

# How High Schools Become Empowering Communities: A Mixed-Method Explanatory Inquiry into Youth-Adult Partnership and School Engagement

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## Highlights

- This inquiry demonstrates that schools can become places of empowerment and engagement.
- Schools that promote youth voice in instructional decision making promote empowerment and engagement.
- Youth-adult partnerships are key to effective high schools.

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**Abstract** Educational reform efforts emphasize empowerment and engagement, but these concepts are rarely translated into policy or classroom practice. This inquiry explores how schools can become places where students take ownership over their own learning. Phase 1 of this inquiry, a survey of students from diverse high schools, examines pathways to school engagement. Results indicated that youth voice in decision-making, particularly when the experience is situated within supportive adult relationships and a sense of safety, significantly predicts emotional and cognitive engagement. Phase 2, a case study of an exemplary high school, sought to explain these pathways. Grounded in the theoretical perspectives of “empowered community settings” and “youth-adult partnership,” analyses highlighted the importance of a shared belief system and core instructional activities that were student-centered, affirmative, and strength-based. Within this context, the opportunity role structure allowed students to exercise voice in creating their own educational program. The relational environment offered partnership and safety for academic risk-taking. Teachers broke down traditional roles and power hierarchies in ways that helped students discover their own sources of

engagement. The article identifies ways that community psychologists, as policy framers and as researchers, can help schools become places of empowerment and engagement.

**Keywords** Empowerment · Youth-adult partnership · School engagement

## Introduction

Adolescents have a developmental need to fully engage within the structures of their everyday lives. At their best, the values, relationships and roles embedded within societal institutions provide young people with the predictability and emotional safety necessary for engagement and agency. Structures only reach their developmental potential, however, when they are cognitively challenging and afford youth something to push against, to mold to their concerns (Ianni, 1998). Community-based youth organizations have long sought, with notable success, to create settings that offer young people both predictability and challenge (Halpern, Heckman, & Larson, 2013; National Research Council, 2002). Youth are expected to be at the center of program and community decision-making, not to stand at the periphery (Camino & Zeldin, 2002). Staff are expected to be partners with youth by balancing adult directivity with authentic opportunities for youth to matter, to make important choices, and take on significant responsibilities (Camino, 2005; O’Donoghue & Strobel, 2007).

Contemporary educational reforms often speak to the importance of empowerment, but this aspiration is rarely

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translated into practice. Chopra (2016) observes that reforms may endorse “students at the center” and “instructional partnerships,” but the structures of policy and pedagogy are rarely changed. Consequently, student-teacher partnerships have been recommended as a leverage point for reform aimed at creating schools as places of empowerment (Kirshner & Jefferson, 2015; Mitra, 2008; Ozer, Newlan, Douglas, & Hubbard, 2013; Rizga, 2015).

We believe that the lessons learned from community organizations have theoretical relevance and applicability to schooling. The present study, consisting of a multivariate analysis and case study linked sequentially, builds from that assumption. The outcome of analytic focus is school engagement. We examine this concept using the theoretical frameworks of empowering community settings and youth-adult partnership.

### School Engagement

Cognitive and emotional engagements are psychological concepts that directly influence or mediate academic learning, positive youth development, and empowerment (Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004). Cognitive engagement refers to a student’s personal investment in a learning activity, including the willingness to exert effort to understand complex ideas or to master difficult skills. School-based studies consistently identify cognitive engagement as a predictor of academic learning, empowerment, graduation, and successful transitions into careers (Archambault, Janosz, Morizot, & Pagani, 2009). Emotional engagement refers to a student’s identification and emotional ties with school, as witnessed through perceptions of closeness, belonging, and community. It has been found to reduce feelings of estrangement and social isolation, while promoting a student’s motivation to stay in school and to learn (Voelkl, 1997).

Student engagement declines with age, reaching a nadir in high school. Upwards of 60% of students are chronically disengaged from school, bored, and disinterested, with insufficient motivation to learn (Corso, Bundick, Quaglia & Haywood, 2013; Gottfried et al., 2011). Policy analysts are beginning to look at community-based youth organizations for insight because these settings consistently engender high levels of motivation and concentration among young people (Halpern et al., 2013). Central to engagement are authentic opportunities for youth voice, leadership, and skill development. Youth are afforded legitimate opportunities to discover their own interests and to pursue them in partnership with staff (Akiva, Cortina, Eccles, & Smith, 2013; Dotterer, McHale, & Crouter, 2007; Zeldin, Gauley, Krauss, Kornbluh, & Collura, 2017). Similar experiences may enhance engagement in schools. Opportunities for voice in shaping curriculum,

co-constructing assignments, and immersion in consequential activities, are particularly important. Students who express their voice on issues that affect them (i.e., school schedule, choice of classes, learning modality) are more likely to see value in their education and consequently become more invested in their learning (Davis & Warner, 2015; Voight & Nation, 2016; Wang & Eccles, 2013). Strong relationships with teachers, characterized by a respectful give and take of ideas, help students regulate their attention and become motivated learners (Chopra, 2016; Conner & Pope, 2013).

### Study Purpose and Methodological Approach

The primary purpose of this study was to gain insight into how high schools can create instructional contexts for youth engagement and empowerment. We employ a sequential explanatory design, a methodology that allowed us to draw inferences from multiple perspectives and analyses within a single inquiry (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). In Phase 1, we surveyed high school youth to examine pathways between three elements of school climate and student engagement. This analysis highlighted the centrality of youth voice in decision-making, with additional contributions from supportive adult relationships and safety. Through case study of an exemplary high school, Phase 2 sought to describe and explain these pathways from two vantage points. We first analyzed the organizational context in which the Phase 1 pathways were embedded. Against this backdrop, we then examined student perspectives of their own engagement, with an emphasis on identifying those experiences that were most powerful in terms of sparking intellectual motivation, curiosity, and experimentation.

Our second purpose was to create an explanatory framework (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Miles & Huberman, 1994) for youth engagement and empowerment. Consistent with the pragmatic nature of mixed-method approaches, we sought not only to conduct the inquiry for the broader research community, but also to provide field professionals with evidence-based frames of knowing that could be used to advance quality practice, assess outcomes, or appease stakeholder (Bryman, 2006).

Two theoretical frameworks were used to guide data collection, analysis and interpretation. The first was empowering community settings. As conceptualized by Maton (2008), empowered settings are those that offer marginalized populations, including youth, legitimate opportunities to gain greater control over their lives and environments. The core components of such settings are an affirmative group-based belief system, challenging core activities, an opportunity role structure, and a collaborative relational environment. Youth-adult partnership, the

second theoretical framework, is an integral aspect of empowered settings for young people (Wong, Zimmerman, & Parker, 2010). As conceptualized by Camino (2000) and Zeldin, Christens & Powers, (2013), youth-adult partnership is purpose-driven activity that is characterized by authentic decision-making and power sharing, reciprocity in teaching and learning, natural mentors, and community connectedness.

### Phase 1: Identifying Pathways to School Engagement

In Phase 1, we examine associations between school instructional climate and school engagement. Grounded in extant theory and empirical evidence, we predicted that youth voice in decision-making would have the strongest influence. It was also expected that supportive adult relationships and school safety would be positively associated with engagement (Serido, Borden, & Perkins, 2011; Voight & Nation, 2016; Zeldin et al., 2017). We conceptualized cognitive engagement as the dependent variable in the path analysis, with emotional engagement as the mediator of school climate. Available research is supportive of this prediction (Côté-Lussier & Fitzpatrick, 2016; Li & Lerner, 2013; Pietarinen, Soini, & Pyhältö, 2014; Wang & Eccles, 2013).

#### Sample

To maximize the diversity of instructional experience within our student sample, we invited different types of schools to be part of the inquiry. We were opportunistic by appealing to schools with whom we had previously collaborated, all of which agreed to participate. From three large traditional high schools, we recruited students who were attending a district required health class. Also invited were all students from eight district-operated alternative programs designed for students who were credit-deficient or chronically absent. All students from Clark Street Community School (CSCS), a small, district-operated alternative to traditional high schools, were also invited. CSCS is the focus of the Phase 2 case study. All participating schools were located within a medium-sized urban area.

Ultimately, 71% of the recruited pool provided both parental consent and student assent. These 603 students completed the Youth and Community (YAC) survey. Students with missing data on key variables were removed from the dataset, resulting in a sample of 513 participants. The overall sample was diverse in educational experience and sociodemographic background. Thirty-seven percent attended traditional high schools, 36% attended alternative

high school programs, and 27% attended CSCS. Students identified as primarily African American (42%) or White (35%), and 52% were female. Sixty-seven percent were on free or reduced lunch programs. Students were fairly distributed from 9th to 12th grade.

#### Measures

The YAC survey asked students to rate positively worded phrases using a 5-point Likert scale (“strongly disagree” to “strongly agree”). *Cognitive engagement* was assessed using an adaption of Cochran, Wood and Arneklev (1994). Five statements were rated (Mean 3.75, *SD* 0.78,  $\alpha = .80$ ), including “My classes at school are interesting,” “The things I am learning in school are important for later in life” and “My school work is important to my life.” *Emotional engagement* was assessed using McNeely, Nonnemaker, and Blum (2002) scale. Five statements were rated (Mean 3.40, *SD* 0.88,  $\alpha = .83$ ), including “I feel close to people at my school,” “I feel I am a part of my school,” and “The teachers at my school treat students fairly.”

The YAC survey also assessed instructional climate. *Youth voice in decision-making* (Zeldin, Krauss, Collura, Lucchesi, & Sulaiman, 2014) examines the degree to which youth perceive that their ideas are heard, respected and considered. Students rated four statements (Mean 3.53, *SD* 0.88,  $\alpha = .87$ ), including “I have a say in planning programs at this school,” and “I am expected to voice my concerns when I have them.” The measure of *Supportive adult relationships* (Zeldin et al., 2014) includes five items that assess relationships among teachers and students (Mean 3.47, *SD* 0.87,  $\alpha = .90$ ), including “There is a good balance of power between students and teachers in this school,” and “Students and teachers learn a lot from working together in this school.” The measure of *Safe learning environment* was assessed using five items (Mean 3.66, *SD* 0.85,  $\alpha = .84$ ) from the Youth Program Quality Assessment (Smith & Hohmann, 2005), including “I feel safe when I’m in this school,” and “Bullying and aggression are not tolerated here.”

#### Preliminary Analysis

Preliminary analysis was conducted through a series of OLS regressions. Regression diagnostics, following Gordon (2015), did not detect any violations. Post-hoc partial *f*-tests and linear combinations found that each component of instructional climate (youth voice, supportive adult relationships, safety) significantly predicted emotional engagement ( $\beta = .13$  to  $.45$ ) and cognitive engagement ( $\beta = .14$  to  $.25$ ). Regarding the sociodemographic controls, no significant differences were detected by grade,

race/ethnicity or free/reduced lunch. Interestingly, boys ( $\beta = .07$ ) were significantly more emotionally engaged than girls, but girls were more cognitively engaged ( $\beta = .10$ ). CSCS students were the most emotionally engaged ( $\beta = .12$ ) compared to peers in other types of schools. No other differences by school type were detected.

In brief, the indicators of instructional climate were associated with engagement far more strongly and consistently than the sociodemographic variables. This pattern is similar to previous research (Davis & Warner, 2015; Krauss, Kornbluh, & Zeldin, 2017; Thapa, Cohen, Guffey, & Higgins-D'Alessandro, 2013). While not discounting the mechanisms through which socio-demographic background can influence engagement, the strength of the instructional climate variables allowed us to focus subsequent analysis on the predicted pathways.

### Path Analysis

We operationalized the analysis as follows: To what extent does school instructional climate (voice, supportive adults, safety) contribute to a student's sense of engagement? To what extent might cognitive engagement mediate the influence of climate on cognitive engagement? A series of four regression models were run. Post-hoc tests of mediation were conducted using the procedures of Baron and Kenny (1986).

Results indicated that youth voice was the only climate variable with a significant direct impact on cognitive engagement (Table 1, model 4). Overall, the full model was significant ( $F(14, 498) = 24.48, p < .001, R^2 = .41$ , adjusted  $R^2 = .39$ ). Compared with previous three models tested, the full model had the best overall fit (AIC = 972, BIC = 1036). The full model suggests that emotional engagement partially mediated the effects of school instructional climate factors. Sobel test results showed that the relationship between students' senses of safety and cognitive engagement was fully mediated by emotional engagement ( $z = 6.82, p < .001$ ). Additionally, 56% of the total effect of supportive teachers on cognitive engagement was mediated by emotional engagement ( $z = 2.84, p < .01$ ), suggesting that supportive teachers influence a student's emotional engagement, which in turn is a determinant of their cognitive engagement. Finally, the relationship between youth voice and cognitive engagement was partially mediated by emotional engagement. Youth voice had a significant direct effect on cognitive engagement ( $b = .13, p < .01$ ), an indirect effect on cognitive engagement through emotional engagement ( $b = .06, p < .05$ ), and a significant total effect ( $b = .19, p < .001$ ). Thirty percent of the total effect of youth voice on a student's cognitive engagement was mediated by their

emotional engagement. The partial mediation indicated by these results was significant, ( $z = 2.47, p < .05$ ).

### Phase 1 Conclusions

The path analysis is depicted in Fig. 1. The analysis indicates a unique and influential role for youth voice in decision-making. Voice had direct effects on both emotional and cognitive engagement, as well as indirect effects on cognitive engagement through emotional engagement. It is also seen that the influence of supportive teacher relationships and safety on cognitive engagement were mediated by emotional engagement.

The observed pathways confirm extant research that youth voice makes substantial contributions to engagement, especially when students perceive school staff as partners in learning (Chopra, 2016; Krauss et al., 2017; Mitra, 2009; Zeldin, Krauss, Kim, Collura, & Abdullah, 2016). The results also confirm past research on the importance of positive attachments to school (Côté-Lussier & Fitzpatrick, 2016; Pietarinen et al., 2014; Strati, Schmidt, & Maier, 2017). The more students perceive their schools to be safe and their teachers to be supportive of their learning, the more likely they are to be emotionally engaged, thus creating a foundation for high cognitive engagement.

### Phase 2: Case Study of Clark Street Community School

Phase 2 was designed as an explanatory case study. Analyses sought to identify the organizational structures and processes that were most powerful in creating a context for the pathways identified in Phase 1. Additional analyses examined how students described the experience of engagement, with particular attention to the roles of youth voice, staff, and safety. The theoretical frameworks of empowering settings and youth-adult partnership guided data analysis and interpretation (Fig. 1).

#### Setting and Sample

Clark Street Community School (CSCS) began operations in 2012 as a district-supported high school aimed at students seeking project-based and personalized learning in a small, community-oriented school (approximately 110 enrolled). CSCS replaced an alternative high school that was housed in the same building and continues to attract a disproportionate number of students who have not thrived in traditional high schools. In the absence of CSCS, many students would not attend high school with

**Table 1** Summary of multiple regression analysis for DV cognitive engagement

Variable	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3		Model 4	
	Beta	SE	Beta	SE	Beta	SE	Beta	SE
Black	.13	0.11	.12	0.11	.11	0.11	.05	0.1
White	.1	0.12	.08	0.11	.07	0.11	-.01	0.1
Hispanic	.03	0.13	.02	0.13	.03	0.13	-.02	0.12
Grade 10	-.08	0.09	-.08	0.09	-.08	0.09	-.07	0.08
Grade 11	-.06	0.09	-.04	0.09	-.05	0.08	-.02	0.08
Grade 12	-.08	0.10	-.06	0.09	-.07	0.09	-.04	0.09
Male	-.11**	0.06	-.11**	0.06	-.10*	0.06	-.13***	0.06
Free Lunch	.06	0.08	.05	0.08	.06	0.08	.05	0.07
Alternative School	-.02	0.08	-.05	0.07	-.04	0.07	-.07	0.07
Clark Street School	.03	0.09	.01	0.09	-.02	0.09	-.08	0.08
Safe Environment	.45***	0.04	.25***	0.05	.20***	0.05	-.02	0.05
Supportive Adults	–	–	.27***	0.05	.14*	0.06	.06	0.06
Youth Voice	–	–	–	–	.21**	0.06	.15**	0.05
Emotional Engagement	–	–	–	–	–	–	.50***	0.04
<i>F</i> (df)	<i>F</i> (11, 501) = 14.51		<i>F</i> (12, 500) = 15.63		<i>F</i> (13, 499) = 15.64		<i>F</i> (14, 498) = 24.48	
<i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	.24		.27		.29		.41	
Adjusted <i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	.22		.25		.27		.39	
AIC	1093.34		1073.79		1063.9		972.6	
BIC	1144.23		1128.91		1123.24		1036.21	

Significance \* < .05; \*\* < .01; \*\*\* < .001.

any consistency, according to the district superintendent. CSCS is actively seeking to recruit “all types of students,” but progress has been relatively slow. Its pedagogy has not yet been fully accepted by parents and students.

We purposely selected CSCS because it is an “exemplary case” (Yin, 1994) for researching the constructs central to this inquiry. The school mission speaks to the goal of reimagining how a school operates to maximize student engagement. There has been stable and reflective leadership at CSCS, primary conditions for empowering communities (Maton, 2008). Indeed, the school’s principal has held this position for a decade, and has long been committed to engagement as the goal of education. She observed: “We have experimented with strategies of engagement and partnership for a long, long time. It has been hard. We are finally at a point where I think we know what we are doing.” Not surprisingly, perhaps, CSCS students score higher on engagement than their peers in other county high schools, even though the student body ranks highest on risk factors such as depression, drug use, and being kicked out of home (Dane County Youth Commission, 2015).

The research team had been collaborating with CSCS for 5 years prior to the present case study. Reciprocity and barter were used as guiding principles. For example, our research team provided capacity building services such as literature reviews, applied research, workshops, and guest lectures while CSCS offered graduate students and faculty direct experience working with staff and students. This ongoing partnership influenced our selection of CSCS for the current analysis. We had already gained

trust and access. It should be noted, however, that this case study relies exclusively on data collected subsequent to Phase 1 of this inquiry.

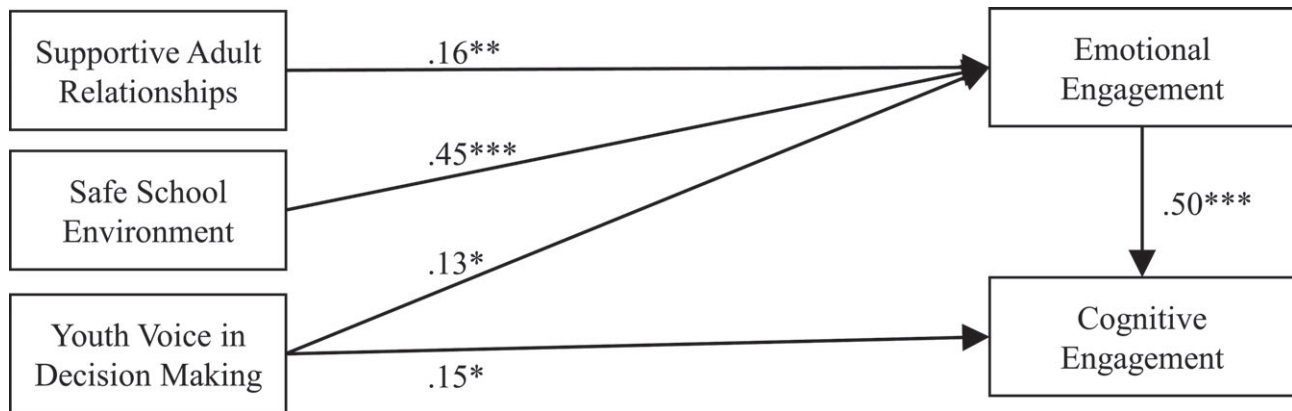
## Methods

Data collection was conducted in the following order: focus groups with students, observation of student presentations, and individual staff interviews. CSCS policies and other written information were reviewed throughout this process. Additionally, the research team informally observed classes and school events when possible.

### Focus Groups

To hear from students who had experienced CSCS for a substantial amount of time, our pool consisted of juniors and seniors who had been enrolled at the school for at least 2 years. We drew the pool from those who had completed the YAC survey over the previous year. Twenty students were randomly selected. Twelve students had relatively high levels of engagement and eight had relatively low levels, thus affording some variety in overall engagement. Focus groups had no more than four students. Most the participants were male ( $n = 16$ ). Each focus group was conducted by two researchers, recorded, and then transcribed. The interview protocol encouraged students to define what engagement meant to them, to discuss those situations when they felt most engaged, and to explore “turning points” (Gilligan, 2009) in their engagement over

**Phase 1: Identify pathways between school instructional climate and student engagement**  
(Surveys completed October 2014 - November 2015).



**Phase 2: Explain key aspects of pathways identified in Phase 1.**

Case study of Clark Street Community School (August 2016 to June 2017).

- What organizational structures and practices most strongly support the pathways between instructional climate and student engagement?
- When are students most engaged? What is the lived experience of engagement?

Guiding Theoretical Frameworks:

- Empowered Community Settings: Shared belief system, core activities, opportunity role structure, relational environment
- Youth-Adult Partnership: Authentic decision making, reciprocity and shared power, natural mentors, community connections

**Fig. 1** Design overview: Sequencing multivariate and case study analyses. Significance \* < .05; \*\* < .01; \*\*\* < .001.

time. The protocol did not direct participants toward the constructs guiding this study (i.e., empowering settings, youth-adult partnership). To enhance construct validity, we wanted students to explore these constructs in their own words, if they chose, within the larger context of

speaking about school engagement. As the dominant domains emerged through open coding, we explored the points of convergence with the theoretical constructs. Axial coding allowed exploration of the links between student perceptions of engagement and their identification

of the causal conditions. Analytic memos were prepared and revised to document domains and linkages (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

### *Observations of Student Learning*

We observed eleven “demonstrations of learning,” most of which were offered by female students ( $N = 7$ ). These demonstrations, delivered to groups of teachers and students, are ten to fifteen minute presentations through which students chart the course of their learning from a given seminar or project. These presentations allowed researchers to hear how engagement manifested itself for students. Field notes were written after each observation. As with the focus groups, our analysis focused on the context and experiences that underlay students’ engagement.

### *Staff Interviews*

We conducted, recorded, and transcribed individual interviews with eight staff members (six teachers, the principal, and one social worker). These interviews were designed to situate the perspectives of students. We had noted that students focused on their most proximal instructional experiences. They rarely identified the organizing structure – the name of the seminar, project, or process – in which their experiences occurred. We therefore used the adult interviews to understand the specific places and events that the students were discussing. We also gained an adult perspective of CSCS as a system, with particular attention to detailing the shared norms and core activities that were central to school goals and operations.

### *Analytic Synthesis*

Given the theoretical and pragmatic aims of this inquiry, analytic synthesis of case study data sought to describe and explain those aspects of organizational context and student experience that were most critical toward a deeper and practical understanding of the Phase I pathways. This strategy ensures that the focus remains on the consequences of the research, not only the phenomenon under investigation (Bryman, 2006; Miles & Huberman, 1994). Toward those ends, researchers met frequently to triangulate the thematic analyses of the focus groups, demonstration of learning, and staff interviews. We worked iteratively, shifting our analysis between independently identifying categories and associations to discussing them as a group. We sought to bring out the unexpected through this analytical approach. At all times, we contrasted the emerging themes to the conceptualizations of

student engagement (Sarason, 2004), empowering communities (Maton, 2008) and youth-adult partnership (Zeldin et al., 2013) that undergird this inquiry. Through this constant comparison process, we sought to make analytic distinctions that informed these theoretical frameworks.

## **Results**

### *The Context of CSCS*

This analysis was grounded in conceptualizations of group-based belief system and core activities (Maton, 2008). Belief systems are the collective views of stakeholders on how they can work together to achieve individual and setting goals. Belief systems are powerful because they shape organizational structures and expectations. Core activities, in turn, are the fundamental strategies that translate shared beliefs into daily practice (Maton, 2008).

### *Group-Based Belief System*

Effective organizations operate from the theoretical stance that youth are agents of their own development when they affirmatively act on the settings in which they live (Benson, Scales, Hamilton, & Sesma, 2006; Zeldin, 2004). CSCS has adopted this perspective, with the most dominant shared belief being that *students thrive when they have ownership over their own learning*. This value is reflected in the principal’s tag line on her email: “How can I create the conditions in which you will thrive?” The dominant view, expressed by many teachers, was that students be treated as “engaged young adults” rather than as “passive students.” One staff member emphasized that her foremost job is help students learn how to construct their educational programs. Making an analogy to Legos, she argued that CSCS provides the pieces and helps students choose which ones they want to work with. But, this is “just a step-in to one’s own decision-making.” Students ultimately have to learn how to “pull those old pieces together, in the order that they want, to initiate the projects that will be most engaging to them.” A student explains:

One of the biggest things is that they encourage you to look for things that interest you. In a class, even if you are not interested in the main thing they may be teaching that day, you’re allowed to branch off. You’re allowed to find what stimulates your mind.

A second shared value is that *student learning is about engagement and proficiency, not compliance*. Compliance is not the pathway to productive learning, according to Sarason (2004), for it limits the processes of curiosity and

agency. Yet, compliance models remain the norm (Schlechty, 2011). The principal works against this status quo, believing that too many schools teach students how to “get by” rather than helping young people learn the subject matter and how to put together knowledge and experience. She wants students “to get lost sometimes” and “embrace discomfort” because discovering oneself as a learner is the most important outcome of schooling. Every teacher knew that this was the principal’s normative stance, with many students also adopting this value. One student explained:

I came here because I opposed the learning of the same thing over and over again. I just couldn’t see myself succeeding because [the previous school] just pushed you through and all you need to do is get all D’s to get through it. I was just doing assignments to get them done. It’s like I don’t want the type of learning. I want somewhere I have to prove that I know the things that I’ve learned.

It is tough to take ownership over one’s own learning. Consequently, CSCS has adopted the belief that *students must be given a safe space to experiment and to stumble, in order to become engaged*. It is further expected that teachers will unconditionally welcome students, especially those who have been chronically disengaged. One teacher explained the strategy:

He’s been surprised that we continue to invite him back to class. When he’s sitting out in the commons, one of us always come in and say, “We’d love it if you would come back to class,” or “We’re about to start practice,” or “Hey, we’re about to read this article. I think you’d really enjoy it.” Versus, us coming out there in a punitive form or us saying, “Look, why aren’t you in class? You need to do this... blah, blah, blah.” Kids are surprised when we don’t take that route.

Students are not “dysfunctionally rescued,” however (Camino, 1995). The students understood that they would not pass until they demonstrated competency. They appreciated that teachers would not let them slide by, while at the same time, refused to let them “go through the cracks” or “make bad choices.” These high expectations, communicated in a context of safety, allowed students to persist in finding their own reasons to engage.

### *Core Instructional Activities*

The CSCS website identifies many activities through which the shared values are translated into practice (e.g., place-based learning, restorative discipline, mindfulness),

yet students never used these labels during data collection. Instead, they spoke to their day-to-day experiences. Consequently, our analysis of core activities followed concurrent directions. We sought to identify the experiences that were most valued by students while also analyzing staff interviews to identify the contexts most supportive of experiences. Triangulation revealed the following categories of core activities.

*Interdisciplinary seminars and projects* provide the foundational structure for engagement and learning. According to students and staff, the seminars are designed through formal meetings and informal conversations, with every person having the opportunity to provide input. Once the “required competencies” have been established, the overriding design criterion is student-directed learning in partnership with teachers. Field notes taken during a “Culture of Haiti” seminar help to illustrate this point:

The class began with a mindfulness circle, with each student briefly speaking to their expectations for the day. The teacher then delivered a brief lecture, presenting content (e.g., Haiti’s governmental structure) deemed as fundamental for all students. Students then worked on their projects, some with other students, some alone. The teacher checked in with all of the students. Subsequently, the teacher asked each student to describe their project to the rest of the class. The topics were diverse: national economics, the status of women, role of philanthropy, hurricane relief and rebuilding, dealing with the HIV crisis, the resurgence of music and the arts. Almost everybody appeared enthused for almost 45 min, with spirited questions and discussion.

This approach demands that *instruction be a reciprocal and shared learning process which, at its best, integrates the knowledge and engagement of students with that of staff*. Teachers are obligated to be instructional partners. They must respond to students in the here and now while, at the same time, guiding student learning toward the core competencies needed for academic credit. This approach also offers students a chance to discover their intellectual passions, as illustrated by a student describing his seminar experience:

Right now, I’m trying to repair an old piano. I’m working on it all the time because it is cool. We had started studying sound waves and musical instruments and I just started getting more curious about the piano. Because there was an older one, sitting out there in our Commons, and I was just thinking that maybe it should be fixed up. It started sparking my interest and just took off from that.

Consistent with the shared belief system, students have to demonstrate their learning. A student observes: “It’s a



school where you can't come here and skip like 90 percent or even 50 percent. You actually have to engage in the learning to succeed." The foundational structures are *proficiency portfolios and presentations of learning*, and at CSCS, they replace the traditional grading system. Students create portfolios that are rigorously assessed by teacher teams. The "presentations of learning" demand that students present aspects of these portfolios to their peers and to teachers. Students discuss what they learned, how they learned it, and why the learning is important to their own development. An excerpt from field notes illustrates the ways that the presentations help students consolidate and demonstrate their learning:

A student spoke about her "Music and Memory" seminar. The student essentially traced her own learning during the seminar. Highlights included, "[I] read eight articles about the science of dementia and the biochemistry of aging." "About the same time, I started reading about the prison pipeline. I read that the prison population is aging and there are many old people with Alzheimer's. These prisoners are no longer safe and that is not fair." This awareness led the student in new directions. After completing the science requirements of the course, she shifted gears and focused on obtaining civics and social justice elements by studying the problems of aging in prison. The young woman discussed trends and issues of elderly in prisons. She concluded by declaring that she "had done [her] research and had found that there are solutions to this problem [...] this really opened my eyes. It impacted me."

The *reflection and feedback process* is core. Indeed, "giving feedback is the Clark Street way," according to one student. Students cannot be assessed as proficient on a particular competency until they complete a required review cycle. For example, students must request feedback from peers and staff on their written products. Only after students have responded to the feedback and made changes are they eligible to receive credit. The process is both daunting and engaging, according to one student: "You are doing this, school work I mean, for yourself. Not for the grade. This is so much harder than the high school I used to go to. Your friends are watching. They are commenting on your work all the time. The whole thing makes me want to dig in." It is noteworthy that respectful feedback is a core competency at CSCS. The value placed on feedback is reflected in the following field notes written during a presentation of learning:

After each presentation, peers are asked to provide comments via a feedback form. We noticed that one student had completed her form, but was hesitant to

submit it to the "host" teacher. The teacher encouraged the student to hand it over, saying: "Your feedback is so good. Thank you for being so insightful." The student granted the teacher a quick smile. After the next presentation, the student wrote even more on her feedback form. She got up out of her chair and took the feedback form to the teacher.

### Student Experiences of Engagement

Most certainly, the CSCS context, as reflected in their share belief system and core activities, is oriented toward youth engagement and empowerment. Analyses continued, therefore, by exploring how students perceived CSCS pedagogies and the experiences that they felt contributed most substantially to their emotional and cognitive engagement. We were guided by the concepts of opportunity role structure and relational environment (Maton, 2008), with a specific focus on detailing how young people described youth voice and adult partnerships (Zeldin et al., 2013).

### Opportunity Role Structure

Clark Street Community School has long sought to maximize youth voice in school governance (e.g., voting rights on boards, co-chairing policy committees). A couple of years prior to this study, for example, our team worked with the school to expand youth influence in school-wide decision-making. We all agreed that these initiatives have failed to sufficiently engage the student body, unfortunately. So it may not be at all surprising that few students even mentioned the opportunity to participate in school-wide governance. In contrast, almost all spoke enthusiastically about decision-making when it concerned their own instructional program. The dominant theme was that *students became most inspired to learn when they had the freedom to identify and pursue their own intellectual interests, typically within the structure of a seminar or project*. This engagement was deeply personal, as revealed in field notes from a demonstration of learning:

A student discussed "The Start Up" seminar. After being "intimidated" by the subject matter of entrepreneurship, the student noted that "I took control of myself. I started to learn what I needed to know." He decided to launch a nonprofit with peers and the teacher, making salsa from homegrown tomatoes. Reflecting on the year, the student summed up: "Starting a business, I can't believe it. And you know what? Math and budget are not just boring topics. I am ecstatic. I never knew how to talk to others. I feel more

confident in my ability to speak up in the future. I have put a lot of time and effort into this. I can't walk away now. This is way more than just salsa!"

Engagement is also experienced when *students discover their own relevance for schooling and learning*. For some, engagement had a compliant orientation (e.g., "I am just trying to graduate, so I do whatever it takes."). The majority of students, however, searched and ultimately found opportunities that matched their own identity as a learner. One student revealed "I don't like being cooped up inside. So, if there's an activity or a time I can be outside and write my stuff or do my research, it is way easier. Calmer, not as many people." As students make decisions about their own learning, engagement occurs in unexpected ways, with unexpected results. One student discussed her seminar experience: "I decided to read 'The Tempest' because it was short. Then I found out that it had many layers. This is what made it interesting to me." She went on to say, "The whole investigation was eye-opening. I researched what it means to be a monster. It made me overcome my own assumptions. I learned that it is important for me to be curious, not to be judgmental about people."

### *Relational Environment*

Creating one's own educational program is often scary. One student vividly explained: "I want to do a project, but I don't know what to do. It just seems like so many ideas. Like, I can do anything. I just sit there in that state of wonder of what I should do. It feels like forever. Sometimes you have some idea of something you want to do. But you don't know how you can flush it out." Students were looking for support, and they often noted that they that they *felt most engaged when adult staff served as guides for their decision-making*. Many students appreciated that teachers were willing to "brainstorm ideas." Others detailed how teachers helped them sequence their project benchmarks and manage their academic calendars. Almost all students revealed their appreciation that CSCS teachers respected "my autonomy" and "my own personality" when offering guidance.

Students engage when they feel as though they matter to teachers (Wehlage, Rutter, Smith, Lesko, & Fernandez, 1989). Indeed, students spoke most extensively about those teachers who went out of their way to understand and to care for them. Almost all students experienced high engagement when staff *broke down traditional norms or hierarchies to demonstrate reciprocity in student-teacher relationships*. It was this sense of sharing that ultimately allowed students to overcome their fears, to respond positively to teacher admonitions, and ultimately, to progress

toward being engaged learners. As a student explained below:

You feel like you share this personal experience with teachers, you heard the stories about their life, and you get to know them on a more personal basis. That helps you connect with them and help them realize what your interests are, how they can get you into a topic. Here it's like they can sit down with you and be like: What's your problem? Why aren't you doing this?

Another student went on to say:

In the traditional high school, you feel like your teacher's not your friend, like they're your teacher. And that can make it really hard to actually come to them with questions that you're maybe not comfortable asking. I'm a person that will not try to ask questions if I don't feel comfortable, because that's just how I am. If you have a teacher you're scared of, how are you going to ask a question or reach out to them?

A sense of mattering was also evidenced in the finding that students *perceived themselves as valuable members of a cross-generational community of learners*. Many students talked about having "real conversations" with peers and teachers in the hallways. Other students appreciated that CSCS operated as a place with structures and norms akin to the "real world" and to "a job." These conditions provided students with a sense of stability and challenge that allowed them to engage. One student stated:

If I didn't have the support that I needed here, yeah, I would have been doing terribly. I'd probably be in a bad state. If I were in a regular high school, I would have a few teachers that would be there for me, but not the whole school.

Another student continued:

And it's not just the teachers, but other students. I've found a really good relationship with a lot of them. And a lot of them have kept me going. It's like a community here because it is a community school. There is always someone there for each other, so it doesn't matter who I talk to.

## **Phase 2 Conclusions**

Clark Street Community School demonstrates that high schools can be settings of empowerment, and within that

context, support youth-adult partnership. Figure 2 highlights how the shared belief system and core activities created a school-wide context for self-directed and reciprocal learning. The opportunity role structure maximized youth voice and influence in instructional decision-making. The relational environment was one of community, largely because staff acted as partners in learning, not only as teachers. Staff actively challenged young people to become agents of their own learning while also providing affirmative support in helping them achieve their goals. All of this contributed to student engagement, both emotional and cognitive.

**Discussion**

The ultimate goal of any educational setting, formal or informal, is to engage young people and reinforce their desire to learn more (Sarason, 2004). Community

organizations maximize youth voice in decision-making as an effective strategy for sustaining engagement, while also promoting supportive and reciprocal relationships with adults. When youth and adults create shared goals on common ground, settings of voice become settings of partnership. Research indicates that both youth and adults benefit under these conditions (Zeldin & Petrokubi, 2008). Structural change within organizations and communities can also occur (Christens & Zeldin, 2016; Krauss, Dahalan, & Zeldin, 2016; Ramey, 2013; Reed & Miller, 2014).

The most potent barrier to educational reform is the hierarchical structures and asymmetrical relationships embedded within all aspects of contemporary high schools, particularly those serving the most vulnerable students (Cuban, 2005). Scholars are increasingly advocating the potential of student-teacher partnerships as a strategy for helping to break down these barriers (Chopra, 2016; Mitra, 2008; Ozer et al., 2013). The present inquiry is supportive of that stance. We find that youth voice in

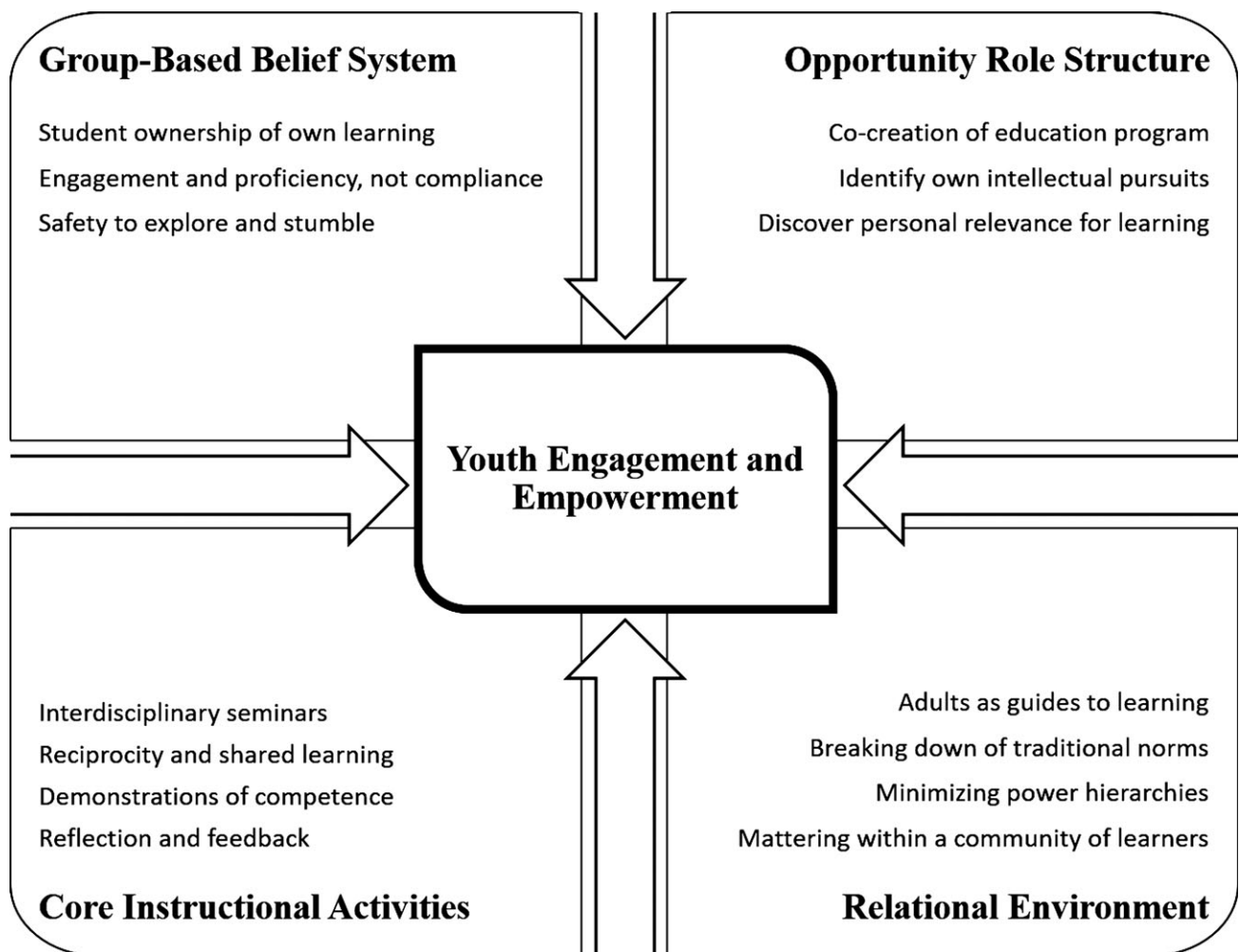


Fig. 2 Clark Street Community School as an Empowering Community Setting.

instructional decision-making is a powerful practice for disrupting the status quo. Changing norms and structures to allow teachers to become partners in student learning is the second part of the equation. Students need to know that they are not alone and that they matter. It is this foundation of empathy, predictability and challenge that allows students to be engaged agents of their own learning.

#### Implications for Community Psychologists

Youth-adult partnership remains understudied, misunderstood, and underutilized (Kirshner & Jefferson, 2015; Mitra, 2008) in educational circles. There is much scholarship to be done. Examining the generalizability of the current findings is warranted. In Phase 1, we found that instructional climate consistently outweighed the insignificant contributions of sociodemographic background. Additionally, the pathways to engagement were similar across school type, race/ethnicity, and gender. These results mirror those found in the literature (Conner & Pope, 2013; Thapa et al., 2013). Our analyses were limited, however, because the sample size was too small for multi-level strategies. Future longitudinal research would more adequately explore causality than was possible with the cross-sectional approach used in Phase 1.

The vast majority of research on school climate and engagement relies on a narrow array of quantitative methods (Conner & Pope, 2013; Fredricks et al., 2004; Voight & Nation, 2016). Phase 2 of this inquiry illustrates how qualitative methods can offer depth and explanation, particularly on questions of organizational context and lived experience. Replication of Phase 2 is warranted, with the aim being to explore similar questions in a more diverse pool of high schools. Clark Street Community School is different from mainstream schools in multiple ways. First, CSCS has a small student body which mostly consists of students who have “failed” in traditional high schools, but who have the personal motivation or family support to try again in a new place. Second, CSCS has had stable leadership for over a decade, with a principal who has long been committed to student voice and engagement. The principal has hired and trained staff who choose to work at CSCS. And finally, the vision at CSCS is consistent with its operational structures and norms. Most everything is oriented toward the expectation that youth and staff will be active agents and partners in the creation of CSCS as a place for youth empowerment and engagement (Fig. 2). These characteristics are contributing to the success of CSCS, highlighting the need for future research to determine which of these characteristics are central to other school-wide efforts to improve engagement in a diverse range of schools.

Core concepts of community psychology – including empowerment, youth-adult partnership, and organizational climate – have become public ideas in many fields of practice. By their nature, the meaning of these multidimensional concepts will always be contested. Validating their central components is important (e.g., Eisman et al., 2016; Voight & Nation, 2016; Zeldin et al., 2014). It is equally important to embrace our roles as public scholars by moving these concepts into mainstream practice. In our outreach, we have found Maton’s (2008) framework to be extremely practical, especially when it is illustrated through case example. The framework resonates with youth and youth workers, who can then adapt the framework for their own purposes and toward their own ends. We hope that our refinement of the framework (Fig. 2), along with the case study of Clark Street Community School, will be similarly used by educators and students. In 2018 and beyond, it is critical for scholars and field professionals to jointly demonstrate how settings for youth empowerment and engagement can be embedded into different types of high schools. Empowering settings should not just be a luxury for the most fortunate, but a necessity for all.

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