The background features a light grey textured area with several stylized speech bubbles and clouds. There are two teal speech bubbles, one on the left and one on the right. A large pink speech bubble is on the left side, partially overlapping the title. Several grey, stylized clouds are scattered across the background.

Engaging Student Voices

*A Case Study on Effective Ways to Access
Students' Voices through the Student Voice
Initiative*

Prepared for the Ontario Principals Council (OPC), Catholic Principals' Council of Ontario (CPCO), and the Association des directions et directions adjointes des écoles franco-ontariennes (ADFO). This study was funded by the Government of Ontario.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Since the launch of the *Ontario Student Voice Initiative* in 2008, the Ministry of Education has embarked on a student engagement strategy that aims to strengthen student engagement in their learning and has developed tools and resources to access student voice, promote student-led opportunities and enable student-teacher collaborative efforts. There has also been great interest in supporting student voice across Canada, the United States, Chile and United Kingdom where educators in elementary and secondary schools are using student voice to improve student engagement.

Although there are numerous examples offered through education reform literature on the benefits of using student voice at the classroom, school and system level, few studies have directly explored the role of student voice in school improvement and even fewer have offered empirical evidence of system wide implementation.¹ In order to understand the impact that Student Voice Initiative (SVI) can have on entire education systems, it is imperative to begin with capturing the lived experiences of early adopters of the SVI, and learning from them on ways to empower students to become active participants in their learning environments.

Through the Student Engagement/Student Voice Modules project, the research study set out to capture and report on the lived experiences and recommendations of Ontario students, teachers and principals that participated in and implemented the SVI in their schools in order to demonstrate ways to a) access the voice of all students and b) meaningfully involve all students in decisions that impact them directly. By conducting a qualitative study through focus groups and one-one-one interviews with students, teachers and principals in 12 schools across Ontario, the study demonstrated a) participants' experiences participating in and implementing SVI in their schools, b) participants' recommendations regarding effective practices on student-teacher partnerships, c) successful practices and examples of using the tools available through SVI to support the Ontario Educational Leadership Framework (OELF), School Improvement Plan for Student Achievement (SIPSA), Board Improvement Plan for Student Achievement (BIPSA), and Ontario's four renewed vision goals. We examined participants' responses as a collective, and divided their responses into themes.

Despite the differences in approaches (i.e. an entire elementary school class or a group of high school student leaders) and variations of implementations (e.g. buying a mascot or interviewing students and parents from feeder schools) the experiences of students, teachers and principals echoes the benefits of SVI to a school's culture of co-creating, where "students are using their knowledge of the self to make decisions that are healthy and beneficial to them, [...] empowering them to make decisions and are involving [them] in their own learning" (Principal 1). Students that participate in SVI

¹ The Education Alliance, Spring 2004, p.3; Fielding, 2001, p.104

projects explained that they saw themselves as agents initiating change in their schools through projects focused on broader social issues such as environmental sustainability, youth mental health and identity formation, and women in STEM, while using and honing 21st century skills such as entrepreneurship, time management, resilience and persistence, creativity, and problem solving.

Most importantly it demonstrates empirical evidence of partnerships between youth and adults, where teachers guide students in the direction they choose to go, and principals understand the importance of allowing students to take ownership in co-constructing their learning space and obtaining opportunities outside of the school. As one principal explains, “students are being trained in research methods that they can come back to their school and community, look at a program, and design a way that they can investigate the problem and provide solutions.” (Principal 3).

Principals explain that SVI also supports the goals of the OELF, specifically when it comes to building a shared vision, having high expectations for students and themselves, maintaining a safe and healthy environment, and developing people and community². As one principal puts it, every principal and teachers believe that student voice is important, and many schools are already including students’ voices in decisions that matter most to their education. What sets SVI apart from other student initiated projects is that it explicitly articulates the importance of intentionally seeking out student voice, intentionally providing opportunities to move from listening to hearing, and articulating the importance of us [principals and teachers] working with our students.

² The Institute for Education Leadership, September 2013, p.12-13

INTRODUCTION

As Ontario embarks on a renewed vision of moving the education system from great to excellent, we must continue to give students and children the tools they need to reach their full potential and become engaged members of their communities.³ Building on the progress made over the past decade, the roots of achieving this goal are exemplified through the “work of thousands of educators and students participating in innovative projects that are making an impact on student engagement, learning and achievement, [...making Ontario’s] education system one of the best in the world.”⁴ An example of this can be seen through the success of SVI across the province of Ontario.

Since the launch of the *Ontario Student Voice Initiative* in 2008, the Ministry of Education has embarked on a student engagement strategy that aims to strengthen student engagement in their learning and has developed tools and resources to access student voice, promote student-led opportunities and enable student-teacher collaborative efforts. There are 4 student engagement tools available through the *Student Voice Initiative*, namely *SpeakUp in a Box*, *Students as Researchers (StAR)*, *SpeakUp Projects*, and the *Minister’s Student Advisory Council (MSAC)*. Each tool empowers students to become active citizens and offers opportunities for them to shape their learning environment by connecting what is happening in the classroom to real-life experiences outside school. These programs also offer ways for educators to access student voice while working in partnerships, and building on 21st century skills such as entrepreneurship, collaboration, communication and character.

Across Canada, examples of various forms of Student Voice programs can be found in Alberta and Manitoba. Through the Alberta Student Engagement Initiative, *Speak Out*, youth are sharing education ideas and experiences with each other and the Alberta Ministry of Education.⁵ In Manitoba, the non-profit organization, *Manitoba School Improvement Program (MSIP)*, has partnered up with various schools in the province to help them assess ways that student voice can be used to achieve goals outlined in the school improvement plans.⁶

Internationally, there has also been great interest in supporting student voice. Student voice scholars such as Adam Fletcher (2003) and Michael Fielding (2001) cite various examples across the United States, Chile and the United Kingdom of classrooms in elementary and secondary schools using student voice to improve student engagement. Examples include students receiving a credit for helping educators learn to use technology in the classroom⁷, secondary school students

³ Ontario Ministry of Education, September 2013

⁴ Ontario Ministry of Education, September 2013, p.5-18

⁵ Alberta Government, 2014

⁶ The Education Alliance, Spring 2004, p.4

⁷ Fletcher, 2003, p.19

conducting research alongside University staff⁸, and students in second grade developing a curriculum for their teachers to use in the classroom.⁹

The term ‘student voice’ is often used as a “metaphor for student engagement and participation in issues that matter in learning”¹⁰ and “has been used in reference to various types of student input, ranging from personal expression in classroom assignments, [...] to involvement in school governance.”¹¹ Although there are numerous examples offered through education reform literature on the benefits of using student voice at the classroom, school and system level, few studies have directly explored the role of student voice in school improvement and even fewer have offered empirical evidence of system wide implementation.¹² Despite the growing attention to student voice in education reform, Fielding explains that one of the key issues faced by the student voice movement is that “for many [...] student voice, is at best, something a small number of other students, often not like them, do with a small number of teachers, often not like other teachers, to no good effect.”¹³ He further argues, “the continuation and incorporation of student voice as a characteristic of school as a learning community, has to do with the systems and structures that are created to give it public status and system-wide impact.”¹⁴ In other words, although students and teachers are demonstrating great interest and ways to incorporate student voice in their classrooms, there isn’t enough legitimacy afforded at the system-level for the student voice initiative to become a social movement. As Michael Fullan puts it, “reculturing must precede, or at least be co-terminus with, restructuring. [Thus] we need to develop different attitudes and dispositions which will make them a felt necessity, rather than an imposed requirement.”¹⁵

One of the most important learning we can take away from literature on student voice, is that “in order for student voice to become an inherent process in the school system, “principals [must] play a key role in honoring student voice and developing a school culture that promotes it.”¹⁶ In order to understand the impact that SVI can have on entire education systems, it is imperative to begin with capturing the lived experiences of early adopters of the SVI, and learning from them on ways to empower students to become active participants in their learning environments. The systemic approach that the Ontario Ministry of Education has taken with implementing SVI is an important example of “educators [...] fostering reciprocal relationships with their students by including them in co-creating learning opportunities, co-designing the learning space, [and] promoting autonomy for learners.”¹⁷

⁸ Fielding, 2001, p.104

⁹ Fletcher, 2003, p.18

¹⁰ The Education Alliance, Spring 2004, p.3

¹¹ Student Achievement, September 2013, p.2

¹² The Education Alliance, Spring 2004; Fielding, 2001

¹³ Fielding, 2001, p.105

¹⁴ Fielding, 2001, p.105

¹⁵ Fielding, 2001, p.106

¹⁶ Student Achievement, September 2013, p.3

¹⁷ Student Achievement, September 2013, p.3-4

In order to provide guidance for leaders on how to engage students through the Student Voice Initiative, the study examples of successful student voice projects across Ontario, to demonstrate how students can help shape the future of Ontario's education system, and help move it from great to excellent. Based on input from principals, teachers and students that have participated in their schools' Student Voice Initiative(s), we have demonstrated effective ways for principals and teachers to a) access the voice of all students, and b) meaningfully involve all students in decisions that impact them directly including how to strengthen their academic, intellectual and social engagement. Furthermore, we draw direct connections between SVI, the Ontario Education Leadership Framework (OELF), School Improvement Plans (SIPSA), Board Improvement Plans (BIPSA), and Ontario's *Great to Excellent* renewed vision goals.

METHODOLOGY AND INSTRUMENTS

Research Design

Research conducted on the Student Voice Initiative (SVI) employed a qualitative methodology, namely constructing a patchwork case study, by looking at different typologies at different points in time. In order to capture the diversity and contextual elements in experiences and implementation of the SVI across Ontario, the study took a descriptive approach to demonstrating ways to

- a) access the voice of all students and
- b) meaningfully involve all students in decisions that impact them directly.

The key concepts measured during the case study were:

- a) Participants' experiences participating in and implementing SVI in their schools
- b) Participants' recommendations regarding effective practices on student-teacher partnerships
- c) Successful practices and examples of using the tools available through SVI to support the Ontario Educational Leadership Framework (OELF), School Improvement Plan for Student Achievement (SIPSA), Board Improvement Plan for Student Achievement (BIPSA), and Ontario's four renewed vision goals.

Using a mixed-method approach, the case study was built based on the experiences of students, teachers, and principals through focus groups, and one-on-one interviews. Students participated in a 30-minute focus group, while teachers and principals participated in a 30 minute on-camera or audio-recorded one-on-one interview. All research was conducted at the participants' school, during school hours, scheduled by the school principal. When planning the research study we had planned for sending teachers an online survey, rather than interviewing them in person. The plan was amended during the visits, and instead teachers' on-camera interviews used for the video portion of the project were also used for the research. This amendment to the methodology was made to avoid participants' fatigue, as teachers would have been asked the same questions in two different ways (on camera and through an online survey), on two different occasions. Teachers signed consent forms agreeing to be interviewed on camera and participate in the study.

The study was conducted in seven Ontario school boards, namely Toronto District School Board (TDSB), Near North District School Board (NNDSB), Peel District School Board (PDSB), Dufferin-Peel Catholic District School Board (DPCDSB), Hastings & Prince Edward District School Board (HPEDSDistrict School Board Ontario North East (DSBONE), and Conseil scolaire catholique de district des Grandes-Rivières (CSCDGR). A mix of Catholic, public, French and English, Urban Priority High Schools

(UPHS), elementary and secondary schools were chosen based on a variety of *SpeakUp* in a Box, *SpeakUp* Projects and Students as Researchers (StAR) programs. Due to the qualitative nature of the research study, mainly conducting face-to-face interviews, the sample size was kept small and chosen from a group of students that had successfully completed the Student Voice initiative in their respective schools. Schools were contacted through a principal project liaison and all study arrangements were made with the permission of the school's principal. For the TDSB, the research study was first approved by the board's ethics committee, prior to conducting the study. A total of 49 students, 7 principals, and 13 teachers from 11 different schools participated in the study. One of the schools was a UPHS school, and two schools had a large First Nations, Métis and Inuit population of students and staff.

Data Analysis

The first level of analysis was conducted using the responses of a working group organized with principals during the month of May 2014, and with the 2014 Minister's Student Advisory Council (MSAC) during the month of August 2014. Based on an aggregated analysis of all preliminary responses we determined the appropriate questions to ask participants, as well as high-level themes. Using qualitative methodologies of coding aggregated responses into themes (with NVivo 10 software), we continued to collect data through a grounded theory approach, and further refine the overall themes that captured the experiences and recommendations of students, teachers and principals. All identifiable data was deleted from the analysis (e.g. names of school, teachers, principals, students, school boards, etc.) to ensure the results would be based on a collective voice of those who participated in the Student Voice Initiative.

Instruments

Please refer to the appendix for the focus group and interview questions, and consent forms

RESULTS

Our questions took on a descriptive approach to asking and communicating the results in an effort to learn about the diversity of participants' experiences, rather than a prescriptive approach, based on measuring frequency or similarity in responses, or suggesting the "right" way to implement or use SVI in a school. Participants' reflections on their experiences and recommendations were captured within a context, contingent on time, school environment, students' grade level, and an intersection between individual identity and life experiences; they are based on individuals' experiences participating in and implementing the Student Voice Initiative (SVI) in their school, but represented as a collective in the form of themes. Results are divided into four sections: 1. key messages; 2. participants' experiences; 3. Participants' recommendations regarding effective student teacher partnerships; and 4. making connections between SVI and the OELF, SIPSA, BIPSA and new vision goals.

1. KEY MESSAGES

The four key takeaways below represent the *compelling why*. During our initial consultation with our principals' working group, participants suggested that it is important to understand the main reasons why student voice is, and continues to be, an initiative that schools use to engage students' voices and include them in decisions that impact them directly.

1. **Uncover school climate:** SVI projects can uncover covert issues such as bullying, which are not always apparent on the surface. Students have used SVI projects to purchase a mascot, which created a sense of pride and belongingness in the school and the community, for learning the experiences of students transitioning to a new school, or for creating a safe space room for students to go for down time. All of these projects address students' lived experiences that were captured and addressed by their peers, thus improving the overall school climate.
2. **Beyond the physical element of a voice:** participating in SVI projects means students can contribute what they feel comfortable sharing, and build on new or existing skills (e.g. researching, writing scripts, organizing trips for the group, or presenting in front of people). Students speak of gaining confidence to pursue their ideas, fortified by gaining the trust of their peers and teachers who believed in their abilities to initiate change, or plant the seed for change, in the school.
3. **Reciprocal learning through collaboration:** SVI intentionally articulates the need to intentionally seek out and listen to students' voices. SVI allows principals and teachers to work shoulder to shoulder with students to achieve common

goals, while addressing the SIP, BIP and new vision goals. SVI also creates an opportunity of a mind shift – where students can create and share knowledge with their peers and teachers on issues that matter most to them, and principals and teachers can harness those skills to improve their school.

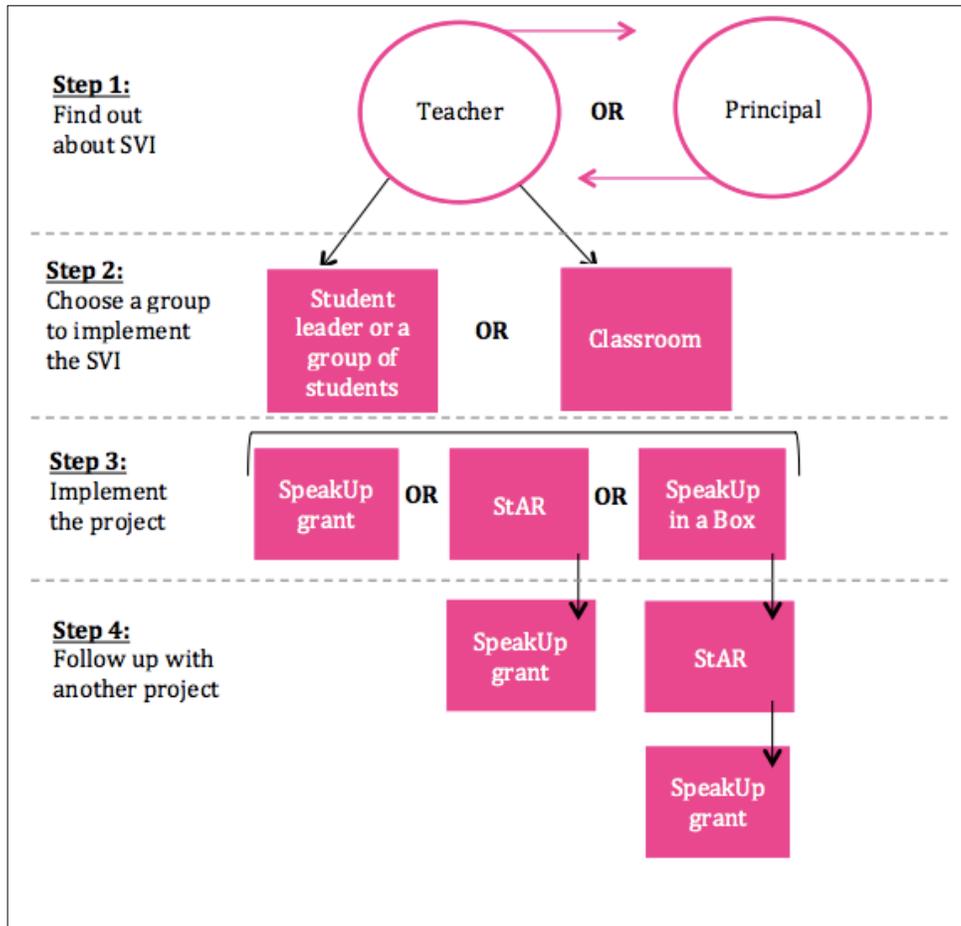
- 4. SVI in specific contexts - Gospel Values, UPHS, and FNMI:** SVI lend themselves to various types of schools, student populations, and cultural contexts. Through SVI, Catholic school students make connections through a celebration of faith, while practicing gospel values such as community, dignity of persons, hope, and excellence. In an indigenous school, SVI projects address the traditional worldview that we are all related and we are all interconnected. Students can use SVI to find their voice, to reclaim their identities and their cultures. In UPHS schools, students use SVI projects to learn about attitudes of their community towards their school, and share their work with other students in their boards and in the UPHS school community.

2. PARTICIPANTS' EXPERIENCES

Students, teachers and principals that participated in and implemented a SVI project in their school were asked to reflect on their individual experiences. Participants reflected on the entire process of participation, from ideation to implementation, and they discussed additional opportunities that students had as a result of their participation in SVI, as well as new or existing skills that students gained or honed while leading their school's SVI project. The responses that participants gave to questions that captured experiences are divided into four subsections: a. successful process; b. skills; c. opportunities; d. challenges; and e. recommendations.

A. Successful processes

We learned that there are multiple ways to begin, and implement a SVI project. The chart below represents the most common process used by schools, communicated in four steps. Typically a SVI begins with either a principal 'tapping' or identifying a champion teacher, or a teacher sharing the opportunity with a principal. Usually a SVI that a teacher or a principal hears about is the same project with which they will proceed. This means that neither the teacher nor the principal research into the different SVI projects in the first year of implementation. Once the teacher chooses the group of students that will participate in SVI, the students proceed to implementing the SVI based on their goals and topic. After a project is completed, some schools choose to participate in other SVI(s) (which greatly depends on the project with which they began). The process for the progression from the starting project to the follow up project is captured in step four of the chart on the next page.



B. Skills

Students, teachers and principals were asked to discuss skills that students gained or honed through the process of participating in their school's SVI. The word cloud (to the right) represents all the skills participants' mentioned, with many skills representing 21st century skills and attributes that students will need to compete for and create the jobs of tomorrow, as outlined in Ontario's renewed vision goals.¹⁸



¹⁸ Ontario Ministry of Education, April 2014, pg.4

C. Opportunities

Participants explained that students received many opportunities that resulted from their participation in a SVI, including in their own school, in their board, at other schools in their board, and at conferences (Ministry organized, and at universities). Below is a breakdown of types of opportunities that students received:

Presentation: Participants discussed the opportunities to present the results of their work at StAR conferences, university lectures, school board meetings, parent council meetings, UPHS schools, indigenous band council meetings, and at the MSAC summer camp.

Learning: Participants reflected on the opportunities to learn new tangible skills such as research methodology (including analysis and informed consent) presentation skills, leadership skills, money management and communicating with their school staff. Students got opportunities to be in leadership roles, and to see themselves succeed, learning about themselves and their abilities.

Travelling & meeting new people: Many students discussed flying on an airplane for the first time, or visiting parts of Ontario for the first. Students spoke of the new friendships they made with other students across the province, as well as the connections they made with their champion teacher during long road trips.

D. Challenges

When participants reflected on the entire experience, from ideation to implementation, some mentioned challenges that they experienced and how they resolved them in order to focus on the goal of the project. Challenges were usually centered on staff and students learning to work as a group, addressing the implied power imbalance that exists at the onset of the project. These were mitigated through constant open communication between everyone involved in the project. The most common challenges cited by participants are the following:

Communication: Students explained that as a result of miscommunication between students and staff, or between changing administration and students, they were unable to access their grant money or had difficulties procuring school resources in the second year of implementation.

Engaging the average student: Students learned that when their communication plans did not succeed they needed to go back and readjust their approach. For example one group explained that they could not engage students in their school to participate in their initiative by simply putting up posters, so they changed their approach to speaking to students directly and offering a free pizza lunch to attendees.

Time management: Students discussed that learning to manage and allocate their time between attending class and conferences, between doing homework, and working on the SVI project, along with keeping up with their familial responsibilities was both a challenge and a learning opportunity, mitigated by effectively communicating with their teachers and family, and learning to ask for help.

E. Recommendations

When participants reflected on things they would do differently, or advice they would offer to those considering getting started with student voice, most agreed that SVI should be a part of every school. The two recommendations below demonstrate specific program-based recommendations offered by some participants.

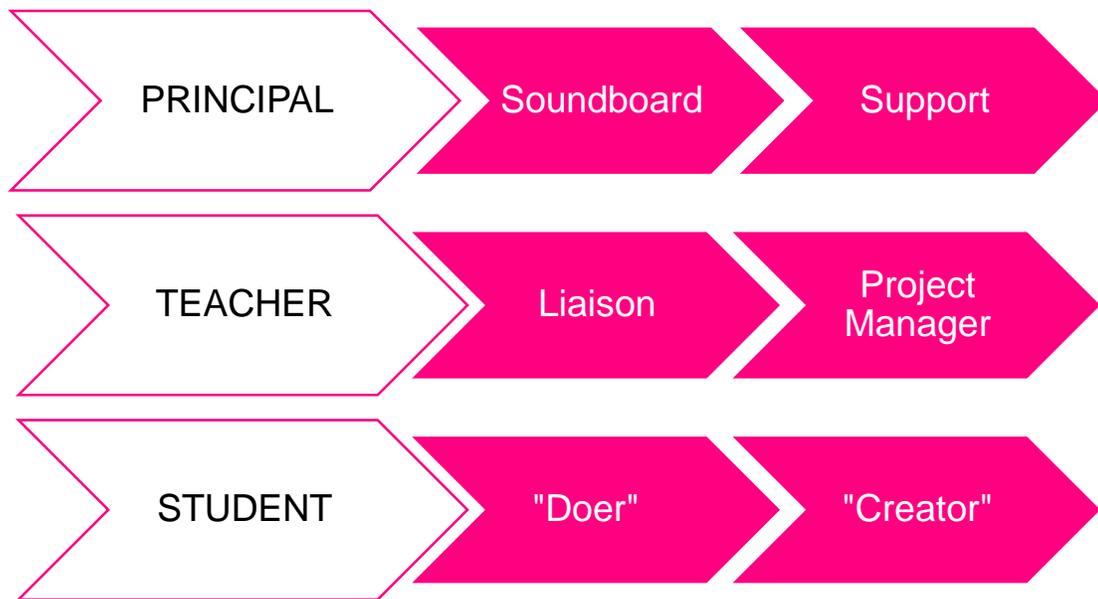
Board level student voice officer: The first recommendation was to designate one person at each school board as a student voice officer. This individual would be responsible for all SVI related work, including communicating new opportunities to the schools, and creating a sense of community between all the schools participating in SVI projects.

More external opportunities: The second recommendation builds on the first in that participants stressed the importance of having a space for students from different schools within a board to share their work with one another, specifically with *SpeakUp* grant projects. When students get to share their work with their school board community, at board meetings, and at conferences (e.g. the way students share their work at StAR conferences), their sense of belonging and their leadership skills improve. Students feel greater achievement in their work when they know people outside of their school know about the impact and the change they have initiated in their school.

3. STUDENT TEACHER PARTNERSHIPS

Students, teachers and principals all agreed that there must be a clear division of roles when implementing the SVI. In these partnerships between students, teachers and principals, each must play their specific role in order for the project goals to be successful. Students need to experience everything that they have designed for themselves, while it is the teachers' role to support them when they feel reluctant, or discouraged, and principals act as a sounding board and advocate for both teachers and students.

Below is the division of specific duties by role:



The role of the student in SVI: Students are responsible for all stages of the project – ideation, planning, and implementation. They are responsible for communicating project needs to the champion teacher, managing their time, and devising roles amongst the group. They serve as the change initiators in their schools, and often serve as advocates for the collective voices of students. The way they choose to contribute to the project depends on their individual skills and interests.

The role of the teacher in SVI: Teachers should serve as liaisons between the students and school administration, while providing support and guidance for students to reach their collective goal. As a liaison, the teacher should communicate the project needs to other teachers, and connect students to the resources they need in order to implement the project such as scheduling a space in the school, purchasing items for the project or advising on vendors to procure for a conference. In the role of a guide and support, these teachers should be advising students on possible options of action while giving them ample space and autonomy to lead and organize the project. Most importantly, teachers must support students during periods of uncertainty or when they lose faith helping them to stay resilient and on track.

The role of the principal in SVI: The primary role of the principal is to provide guidance and support to the champion teacher working on the SVI. The secondary role of the principal is to serve as a sounding board for the champion teacher and students, during ideation, planning, implementation, and end of project reflection.

4. MAKING CONNECTIONS BETWEEN SVI and OELF, SIPSA, BIPSA and NEW VISION GOALS

The goal of asking principals to draw connections between the SVI projects and the SIPSA, BIPSA, OELF and new visions’ goal was to demonstrate successful practices and examples of using the tools available through SVI to support the Ontario Educational Leadership Framework (OELF), School Improvement Plan (SIPSA), Board Improvement Plan (BIPSA), and Ontario’s four renewed vision goals. These questions were asked of only the principals. Below are specific goals from the OELF and Ontario’s new vision goals, along with specific SVI projects that support those goals.

How can principals use SVI in their schools to support the OELF?

Setting Direction

Goal Breakdown	SVI project in support of the goal
Building a shared vision and having high expectations for students and themselves (pg.12-13)	A high school in HPEDSB used 3 SVI programs to initiate change in their school by intentionally seeking out students’ voices. Students facilitated <i>SpeakUp</i> in a Box sessions in each class, collected responses from these sessions and based on the responses, created a survey using skills they learned from the StAR conference. These same students proceeded to apply for a <i>SpeakUp</i> grant to implement the results from their study.

Building relationships and developing people

Goal Breakdown	SVI project in support of the goal
Maintaining a safe and healthy environment (pg.12-13)	A classroom of students in a Toronto elementary school with a predominant indigenous population used a <i>SpeakUp</i> grant to create healthy snacks for all students in the school, by growing their own plants. The students went around to every classroom in the school to teach their peers healthy eating habits. They also made their own soil, using a worm tower and the compost garbage from all the classes in the school.
Developing people and community (p.12-13)	A French Catholic elementary school in CSCDGR purchased a school mascot using their <i>SpeakUp</i> grant money, after learning that students were feeling a lack of belonging. With the mascot, students created a sense of community and pride within the school, as well as in the community.

How can principals use SVI in their schools to support the renewed vision?

1. Achieving Excellence¹⁹

Goal Breakdown	SVI project in support of the goal
<p>A. “Building skills & attributes they will need to compete for and create the jobs of tomorrow.” (Pg.4)</p>	<p>All students that participate in StAR projects attend a conference with other students across the province, to learn research methodology and analysis skills, and to investigate a problem in their school. A group of students in a Toronto UPHS school studied the opinions of students and parents from feeder schools towards their school, assisting the principal in understanding community attitudes.</p>
<p>B. “Benefit from a wide array of opportunities both inside and outside of the school (...) including the appropriate and effective use of technology.” (Pg. 4)</p>	<p>A group of high school students in PDSB put together a STEM Olympics using their <i>SpeakUp</i> grant money, involving the entire school, and competing with another school in the board. They created a new club and way for students interested in STEM to participate in extracurricular activities, and use their science and math skills and knowledge taught in the classroom, outside of the classroom.</p>
<p>C. “Educators are creating more relevant, applied and innovative learning experiences that spark learners’ curiosity and inspire them to follow their passions.” (Pg.4)</p>	<p>A teacher in a French elementary catholic school in CSCDGR used money from the <i>SpeakUp</i> grant to fund a robotics club. This created experiential learning opportunities for the participating students to practice basic computer programming, learn about teamwork, and sparked athletic students’ curiosities to learn more about STEM subjects.</p>

¹⁹ Children and students of all ages will achieve high levels of academic performance, acquire valuable skills, and demonstrate good citizenship. Educators will be supported in learning continuously and will be recognized among the best in the world.

2. Ensuring Equity²⁰

Goal breakdown	SVI project in support of the goal
<p>A. Increase knowledge and understanding of First Nations, Metis and Inuit cultures and histories.” Pg.9</p> <p>B. “Supporting students through transition periods: e.g. when they move from elementary to secondary.” Pg.9</p>	<p>A group of indigenous students in a high school in DSBONE used StAR to understand the experiences of First Nations students as they made their transition to publicly funded schools. One of their follow up actions, after analyzing the results of their survey, was creating a committee composed of a diverse group of students to create better connections between various ethnic and cultural groups of students in the school.</p>

3. Promoting Well-Being ²¹

Goal Breakdown	SVI project in support of the goal
<p>A. “Strong relationships and positive sense of self, makes students resilient and become healthy, active and engaged citizens and feel safe in school.” Pg.16</p>	<p>A school in NNDSB used <i>SpeakUp</i> grant to create a dialogue between students and parents on what it means to have a learning disability. This created an opportunity for students and parents to communicate and build relationships, while contributing to the presenting students’ positive sense of self within their school and broader community.</p>

4. Enhancing Public Confidence²²

Goal Breakdown	SVI project in support of the goal
<p>A. Partner with community organizations and businesses to provide students with more experiential learning opportunities.” Pg.19</p>	<p>A classroom of students in a Toronto elementary school with predominately an indigenous population used <i>SpeakUp</i> grant collaborated with a non-profit organization to learn how to grow plants and make their own soil for their community garden project. The organization donated resources and conducted workshops in the school, to support of their SVI project.</p>

²⁰ All children and students will be inspired to reach their full potential with access to rich learning experiences that begin at birth and continue into adulthood.

²¹ All children and students will develop enhanced mental and physical health, a positive sense of self and belonging and the skills to make positive choices.

²² Ontarians will continue to have confidence in publicly funded education system that helps develop new generations of confident, capable and caring citizens.

DISCUSSION

The discussion below represents the researcher's observations throughout the research process. This discussion is meant to serve as a reflection and advice for future studies that could build on the work of this study, and it does not address the participants' responses, rather the manner in which participants responded to the questions and overall observations made by the researcher during the visits to the participating schools.

The first observation was centered on the way schools adapted a SVI project to fit their school culture. In all schools that participated in our study, it was clear that the student voice initiative had been adapted to reflect the school culture and needs while indirectly supporting the goals of the SIPSA and BIPSA, as well as contextualizing the goals outlined in the OELF and Ontario's new vision. All schools that participated in our study had projects that progressed beyond the first year of pilot testing the initiative, to second, third or fourth year projects. All schools that participated in our study had completed their projects, despite having some challenges along the way. In some schools, the SVI was structured similarly to other school clubs (e.g. student led activities with a teacher advisor), while others involved an entire class.

Although most participants indicated that SVI should follow a structure that is student-led, teacher-guided, and principal-supported, there were projects where it was clear that the project was teacher-led and student-supported. The latter structure was seen at both elementary and secondary school levels, with all projects completing their first year of a *SpeakUp* grant and without any articulated plans for follow up projects. Students did not express any discontent regarding the structure of the roles; rather they seemed proud that they had been chosen by their teacher to participate in this project.

The second observation was centered on the profile of students chosen to participate in a SVI. In schools where the structure of a SVI was student-led and teacher-guided, many of the students self-identified as school leaders, and mentioned that they had been chosen because they were already school leaders prior to participating in a SVI. These were students that were captains of sports teams, sat on the school council, and organized school events outside of the SVI. Only two teachers/principals out of the twelve schools we visited explained that they intentionally chosen a mixture of students, i.e. balancing the group with those that were academically strong, athletically inclined, and with leadership potential but lacking opportunity. There is a real opportunity for schools to move in the direction of finding more average students who do not get as many opportunities to step into leadership roles. Students that were given leadership opportunities for the first time indicated an increase in self-confidence and noticed that their peers and teachers began to have higher expectations for them.

The third observation was centered on the SVI brand recognition. When asked to reflect on their experiences participating in SVI in their schools, brand recognition was based on project type, followed by participant group. When participants were asked to reflect on their experiences, those who participated in StAR projects had the most brand recognition, followed by *SpeakUp* Projects and *SpeakUp* in a Box. This means those that participated in StAR projects were able to recall exact details on how the project started, who approached whom (principal approaching the teacher, or the teacher approaching the principal), and specific challenges in implementations. Those that participated in the *SpeakUp* grant or *SpeakUp* in a

Box had difficulty making a distinction between their SVI project and general use of students' voices in other school initiatives, such as the school climate survey where staff surveyed students for their opinions. For the participant group breakdown, teachers had the strongest brand recognition, irrespective of the project type, followed by students then principals. This could be because teachers served as the liaison and project managers of the SVI project group, and were accountable to both the principal and the students.

The most important takeaway from these observations is that when students were given the opportunity to step into leadership roles, whether specifically through speaking up or by contributing through their own abilities, their confidence level increased. Furthermore, students participating in projects that involved further opportunities to share their work with their school and external community had a greater understanding of the SVI and felt most confident to self-identity as 'change-makers', or as change initiators. When students could situate their work within the broader context of Ontario's education system or social issues they had more nuanced experiences and opportunities to grow.

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APPENDIX

A. Focus groups and interview questions

Focus group questions for students

Personal experiences

1. How did you first get involved with SVI in your school?
Probes:
 - How did you find out about SVI?
 - How did you choose the student voice initiative?
2. Tell me about your experiences participating in the SVI in your school?
Probes:
 - Barriers/challenges to implementing the project?
 - Student or teacher led?
3. Did you learn any new skills or improve on existing ones as a result of your participation in SVI in our school?
Probe:
 - Leadership, communication, teamwork
4. Has your participation in SVI opened up any new opportunities for you?
Follow up questions:
 - Opportunities to participate in school decisions?
5. Has your participation in SVI empowered you to get involved in your community as a leader?
Follow up question:
 - Would you consider yourself a “changemaker”?

Partnership questions

6. What did you learn about student/teacher partnerships?
7. What did you learn about your school?
8. Do you feel empowered to speak your mind in your school?

Recommendations

9. What advice would you offer to a group of students considering starting a student voice initiative in their school?
Follow up:
 - What advice would you offer to teachers and principals?

ONE-ON-ONE INTERVIEW QUESTIONS FOR PRINCIPALS

1. *How many years in total have you worked as a principal?*
2. *How many years have you worked as a principal in your current school?*
(note: if the principal is new at the school, question 3 will be asked?)
3. *Was there an active student voice initiative in the school when you arrived?*

Personal experiences

1. How did you first get involved with SVI?
2. What were some of your experiences participating in Student Voice?
3. What did you learn about your school?

Partnerships

4. What did you learn about student/teacher partnerships?
5. When students offer their opinions and ideas, how does it change what you do as an administrator?

Follow up:

- a. How do you move from hearing what students are saying to listening to students' voices?
- b. Did you make any changes in your practice as a result of participating in Student Voice?

Making Connections to OELF, SIP, and BIP

6. How do you make connections with OELF?
Follow up:
 - a. How do you make connections with your SIP and BIP?
 - b. Could you give me an example?

Recommendations

7. What are your recommendations regarding effective practice for student/teacher partnerships?
8. What advice would you offer to principals considering participating in Student Voice?
Probe:
- how about students and teachers?

ONE-ON-ONE INTERVIEW QUESTIONS FOR TEACHERS

Personal experiences

1. How did you get involved with SVI?
2. What were some of your experiences participating in Student Voice?
3. What were some barriers or challenges that you faced implementing the project?
4. What did you learn about your school?

Student/Teacher Partnerships

5. What did you learn about student/teacher partnerships?
6. Has this partnership enhanced the academic experience for participating students?
7. When students offer their opinions and ideas, how does it change what you do as an educator?

Recommendations

8. What are your recommendations regarding effective practice for student/teacher partnerships?
9. What advice would you offer to teachers, students and principals considering participating in Student Voice?

B. Participant Information Letter

INFORMATION LETTER FOR PRINCIPALS

Tuesday, November 4, 2014

Dear Principal

My name is Anna Meliksetyan and I am a researcher studying the experiences of principals that have participated in various SVI in their schools, on behalf of OPC, CPCO and ADFO. I am interested in gathering feedback from principals regarding their experiences participating in *Speak Up in a box*, *Students as Researchers*, and *Speak Up grant*. I am seeking principals' ideas on ways to reach every student, access student voice and meaningfully involve students in their learning. I will also gather input from students and teachers, seeking their recommendations regarding effective student-teacher collaborative practice, and their experiences following their involvement in the SVI.

Through funding from the Ontario Ministry of Education, collaboratively the OPC, CPCO and ADFO will develop Student Engagement/Student Voice training modules for school leaders, which highlight effective student-teacher collaborative practice. The modules will demonstrate effective ways for principals and teachers to access the voice of all students, and meaningfully involve all students in decisions that impact them directly.

The External Research Review Committee of the [school board name] has granted approval of this study.

In the months of September-November 2014, principals involved in the SVI will be asked to participate in a one-on-one interview with the principal researcher, which will be audiotaped. This would occur during the school day and last approximately 20 minutes. The scheduling will be based on your availability to minimize interference with daily routines, and will take place in your school. The interview will include questions about your experiences participating in SVI, advice for other principals considering getting involved in SVI, and recommendations regarding effective ways to access the voice of all students.

Participation in this study is voluntary and you may withdraw from the research at any time without giving a reason and with no adverse consequences, even after you have participated in the one-on-one interview. All information collected will be strictly confidential and will only be viewed by principal researcher. After all data has been collected from principals across Ontario, your responses will be analyzed as an aggregate with all other principals' responses participating in the study. Individual names, schools, and responses will not be identified in the final report.

Please indicate on the attached consent form whether you agree to participate in this study. Your cooperation will be very much appreciated. Contact me at meliksetyan.anna@gmail.com if you have further questions.

Sincerely

Anna Meliksetyan, Researcher
Phone: (647) 244-2177
Email: meliksetyan.anna@gmail.com

INFORMATION LETTER FOR STUDENTS AND PARENTS

Tuesday, November 4, 2014

Dear Parent or Guardian:

My name is Anna Meliksetyan and I am a researcher at the studying the experiences of students that have participated in various SVI in their schools. I am interested in gathering feedback from students regarding their experiences participating in *Speak Up in a box*, *Students as Researchers*, and *Speak Up grant*, and seeking their recommendations regarding effective student-teacher collaborative practice. I will also gather input from principals and teachers regarding their ideas on ways to reach every student, access student voice and meaningfully involve students in their learning.

Through funding from the Ontario Ministry of Education, collaboratively the OPC, CPCO and ADFO will develop a Student Engagement/Student Voice training modules for school leaders, which highlight effective student-teacher collaborative practice. The modules will demonstrate effective ways for principals and teachers to access the voice of all students, and meaningfully involve all students in decisions that impact them directly.

The External Research Review Committee of the [school board name] has granted approval of this study. Principal [name of principal] has also given permission for this study to be carried out in your son/daughter's school

In the months of September-November 2014, your son/daughter will be asked to participate in a focus group interview with 4-5 other students, which will be videotaped. This would occur during the school day and last approximately 30 minutes. The scheduling will be at the teacher's convenience to minimize interference with daily routines. For focus groups that take place during the lunch hour, students will be provided with a complementary pizza lunch as a token of appreciation for their participation. The focus group will include questions about his/her experiences participating in SVI, advice for other students considering getting involved in SVI, and recommendations regarding effective student-teacher collaborative practice.

Participation in this study is voluntary and will not affect your son/daughter's attendance in class or his/her evaluation by the school. Study results will not appear in any school records. He/she may withdraw from the research at any time without giving a reason and with no adverse consequences, even after they have participated in the focus group interview. All information collected will be strictly confidential. After all data has been collected, the students will not be identified individually.

Please indicate on the attached for whether you permit your son/daughter to take part in this study. Your cooperation will be very much appreciated. Contact me at meliksetyan.anna@gmail.com if you have further questions.

Sincerely

Anna Meliksetyan, Researcher
Phone: (647) 244-2177
Email: meliksetyan.anna@gmail.com

INFORMATION LETTER FOR TEACHERS

Tuesday, November 4, 2014

Dear Teacher,

My name is Anna Meliksetyan and I am a researcher studying the experiences of teachers that have participated in various SVI in their schools, on behalf of OPC, CPCO and ADFO. I am interested in gathering feedback from teachers regarding their experiences participating in *Speak Up in a Box*, *Students as Researchers*, and *Speak Up grant*. I am seeking their ideas, along with those of the principals in their schools, on ways to reach every student, access student voice and meaningfully involve students in their learning. I will also gather input from students seeking their recommendations regarding effective student-teacher collaborative practice, and their experiences following their involvement in the SVI.

Through funding from the Ontario Ministry of Education, collaboratively the OPC, CPCO and ADFO will develop Student Engagement/Student Voice training modules for school leaders, which highlight effective student-teacher collaborative practice. The modules will demonstrate effective ways for principals and teachers to access the voice of all students, and meaningfully involve all students in decisions that impact them directly.

The External Research Review Committee of the [school board name] has granted approval of this study. Principal [name of principal] has also given permission for this study to be carried out in your son/daughter's school

In the months of September-November 2014, teachers involved in the SVI will be asked to complete an online survey, lasting approximately 15 minutes. The survey will include questions about your experiences participating in SVI, advice for other teachers and principals considering getting involved in SVI, recommendations regarding effective ways to access the voice of all students, and teacher-student collaborative practice.

Participation in this study is voluntary, and your responses will remain anonymous. You may withdraw from the research at any time without giving a reason and with no adverse consequences, even after you have completed the survey. All information collected will be strictly confidential and will only be viewed by principal researcher. After all data has been collected from teachers across Ontario, your responses will be analyzed as an aggregate with all other teachers' responses participating in the study. Individual names, schools, and responses will not be identified in the final report.

The link to the survey will be sent to your board email at the end of November 2014.

Your cooperation will be very much appreciated. Contact me at meliksetyan.anna@gmail.com if you have further questions.

Sincerely

Anna Meliksetyan, Researcher
Phone: (647) 244-2177
Email: meliksetyan.anna@gmail.com

C. Participant Consent Form

PRINCIPAL RESEARCH AND TEACHER CONSENT FORM

I have read and understood the request for me to participate in the study of *Student Engagement/Student Voice Modules for School Leaders: Case study on effective ways to access students' voices through the Student Voice initiative*. I have reviewed the information provided and ...

YES, I _____ agree
(Please write your first name, last name)

- a) to participate in the one-on-one interview
- b) to be audio-taped during the one-on-one interview

NO, I _____ do **NOT** agree
(Please write your first name, last name)

- a) to participate in the one-on-one interview
- b) to be audio-taped during the one-on-one interview

Name of Participant (*please print*) _____

Signature of Participant _____ Date: _____

Please return this form, signed and dated, to the researcher during the one-on-one interview. Retain the information letter on page 1 for your personal record.

If you have any further questions, contact me at meliksetyan.anna@gmail.com

PARENTAL/GUARDIAN RESEARCH CONSENT FORM

I have read and understood the request for my son/daughter to participate in the study of *Student Engagement/Student Voice Modules for School Leaders: Case study on effective ways to access students voices through the Student Voice initiative*. I have discussed the information provided with my child and ...

YES, I give permission for _____
(first name, last name of son/daughter)

- c) to participate in the focus group interview
- d) for him/her to be audio-taped during the focus group interview

NO, I do **not** give permission for _____
(first name, last name of son/daughter)

- c) to participate in the focus group interview
- d) for him/her to be audio-taped during the focus group interview

Name of Parent/Guardian (*please print*) _____

Signature of Parent/Guardian _____ Date: _____

or

Signature of Student (if 18 or older) _____ Date: _____

Please return this form, signed and dated, to the researcher during the focus group. Retain the information letter on page 1 for your personal record.

If you have any further questions, contact me at meliksetyan.anna@gmail.com