feel like the environment affects whether shy kids will talk during recess and then feel confident enough to go up in class and speak." This thought was furthered by another student stating,

It is just the environment of a classroom; it affects the entire thing [student's willingness to engage in discourse]. If I'm in a negative environment, I'm not going to feel the best. I'm not going to share ideas or even respond to questions. So, I feel like [the environment in the classroom] definitely can add on to leading to the infractions [negative marks earned by students from teachers for being off task].

Another statement highlighted that students were also unwilling to engage with others based on environmental influences beyond the classroom by articulating,

Think about those assemblies [quarterly recognition assemblies], I noticed how teachers recognize the students who got the awards, but some students are rarely recognized, and I don't want to cheer for others because I think it is mean not to just recognize the entire class.

Examining environmental influences underscored the interplay between physical surroundings, classroom atmosphere, and student engagement. By acknowledging the

impact of these factors, educators can create learning environments that promote EC and civic engagement, leading to an increased social awareness among learners.

I identified the third and final theme within the Social Awareness construct as community involvement. Students showcased their dedication to enhancing the school community by proposing actionable solutions to address various issues and advocating for meaningful change for both students and staff members. Students' suggestions aimed to promote school spirit, foster greater student involvement, and ensure inclusivity and recognition for all students by eliciting suggestions from both students and staff. Moreover, students' commitments extended beyond mere discussion; they actively participated in weekly meetings and collaborated on initiatives that could positively impact staff and students across all grade levels, from K-8. To ensure everyone's voices were heard, one student suggested,

We need to ensure that we're seeking input from both students and staff, not just students. If staff members aren't included, there might be dissatisfaction with these spirit days. It's important to involve everyone in the decision-making process to maintain balance and prevent potential issues.

Another participant insisted, "We need to just make sure it's the whole school [to participate in the survey] because we don't want to be biased about our actions at all."

Another student expressed, "This can help us understand not just about school spirit, but other stuff. Maybe see if boys have different opinions than girls on spirit day."

Community involvement not only strengthens social bonds but also cultivates a heightened sense of social awareness among students and the wider school community.

Through active participation and collaboration, individuals become more aware of the needs and perspectives of others, thereby contributing to a more inclusive learning environment (CASEL, 2023). This further suggests that providing a platform, such as the SAC, empowers students to actively address environmental or other concerns and advocate for positive changes within their school community, fostering a culture of social responsibility and positively impacting student SECs (CASEL, 2023; Hattie, 2016; Mirra, et al. 2016).

**Self-Efficacy.** As I finished the CA of the data that I collected from my observations, I, again, began by connecting the Self-Efficacy construct to concepts discussed within the theoretical framework. Self-Efficacy is closely related to self-confidence, self-directed learning, and agency. Self-efficacy refers to an individual's belief in their ability to accomplish specific tasks or goals (CASEL, 2023). When someone has high self-efficacy, they are more likely to have confidence in their abilities, which in turn can lead to greater self-directed learning and agency. Self-directed learning involves taking initiative and responsibility for one's own learning process, which requires a certain level of confidence in one's abilities (Hattie, 2008, 2020). Similarly, agency refers to the capacity to act independently and make choices that influence one's outcomes (McLeod, 2018), which is closely tied to having confidence in one's abilities and a sense of self-efficacy (CASEL, 2023). As I move into my discussion of the CA of student statements, the importance of making these connections, between self-efficacy, self-confidence, self-directed learning, and agency, lies in the acknowledgment that various factors may impact students' perceptions of their experiences in the SAC.



As I delved into the CA, considering the previously described connections, I identified two overarching themes: resilience and personal growth. Both ideas became salient in the final research team meetings as students were reviewing their survey results and considering next steps. The first theme, resilience, was supported by student statements such as, “I definitely think we could do it [improve student perceptions regarding school spirit]. It would just take more, a lot more, time and a lot more consistency in posting these surveys.” This statement reflects a determination to overcome challenges and achieve goals through persistence and hard work.

Another team shared, “We've decided we'd like to continue our campaign [identifying more opportunities to recognize students]. This is because we gathered an unsatisfactory amount of info, not enough to make any impact [on student perceptions], and we hope that this could change if we continue.” This statement demonstrated a commitment to perseverance despite initial setbacks, indicating a belief in the potential for positive change through continued effort. Another student thought, “Maybe we could either try another survey or we can just do a couple more spirit days. Maybe we can come back in a month or so and do a bigger survey.” These sentiments reflect a collective determination to persist in their efforts despite encountering challenges, demonstrating a shared belief in the possibility of effecting positive change through ongoing engagement and adaptation of their strategies.

In continuing to persevere, students began to experience and express statements to support the second theme of personal growth. More expressly, as the student-led research cycles ended, I began to hear them make statements that supported their own personal

growth. One student exclaimed, “I definitely think this is a great place [the team received positive results from their pre- and post-survey]. I'm glad we asked more questions and adjusted our approach [changed their methods from interviews to surveys]. I feel like we've made a positive impact.” Another student shared, “I didn't think we would be able to finish our research. It’s incredible how much we've accomplished. I hope we get to do this again.” Lastly, a student pondered, “Is this something we'll have to do in high school? I feel ready to teach older students about what we've learned.” These statements illustrate how participants in the SAC evolved in their attitudes and perspectives demonstrating personal growth through their experiences and interactions. Notably, these anecdotes, again, challenged the quantitative data, suggesting that student engagement in the SAC may have indeed fostered positive growth in participating students’ SECs.

I further investigated these qualitative data to assess the perceived effects of Student Participation in the SAC on the constructs of Student Voice, Social Awareness, and Self-Efficacy. Recall that this involved conducting interviews with five student participants, ensuring representation from each grade level or research team to capture diverse perspectives. Through these interviews, I aimed to gain deeper insights into how student engagement in an SVI, such as the SAC, influenced student participants’ perspectives and overall experiences within the school community. I discuss the findings I derived via my interviews next.

## **Interviews**

In alignment with my qualitative analyses of the data derived via my open-ended survey questions and observations, I also completed a CA for my participating students’

interview responses. Recall to collect data from a diverse group of student participants, I interviewed five students, one from each research team, and each interview took an average of 15 minutes. It is important to note that I utilized an unstructured interview format which allowed me to have some flexibility to be able to ask clarifying questions and seek different information from different students (Leedy & Ormrod, 2010). I did this to help me guide each interview and ensure some level of consistency, using predetermined questions that I developed based on my RQs.

Recall that I opted not to analyze the data specifically for the Student Participation in the SAC construct, as I designed the interview question to determine its impact on these other constructs. Moreover, I recognized, again, that Student Participation influenced the other constructs and analyzing student responses specifically regarding students' participation would not provide additional insights. For these interviews, I also gathered additional data to help me determine if students' secondary goals (i.e., increases in confidence, self-directed learning, and civic engagement) were impacted by Student Participation in the SAC. Next, I shared my findings per these other three constructs.

**Student Voice.** In alignment with RQ 2 (i.e., How and to what extent did participating in the SAC affect participating students' confidence to use their voice to impact change in their school and community?), I asked students how participation in the SAC influenced students' confidence in expressing their opinions and ideas within the school. All five students reported that their involvement in the SAC empowered them to voice their thoughts and perspectives. One student stated,

It [participation in the SAC] effected it [confidence] positively because you get a say in things and it makes you more confident that you can express your thoughts and they'll [school staff] actually listen to you.

Another student shared, "Being in the Student Ambassador program, it gave me an opportunity to express how I feel, but also to make other students' voices feel heard. It [participating in the SAC] just taught me that our [students'] opinions matter." Another student shared how making connections within the SAC helped by explaining,

It's definitely made it a lot easier [to share ideas] because now I feel like I know a few more teachers that can actually help me with the stuff that I need help with [sic]. Like, if it wasn't for this, I would have never known Miss Z at all.

The students' reflections suggested that involvement in the SAC not only enhanced their confidence in expressing opinions but also showed the importance of collaboration with peers or staff in fostering positive change within the school community. Students further elaborated on this idea as they responded to the question, "In what ways do you think the SAC has helped you develop the skills necessary to use your voice to make a difference?" A student shared,

I'm glad that I signed up for the program. I felt I was impacted because I learned a good way [YPAR] to work with others, and I was able to make a difference in a way that made sense, and we [the research team] had data to show our ideas work.

Another student explained, "I feel that we [the research team] all gained confidence to state our opinions and say everything respectfully. Even if we disagreed, we learned to compromise." An additional participant explained,

In the first two [SAC meetings] we went over ways to collect data. I definitely learned a lot from that, especially with the anonymous stuff [making surveys anonymous]. As much as we [as the research team] wanted to do video recordings, we found out [other students'] privacy is kind of important to them. Learning [and using] the anonymous factor kind of made people want to express themselves a little bit more.

The reflections shared by students in the SAC conveyed the impact of their participation on their confidence and collaborative skills, underscoring the importance of nurturing student voices. Their insights not only showcased personal growth but also underscored the value of respectful collaboration, as well as the meaningful student-staff connections that reportedly empowered students to utilize their voices effectively.

My CA, focused on the impact of Student Participation in the SAC, specific to the Student Voice construct, reflected similar trends I identified in my prior qualitative analyses of the data derived from my open-ended survey questions and meeting observations. Next, I deepen these connections by analyzing student interview responses aligned with the Social Awareness construct.

**Social Awareness.** In accordance with the RQ 1 (i.e., How and to what extent did participation in the SAC impact students' development of their SECs, specifically Social Awareness and Self-Efficacy?), I asked students to describe how Participation in the SAC impacted their Social Awareness. All five students shared that they perceived that they became more aware of the opinions or needs of others due to the work they completed in the SAC. More specifically, conducting a CA enabled me to discern two prevalent trends

in the students' feedback. First, participants predominantly highlighted a heightened awareness of others' viewpoints. This was evident when one student shared,

Being part of the SAC really opened my eyes. I knew some students didn't like being in class, but doing those surveys [as part of the student-led research via YPAR] showed me what they're really going through. It's not just about not liking a class; it's about feeling uncomfortable for other reasons [such as negative interactions with peers or a teacher] too. So yeah, I think it [participation in the SAC] definitely made me more aware of what's going on with others.

Another student explained, "It helped me understand that people can have different feelings about the same topic. Some kids may not be interested in what others really care about."

These statements highlighted that students gained an understanding that individuals may share similar opinions for different reasons and that their level of interest in a topic can vary. The students demonstrated an understanding of the diversity of perspectives within the school due to an increased awareness.

As I continued to analyze student responses, I identified the second trend being that students recognized that their increased social awareness helped them make a positive impact on others and within the school. This was supported by one student explaining,

It [Participation in the SAC] definitely made me think more about how people [students] are really feeling about my topic that I'm doing [a lack of student

recognition]. It's [participation in the SAC] helping me know how people actually feel, and how I can help them [feel more recognized or seen].

Another student shared, "Being in the Student Ambassador Council we [students] get to work on things that affect the whole school. I see how I can make a bigger difference for everyone now." Another student shared a similar sentiment by stating,

I feel like being a part of Student Ambassadors really helped me to understand everyone's [other students] opinions more. I could talk to others and figure out what the problems were and then we [the research team] could work together to find solutions.

These statements indicated that students viewed participation in the SAC as improving their social awareness and enabled them to support others and find solutions to challenges within the school. This also supported my previous CA, suggesting students' SECs were positively impacted by their Participation in the SAC. Though all students communicated an increased awareness of others, it is noteworthy that they continued to exhibit a limited grasp of the scope of social awareness. Recall that I made similar findings in my qualitative analysis of the open-ended survey responses for the Social Awareness construct. While their responses centered around understanding the needs or opinions of others, they sometimes overlooked the importance of considering others' diverse cultural backgrounds and societal contexts. Again, this may be related to the developmental stage of the students, as also previously discussed.

Moving forward, I discuss how students shared their perceived changes in Self-Efficacy, building upon insights gained from their Participation in the SAC.

**Self-Efficacy.** Similar to the Social Awareness construct, I continued my interviews of student participants by asking questions in connection to RQ 1 (i.e., How and to what extent did participation in the SAC impact students' development of their SECs?). More specifically, I asked student interviewees, “In what ways do you think your participation in the SAC has influenced your self-efficacy?” My CA of students' responses yielded two more themes. The first was that students felt Participation in the SAC positively impacted their self-efficacy because they had to persevere through challenges. One student stated,

I feel like being part of the SAC has helped my self-efficacy. We [the research team] saw growth in some areas of our work, but there were also parts that didn't progress much. It made me realize that I needed to think of different ways to make things work when faced with challenges.

Another student shared, “Yeah, I definitely feel like being part of the SAC has boosted my confidence in what I can do. We [the research team] disagreed and faced a few challenges at first but working with Mrs. H. helped.”

These student statements suggested that participation in the SAC had a positive impact on their self-efficacy by providing opportunities to persevere through challenges and find alternative approaches to achieve success. Working collaboratively and overcoming disagreements with guidance from their advisor likely also contributed to these students' growing confidence in their abilities (Mirra, et al. 2016).

The second theme I identified through my CA of these data was that students not only perceived a positive impact on their self-efficacy due to their Participation in the



SAC, but they planned to use this new gained confidence in the future. One student shared, “Being a Student Ambassador has helped my self-efficacy. I feel that I have a say in things and [Participating in the SAC] showed me that in the future I can make a difference rather than sitting around and complaining.” Another student shared,

Being in the SAC really helped me [my self-efficacy]. Like, there was this assembly and I never thought I could speak up in front of everyone, but I did, and it was easier than I thought. Now, I feel more confident, and I think it'll help me in the future, you know, if I ever have a job where I need to speak in public.

Another student added, “I've always liked helping out and being there for others. Being a [Student] Ambassador gave me the confidence to help people I don't know and has shown me I can really make a difference and keep doing so in the future.”

These statements suggest that Participation in the SAC not only increased the students' self-efficacy but also empowered them to believe in their ability to make a difference and contribute positively to their school community, again, in the future. This also supports the previous finding from my qualitative analyses of the data derived via my open-ended survey questions and observations.

In the final stage of my interview analyses, I used students' statements to determine if Student Participation in the SAC yielded the hypothesized secondary outcomes of my research: an increase in confidence, self-directed learning, and civic engagement. Based on RQ 3 (i.e., What was the effect of participation in the SAC on the development of participating students' confidence, self-directed learning skills, and civic engagement?), I asked students what were their perceived effects of their Participation in

the SAC on the development of their confidence, self-directed learning skills, and civic engagement. One student responded by explaining,

Participating in the SAC has really helped my confidence, self-directed learning skills, and civic engagement. It's been great for keeping my grades up because I can always rely on the group for help when I need it. Plus, it's helped me feel more confident because I've gone from barely talking to anyone outside my friends and teachers to speaking in front of the whole school. When it comes to civic engagement, the program has made it easy for me to get involved in community service activities, like picking up trash. Now, I even do it spontaneously while just hanging around. Working with older peers in the group has also been really beneficial too; it's cool that I still get to share my thoughts even though they're older. This statement suggested that Participation in the SAC had a multifaceted impact on this student. It also highlighted how SVIs, in my context the SAC, impacted student confidence, facilitated community involvement, and enabled positive interactions with peers, also contributing to this student's overall growth and development (Mirra et al., 2016; Mitra, 2014; Ozer et al. 2021). Another student shared a similar experience by stating,

Participating in the [SAC] helped me to increase my confidence and develop better self-directed learning skills. At first, I was shy in class, but as the program went on, I started speaking up more confidently and even felt safe sharing my thoughts. It [Participating in the SAC] made me talk to teachers and understand their perspectives, and also made me more comfortable expressing myself to them. Plus, I learned how

important it is to consider different viewpoints when addressing problems, whether in school or beyond.

This statement suggested that participating in the SAC yielded the secondary outcomes of increased confidence and self-directed learning for this student. Through participation, they overcame initial shyness in class, gained confidence in expressing their thoughts, and felt more comfortable engaging with teachers. Additionally, this student learned the importance of considering diverse perspectives when addressing problems, both within the school and in broader contexts. Finally, this statement supported the notion that by providing a platform for students to share their voices, through the SAC, this not only promoted increased student engagement in learning, but also fostered in students essential SECs such as self-efficacy, inside and outside of the classroom (Ennis, 2017; Quaglia & Fox n.d.; Rovegno & Dolly, 2006).

These student responses to questions, again, as aligned to RQ 3, further supported my previous analyses of the qualitative data derived from my open-ended survey questions and observations. Building on these insights, it is even more evident that providing an opportunity for participants to use their Student Voice through Participation in the SAC, and perhaps other SVIs, impacted participating students' SECs, specifically in terms of their Social Awareness and Self-Efficacy. To help validate these findings, I triangulated the quantitative data I obtained from my survey instruments with the qualitative data I collected through my open-ended survey responses, observations of team meetings, and student interviews, noting I did this as best I could given the clear

contradictions I observed and explained prior as evident between my numerical and qualitative results.

**Triangulation.** Recall that I implemented an across-method methodological triangulation approach, defined prior as integrating both quantitative and qualitative data collection techniques by obtaining a broad range of data, examining working themes across data sources, and ultimately improving the validity of the findings drawn (Bekhet & Zauszniewski, 2012). Using this approach, I was able to cross-check my results and obtain a more accurate and holistic understanding of the answers to my RQs, as well as of the effects of my intervention, to help me draw more accurate and overarching conclusions. Note that I chose to only complete a triangulation of my data for RQ1 and RQ 2 as I aimed to evaluate both the extent to which (i.e., quantitative) and how (i.e., qualitative) Participation in the SAC reportedly impacted participating students' perceptions of their SECs, more specifically in terms of their Social Awareness and Self-Efficacy (RQ 1), as well as confidence to use their voice to impact change in their school and community (RQ 2). For RQ 3, I aimed to evaluate only how (i.e., qualitative) Participation in the SAC affected the development of participating students' confidence, self-directed learning skills, and civic engagement. Put differently, I did not have quantitative data to triangulate for RQ 3.

Also, important to recall is that my quantitative analyses of the constructs, Social Awareness and Self-Efficacy, as related to RQ 1, yielded mean difference declines for both Social Awareness (-.21) and Self-Efficacy (-.25). However, the *p*-values for each construct were substantially greater than the statistical significance level I set at  $p < 0.05$ ,

meaning there was insufficient quantitative evidence to conclude that Participation in the SAC significantly impacted students' SECs, for better or worse. Contrary, the CAs of the qualitative data collected from the open-ended survey question responses, meeting observations, and interviews supported that students perceived that their Participation in the SAC positively impacted both constructs.

Similarly, my analyses of my quantitative and qualitative data regarding my Student Voice construct, as related to RQ 2, yielded a similar pattern. A mean difference decline of  $-.22$  with a relatively large  $p$ -value suggested that there was, again, insufficient quantitative evidence to conclude that Participation in the SAC significantly impacted students' confidence to use their voice. Yet again, my CAs of the qualitative data I collected from my open-ended survey question responses, meeting observations, and interviews supported that students perceived that their Participation in the SAC did have a positive impact on their confidence to share their ideas and opinions.

As such, and as demonstrated in my discussion of the results above, the quantitative and qualitative results related to both RQ 1 and RQ 2 demonstrated divergence. According to Campbell et al. (2018), such divergence refers to discrepancies or contradictions observed between findings derived from various data sources or methodologies. In my study, such differences emerged when I compared my quantitative and qualitative data, whereby my quantitative data indicated a decrease in students' perceptions of a positive impact of Participating in the SAC on their SECs, and my qualitative data suggested an increase.

While the integration of my qualitative methods alongside my quantitative measures offered a multifaceted examination of students' experiences and perceptions in the SAC intervention I designed and implemented, my qualitative data, and results, proved more useful, as well as instrumental in uncovering the deeper intricacies reflecting students' perceptions and other related and nuanced aspects and perspectives that my quantitative measures could simply not capture. Through my interviews, for example, participating students had the opportunity to elaborate on their experiences, shedding more light on and details about their feelings and perceptions, as also more complex than they proved to be. Furthermore, my observations provided me with substantively more valuable insights into the contextual factors surrounding students' responses, such as situational considerations as related to their personal experiences, which my quantitative measures also did not fully capture. Last, by observing specific research team meetings, I was able to listen to the much more authentic conversations students had with their team members which also offered me a deeper understanding of many more complex, multifaceted, nuanced, etc. factors.

As such, given the robust and consistent patterns I observed across my multiple sources of data, including the data derived via my open-ended survey responses, meeting observations, and interviews, it became evident that students uniformly perceived their Participation in the SAC as having a positive impact on their SECs, particularly in terms of their Social Awareness and Self-Efficacy, as well as their confidence in using their Student Voice. Therefore, I argue that my insights gleaned from the CA of qualitative

findings definitely outweighed the observed but significantly uncertain declines suggested by the divergent quantitative results I observed.

## CHAPTER 6

### DISCUSSION

Again, through my action research I used mixed methodologies, I created a venue, a SAC, for middle school students in the 5th - 8th grades, to share their voices to improve their SECs. I further aimed to determine if Student Participation in the SAC would have secondary effects on students such as an increase in confidence, self-directed learning skills, and civic engagement, each of which I discussed in depth in my Literature Review and Theoretical Framework sections. My overarching goal for my research was to take action to help address the lack of opportunities for middle school students to express their voices within my middle school setting. My assertion was that by establishing an SVI, specifically the SAC, for students to openly express their ideas and opinions about school processes and procedures, their SECs would be positively impacted enabling them to become contributing members of their school and community.

Recall that the RQs I utilized to guide my action research were as follows:

RQ 1: How and to what extent did participation in the SAC impact students' perceptions of their SECs?

- c. How was participating students' social awareness impacted?
- d. How was participating students' self-efficacy impacted?

RQ 2: How and to what extent did participating in the SAC affect participating students' confidence to use their voice to impact change in their school and community?



RQ 3: What was the effect of participation in the SAC on the development of participating students' confidence, self-directed learning skills, and civic engagement?

Next, I delve into my overarching findings for each of my three RQs and their implications in relation to my study objectives. I chose to discuss RQ1 and RQ2 together because they both delved into how students' perceptions were impacted due to their Participation of the SAC on specific constructs, namely on Social Awareness, Self-Efficacy, and Student Voice. These constructs are intertwined and often influenced by similar factors, making it logical to analyze them together. Furthermore, I used the same approach to data collection and analysis for both RQs which ensured consistency and comparability in my findings for these RQs. By examining these questions together, as such, I aimed to provide a more comprehensive understanding of how the SAC affected various aspects of student perceptions about their participation. Following this discussion, I discuss my findings for RQ3, after which I discuss implications for each of my RQs, and then address the study's limitations.

### **RQ 1 and RQ 2**

The purpose of RQ 1 was to evaluate 5th-8th grade middle school students' perceptions on how Participation in the SAC impacted their SECs. Recall the RQ1 was as follows;

RQ 1: How and to what extent did participation in the SAC impact students' perceptions of their SECs?

- a. How was participating students' social awareness impacted?

b. How was participating students' self-efficacy impacted?

Note, I divided RQ1 into two parts to assess the effects of Participation in the SAC on students' Social Awareness and Self-Efficacy.

The purpose of RQ 2 was to evaluate middle school students' perceptions on how Participation in the SAC impacted their Student Voice Recall RQ2 was as follows:

RQ 2: How and to what extent did participating in the SAC affect participating students' confidence to use their voice to impact change in their school and community?

To effectively answer both RQ 1 and RQ 2, I ensured the intervention provided participants with a structure for them to navigate. Therefore, during weekly SAC meetings, students were guided through the YPAR process, wherein they were grouped into research teams according to their self-identified problems. Participants also worked collaboratively with an adult consultant, who had completed three hours of PD in preparation of this work. Mirra et al. (2016) emphasized the importance of adult support and mentorship in YPAR, highlighting how it can assist students in traversing complex research processes, accessing resources, and effectively advocating for their ideas.

Before and after students completed one round of research, using the YPAR method, I asked them to complete a pre- and post-survey in order to determine the impact on their perceptions after Participating in the SAC. Administering a survey allowed me to simultaneously collect quantitative (e.g., Likert-scale) and qualitative (e.g., open-ended questions, observations of SAC meetings, and interviews) data, and it provided me insights into observed changes in attitudes over time (Fowler, 2014; Groves et al., 2009;

Plano Clark & Creswell, 2015). My quantitative data yielded means for the three constructs (i.e., Social Awareness, Self-Efficacy and Student Voice), that suggested participants perceived their SECs were “Rarely” or “Slightly” (i.e., on a 6-point Likert scale, with means of 1.54, 1.72 and 2.77 respectively) impacted due to their Participation in the SAC. Recall, the mean scores, though in the same range of “Rarely” or “Slightly” demonstrated a decrease from the pre-survey scores (i.e., on a 6-point Likert scale, with means of 1.75, 1.97 and 2.99 respectively). Further, when comparing my pre- and post-intervention survey results, I found that the *p*-value for these same three constructs (i.e., .26, .21 and .42) lacked statistical significance. Meaning that even though I observed mean losses across constructs, there was insufficient evidence to conclude that participation in the SAC significantly impacted students’ SECs (Salkind & Frey, 2020).

Through my qualitative data analyses, via the data I collected via student responses to open-ended survey questions, observations of SAC meetings, and interviews, I evaluated the same three constructs (i.e., Social Awareness, Self-Efficacy and Student Voice). All of the students expressed that they perceived Participation in the SAC had a positive impact on their SECs, Social Awareness, and Self-Efficacy, as well as their confidence to use their voice to impact change in the school. Specifically, they felt they were more aware of the needs of others and confident that they could identify and advocate for solutions to overcome challenges. Based on the consistency of the trends I identified in my qualitative data, I determined that, overall, participants perceived Participation in the SAC as having a positive impact on their SECs, Social Awareness, Self-Efficacy, and Student Voice.

To fully understand the results of RQ 1 and RQ 2 it was important for me to address the divergent results of my quantitative and qualitative data. As just mentioned, specific to Social Awareness, Self-Efficacy and Student Voice constructs, there was a slight decrease in the mean scores that I observed (i.e., -.21, -.25, and -.22 respectively). Yet, student statements collected and analyzed on all of my qualitative data overwhelmingly supported the perception of a positive impact. The qualitative data revealed nuanced perspectives beyond my quantitative measures, shedding light on external factors that apparently influenced my participating students' perceptions. Interviews provided deeper insights into students' perceptions, while observations captured contextual influences on their responses. Observing research team meetings, for example, unveiled authentic conversations, highlighting multifaceted factors at play in influencing students' experiences. I delve into the implications of my findings for RQ 1 and RQ 2 in the subsequent discussion.

### **Implications of RQ 1 and RQ 2**

The findings of RQ 1 and RQ 2 underscore the significance of fostering Social Awareness and Self-Efficacy among middle school students through SVIs like the SAC. Social awareness, characterized by an understanding and empathy for diverse perspectives (CASEL, 2023; PMC, 2021), is essential for nurturing positive relationships and preparing students for responsible citizenship (CASEL, 2023). Through the SAC, students engaged in an inclusive environment where they shared experiences and learned from one another, developing crucial skills such as appreciating diverse viewpoints and

recognizing emotions. This heightened social awareness apparently empowered students to communicate effectively, find common ground, and treat others with respect.

Similarly, self-efficacy, representing one's belief in their ability to achieve specific goals (Bandura, 2002; Morton & Montgomery, 2013), was cultivated through the SAC's emphasis on student autonomy through the use of YPAR. By providing opportunities for students to take ownership of their research, the SAC fostered self-directedness and autonomy as key attributes for lifelong learning (Hattie, 2008, 2020). Additionally, the SAC served as a platform for students to demonstrate their competence and receive tangible results, boosting their confidence and motivation to contribute positively to their communities.

Student voice refers to the meaningful and active participation of students in matters that affect their education and school environment (Mirra, et al. 2016). By participating in the SAC, students also had the opportunity to not only express their opinions but also to engage in meaningful discussions and decision-making processes that shape their educational experiences. Research has shown that initiatives promoting student voice has led to increased student engagement and ownership in their learning environments, ultimately enhancing their senses of agency and levels of confidence when impacting change (Mitra, 2014). Thus, fostering SVIs, such as the SAC, might not only enrich students' educational experiences but also equip them with the skills and confidence they need to become active contributors to positive change within their school and broader community (Mitra et al., 2012; Black & Mayes, 2020; Quaglia & Fox, n.d.)

In essence, the SAC seemed to have facilitated active student participation in decision-making processes, enhancing their social awareness and self-efficacy. Grounded in theoretical frameworks like Paulo Freire's Pedagogy of the Oppressed and Erik Erikson's Psychosocial Development, the SAC also seemed to have empowered students to express themselves confidently, fostering a sense of agency and responsibility. By integrating elements of YPAR, the SAC encouraged students to critically analyze school issues and advocate for meaningful change. Through initiatives like the SAC, as such, participating students also seemed to have acquired invaluable skills and experiences that might better equip them to navigate an ever-evolving world with resilience and confidence in the future.

### **RQ 3**

RQ 3 was, “How and to what extent did participating in the SAC affect participating students’ confidence to use their voice to impact change in their school and community?” The purpose of RQ 3 was to determine if Participation in the SAC produced the secondary outcomes (i.e., increased confidence, self-directed learning skills, and civic engagement) expected. In the literature review, I highlighted that increased self-efficacy leads to greater confidence and improved self-advocacy among students (Hattie, 2016; Mirra, et al. 2016). Similarly, heightened social awareness and confidence can drive students to become active advocates for others within their school and community (Mirra, et al. 2016).

The innovation at the core of this study, namely Student Participation in the SAC, served as the catalyst for these anticipated outcomes (i.e., increased confidence, self-

directed learning skills, and civic engagement). Therefore, to ensure effective implementation and consistency of the students' work, I used elements of YPAR, or, more specifically, the ICR framework. This involved empowering students to identify, address, research, and subsequently reflect on issues that mattered to them (Mirra et al., 2016). Participants engaged in a series of YPAR activities, which guided them in identifying issues and selecting RQs for the student-led studies. After identifying an issue, research teams developed a research plan utilizing the method they selected [all of the teams chose to use surveys] of data collection and the adoption or construction of research instruments, after which students collected and analyzed data and made recommendations to help address the issues examined (Oregon Health Authority, n.d.).

In contrast to RQ 1 and RQ 2, I did not have quantitative data for RQ 3. Students did not complete a pre- and post-survey because I aimed only to evaluate only how (i.e., qualitative) their participation in the SAC affected the development of participating students' confidence, self-directed learning skills, and civic engagement. Through my qualitative data, though, in the form of student responses to open-ended survey questions, my observations of SAC meetings, and the interviews I conducted, I was able to evaluate the Student Participation in the SAC construct. In short, all participating students expressed that Participation in the SAC helped them increase their confidence and positively impacted their self-directed learning skills and levels of civic engagement. Specifically, they felt they were more confident to express their opinions, advocate for themselves, and interact with staff members. Based on these trends, I determined that,

overall, Participation in the SAC did produce all three of my anticipated secondary outcomes.

### **Implications of RQ 3**

While quantitative data for RQ3 was lacking, qualitative analysis uncovered compelling evidence of the beneficial impact of SAC involvement on students' confidence, self-directed learning skills, and civic engagement. This success can be largely attributed to the strategic utilization of YPAR as the framework for the SAC. YPAR not only provided clear guidelines for both students and adult consultants but also acted as a driving force behind the observed positive outcomes. By adhering to YPAR principles, the SAC ensured active student engagement in decision-making processes, thus fostering a sense of ownership and empowerment among participants. This structured approach empowered students to lead in identifying issues, conducting research, and implementing solutions within their school community. These findings underscore the importance for educators to not only provide opportunities for student voice but also to be deliberate in establishing structures to guide the process. This implies that educators should adopt intentional approaches to student engagement, recognizing the transformative potential of structured frameworks in fostering meaningful student participation and fostering a culture of inclusivity and empowerment within educational environments. While the positive impact of structured frameworks like YPAR in facilitating student engagement and empowerment within SVIs such as the SAC is evident, it is important to acknowledge certain limitations inherent in this study which I will discuss in the following section.



## **Study Limitations**

It is crucial to contextualize my results and interpretations regarding the impact of my intervention within the limitations of my study. Like any research endeavor, my study was susceptible to both internal and external validity threats. Internal validity refers to the extent to which changes observed in the dependent variable (in this case, student perceptions of the impact on their SECs, Social Awareness and Self-Efficacy, and Student Voice) can be confidently attributed to the independent variable (Participation in the SAC) (Smith & Glass, 1987). External validity refers to the extent to which findings from a study can be applied or generalized to broader contexts (Smith & Glass, 1987). Smith & Glass (1987) outlined potential threats to external validity, including population-related factors or ecological aspects concerning the study's physical or social environments. In the subsequent sections, I will elaborate on and address both internal and external validity threats relevant to the overall integrity of the inferences drawn in my study.

## **Internal Threats to Validity**

Recall in the Role of the Researcher section I discussed and described potential biases that arose due to my dual role as a practitioner-researcher. As the principal conducting this study with students from my own school, there were several biases to consider, such as social desirability bias and self-selection bias. Each of these biases would be considered internal validity threats. Also, in the Role of the Research section, I discussed steps I took to minimize these threats. However, not discussed in the aforementioned section was an internal threat, construct validity. Construct validity

concerns the extent to which the measures used in a study accurately capture the constructs they are intended to assess (Sternberg, 1997). More specifically, if participants do not understand the ratings or scales used in a survey, it can undermine the construct validity of the study (Sternberg, 1997). This could lead to participants providing inaccurate or inconsistent responses, which may not reflect their true perceptions or experiences. Construct validity is particularly relevant to my research given the discrepancy I observed between my quantitative and qualitative data. The divergent findings between students' responses on the Likert scale and their qualitative responses suggest an issue with the measurement instrument's ability to accurately assess the constructs. Students' misunderstanding of the Likert scale options may have influenced quantitative results, potentially skewing the findings. For instance, when closely reviewing student selections, I noted that students who wrote about a positive impact on their social awareness in the open-ended survey questions also selected a lesser option on the Likert scale. This demonstrates a disconnect between the use of the scale and the students' actual perceptions.

### **External Threats to Validity**

Next, I will address the potential limitations to the validity of my research, particularly concerning the applicability of its outcomes to a broader or different population (Smith & Glass, 1987). Alongside the biases previously discussed, I identified an additional external threat to validity: inadequate sample representation. This term refers to discrepancies between the sample population and the broader target population, which can impede the generalizability of study findings (Smith & Glass, 1987). To

mitigate this threat, researchers often utilize sampling methods such as random sampling to create a representative sample that mirrors the characteristics of the target population (Kalaian & Kasim, 2008). In my study, I sought to address this issue by allowing any student from 5th to 8th grade to participate in the SAC, without considering academic performance or behavior. However, despite these efforts, the small sample size of my study (n=24) left it vulnerable to noncomparability, as it may not adequately represent the entire middle school population.

Despite the challenge this poses to the validity of my findings, it's important to note that action research is primarily concerned with transferability rather than generalizability. Transferability occurs when readers can intuitively relate the research findings to their own contexts, enabling them to apply the insights gained to their own actions (Mertler, 2020). To enhance the transferability of my action research findings, I have provided detailed information about my role as the researcher, participant demographics, research design, and data analysis methods.

Additionally, educational research aims to facilitate naturalistic generalizations, as described by Stake & Trumbull (1982). While formal generalizations assume that knowledge is what leads to improved practice, Stake and Trumbull argue that the feeling of personal knowledge and experience is what leads to improved practice (Tracy, 2010). In the process of naturalistic generalizations, readers rely on their intuitive grasp of the situation, rather than feeling dictated by the research report (Tracy, 2010). Essentially, naturalistic generalizations entail providing readers with comprehensive descriptions of research interventions and observations, empowering them to acquire experiential

knowledge applicable to their own contexts for enhanced practice. Thus, by furnishing explicit details about my role as the researcher, participant characteristics, research methods, and interpretation of findings, I aim to enhance the potential transferability of my action research findings to diverse contexts.

## CHAPTER 7

### CONCLUSION

As an educator, my belief in youth empowerment has always been unwavering. When I embarked on my research journey, I was thrilled to witness a burgeoning trend in education by which educators prioritized the development of strategies aimed at genuinely engaging students (Kirshner, 2004, Westheimer et al., 2004). It was heartening to see that this trend extended beyond a traditional focus on academic achievement to encompass the holistic well-being of students, including their social and emotional needs.

Many schools have responded to this by integrating SEL curriculum into their master schedules. While SEL undoubtedly plays a vital role in nurturing students' emotional intelligence and interpersonal skills, it is crucial to recognize that it alone may not suffice in equipping students with the resilience and agency they need to navigate the complexities of the modern world (Kirshner, 2004, Westheimer et al., 2004). In tandem with SEL instruction, there is a growing acknowledgment of the role of youth empowerment programs in fostering the social-emotional well-being of students (Mitra et al., 2004, Oregon Health Authority, n.d.). These programs serve as invaluable platforms for students to actively engage in decision-making processes that directly impact their lives. By providing students with these opportunities, school leaders not only increase the students' academic growth but also cultivate a culture of inclusivity, ownership, and empowerment within the school community (Quaglia & Fox, n.d.).

I take pride in the findings of my research, which illustrate the positive impact of SVIs, particularly the SAC. The insights I gleaned from students' statements, my

observations of them, and their responses to interview questions showcased their transformative journey. It was evident to me that they not only acquired new skills but also underwent personal growth. Students' testimonials also resonated with themes of enhanced collaboration and refined problem-solving abilities, underscoring the tangible benefits of their involvement in the SAC. Moreover, there was a sense of heightened confidence and awareness of the needs of others among student participants.

This multifaceted growth speaks volumes about the efficacy of SVIs like the SAC in nurturing students' holistic development. It underscores the importance of providing platforms for student voice and active participation in decision-making processes. As educators, and as such, it is imperative that we continue to prioritize and support initiatives that empower students, enabling them to thrive academically, socially, and emotionally.

### **Implications for Future Research**

I can recommend or consider several possibilities for future research related to my study and findings. First, exploration of the impact of the SAC on the adult consultants. I might delve into how participation in the SAC shapes the perceptions, attitudes, and professional development of the adults, such as teachers, administrators, and support staff, who collaborated with the students. Understanding how involvement in student-led initiatives influences adults' views on student empowerment could offer valuable insights into the broader implications of youth empowerment initiatives in educational settings.

I might also consider the ways in which collaboration with students in initiatives like the SAC enhances adults' understanding of student perspectives, needs, and voices.

Understanding how adults' engagement with student-led initiatives impacts their approaches to teaching, leadership practices, and interactions with students could illuminate the reciprocal nature of youth empowerment processes and contribute to the cultivation of more inclusive and student-centered educational environments.

Similarly, there is a need to investigate the effect of the SAC on school administration, including principals, vice principals, and district-level administrators. Research in this area could focus on clarifying how the SAC influences administrative decision-making, school policies, and the overall school climate into the future. By examining the relationships between student-led initiatives like the SAC and administrative practices, I might further shed light on the effectiveness of collaborative governance structures in promoting student voice and fostering a positive and inclusive school culture.

Lastly, future research might involve exploring the implementation of YPAR in classroom settings. I could investigate the feasibility and effectiveness of integrating YPAR principles and methodologies into existing curriculum frameworks across various subjects and grade levels. Studying the impact of YPAR on student engagement, critical thinking skills, and civic participation, as such, could provide evidence-based strategies for promoting student agency and empowerment in educational contexts.

### **Implications for Practice**

In terms of my future actions, I am committed to continuing the SAC as it has shown promising results in empowering students and promoting their social-emotional well-being. However, I plan to make some modifications to enhance its effectiveness

further. One such modification might involve refining the method of survey completion for students. Instead of giving students a post-survey, I would consider giving students their pre-survey responses and asking them to reflect on and make changes to their answers based on their experiences throughout the program. This approach would possibly provide students with a better understanding of their own growth and development over time, thereby fostering greater self-awareness and engagement with the SAC process. On the flipside, students might indeed attempt to artificially inflate their scores after reviewing their previous responses. This behavior could arise from various motivations, such as a desire to appear more favorable or to meet perceived expectations. Therefore, it is essential for me to implement strategies to minimize this risk, such as providing clear instructions on the importance of honest and accurate responses. Additionally, I will continue to employ diverse methods of data validation, similar to those utilized in this iteration, such as triangulating the data.

Finally, I now more fully recognize the importance of providing students with adequate time and resources to conduct meaningful research as part of the SAC activities. To address this, I would reconsider the group dynamics within the program and possibly reduce the number of groups to allow for more focused and in-depth exploration of topics. By allocating more time and attention to each group, students would have the opportunity to delve deeper into their chosen areas of interest, leading to more comprehensive research outcomes and a richer learning experience overall.

Another important future action I might undertake is to collaborate with other school leaders to share the success and benefits of the SAC program and support them in



implementing similar initiatives in their schools. By leveraging my experience and insights gained from running the SAC, I will likely aim to provide guidance and resources to fellow educators interested in fostering student empowerment and enhancing social-emotional learning within their own school communities. This collaborative effort would involve conducting workshops, training sessions, and providing mentoring opportunities for school leaders to learn about the principles and practices behind student-led initiatives like the SAC. Through these interactions, I would emphasize the importance of creating a supportive environment by which school leaders and staff value student voice and agency in decision-making processes.

Overall, via these future actions I would aim to build upon the successes of the SAC while addressing areas for improvement to ensure that students continue to benefit from meaningful opportunities for empowerment and growth within their school community. Also, by fostering a network of schools implementing similar youth empowerment programs, we might more collectively contribute to creating a broader culture of student engagement and well-being across educational institutions.

### **Final Thoughts**

I began this journey with the lyrics to the Whitney Houston song, "The Greatest Love of All." As I have moved through the ups and downs of completing this research, I will add to the lyrics I previously selected by including two more lines from first verse, "I believe the children are our future, teach them well and let them lead the way, show them all the beauty they possess inside, give them a sense of pride to make it easier." These lyrics encapsulate the essence of my research journey as I witnessed the transformative

power of providing opportunities for students to lead and thrive. The growth and development observed in my student participants involved in the SAC reaffirmed my belief that every child is capable of achieving greatness when given the chance to shine. Moving forward, I am inspired to continue fostering environments where students are empowered to express themselves, lead initiatives, and make meaningful contributions to their schools and communities. By nurturing their potential and instilling a sense of pride in their abilities, we can pave the way for a brighter and more inclusive future.

## REFERENCES

- Alhabib, L. (2021). *The influence of Paulo Freire on today's education*. Doran International ECE Center. <https://doran-ece.ca/blog/the-influence-of-paulo-freire-on-todays-education/>
- American Psychological Association. (2009). *Civic engagement*. American Psychological Association. <https://www.apa.org/education-career/undergrad/civic-engagement>
- Arnold, J., & Mundy, B. (2020). Praxis pedagogy in teacher education. *Smart Learning Environments*, 7(1), 1–14. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40561-020-0116-z>
- Azzarito, L. (2009). The panopticon of physical education: Pretty, active and ideally white. *Physical Education & Sport Pedagogy*, 14(1), 19–39. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17408980701712106>
- Bandura, A. (2002). *Social learning theory*. Prentice-Hall.
- Barnes. (2020). Promoting student agency in writing. *The Reading Teacher*, 73(6), 789–795. <https://doi.org/10.1002/trtr.1899>
- Bekhet, A. K., & Zauszniewski, J. A. (2012). *Methodological triangulation: An approach to understanding data*. Marquette University. [https://epublications.marquette.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1395&context=nursing\\_fac](https://epublications.marquette.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1395&context=nursing_fac)
- Benner, M., Brown, C., & Jeffrey, A. (2019). *Elevating Student Voice in education*. Center for American Progress. <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/education-k12/reports/2019/08/14/473197/elevating-student-voice-education/>
- Biddle, C., & Hufnagel, E. (2019). Navigating the “Danger Zone”: Tone policing and the bounding of civility in the practice of Student Voice. *American Journal of Education*, 125(4), 487–520. <https://doi.org/10.1086/704097>
- Black, R., & Mayes, E. (2020). Feeling voice: The emotional politics of “Student Voice” for teachers. *British Educational Research Journal*, 46(5), 1064–1080. <https://doi.org/10.1002/berj.3613>
- Blankson, A., Weaver, J., Leerkes, E., O’Brien, M., Calkins, S., & Marcovitch, S. (2017). Cognitive and emotional processes as predictors of a successful transition into school. *Early education and development*, 28(1), 1–20. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10409289.2016.1183434>

- Brannen, J. (2017). Combining qualitative and quantitative approaches: An overview. *Mixing Methods: Qualitative and Quantitative Research*, 3–37. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315248813-1>
- Brennan, M. (1996). *Schools as public institutions: Students and citizenship*. Soundout.org. <https://soundout.org/2015/02/02/why-student-voice-a-research-summary/>
- Brinkmann, S., & Kvale, S. (2015). *Interviews: Learning the craft of qualitative research interviewing*. Sage Publications, Inc.
- Bridgeland, J. M., DiIulio, J. J., & Morison, K. B. (2006). *The silent epidemic: Perspectives of high school dropouts*. Civic Enterprises. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED513444>
- Bryman, A. (2004). Triangulation. In M. S. Lewis-Beck, A. Bryman, & T. F. Liao (Eds.), *The SAGE encyclopedia of social science research methods* (pp. 1143–1143). SAGE Publications, Inc. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781412950589.n1031>
- Campbell, R., Goodman-Williams, R., Feeney, H., & Fehler-Cabral, G. (2018). Assessing triangulation across methodologies, methods, and stakeholder groups: The joys, woes, and politics of interpreting convergent and divergent data. *American Journal of Evaluation*, 41(1), 125–144. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1098214018804195>
- Caraballo, Lozenski, B. D., Lyiscott, J. J., & Morrell, E. (2017). YPAR and Critical Epistemologies: Rethinking education research. *Review of Research in Education*, 41(1), 311–336. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0091732X16686948>
- Carroll, Houghton, S., Wood, R., Unsworth, K., Hattie, J., Gordon, L., & Bower, J. (2008). Self-efficacy and academic achievement in Australian high school students: The mediating effects of academic aspirations and delinquency. *Journal of Adolescence* 32(4), 797–817. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.adolescence.2008.10.009>
- Castleberry, A., & Nolen, A. (2018). Thematic analysis of qualitative research data: Is it as easy as it sounds? *Currents in Pharmacy Teaching and Learning*, 10(6), 807–815. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cptl.2018.03.019>
- Cekaite, A., & Ekstrom, A. (2019). Emotion socialization in teacher-child interaction: Teachers' responses to children's negative emotions. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 10(1546). <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2019.01546>

- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). (2021). *Middle childhood (9-11 years old)*.  
<https://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/childdevelopment/positiveparenting/middle2.html>
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). (2021). *Young teens (12-14 years old)*.  
<https://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/childdevelopment/positiveparenting/adolescence.html>
- Clarke, V., & Braun, V. (2017). Thematic analysis. *The Journal of Positive Psychology*, 12(3), 297–298. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17439760.2016.1262613>
- Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL). (2007). *Background on social and emotional learning (SEL)*.  
<https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED505362.pdf>
- Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL). (2023). *What is the CASEL Framework?* <https://casel.org/fundamentals-of-sel/what-is-the-casel-framework/>
- Cox, T. (2017). *The effect of YPAR on student self-efficacy and engagement in a suburban junior high school* (thesis). Arizona State University.  
<https://hdl.handle.net/2286/R.I.46275>
- Crosley, J. (2023). *What is thematic analysis?* Grad Coach.  
<https://gradcoach.com/what-is-thematic-analysis/>
- Darder, A., Baltodano, M., & Torres, R. (2009). *The critical pedagogy reader*. Routledge.
- Denham, S. A., & Bassett, H. H. (2019). Early childhood teachers' socialization of children's emotional competence. *Journal of Research in Innovative Teaching and Learning*, 12(2), 133–150. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JRIT-01-2019-0007>
- Di Maggio, Zappulla, C., & Pace, U. (2016). The relationship between emotion knowledge, Emotion regulation and adjustment in preschoolers: A mediation model. *Journal of Child and Family Studies*, 25(8), 2626–2635.  
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s10826-016-0409-6>
- Diaz, A., Eisenberg, N., Valiente, C., VanSchyndel, S., Spinrad, T. L., Berger, R., Hernandez, M. M., Silva, K. M., & Southworth, J. (2017). Relations of positive and negative expressivity and effortful control to Kindergarteners' student–teacher relationship, academic engagement, and externalizing problems at school. *Journal of Research in Personality*, 67, 3–14.

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jrp.2015.11.002>

- Durlak, Weissberg, R. P., Dymnicki, A. B., Taylor, R. D., & Schellinger, K. B. (2011). The impact of enhancing students' social and emotional learning: A meta-analysis of school-based universal interventions. *Child Development*, 82(1), 405–432. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8624.2010.01564.x>
- Elementary and Secondary Education Act. (1965). H. R. 2362, 89th Cong., 1st sess., Public law 89-10. Reports, bills, debate and act. [U.S. Govt. Print. Off.]
- Elkind, D., Davidson, F., & Davidson, J. (1999). *Adolescent cognition*. [Video/DVD]. Davidson Films. <https://video.alexanderstreet.com/watch/adolescent-cognition>
- Elo, S., & Kyngäs, H. (2008). The qualitative content analysis process. *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, 62(1), 107–115. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1365-2648.2007.04569.x>
- Elo, S., Kääriäinen, M., Kanste, O., Pölkki, T., Utriainen, K., & Kyngäs, H. (2014). Qualitative content analysis. *SAGE Open*, 4(1), 215824401452263. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2158244014522633>
- Ennis, C. D. (2017). Educating students for a lifetime of physical activity: Enhancing mindfulness, motivation, and meaning. *Research Quarterly for Exercise and Sport*, 88(3), 241–250. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02701367.2017.1342495>
- Erikson, E. H. (1959). *Identity and the life cycle: Selected papers, with a historical introduction by David Rapaport*. International University Press.
- Erikson, E. H. (1962). Youth: Fidelity and diversity. *Daedalus*, 91(1), 5–27. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20026695>
- Erikson, E. H. (1963). *Childhood and society*. Norton.
- Erikson, E. H. (1968). *Identity, youth, and crisis*. Norton
- Every Student Succeeds Act, 20 U.S.C. § 6301 (2015). <https://www.congress.gov/bill/114th-congress/senate-bill/1177>
- Fandakova, & Gruber, M. J. (2021). States of curiosity and interest enhance memory differently in adolescents and in children. *Developmental Science*, 24(1), e13005. <https://doi.org/10.1111/desc.13005>

- Fletcher, A. (2017). *Students as decision-makers*. SoundOut.  
<https://soundout.org/2015/03/31/students-as-decision-makers/>
- Fowler, F. J. (2014). *Survey research methods*. (5th ed.). SAGE Publications, Inc.
- Freire, P. (1998). Cultural action and conscientization. *Harvard Educational Review*, 40(3), 499–521. <https://doi.org/10.17763/haer.40.3.h76250x720j43175>
- Freire, P. (2017) *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. Penguin Classics.
- Freire, P., Clarke, P., Macedo, D., & Aronowitz, S. (2001). *Pedagogy of freedom: Ethics, democracy, and civic courage*. Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.
- Graneheim, U. H., & Lundman, B. (2004). Qualitative content analysis in nursing research: Concepts, procedures and measures to achieve trustworthiness. *Nurse Education Today*, 24(2), 105–112. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.nedt.2003.10.001>
- Groves, R. M., Fowler, F. J., Couper, M. P., Lepkowski, J. M., Singer, E., & Tourangeau, R. (2009). *Survey methodology*. John Wiley & Sons.
- Guetterman, T., Fetters, M., Creswell, J. (2015) Integrating quantitative and qualitative results in health science mixed methods research through joint displays. *Annals of Family Medicine*, 13(6), 554–561. <https://doi.org/10.1370/afm.1865>
- Guetterman, T. C., Fetters, M. D., & Creswell, J. W. (2015). Integrating quantitative and qualitative results in health science mixed methods research through joint displays. *Annals of Family*, 13(6), 554–561.  
<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4639381/>
- Hallman, T. (2019). Being a fifth grader is, and always has been, complicated. *The OregonLive*. <https://www.oregonlive.com/education/2019/09/as-the-school-year-begins-a-reminder-to-adults-that-being-a-fifth-grader-is-and-always-has-been-complicated.html>
- Hamed, H. M. (2012). The relationship between self-efficacy beliefs and social-emotional competence in at-risk girls. *Welcome to RUcore - Rutgers University Community Repository*. <https://rucore.libraries.rutgers.edu/rutgers-lib/37576/>
- Hattie, Hodis, F. A., & Kang, S. H. K. (2020). Theories of motivation: Integration and ways forward. *Contemporary Educational Psychology*, 61, 101865.  
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cedpsych.2020.101865>

- Hattie, J., Masters, D., & Birch, K. (2016). *Visible learning into action: International case studies of impact*. Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group.
- Hernández, M. M., Eisenberg, N., Valiente, C., VanSchyndel, S. K., Spinrad, T. L., Silva, K. M., Berger, R. H., Diaz, A., Terrell, N., Thompson, M. S., & Southworth, J. (2016). Emotional expression in school context, social relationships, and academic adjustment in kindergarten. *Emotion, 16*(4), 553–566.  
<https://doi.org/10.1037/emo0000147>
- Howley, Dyson, B., Baek, S., Fowler, J., & Shen, Y. (2021). This is not gym: Enacting Student Voice pedagogies to promote social and emotional learning and meaningful physical education. *Frontiers in Sports and Active Living, 3*.  
<https://doi.org/10.3389/fspor.2021.764613>
- Hytten, K. (2017). Democracy and education in the United States. *Oxford University Press*.  
<https://oxfordre.com/education/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780190264093.001.0001/acrefore-9780190264093-e-2>
- IBM. (n.d.). IBM SPSS Statistics. <https://www.ibm.com/products/spss-statistics>
- Jobs for the Future. (2013). *Motivation, engagement, and Student Voice toolkit*.  
<https://www.jff.org/resources/motivation-engagement-and-student-voice-toolkit/>
- Johnson, A. P. (2012). *A short guide to action research*. Pearson.
- Jones, D. E., Greenberg, M., & Crowley, M. (2015). Early social-emotional functioning and public health: The relationship between Kindergarten social competence and future wellness. *American Journal of Public Health, 105*(11), 2283–2290.  
<https://doi.org/10.2105/ajph.2015.302630>
- Jones, S., & Brush, K. (2017). *Navigating social and emotional learning from the inside out*. Wallace Foundation. <https://www.wallacefoundation.org/knowledge-center/pages/navigating-social-and-emotional-learning-from-the-inside-out.aspx>
- Kalaian, S., & Kasim, R. (2008). External validity. In *Encyclopedia of Survey Research Methods* (Vol. 0, pp. 255-257). Sage Publications, Inc.,  
<https://doi.org/10.4135/9781412963947>
- Kirk, D., & Macdonald, D. (1998). Situated learning in physical education. *Journal of Teaching in Physical Education, 17*(3), 376–387.  
<https://doi.org/10.1123/jtpe.17.3.376>



- Kirshner B. (2004). *Democracy now: Activism and learning in urban youth organizations*. (Unpublished doctoral thesis). Stanford University.
- Konrad, Firk, C., & Uhlhaas, P. J. (2013). Brain development during adolescence: neuroscientific insights into this developmental period. *Deutsches Ärzteblatt International*, 110(25), 425–431. <https://doi.org/10.3238/arztebl.2013.0425>
- Krumpal, I. (2011). Determinants of social desirability bias in sensitive surveys: A literature review. *Quality & Quantity*, 47, 2025–2047. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11135-011-9640-9>
- Kvale, S. (2006). Dominance through interviews and dialogues. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 12(3), 480–500. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800406286235>
- Lakens, D. (2013). Calculating and reporting effect sizes to facilitate cumulative science: A practical primer for T-tests and ANOVAS. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 4. <https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fpsyg.2013.00863/full>
- Lasfeto, D. (2020). The relationship between self-directed learning and students' social interaction in online learning environment. *Journal of e-Learning and Knowledge Society*, 16(2). <https://doi.org/10.20368/1971-8829/1135078>
- Learning Policy Institute. (2017). *The role of principals in addressing teacher shortages*. [https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/media/82/download?inline&file=Role\\_Principals\\_Addressing\\_Teacher\\_Shortage\\_BRIEF.pdf](https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/media/82/download?inline&file=Role_Principals_Addressing_Teacher_Shortage_BRIEF.pdf)
- Learning Policy Institute. (2023). *Teacher recruitment, retention, and shortages*. <https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/topic/teacher-recruitment-retention-and-shortages>
- Leedy, P., & Ormrod, J. (2010). *Practical research: Planning and design*. Pearson.
- Lindholm, M. (2018). Promoting curiosity?: Possibilities and pitfalls in science education. *Science & Education*, 27(9-10), 987–1002. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11191-018-0015-7>
- Lingard, A., & Levinson, W. (2008). Qualitative research: Grounded theory, mixed methods, and action research. *British Medical Journal*, 337(7667), 459–461. <https://doi.org/10.1136/bmj.39602.690162.47>
- Low, S., Smolkowski, K., & Cook, C. (2016). What constitutes high-quality implementation of SEL programs? A latent class analysis of second step implementation. *Prevention Science*, 17(8), 981–991. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11121-016-0670-3>

- Lupoli, C. (2018). *Deepening Student Voice and empowerment*. The Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD).  
<https://www.ascd.org/blogs/deepening-student-voice-and-empowerment>
- Marks, W. (2013). *The late-career and transition to retirement phases for school leaders in the 21st century: The aspirations, expectations and reflections of late-career and recently retired principals in New South Wales*. [Unpublished doctoral dissertation]. University of Wollongong.
- Markstrom-Adams, C., Hofstra, G., & Dougher, K. (1994). The ego-virtue of fidelity: A case for the study of religion and identity formation in adolescence. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, 23(4), 453–469. <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF01538039>
- Markstrom, C., Berman, R. C., Sabino, V. M., & Turner, B. (1998). The ego virtue of fidelity as a psychosocial rite of passage in the transition from adolescence to adulthood. *Child & Youth Care Forum*, 27(5), 337–354. <https://doi.org/10.1007/bf02589260>
- McLaren, P. (2017). Critical pedagogy: A look at the major concepts. In *The critical pedagogy reader* (pp. 69-96). Routledge/Falmer.
- McLeod, S. (2018). *Erik Erikson's 8 stages of Psychosocial Development*. Simply Psychology. <https://simplypsychology.org/Erik-Erikson.html>
- Meier, S. T. (2022). Investigation of causes of ceiling effects on working alliance measures. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 13.  
<https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2022.949326>
- Mertler, C. A. (2020). *Action research: Improving schools and empowering educators*. SAGE Publications, Inc.
- Mirra, N., Garcia, A., & Morrell, E. (2016). *Doing youth participatory action research: Transforming inquiry with researchers, educators, and students*. Routledge.
- Mitra, D. (2014). *Student Voice in school reform: Reframing student-teacher relationships*. McGill Journal of Education.  
[https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/1-4020-3367-2\\_29](https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/1-4020-3367-2_29)
- Mitra, D., & Serriere, S. (2012). Student Voice in elementary school reform: Examining youth development in fifth graders. *American Educational Research Journal*, 49(4), 743–774. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0002831212443079>

- Morton, M., & Montgomery, P. (2013). Youth empowerment programs for improving adolescents' self-efficacy and self-esteem: A systematic review. *Research on Social Work Practice, 23*(1), 22–33. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1049731512459967>
- National Center for Education Statistics. (n.d.). *Early childhood longitudinal studies program (ECLS): Instruments and assessments*. U.S. Department of Education (USDE). <https://nces.ed.gov/ecls/pdf/eighthgrade/student.pdf>
- National Center for Education Statistics. (n.d.). *The NCES fast facts tool provides quick answers to many education questions*. U.S. Department of Education (USDE). <https://nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/display.asp?id=84>
- Nyman, J., Parisod, H., Axelin, A., & Salanterä, S. (2019). Finnish adolescents' self-efficacy in peer interactions: A critical incident study. *Health Promotion International, 34*(5), 961–969. <https://doi.org/10.1093/heapro/day048>
- Oberle, E., Domitrovich, C., Meyers, D., & Weissberg, R. (2016). Establishing systemic social and emotional learning approaches in schools: a framework for schoolwide implementation. *Cambridge Journal of Education, 46*(3), 277–297. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0305764X.2015.1125450>
- Oregon Health Authority. (n.d.). *The Institute of Community Research's youth participatory action research curriculum*. Institute of Community Research. <https://icrweb.org/portfolio-items/building-the-capacity-of-facilitators-to-implement-y-par-in-oregon/>
- Oregon Health Authority & Match Stick Consulting. (n.d.). *Youth participatory action research (YPAR)*. Oregon Health Authority. <https://www.oregon.gov/oha/ph/HealthyPeopleFamilies/Youth/Pages/youth.aspx>
- Ozer, E., Shapiro, V., & Duarte, C. (2023). *Opportunities to strengthen SEL impact through youth-led Participatory Research (YPAR)*. Edna Bennett Pierce Prevention Research Center. <https://prevention.psu.edu/sel/issue-briefs/opportunities-to-strengthen-sel-impact-through-youth-led-participatory-research-y-par/>
- Parsons, R., & Brown, K. (2002). *Teacher as reflective practitioner and action researcher*. Wadsworth/Thomson Learning.
- Piotrowski, J., Litman, J., & Valkenburg, P. (2014). Measuring epistemic curiosity in young children. *Infant and Child Development, 23*(5), 542–553. <https://doi.org/10.1002/icd.1847>
- Plano Clark, V., & Creswell, J. (2015). *Understanding research: A consumer's guide*. Pearson.

- Polit, D. F., & Beck, C. T. (2012). *Nursing research: Principles and methods*. Lippincott Williams and Wilkins.
- Post, T., & van der Molen, J. (2021). Effects of an inquiry-focused school improvement program on the development of pupils' attitudes towards curiosity, their implicit ability and effort beliefs, and goal orientations. *Motivation and Emotion*, 45(1), 13–38. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11031-020-09851-5>
- Poulou, M., & Denham, S. (2022). Teachers' emotional expressiveness and coping reactions to students' emotions: Associations with students' social-emotional competences and school adjustment. *Early Education and Development*, 34(3), 607–625. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10409289.2022.2053486>
- Public Media Connect (PMC). (2021). *Social-awareness: Social-emotional learning*. PBS LearningMedia. <https://az.pbslearningmedia.org/resource/social-awareness-social-emotional-learning/social-emotional-learning-video/>
- Public Media Connect (PMC). (2022). *Social awareness and relationship skills: SEL at home*. PBS LearningMedia. <https://az.pbslearningmedia.org/resource/social-awareness-and-relationship-skills-sel-video/social-emotional-learning/>
- Putman, H. (2016). *NCTQ: Blog: A fault in our measures? Evidence of bias in classroom observations may raise some familiar concerns*. National Council on Teacher Quality (NCTQ). <https://www.nctq.org/blog/A-fault-in-our-measures-Evidence-of-bias-in-classroom-observations-may-raise-some-familiar-concerns>
- Quaglia, R., & Fox, K. (n.d.). *Student Voice: Do students really have a voice in your school?* Quaglia Institute. <https://quagliainstitute.org/uploads/originals/ael-vol-43-issue-4-2021-student-voice-2.pdf>
- Ranson, S. (2000). Recognizing the pedagogy of voice in a learning community. *Educational Management & Administration*, 28(3), 263–279. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0263211x000283003>
- Robinson, V., Lloyd, C., & Rowe, K. (2008). The impact of leadership on student outcomes: An analysis of the differential effects of leadership types. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 44(5), 635–674. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0013161x08321509>

- Roth, J., & Brooks-Gunn, J. (2003). What is a youth development program? Identification of defining principles. In *Handbook of applied developmental science: Promoting positive child, adolescent, and family development through research, policies, and programs*. (pp. 197-224). Sage Publications.  
<https://doi.org/10.4135/9781452233642>
- Rovegno, I., & Dolly, J. (2006). Constructivist perspectives on learning. *Handbook of Physical Education*, 242–261. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781848608009.n14>
- Rudduck, & Fielding, M. (2006). Student Voice and the perils of popularity. *Educational Review*, 58(2), 219–231. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00131910600584207>
- Sagor, R. (2011). *The action research guidebook: A four-stage process for educators and school teams*. Corwin.
- Salkind, N., & Frey, B. (2020). *Statistics for people who (think they) hate statistics*. SAGE Publications, Inc.
- Salvia, J., & Meisel, C. (1980). Observer bias: A methodological consideration in special education research. *The Journal of Special Education*, 14(2), 261–270.  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/002246698001400213>
- Second Step. (2011). *What is second step?* <https://www.secondstep.org/what-is-second-step>
- Schreier, M. (2017). *Qualitative content analysis in practice*. SAGE.
- Scott, M., Pyne, K., & Means, D. (2015). Approaching praxis: YPAR as critical pedagogical process in a college access program. *The High School Journal*, 98(2), 138–157. <https://doi.org/10.1353/hsj.2015.0003>
- Schmuck, R., Perry, E., Schmuck, R., & Snodgrass, A. (2006). *Practical action research for change*. Corwin Press.
- Schweder, S., & Raufelder, D. (2019). Positive emotions, learning behavior and teacher support in self-directed learning during adolescence: Do age and gender matter? *Journal of Adolescence*, 73(1), 73–84.  
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.adolescence.2019.04.004>
- Sinclair R. (2000). *Young people's participation in research practice*. Keele University.
- Smith, M., & Glass, G. (1987). Experimental studies. In *Research and evaluation in education and the social sciences* (pp. 124-157). Allyn and Bacon.

- Sonix, Inc. (2024). *Sign in - best automated transcription service in 2024*. Sonix.  
<https://sonix.ai/>
- Stake, R. E., & Trumbull, D. J. (n.d.). *Stake, Robert E., and Deborah J. Trumbull, "naturalistic generalizations," review journal of Philosophy and Social Science, 7(nos. 1 & 2, 1982), 1-12.* \*. STARS. <https://stars.library.ucf.edu/cirs/1509/>
- Sternberg, R. J. (1997). Construct validation of a triangular love scale. *European Journal of Social Psychology, 27*(3), 313–335. [https://doi.org/10.1002/\(SICI\)1099-0992\(199705\)27:3<313::AID-EJSP824>3.0.CO;2-4](https://doi.org/10.1002/(SICI)1099-0992(199705)27:3<313::AID-EJSP824>3.0.CO;2-4)
- Strauss, A. & Corbin, J. (1990). *Basics of qualitative research: Grounded theory procedures and techniques*. Sage Publications, Inc.
- Stuckey, H. (2015). The second step in data analysis: Coding qualitative research data. *Journal of Social Health and Diabetes, 03*(01), 007–010.  
<https://doi.org/10.4103/2321-0656.140875>
- Sullivan, G. M., & Feinn, R. (2012). Using Effect Size—Or why the p value is not enough. *Journal of Graduate Medical Education, 4*(3), 279–282.  
<https://doi.org/10.4300/JGME-D-12-00156.1>
- Thurman, N. (2018). *Mixed-methods communication research: Combining qualitative and quantitative approaches in the study of online journalism*. Sage Publications, Inc. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781526428431>
- Tracy, S. J. (2010). Qualitative quality: Eight “big-tent” criteria for excellent qualitative research. *Qualitative Inquiry, 16*(10), 837–851.  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800410383121>
- UC Berkeley. (2023). *Why Ypar?* Berkeley YPAR Hub.  
<https://yparhub.berkeley.edu/why-ypar>
- U.S. Department of Education (USDE). (2018). *Title I, Part A Program*.  
<https://www2.ed.gov/programs/titleiparta/index.html>.
- Valenzuela, A. (1999). *Subtractive schooling: U.S.-Mexican youth and the politics of caring*. State University of New York Press.
- Watson, J. (2022). *Why is teen identity development important?* Aspiro.  
<https://aspiroadventure.com/blog/why-is-teen-identity-development-important/>
- Welsh, M., Pennington, B., & Groisser, D. (1991). A normative-developmental study of executive function: A window on prefrontal function in children. *Developmental Neuropsychology, 7*(2), 131–149. <https://doi.org/10.1080/87565649109540483>

Westheimer, J., & Kahne, J. (2002). What kind of citizen? The Politics of Educating for Democracy. *American Educational Research Journal*, 41(2), 237–269.  
<https://doi.org/10.3102/00028312041002237>

Wolf, G.(2007). What is self-efficacy? *Quantified Self*.  
<https://quantifiedself.com/blog/what-is-selfefficacy/>

Zoom. (n.d.). *One platform to connect*. <https://zoom.us>

APPENDIX A  
STAFF PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT



## **Description for Professional Development Sessions**

Staff participants will participate in four one-hour professional development (PD) sessions during which they will receive instructions on the following topics. Data will be collected from the PD through video/audio recordings of staff interactions and discussions, responses to the reflection questions and a post PD survey.

### **Session 1 - Developmental Milestones**

#### **Book Reference:**

Wood, C. (2014). *Yardsticks: Child and adolescent development ages 4-14* (4th ed.). Center for Responsive Schools.

#### **Purpose**

To provide staff with the knowledge to effectively support the developmental milestones of students ages 11-14 in the areas of social and emotional competence (SEC), cognitive development, and physical development.

By the end of the professional development session, staff will be able to:

- Identify the key developmental milestones for students ages 10-14 in the areas of SEC, cognitive development, and physical development.
- Understand the potential impact of these developmental milestones on student behavior and learning.
- Recognize strategies and interventions that can support and enhance student development in these areas.
- Implement these strategies and interventions effectively in their work with students.

#### **New Learning**

Warm-Up (10 minutes):

- Introduce the topic of the lesson.
- Provide an overview of the jigsaw process and the roles of experts and learners.
- Distribute copies of Yardsticks chapters 10-14 and handouts with jigsaw instructions and reflection questions.

Development (30 minutes):

- Divide staff into pairs and assign each group one of the five chapters to read and discuss.
- Within each pairing, assign roles (expert and summarizer) and have staff complete the reading for their assigned chapter.

- Have each pairing share their summary and key takeaways with the larger group.
- The larger group will discuss the new learning from each presentation.

Independent Practice (10 minutes):

- Have staff complete the reflection questions individually.
  - How does the information in these chapters align with your current understanding of the developmental milestones for students ages 10-14?
  - What new insights or perspectives have you gained from reviewing these chapters?
  - How can you apply the information from these chapters to your work with students in this age range?

Closure (10 minutes):

- Review the key points covered during the lesson.
- Ask staff to share any insights or observations they had during the PD.
- Encourage staff to consider how they can incorporate their new learning into their work with students in the SAC.

**Session 2 - Social Emotional Competencies (SECs)**

**Article References:**

Importance of SECs

DeAngelis, T. (2010, April). *Social Awareness + emotional skills = successful kids*. Monitor on Psychology. <https://www.apa.org/monitor/2010/04/classrooms>

Social Awareness

Roeser, T. D. F. and A. (2022, October 4). *Sel & Beyond: Social Awareness*. Infobase. <https://infobase.com/blog/sel-beyond-social-awareness/>

Self-Efficacy

Roeser, T. D. F. and A. (2022, July 22). *SEL & Beyond: Self-Awareness*. Infobase. <https://infobase.com/blog/sel-beyond-self-awareness/>

**Purpose**

To provide staff with the knowledge to support the development of social awareness, responsible decision-making, and self-efficacy in students.

By the end of the professional development session, staff will be able to:

- Define social awareness and self-efficacy and understand the importance of these skills for student development.
- Identify strategies and interventions that can support the development of social awareness and self-efficacy in students.
- Reflect on the impact of their efforts to support the development of social awareness and self-efficacy in students.

## **New Learning**

Warm-Up (10 minutes):

- Introduce the topic of the lesson.
- Ask staff to share their current understanding of SEL and how they have incorporated SEL into their work with students.
- Distribute the four articles and handouts with jigsaw instructions and reflection questions.

Development (30 minutes):

- Divide staff into pairs and assign each group one of the three articles to read and discuss.
- Within each pairing, assign roles (expert and summarizer) and have staff complete the reading for their assigned chapter.
- Have each pairing share their summary and key takeaways with the larger group.
- The larger group will discuss the new learning from each presentation.

Independent Practice (10 minutes):

- Have staff complete the reflection questions individually.
  - How does the information on SEL, social awareness and self-efficacy, align with your current understanding and practices in these areas?
  - What new insights or perspectives have you gained from learning about these SEL skills?
  - How can you apply this information to your work with students to support their development of social awareness, self-efficacy, and other SEL skills?

Closure (10 minutes):

- Review the key points covered during the lesson.
- Ask staff to share any insights or observations they had during the PD.
- Encourage staff to consider how they can incorporate their new learning into their work with students in the SAC.

## **Session 3 - YPAR**

**Book Reference:**

Mirra, N., Garcia, A., & Morrell, E. (2016). *Doing youth participatory action research: Transforming inquiry with researchers, educators, and students*. Routledge.

## **Purpose**

To provide staff with the knowledge and skills to effectively implement Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) in their work with students.

By the end of the professional development session, staff will be able to:

- Define YPAR and understand its principles and aims.
- Identify the steps and stages of the YPAR process.
- Understand the benefits and challenges of using YPAR with students.

## **New Learning**

Warm-Up (10 minutes):

- Introduce the topic of the lesson: What is YPAR?
- Ask staff to share their current understanding of YPAR and any prior experience they have with this research method.

Development (40 minutes):

- Provide an overview of YPAR, including its principles and aims.
- Review the steps and stages of the YPAR process.
- Create a thinking map with staff to identify the benefits and challenges of using YPAR with students.
- Distribute copies of *Doing Youth Participatory Action Research* (Mirra, et al. 2016), Chapters 1 and 2 and handouts with reflection questions.
- Divide staff into groups and assign each with the two chapters to read and discuss.
- Within each group, have staff complete the assigned reading.
- Have each group share their responses with the larger group.

Independent Practice (10 minutes):

- Have staff complete the remaining reflection questions on the handout individually.
  - What is your current understanding of YPAR and its principles and aims?
  - How do you see YPAR fitting into your work with students, and what potential benefits and challenges do you foresee in using this research method with them?

### **Closure (10 minutes):**

- Review the key points covered during the lesson.
- Ask staff to share any insights or observations they had while reading the chapters and completing the reflection questions.
- Encourage staff to consider how YPAR might fit into their work with students and to start thinking about potential projects they might want to pursue.

### **Session 4 - YPAR**

#### **Book Reference:**

Mirra, N., Garcia, A., & Morrell, E. (2016). *Doing youth participatory action research: Transforming inquiry with researchers, educators, and students*. Routledge.

#### **Purpose**

To provide staff with the knowledge and skills needed to effectively implement YPAR with the SAC and to identify and utilize their own areas of expertise to enhance their practice.

By the end of the professional development session, staff will be able to:

- Staff will learn how to engage students in the research process, gather and analyze data, and use findings to impact the school and students.
- Staff will reflect on their own strengths and areas of expertise and explore ways to utilize these skills to better serve their SAC.

#### **New Learning**

Warm-Up (10 minutes):

- Introduce the topic of the lesson: The importance of adult and student relationships and collaboration in YPAR.
- Ask staff to spend a few minutes reflecting on their awareness of school practices and procedures in any areas where they feel particularly strong or confident.

Development (30 minutes):

- Provide a brief overview of the concept of "expertise" and how it relates to teaching and learning.
- Have participants read Chapter 3 (Mirra, et al. 2016), of the assigned reading, which focuses on the importance of relationships and adult mentoring in the YPAR process.
- As a group, discuss key points from the reading and any questions or concerns that arise.
- Divide the group into small groups of 2-3 participants.

- Give each group a flipchart or a section of the whiteboard and ask them to brainstorm a list of areas of expertise that are relevant to school practices. Examples might include the master schedule, recess requirement, discipline procedures, dress code, etc.
- Have each group share their lists with the larger group and discuss any overlap or areas of disagreement.
- As a whole group, create a master list of areas of expertise on the whiteboard or flipchart.

Independent Practice (10 minutes):

- Give each staff member a pen and a piece of paper and ask them to reflect on their own practice and identify at least 2 areas of expertise where they feel particularly strong or confident.
- Have participants share their areas of expertise with a partner or small group and discuss how they might utilize these skills to enhance their work with the SAC.

Closure (10 minutes):

- Review the main points of the lesson and encourage participants to continue thinking about their areas of expertise as they begin to work with the SAC. Collect and review written responses from independent practice to share with

SAC student participants to help guide them in the selection of the problem they would like to address.

APPENDIX B  
YPAR CURRICULUM

## Description of Implementation of YPAR Curriculum

In the YPAR curriculum from the Institute of Community Research, nine out of the 12 modules are used due to time constraints, age-appropriateness, and context. I made this decision to ensure that the material being covered is relevant and suitable for the age group and setting in which it is being taught. By carefully selecting which modules to include, the curriculum can be tailored to the specific needs and interests of the learners, making it a more effective and engaging learning experience.

### Curriculum Reference:

Oregon Health Authority. (n.d.). *The Institute of Community Research's youth participatory action research curriculum*. Institute of Community Research.

### Description of Use of Modules

Module	Title	Used	Not Used	Rationale
1	Promoting positive youth development youth participatory action research and youth-adult partnership		X	This module is designed to help adults develop the skills needed to effectively work with students. The PD described in Appendix A aligns with other school-facilitated PDs and helps to meet this need.
2	Laying the foundation of the action research team		X	I will use only two of the activities from the module due to the age of participants and the setting, a K-8 public school in Arizona, as the rest of the module deals with sensitive topics such as culture, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality that may not be supported by my school district. However, it is possible that the students may choose to address problems related to these topics within the school setting.
3	Introduction to youth participatory action research	X		The SAC will spend four weeks working on activities from this module in order to establish a solid foundation in research and methods.



4	Identifying the issue and selecting a research question	X		This module is designed to guide students through the selection of a specific challenge or issue and the creation of their research question. This is an important step because it will shape the direction of their research and inform the remainder of their work.
5	Methodologies	X		In this module, students will use the knowledge and skills they have acquired during week 2 to choose the appropriate data collection method for their research project.
6	Developing a research plan		X	Due to time constraints and the fact that I have already established a plan for the students as part of my research process, I decided not to utilize this module.
7	Developing research instruments	X		After selecting the appropriate data collection method, participants will then create the necessary instruments for their research. This process builds upon the skills and experience they have gained through previous SAC meetings.
8 & 9	Data collection and Data analysis	X		These modules provide guidance to students on how to collect and analyze data using the research instruments they have created, with the aim of identifying patterns and themes in the data. This is a crucial part of the research process as it allows us to draw insights and conclusions from our study.
10 & 11	Presenting key findings and using the data for social change	X		The module's guidance on creating a presentation helps students develop the skill to be able to effectively share their findings and communicate their research and recommendations to others. In the final two weeks, students will use the skills and knowledge they have gained to present their research findings and recommendations for addressing their identified issue.

<b>12</b>	Celebration!	X		This module serves as a reminder to celebrate students for their work, despite the outcomes of the research. It also guides students through a reflection on the process and new learning.
-----------	--------------	---	--	--

APPENDIX C

STUDENT AMBASSADOR COUNCIL (SAC), YPAR CURRICULUM

## Description for SAC Sessions

Research teams will have the opportunity to engage in elements of the YPAR process over the course of nine one-hour sessions. During these sessions, students will have the chance to identify issues or areas for improvement related to school or district rules, expectations, or procedures, and work to develop innovative solutions or recommendations for addressing these issues. The goal of this process is to give students a voice in shaping their school or district, and to empower them to take an active role in creating positive change.

### Session 1 - Module 3, Section 1: Why do Research

#### Curriculum Reference:

Oregon Health Authority. (n.d.). *The Institute of Community Research's youth participatory action research curriculum*. Institute of Community Research.

#### Purpose

To introduce students to the YPAR process and its role in empowering them to identify and address issues or areas for improvement in their school or learning community.

By the end of the session, students will be able to:

- Students can accurately describe the YPAR process and its key steps.
- Students can identify at least one issue or area for improvement in their school or learning community that they would like to address through YPAR.

#### New Learning

Warm-up (15 minutes): Ice Breaker

Best Friend

- Have members sit in a circle and introduce the person sitting next to them
- to the rest of the group, even though they may have never met.
- The person should start by saying, “This is my best friend Rob,” and then say at least three things about the person, such as, “He was the third man to land on the moon. He is 95 years old and he has a pet alligator.”
- Once the person has been introduced by their “friend” they introduce themselves to the group, telling people the truth about who they are.
- Then they introduce the person next to them by making up things about the person.
- This continues until everyone in the group has had a chance to introduce both someone else as well as themselves.

Development (20 minutes):

- Create an anchor chart with the acronym YPAR on a flipchart.

- Ask students if they have heard of this term before, and if they know what it means.
- Provide a brief overview of the YPAR process and its focus on empowering young people to identify and address issues or areas for improvement in their community.
  - Scientific Method Handout
  - What is Action Research Handout
  - Ethical Principles in Action Research Handout

**Independent Practice (30 minutes):**

- Divide students into small groups and give each group a set of index cards and pens/pencils.
- Have students brainstorm a list of issues or areas for improvement related to their school or learning community.
- Encourage them to think broadly and consider issues that they feel passionate about or that they believe would have a positive impact on their school or community.
- Have each group share their ideas with the class.
- Have students choose one issue or area for improvement from the list that their group brainstormed and write a short paragraph explaining why they believe this is an important issue to address.
- Have them share their chosen issue and explanation with a partner or small group.

**Closure (5 minutes):**

- Review the main points of the YPAR process as a class.
- Emphasize the importance of empowering young people to identify and address issues or areas for improvement in their community, and the role that students can play in this process.
- Collect and review the paragraphs that students write explaining their chosen issue or area for improvement.
- Have students self-assess their understanding of the YPAR process, using a simple scale (e.g., 1 = no understanding, 5 = deep understanding).

**Session 2 - Module 3, Section 2: Research Stations**

**Curriculum Reference:**

Oregon Health Authority. (n.d.). *The Institute of Community Research's youth participatory action research curriculum*. Institute of Community Research.

**Purpose**

To introduce students to three examples, surveys, interviews, and visual documentation, of the different methods they can use to gather information about their chosen topic.

By the end of the session, students will be able to:

- Students can accurately describe the characteristics and uses of each of the three methods (surveys, interviews, and visual documentation).
- Students can identify the appropriate situations in which to use each of the three methods.

## **New Learning**

Warm-up (15 minutes): Ice Breaker

Human Bingo

- Pass out a bingo sheet to each person in the group.
- Instruct them to walk around the room and try to find someone who matches the description in each box.
  - They cannot have the same name twice in the same row.
- The first person to fill in all the boxes in a line should yell “bingo!”
  - Have that person recreate the line with the people who signed their names and have the person introduce each person in the line by the attribute on the sheet.

Development (20 minutes):

- Ask students to brainstorm different ways that they have gathered information in the past.
- Write their responses on the board and discuss them as a group.
- Introduce the concept of data gathering methods and explain that there are different ways to collect information.
- Distribute the handouts and go over the characteristics and appropriate uses of each method (surveys, interviews, visual documentation).
- Show examples of each method and discuss their strengths and limitations.

Independent Practice (30 minutes):

- Divide students into small groups based on their topic of interest and give each group one of the data gathering methods.
  - These groups will continue to work together for the remainder of the innovation as research teams.
- Research teams will do a 10-minute rotation in each station, one for each method.
- Have the teams brainstorm a list of possible questions or prompts to use with each method.
- Have the teams present their questions or prompts to the larger group at the end of all the rotations and discuss as a whole.
- Review the topics chosen from session 1 with the group.
- Have teams consider the topic that they are interested in and brainstorm a list of questions or prompts to use with one of the data gathering methods.

Closure (5 minutes):

- Review the characteristics and appropriate uses of each data gathering method.
- Ask participants to reflect on which method they think would be most useful for their topic and why.
- Students will complete an exit survey.

### Session 3 - 4 - Module 3, Section 4: Internet and Literature Search

#### Curriculum Reference:

Oregon Health Authority. (n.d.). *The Institute of Community Research's youth participatory action research curriculum*. Institute of Community Research.

#### Purpose

Research teams will be able to determine how to find and collect reliable existing information on a topic of interest from a variety of sources.

By the end of the session, teams will be able to:

- Teams can effectively use search terms and strategies to find relevant information from a variety of sources.
- Teams can identify and explain the importance of using reliable sources when gathering information.
- Teams can locate and access a variety of sources (e.g. books, articles, websites) related to their topic of interest.
- Teams can accurately summarize and synthesize the information they have gathered from multiple sources.
- Teams can properly cite the sources they have used in their research.

#### New Learning

Warm-up (15 minutes):

##### Circles of Life

- Pass out a bullseye paper.
- Have youth write the word “self” in the center of the bull’s-eye and “the world” as the outermost circle.
  - Ecological Model Handout
- Pick topic - School Uniforms
  - Explore the different levels of influence on this topic.
- Have students brainstorm, in pairs, different influences and where they fall on the bull’s eye.
- Come to a consensus on the labels for the different layers of the model and compare them to the ecological model. What is different? Are there pieces they missed?
  - Ecological Model Handout 2

Development (20 minutes):

- Explain that a literature review is a summary of what is known about a particular topic.
- Explain the importance of finding and collecting reliable information, particularly when conducting research or making important decisions.
- Introduce the various types of sources that students can use to find information, such as books, articles, websites, and databases.
- Discuss the importance of evaluating the credibility of each source, including the author's credentials, the publisher or website, and any biases that may be present.

Independent Practice (30 minutes):

- Hand out the list of key terms to use when looking for sources on the impact of their topic of interest.
  - Have students work in small groups to brainstorm additional search terms and strategies that they could use.
- Have students use the key terms and search strategies to find sources on these topics.
  - Encourage them to use a variety of sources, including books, articles, websites, and databases.
- Once students have found several sources, have them use the evaluation criteria to determine which sources are most credible.
  - Author's credentials
  - The publisher
  - Any biases present
  - Timeliness
  - Supporting Evidence

Closure (5 minutes):

- Teams summarize and synthesize the information they have gathered from three sources.
- Teams properly cite the sources they have used in their research.
- Students will complete an exit survey.

**Session 5 – Module 4: Identify the issue and Research Question**

**Curriculum Reference:**

Oregon Health Authority. (n.d.). *The Institute of Community Research's youth participatory action research curriculum*. Institute of Community Research.

**Purpose**

Research teams will be able to identify a specific issue and develop a related research question.



By the end of the session, teams will be able to:

- Clearly identify a specific issue that is relevant to the topic being studied.
- Explain the background and context of the issue in a concise and accurate manner.
- Formulate a research question that is clear, focused, and relevant to the issue.
- Explain the importance or significance of the research question and how it relates to the larger topic.

## **New Learning**

Warm-up (15 minutes):

What is my issue?

- Place one student from each topic group into a new group
- Each student will discuss their topic and explain why it is relevant to their lives or to current events.
  - Other students ask clarifying questions.
- Each student will then identify a specific issue for their topic and again explain why it is relevant.
  - Other students will provide feedback.

Development (20 minutes):

- Introduce the concept of research questions and explain their role in the research process.
- Discuss the criteria for a good research question
  - Clear independent and dependent variables
  - Focused
  - Relevant
  - Specific
  - Testable
- Provide examples of strong and weak research questions.
  - Compare and contrast both
  - Rewrite weak questions to fit the criteria

Independent Practice (30 minutes):

- Teams will discuss the issue identified during the warm-up activity with their group.
- Teams brainstorm and generate a list of potential research questions related to each issue.
- Teams share their list of research questions with the class and discuss if the questions meet the criteria.
  - Teams revise as needed to make their questions more focused, relevant, and testable.
- Teams choose one research question to focus on for the remainder of the cycle.

- Teams write a paragraph or two explaining the background and context of their chosen research question and why it is important or significant.
- Teams present their research question and explanation to the whole group to receive feedback.

Closure (5 minutes):

- Teams finalize the selected research question as their focus.
- Teams underline the independent and dependent variables in the question.
  - Discuss why it is important to have variable clearly identified as we move forward in the process.
- Students will complete an exit survey.

**Session 6** – Module 5 and 7 – Methods and Research Instruments

**Curriculum Reference:**

Oregon Health Authority. (n.d.). *The Institute of Community Research's youth participatory action research curriculum*. Institute of Community Research.

**Purpose**

Research teams will be able to identify an appropriate research method and create a corresponding research instrument that will enable the teams to effectively gather data and information for their research project.

By the end of the session, teams will be able to:

- Select an appropriate method for the specific research project.
- Create an instrument that is well-designed and clearly communicates the research questions and objectives to the participants.
- Develop an instrument that can effectively gather the necessary data and information from the participants.
- Design an instrument that can be administered in a timely and efficient manner.

**New Learning**

Warm-up (15 minutes):

Gallery Walk

- Provide each research team with a large piece of paper and markers.
- On the top of the paper, write the name of one of the following research methods: surveys, interviews, or visual documentation.
- Give the groups 5 minutes to brainstorm and list the pros and cons of using their assigned research method.
- When finished, each team will rotate right to read the chart of another team.
  - Teams will star items they agree with

- Add a new pro or con
- Write any questions or new thoughts
- When each team has read and commented on each chart, they will return to their chart and discuss the input from others.
- Teams will present their findings to the class and discuss as a group.
  - What are the strengths and limitations of each research method?
  - In what types of research projects might each method be most appropriate?
  - How might the results of a research project be different depending on which method is used?

Development (20 minutes):

- Distribute and Review Handout: Approaches to data collection
- Share a model research question with the groups.
- Teams will discuss the question and use the knowledge and skills they have learned to decide on an appropriate research method.
- Teams will justify their decision by explaining how the chosen research method aligns with the research question and objectives.

Independent Practice (30 minutes):

- Distribute handout: Which method works best for me handout?
- Teams work together to complete based on their chosen research question.
- Teams select no more than two methods to use for their work.
- Based on the method selected, students will complete activity from Module 7.
  - Section 1 - Interviewing
  - Section 2 - Survey Development
  - Section 4 - Visual Documentation

Closure (5 minutes):

- Teams justify their decision by explaining how the chosen research method aligns with the research question.
- Each team will present their created instrument, explaining the type of data they hope to collect through its use.
- Students will complete an exit survey.

**Session 7-8 - Module 8-9 - Data Collection and analysis**

**Curriculum Reference:**

Oregon Health Authority. (n.d.). *The Institute of Community Research's youth participatory action research curriculum*. Institute of Community Research.

**Purpose**

During the next two weeks, research teams will finalize their data collection instruments and practice organizing collected data. They will then conduct the data collection and analyze the results to draw appropriate conclusions.

By the end of the session, teams will be able to:

- Teams are able to effectively distribute the data collection instrument to the appropriate participants.
- Teams are able to accurately collect and record the data from the participants.
- Teams are able to effectively analyze the collected data, including organizing and summarizing the data in an appropriate manner.
- Teams will consider conclusions based on the analyzed data.

## **New Learning**

Warm-up (20 minutes):

Our turn:

- Research teams will share their data collection instrument with the other teams.
- Have the other teams complete the instrument and provide feedback on its effectiveness and any suggestions for improvement.
- Allow time for each team to make any necessary adjustments to their instrument based on the feedback received.
- Have each team present their finalized instrument to the class.

Development (10 minutes):

- Teams will receive overview based on their data collection method.
  - Module 9, Section 1, Activity 2 - Identifying Themes
  - Module 9, Section 1, Activity 4 - Visual Documentation Analysis
  - Module 9, Section 2, Activity 1 - Interpreting Results

Independent Practice (30 minutes):

- Research teams will receive a sample set of data from one of the research methods (surveys, interviews, or visual documentation).
- Groups will work through the data, using the guiding questions to help uncover themes and interpret the results.
  - What is the research question?
  - How do the results relate to the research question?
  - What are the key themes or patterns that emerge from the data?
  - Are there any unexpected or surprising findings?
  - How might the results be useful or applicable to the team's issue?
  - What additional research or data might be needed to fully understand the results?
  - Have each group present their findings to the class and discuss as a group.

Closure (5 minutes):

- Teams will present their findings and interpretations of the data to the class, highlighting the key themes and patterns that emerged. They will also discuss whether the type of data collection (surveys, interviews, visual documentation) impacted the results in any way.
- Students will complete an exit survey

**Session 9** - Module 10-11 - Identify and Summarize Key Findings and Use Data for Change

**Curriculum Reference:**

Oregon Health Authority. (n.d.). *The Institute of Community Research's youth participatory action research curriculum*. Institute of Community Research.

**Purpose**

Research teams will summarize the key findings of their research and determine recommendations to address the issue. Teams will also make decisions about to whom they should present their findings.

By the end of the session, teams will be able to:

- Effectively summarize the key findings of their research and develop recommendations to address the issue.
- Determine which stakeholders they should present their findings to and justify their decisions.
- Create a presentation of their findings and recommendations for their chosen stakeholders.

**New Learning**

Warm-up (15 minutes):

Elevator Pitch:

- Explain what an elevator pitch is and the purpose of it.
  - An elevator pitch is a brief, persuasive speech that is used to sell an idea, product, or service. It's called an elevator pitch because it should be brief enough to deliver in the time it takes to ride an elevator.
- Give an elevator pitch of why students should attend school.
  - Have students write down key points shared in the pitch.
  - Research teams, share what they write down and why it resonated with them.
- Research teams will have a few minutes to discuss their findings.
  - Complete handout: Elevator Pitch

Development (15 minutes):

- Explain what stakeholders are and give examples of who they may be from the elevator model elevator pitch.
- Research teams will brainstorm a list of people or groups that might be affected by their problem or issue in their community.
- Encourage them to think about a variety of perspectives, including individuals, organizations, and government agencies.
- Distribute handout: Stakeholder Chart
  - Teams will create a list of stakeholders.

Independent Practice (30 minutes):

- Distribute handout: So what? Presenting Action Research Findings
- Research teams will complete the handout.
- Teams will then use information from elevator pitch, stakeholder and So What? handout to create a presentation.
- Teams will also create an elevator pitch.

Closure (5 minutes):

- Research teams will present their elevator pitch to the class.
- Other teams will provide feedback and suggestions for improvement.
- Students will complete an exit survey.

APPENDIX D

PARENTAL PERMISSION FOR CHILD PARTICIPATION IN RESEARCH

**Title:** Student Ambassadors: Creating a Venue for Middle School Students to Share their Voices to Improve their Social Emotional Competencies

**Introduction:** The purpose of this form is to provide you (as the parent of a prospective research study participant) information that may affect your decision as to whether or not to let your child participate in this research study. The person performing the research will describe the study to you and answer all your questions. Read the information below and ask any questions you might have before deciding whether or not to give your permission for your child to take part. If you decide to let your child be involved in this study, this form will be used to record your permission.

**Purpose of the Study:** If you agree, your child will be asked to participate in a research study about the social emotional competencies of middle school students. The purpose of this study is to determine if using student input or opinions to help decide school policies and procedures will have a positive impact on the social emotional competencies of middle school students.

**What is my child going to be asked to do?** If you allow your child to participate in this study, they will be asked to

1. Participate in a Student Ambassador Club
  1. Weekly 60-minute meetings
    - i. Observation data will be collected during these meetings.
    - ii. The meetings will also be audio-recorded for data collection purposes.
  2. Meetings will take place before or after school.
    - i. Please note, there may be students in the club that are not participating in the research study. Non-participants will not be asked to complete actions 2-3.
2. Complete a pre/post survey instrument
  1. Anticipated survey time will be approximately 15 minutes each.
3. Possibly participate in a one-on-one interview with the researcher
  1. Anticipated interview time will be approximately 30 minutes.
  2. Your child may be audio recorded if they participate.
  3. All interview recordings will be stored on a password protected computer for a period of four years, after which they will be deleted.
4. Possibly make a presentation to the middle school staff or AESD Governing Board
  1. Anticipated time of the presentation is no more than 30 minutes.



This study may take place throughout the school year, which is 180 days and there will be no more than 29 other students and six teachers in this study.

**What are the risks involved in this study?** There are no foreseeable risks to participating in this study.

**What are the possible benefits of this study?** Although there is no direct benefit to participants, they may benefit from being able to provide input on school practices and learning about social emotional competencies and the action research process.

**Does my child have to participate?** No, your child's participation in this study is voluntary. Your child may decline to participate or to withdraw from participation at any time. Withdrawal or refusing to participate will not affect their relationship with the Copper Trails School or Avondale Elementary School District in any way. You can agree to allow your child to be in the study now and change your mind later without any penalty. Again, this research study will take place during regular School Ambassador Club meetings; however, if you do not want your child to participate, they can continue to actively participate in the club.

**What if my child does not want to participate?** In addition to your permission, your child must agree to participate in the study. If your child does not want to participate, they will not be included in the study and there will be no penalty. If your child initially agrees to be in the study, they can change their mind later without any penalty.

**Will there be any compensation?** Neither you nor your child will receive any type of payment participating in this study.

**How will your child's privacy and confidentiality be protected if s/he participates in this research study?** Your child's privacy and the confidentiality of his/her data will be protected. Data will be stored on a password protected computer for a period of four years and then deleted. The instrument will be coded using a four number and two letter code participants will select. IP addresses for online survey instruments will not be collected.

If it becomes necessary for Arizona State University's (ASU's) Institutional Review Board (IRB) to review the study records, information that can be linked to your child will be protected to the extent permitted by law. Your child's research records will not be released without your consent unless required by law or a court order. The data resulting from your child's participation may be made available to other researchers in the future for research purposes not detailed within this consent form. In these cases, the data will

contain no identifying information that could associate it with your child, or with your child's participation in any study.

If you choose to participate in this study, your child may choose to be audio recorded. Any audio recordings will be stored securely and only the research team will have access to the recordings. Recordings will be kept for four years and then erased.

**Whom to contact with questions about the study?** PPrior, during or after your participation you can contact the researcher Stacy E. Ellis at 623-734-8112 or send an email to [Stacy.Ellis@asu.edu](mailto:Stacy.Ellis@asu.edu) for any questions or if you feel that you have been harmed. This study has been reviewed and approved by The University Institutional Review Board and the study number is 00016423.

**Whom to contact with questions concerning your rights as a research participant?** For questions about your rights or any dissatisfaction with any part of this study, you can contact, anonymously if you wish, Dr. Audrey Beardsley via email at [Audrey.beardsley@asu.edu](mailto:Audrey.beardsley@asu.edu).

**IRB Contact Information:** This study has been reviewed and approved by ASU's IRB and the study number is 00016423. If you have any questions about your rights as a subject/participant in this research, or if you feel you have been placed at risk, you can contact the Chair of ASU's IRB, through the ASU Office of Research Integrity and Assurance, at (480) 965-6788.

**Signature:** You are making a decision about allowing your child to participate in this study. Your signature below indicates that you have read the information provided above and have decided to allow them to participate in the study. If you later decide that you wish to withdraw your permission for your child to participate in the study, you may discontinue his or her participation at any time. You will be given a copy of this document.

**NOTE: Include the following if recording is optional:**

- \_\_\_\_\_ **My child MAY be audio recorded.**
- \_\_\_\_\_ **My child MAY NOT be audio recorded.**

\_\_\_\_\_  
**Printed Name of Child**

\_\_\_\_\_  
**Signature of Parent(s) or Legal Guardian**

\_\_\_\_\_  
**Date**

\_\_\_\_\_  
**Signature of Investigator**

\_\_\_\_\_  
**Date**

APPENDIX E

STUDENT ASSENT FORM FOR PARTICIPATION IN RESEARCH

**Title:** Student Ambassadors: Creating a Venue for Middle School Students to Share their Voices to Improve their Social Emotional Competencies

**I have been informed that my parent(s) have given permission for me to participate in a study concerning \_\_\_\_\_ . I will be asked to**

1. Complete an online survey. Questions focus on the student’s perception of their social and emotional competencies. Questions will also respond to questions about how they perceive their opinions are valued on school procedures and expectations. The survey, taken twice, a pre and post, will last about 15 minutes.
2. Observations of participating students will be completed during club meetings in order to observe students providing input on school protocols and activities. The observation will be 40-60 minutes. Note-taking will be done during the observations to collect. The observer will note changes in language/vocabulary students use during discussions.
3. Students may also be asked to participate in a one-on-one interview. The interviews will only take place if the observation data does not align to the survey data. Interview questions will be created based on the results.
4. Students may also be asked to create and give a presentation to the middle school staff or AESD Governing Board.

The study is anticipated to take place over a 9-to-18-week period.

My participation in this project is voluntary and I have been told that I may stop my participation in this study at any time. If I choose not to participate, (it will not affect my grade, treatment/care, whichever applies - select only one) in any way.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Student Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Printed Name

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

APPENDIX F

SAC PRE AND POST SURVEY INSTRUMENT

**Introduction:** Through this survey research study, I aim to gather your perceptions regarding participation in the Student Ambassador Council (SAC) to determine whether and the extent to which participation in the SAC might impact on your experiences in school.

**Directions:**

1. Read each question carefully and make sure you understand what each question is asking.
2. Look at the scale that corresponds with each question.
3. Think about your opinions or experiences related to each question and decide how much you agree or disagree with each statement.
4. Choose the number that best represents your response.
5. Repeat the process for all the questions on the survey instrument.
6. Review the survey instrument to ensure that you have answered all the questions and have marked the appropriate response for each question.
7. It is important to answer each question honestly and to avoid leaving any questions blank.
8. If you have any questions about the meaning of the words, please ask an adult mentor.

**Student Voice** – Student Voice is defined in this study as your ability to share your opinions and provide input about the ways you learn, the way school rules and procedures are managed, etc. Please answer the following questions given this definition.

	Always	Almost Always	Often	Sometimes	Rarely	Not at All
	6	5	4	3	2	1
1a. My opinions and ideas are valued and taken into consideration by staff at my school						
1b. I have opportunities to share my thoughts and ideas in school.						
1c. I am able to						

participate in discussions and decision-making processes at school.						
1d. I feel that I have a say in decisions that affect my education.						
1e. I feel my input is considered when decisions are made at my school?						

**Post-Survey Questions**

1. Do you currently feel comfortable and able to share your opinions and provide input about the ways you learn, the way school rules and procedures are managed, etc.? Please explain and/or provide examples in support of your response.
2. If there is anything else you would like to add about your voice as a student, please do so here.

**Social Awareness** – Social awareness is defined in this study as your ability to notice and care about the well-being of others and to understand how your actions and words affect them. Please answer the following questions given this definition.

	Completely	Mostly	Fairly	Sometimes	Slightly	Not at All
	6	5	4	3	2	1
2a. I understand the perspectives of others in my school community.						
2b. I am aware of the diversity of cultural experiences in my school community.						
2c. I am able to						

understand and respect different perspectives in my school community.						
2d. I consider the impact of my actions on others in my school community.						
2e. I have a positive impact on my school community through my actions and words.						

**Post-Survey Questions**

1. Do you currently feel able to notice and care about the well-being of others and to understand how your actions and words affect them? Please explain and/or provide examples in support of your response.
2. If there is anything else you would like to add about your current level of social awareness, please do so here.

**Self-Efficacy** – Self-efficacy is defined in this study as your belief in yourself and your ability to achieve your goals despite challenges or obstacles. Please answer the following questions given this definition.

	Completely	Mostly	Fairly	Sometimes	Slightly	Not at All
	6	5	4	3	2	1
3a. I have the knowledge needed to effectively participate in the Student Ambassador Council.						



3b. I am confident in my ability to work with others to achieve a common goal in my school community.						
3c. I am capable of expressing my opinions and ideas in group settings.						
3d. I believe in my ability to make a difference in my school community.						
3e. I am confident in my ability to stand by my ideas or opinions in the face of disagreement with my peers.						

**Post-Survey Questions**

1. Do you currently feel confident in yourself and your ability to achieve your goals despite challenges or obstacles? Please explain and/or provide examples in support of your response.
2. If there is anything else you would like to add about your current level of self-efficacy, please do so here.

**Participation in the Student Ambassador Council** – Participation in the SAC is defined in this study as attending weekly meetings and collaborating with peers and staff mentors to identify solutions to perceived problems at school. Please answer the following questions given this definition.

	Completely	Mostly	Fairly	Sometimes	Slightly	Not at All
--	------------	--------	--------	-----------	----------	------------

	6	5	4	3	2	1
4a. My involvement in the Student Ambassador Council will/has increased my ability to have a voice in my school community.						
4b. My involvement in the Student Ambassador Council will/has impacted my confidence in my ability to make a positive impact in my school community.						
4c. My involvement in the Student Ambassador Council will/has improved my awareness of the diverse perspectives of others in my school community.						
4d. My involvement in the Student Ambassador Council will/has influenced my						

ability to work effectively with others to achieve common goals in my school community.						
4e. My involvement in the Student Ambassador Council will/has helped me to respect different perspectives of others in my school community.						

**Post-Survey Questions**

1. In what ways has participating in the Student Ambassador Council meetings impacted your social awareness or your ability to understand the perspectives of others, including those from diverse backgrounds and cultures?
2. Can you provide specific examples of situations during Student Ambassador Council meetings where you felt confident in your ability to use your voice to impact change in your community?
3. Can you explain if and how participation in the Student Ambassador Council impacted you in the following ways:
  - a. Your confidence?
  - b. Your self-directed learning skills?
  - c. Your civic engagement?
4. If there is anything else you would like to add about your involvement with the Student Ambassador Council, please do so here.

**Demographics** - Demographics are defined in this study as basic information about participants in this study that may be used to help analyze how different groups of students respond to different survey questions. Please answer the following questions given this definition.

<b>What is your gender identity?</b>	<b>Male</b>	<b>Female</b>	<b>Other</b>	<b>Prefer not to say</b>
--------------------------------------	-------------	---------------	--------------	--------------------------

<b>What is your current grade level?</b>	<b>5th</b>	<b>6th</b>	<b>7th</b>	<b>8th</b>
--	------------	------------	------------	------------

<b>What is your ethnicity or race?</b>	<b>Asian</b>	<b>Multi-Racial</b>	<b>Black or African American</b>	<b>Hispanic or Latinx</b>	<b>White</b>	<b>Other</b>	<b>Prefer not to say</b>
--	--------------	---------------------	----------------------------------	---------------------------	--------------	--------------	--------------------------

<b>How many years have you attended Copper Trails?</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>9</b>
--	----------	----------	----------	----------	----------	----------	----------	----------	----------

APPENDIX G  
OBSERVATION PROTOCOL

Observation # _____ Date: _____ Time: _____ - _____	<b>Observation</b>	<b>Observational Comments And Notes</b>
A priori Descriptive Codes		
<b>Epistemic Curiosity</b> (Student Voice and Social Awareness)		
<b>Praxis</b> (Self-Efficacy)		
<b>Fidelity</b> Student Voice		
<b>Agency</b> (Self-Efficacy)		
<b>Civic Engagement</b> (Social Awareness)		
<b>Self Confidence</b> (Self-Efficacy)		
<b>Self-Directed Learning</b> (Self-Efficacy)		

APPENDIX H  
INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

**Parent/Guardian consent will be obtained before students are asked to participate in the interview.**

**Briefing Statement:** Thank you for agreeing to participate in this interview. Your insights and perspectives on your participation in the Student Ambassador Council are highly valued. During this interview, I will be asking you a series of open-ended questions and encourage you to respond with your honest thoughts and experiences. Your input will provide valuable information for our research and contribute to a better understanding of the impact of the Student Ambassador Council program.

**Request:** May I audio record this interview?

**RQ 1:** How and to what extent does participation in the SAC impact students' development of their SECs?

1. Can you describe how your participation in the SAC has impacted your social awareness?
2. In what ways do you think your participation in the SAC has influenced your self-efficacy?
3. Can you share any specific experiences or activities in the SAC that have helped you develop your SECs?

**RQ 2:** How and to what extent does participating in the SAC affect participating students' confidence to use their voice to impact change in their school and community?

1. How has participating in the SAC impacted your confidence to express your opinions and ideas in school and the community?
2. Can you give an example of how your participation in the SAC has helped you feel more empowered to create change in your school or community?
3. In what ways do you think the SAC has helped you develop the skills necessary to use your voice to make a difference?

**RQ 3:** What is the effect of participation in the SAC on the development of participating students' confidence, self-directed learning skills, and civic engagement?

1. Can you describe how your participation in the SAC has impacted your confidence in your abilities to learn and grow independently?
2. In what ways has your participation in the SAC influenced your understanding of civic engagement and its importance?
3. Can you share any specific experiences or activities in the SAC that have helped you develop your self-directed learning skills or civic engagement?

Do you have any questions or is there anything else you would like to add?

Thank you for participating in this interview.



APPENDIX I  
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD (IRB) APPROVAL



APPROVAL: MODIFICATION

[Audrey Beardsley](#)

MLFTC: Educational Leadership and Innovation, Division of

-

[audrey.beardsley@asu.edu](mailto:audrey.beardsley@asu.edu)

Dear [Audrey Beardsley](#):

On 4/24/2023 the ASU IRB reviewed the following protocol:

Type of Review:	Modification / Update
Title:	The influence of school decision making processes on the social emotional competencies of middle school students
Investigator:	<a href="#">Audrey Beardsley</a>
IRB ID:	STUDY00016423
Funding:	None
Grant Title:	None
Grant ID:	None
Documents Reviewed:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• IRB Protocol, Category: IRB Protocol;</li> <li>• Observation Protocol, Category: Measures (Survey questions/Interview questions /interview guides/focus group questions);</li> <li>• Parent Consent - Intervention Group, Category: Consent Form;</li> <li>• Parent Consent - Survey Only, Category: Consent Form;</li> <li>• Student Assent Form - Intervention Group, Category: Consent Form;</li> <li>• Student Assent Form (Survey Only), Category: Consent Form;</li> <li>• Student Interview Protocol, Category: Measures (Survey questions/Interview questions /interview guides/focus group questions);</li> <li>• Updated Survey Instrument, Category: Measures (Survey questions/Interview questions /interview guides/focus group questions);</li> </ul>

--	--

The IRB approved the modification.

When consent is appropriate, you must use final, watermarked versions available under the "Documents" tab in ERA-IRB.

In conducting this protocol you are required to follow the requirements listed in the INVESTIGATOR MANUAL (HRP-103).

Sincerely,

IRB Administrator

cc: Stacy Ellis  
Stacy Ellis

APPENDIX J  
STAFF RECRUITMENT CONSENT LETTER

Dear Colleague:

My name is Stacy E. Ellis and I am a doctoral student in the Mary Lou Fulton Teachers College (MLFTC) at Arizona State University (ASU). I am working under the direction of Dr. Audrey Beardsley, a faculty member in MLFTC. We are conducting a research study on how the development of school policies and procedures impact the development of social-emotional competencies of middle school students. The purpose of this study is to understand the impact of increasing student voice in the creation of school policy or practices on middle school students' social emotional development.

We are asking for your help, which will involve your participation in an intervention, 3 1-hour professional development sessions, completion of an online survey on two occasions (10 minutes, each), with a focus on your understanding of youth participatory action research and age-appropriate social emotional competencies. Finally, observations will be conducted during club meetings (about 40 -60 minutes each). The observer will take written notes that focus on the language or vocabulary used by students during the meetings.

In the survey, to protect your confidentiality, I will ask you to create a unique identifier known only to you. To create this unique code, use the first three letters of your mother's first name and the last four digits of your phone number. Thus, for example, if your mother's name was Sarah and your phone number was (602) 543-6789, your code would be Sar 6789. The unique identifier will allow us to match your post-intervention survey responses and your retrospective, pre-intervention responses when we analyze the data. Results from the survey will only be shared in the aggregate form. De-identified data collected as a part of current study will not be shared with others (e.g., investigators or industry partners) for future research purposes or other uses.

Your participation in this study is voluntary. If you choose not to participate or to withdraw from the study at any time, there will be no penalty. Choosing not to participate in the study does not affect your standing at Copper Trails School. You must be 18 or older to participate in the study.

The benefit to participation is the opportunity for you to learn strategies and practices related to middle school student development milestones and SEL Competencies, which have the potential to benefit your students. There are no foreseeable risks or discomforts to your participation.

Your responses will be confidential. Results from this study may be used in reports, presentations, or publications but your name will not be used.

If you have any questions concerning the research study, please contact the research team Stacy E. Ellis at [Stacy.Ellis@asu.edu](mailto:Stacy.Ellis@asu.edu) or 623-282-6873 or Dr. Audrey Beardsley at [Audrey.beardsley@asu.edu](mailto:Audrey.beardsley@asu.edu).

Thank you,

Stacy E. Ellis, Doctoral Student  
Dr. Audrey Beardsley, Dissertation Chair

If you have any questions about your rights as a participant in this research, or if you feel you have been placed at risk, you can contact Dr. Audrey Beardsley or the Chair of Human Subjects Institutional Review Board through the ASU Office of Research Integrity and Assurance at (480) 965-6788.

APPENDIX K  
CODE BOOK  
THEORY-DRIVEN CODES, DEFINITIONS AND EXAMPLES

Code	Description	Example
Student Voice	Students or research teams articulate an opinion or idea concerning an identified problem, or demonstrate a level of comfort in expressing their thoughts and viewpoints.	“I think the reason why we choose the topic of respect is because a lot of students here really want to figure out why teachers don't get respect or try to see that we are feeling that we don't get the respect we want from them [the teachers].”
Social Awareness	Students or research teams state or allude to recognizing the perspective or needs of others.	“I think because everybody's experiences are different and we might not know what they are going through, they may respond differently when they feel disrespected.”
Self-Efficacy	Students or research teams convey their confidence in their ability to overcome a challenge or achieve success in completing a task.	“I definitely think we could do it [improve student perceptions regarding school spirit]. It would just take more, a lot more, time and a lot more consistency in posting these surveys.”
Epistemic Curiosity	Student or research teams exhibit an interest in understanding the reasons behind why things occur the way they do or why certain processes or procedures are in place.	“I think the reason why we choose the topic of respect is because a lot of students here really want to figure out why teachers don't get respect or try to see that we are feeling that we don't get the respect we want from them [the teachers].”
Praxis	Students or research teams engage in discussion or demonstration regarding the application of their	“So I can just tell him [a teacher] to proctor the survey today with his homeroom call. Then we can all do the same thing as

	learning within the school environment.	we did with the pre-survey to review the results. That way we will know if we should ask to continue the extra recess time.”
Fidelity	Students or research teams exhibit resilience in the face of adversity by maintaining or expressing their opinion even in the presence of disagreement from others.	“I just like the environment of a classroom just affects the entire thing. I mean for me and other students. If I'm in a negative environment, I'm not going to feel the best. I'll try to stay positive even when my friends are making things worse. I know I need to keep doing what I know is right.”
Agency	Students or research teams demonstrate independence by making choices and taking control of the direction of their intervention.	“We're transitioning to high school, and we're brainstorming ideas for a project that could leave a lasting impact for other students.”
Civic Engagement	Students or research teams make direct or indirect references to taking action or offering suggestions aimed at positively impacting others within the school community.	“I think that the student ambassador program was great, and I think it truly does impact the school and staff and the culture and students.”
Self-Confidence	Students or research teams describe or provide examples of feeling more confident in their abilities.	“My confidence and my group's confidence definitely went up after this. If we have a problem with a teacher, we'll respectfully tell them and we'll be like, hey, I don't agree with this. And we did a strategy with our group where we could tell them



		<p>orally or either on paper. So if we need that, we could just tell orally, like, hey, I don't agree with this. So I feel like my confidence went up and I'm able to tell the teachers when I don't agree with something.”</p>
Self-Directed Learning	<p>Students or research teams describe or provide examples of feeling more comfortable asking questions or taking steps to direct their own learning experiences.</p>	<p>“I think we can focus on just talking to students to see what they feel about the topic and see what their opinions and their POV. And I think we could also try and talk to the teachers too, to get their point of view so we know their opinion.”</p>