A Systematic Review of Literature on Student Voice and Agency in Middle Grade Contexts

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Abstract: This systematic review analyzes the research literature on student voice and agency in the middle grades, focusing on middle-level schools, culture, and learning environments. The idea of student voice and agency was taken up as collaborative decision-making and/or student feedback on issues related to school and pedagogy. After a comprehensive search for peer-reviewed research (2015–2024), an article review framework was developed to determine how, where, and why student voices and agency were engaged in the middle grades. Three themes characterized the research literature: (1) passive student voice and agency: researcher-driven studies to gain understanding; (2) active student voice and agency: partnering with students to improve their learning experiences; and (3) activating the inner voice and agency: helping students to reflect on their own learning. The research on student voice and agency provided information that directly and indirectly benefited students. The literature related to passive student voice and agency tended to be indirect, while active student voice and agency and activating students' inner voice and agency tended to provide tangible and observable student benefits. While the studies were responsive to different aspects of young adolescent development and included foci on students' social/emotional development and identity, other areas were lacking—including culturally responsive teaching, international perspectives, and sense of self/peer perceptions.

Keywords: middle grades schools; middle grades classrooms; learning environment; young adolescent voice; student voice; co-research with students; partnering with students; student decision-making; student agency

1. Introduction

In this article, we present a systematic review (SR) of the research literature related to "student voice and agency" in the middle grades. We begin by describing the impetus for this SR and then look closely at how this concept has been taken up and realized, broadly and particularly, in the literature; in our discussion, we include why student voice and agency are important for students in the middle grades. We explain how we used the tenets of the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) to guide the methods for and descriptions of our search strategies [1]. Following that, we describe the research-based framework we built to guide our searches and help focus our readings of the articles we located. We present our findings and discuss what such findings mean for the future of middle level research on student voice and agency.

The impetus for a review of the literature on student voice and agency that is situated in middle grades contexts was inspired by a new research agenda for the middle grades [2]. The purpose of the agenda was to create a series of guiding research questions around key topics of interest to educational scholars. This new research agenda (2024) was created in collaboration with over 40 members of the Middle Level Educational Research

(MLER) Special Interest Group (part of the American Education Research Association). This new agenda is built on research and topics from the previous *MLER SIG Research Agenda* [3] and includes additional categories of study (i.e., Food and/or Housing Insecurity; Intersectionality; Neurodiversity; Preparing Equity-Oriented, Antiracist, Culturally Sustaining Educators).

One of the eight overarching topics for the new research agenda included "Middle Level Schools, Culture, and Learning Environment". A subset of this topic was "Student Voice and Agency". After locating and reviewing 21 articles related to this area, we created research questions to guide scholars interested in pursuing student voice and agency studies in the middle grade years. However, soon thereafter, we realized that while including students' voices and agency in different ways was important, the concepts of "voice" and "agency" seemed underutilized and undertheorized. Engaging in this SR provided an opportunity to dig deeper into how student voice and agency have been enacted and realized in the middle-level research literature. We aimed to understand the current state of scholarship on student voice and agency and articulate areas of need regarding research and practice. Thus, we asked the following questions of the literature in order to guide our review: What are the qualities of scholarship related to student voice and agency in the middle grades? In what ways, if at all, does the research on student voice and agency address the unique characteristics of middle grade students?

1.1. Student Voice and Agency and Why It Matters in the Middle Grades

We begin this section by describing how the terms "student voice" and "student agency" have been conceptualized and used in the literature. We then provide a history of these two somewhat fraught terms and of what we determine to be the most accurate, research-based working definition for our literature review. We first focus on the term "student voice", and then turn to the term "student agency" in the following section.

The term "student voice" has a history of inconsistent definitions. The idea of student voice can include varying levels of student involvement in decision-making [4,5], school reform [6–8], and policy changes [9–11]. The term is also problematic in that it has been taken up in different ways by different researchers. For example, some articles identified voice as classroom talk [12–14] or the literal "lifting" of voices to engage in critical conversations [15]. In other articles, student voice meant listening to and acting upon students' opinions and ideas in relation to school policy [16]. While all of the studies shed an important light on middle grade students, we wondered about the *idea* of voice in these contexts. Was student choice an important factor? What about decision-making? We were not alone in our confusion over definitions: a research team examining literature reviews around student voice found that "each of the literature reviews acknowledge a range of definitions…making it difficult to categorize student voice practices" [17] (p. 709). Fortunately for us, Holquist et al. [17] took up this problem.

After realizing the different and sometimes competing definitions of "student voice," Holquist et al. [17] decided to engage in a systematic review of all scholarship on student voice situated at the middle and high school levels; from that review, they determined core components and elements of student voice (see the next section for a description of how we used these in our own systematic review). The effect of those efforts led to a framework that provided "ways to get inside the idea of student voice to understand how students, teachers, school administrators, and academic scholars can envision and design student voice practices" [17] (p. 732). Their extensive work on student voice also provided them with a foundation for a working definition, articulated in a recent co-authored chapter in which they asserted, "we define student voice practices as strategies that invite student feedback on, input into, or collaborative decision-making about educational planning, delivery, assessment, or reform" [18] (Introduction, para. 2).

This overarching and all-encompassing definition aligned with our reading of student voice and provided the understanding of student voice that we used for our study: student voice was understood as collaborative decision-making and/or student feedback on issues

related to school and pedagogy. This definition of student voice aligns with multiple characteristics within *The Successful Middle School* framework [19]. In particular, the first characteristic—"Educators respect and value young adolescents"—suggests that educators should "demonstrate that they value their students by listening intensively to their students' words...in order to actively respond to their needs" [19] (p. 12). Student voice is also noted under the theme of leadership and organization, wherein it is recommended that organizational decisions be guided by a "shared vision" among all stakeholders [19]. Students are one stakeholder group specifically mentioned within this characteristic, supporting the idea that their voice should be featured in decisions regarding school practices and policies, as well as in school mission and vision statements. This characteristic is also closely aligned with student agency, which is described and defined next.

The concept of "student agency" is often discussed in conjunction with "student voice" in academic research. It refers to students' ability to purposefully influence their own learning experiences and environment [20–23]. Student agency is closely linked to the important role of students in decision-making and expressing their opinions. It is imperative to involve student voices in educational decision-making processes to promote student agency, a fact that is recognized as essential in *The Successful Middle School* framework [19].

Holquist et al.'s [17] comprehensive review of student voice in secondary contexts created a strong background of information, and we are grateful for their work as it helps to situate ours. What is still missing is a comprehensive literature review of ways that student voice and agency are recognized and realized exclusively in middle grade contexts.

In the next section, we describe how we leaned on the work of previous literature reviews to extract studies that occurred in middle grade contexts. There were fewer than one might imagine. For example, after a careful review of the references from Holquist et al.'s [17] extensive literature review, their final list of 70 research studies on student voice and agency yielded only six middle grade focused studies, and two of those were outside of our 2015–2024 range (see Section 2 for details). Most of the research literature on student voice and agency was situated in secondary schools, mainly in high schools.

1.2. Why Student Voice and Agency Matters in Middle School

Young adolescents have distinct characteristics that, in successful middle grade classrooms and schools, inform and drive instruction and school policy [19]. One of these key features includes a desire for autonomy and decision-making [24]: young adolescents should have agency—meaning playing a role in what they learn and the environment in which that learning occurs [25]. As Bishop and Harrison [19] point out, "placing students in the driver's seat [responds to] young adolescents' need for increased autonomy and can positively influence student engagement and achievement" (p. 36). Further, as Ryan and Patrick [25] found, "being in an environment where students' ideas and efforts are respected...boosts students' confidence in their ability to learn" (p. 455). A concept of voice that includes collaborative decision-making speaks to these distinct characteristics of young adolescents and underscores the need for students to have opportunities to have a say in what and how they learn. This includes opening up opportunities for students to help make decisions about classroom curricula and school policy [19].

Middle grade contexts that are responsive to students' voices invite them to take leadership roles and make decisions about how they spend their time in school [26]. Further, as citizens in a democratic nation, students *should* have a voice in their school experiences [27,28], and responsive adult leadership in the middle grades should include opportunities for students to share that leadership and help make decisions [28] that directly affect their lives. Collaborating in ways that benefit students and their learning means that students are shown respect for their ideas and efforts [19]. We know that middle grade students can engage in critical and creative thinking [19] and that such qualities can enhance middle grade learning environments. Thus, as we examine student voice and agency in this SR, we are especially attentive to the important idea of students engaging in meaningful decision making about their own learning and learning contexts.

2. Materials and Methods

The PRISMA statement [29] helped guide the conduct and reporting of our search strategies. This statement and its extensions were designed to provide an "evidence-based, minimum set of recommendations designed primarily to encourage transparent and complete reporting of SRs" (p. 1), as well as create a set of common elements that can and should be used in conducting and reporting SRs. We used the 16-item PRISMA-S checklist [30] as a guide to help make transparent the underlying processes of our article collection and subsequent analyses.

2.1. Collection Guidelines for Our Systematic Review

We used a wide range of databases to locate studies on student voice and agency, as "no single database. . .is able to provide a complete and accurate list" [30] (p. 5). Our systematic review team of four used EBSCOhost, ERIC, Academic Search Complete, Science Direct, Google Scholar, ProQuest, JSTOR, and Web of Science databases. Each team member was responsible for one or more of these databases, and we also used conference proceedings to locate research-in-progress related to student voice and agency in the middle grades. For example, Author 4, Tang, shared information on a symposium (Empowering Student Voice in Educational Practice) held during the American Educational Research Association conference (2024). Author 1, Schaefer, reached out to the lead author of this symposium [31] to gain information on additional studies and data. Data from that symposium led us to the article by Holquist et al. [17], which in turn provided us with two additional studies to add to our collection and connected us with a recent chapter publication [18] that provided a foundation for our working definition of student voice and agency.

2.2. Phase I: Terms and Parameters for Searches

We engaged in two iterations of formal searches—one in the summer of 2023 and another in the summer of 2024. For our first search on student voice and agency, the one undertaken for the purposes of adding to a middle grade research agenda, we used the terms "Middle School" OR "Middle Grades" OR "Middle Level" OR "Young Adolescent" AND "Student Voice" OR "Discussion" OR "Agency" OR "Classroom Conversation." We limited the scope of articles reviewed to empirical, peer-reviewed journal articles from 2015–2023. Twenty-one articles were located.

In our second search, we added 2024 to our scope, and, with our enhanced understanding of student voice and agency, included the terms "student decision making" and "student participation in decision-making" [17]. As recent literature reviews have shown, the term "student voice and agency" connoted more than physical intonation: it should have an element of decision-making with the idea of change as aspirational [20,21,32]. A key aspect of this search that differentiated it from other literature reviews on student voice and agency was its exclusive emphasis on middle grade learning environments. Holquist et al., [17] , for example, looked at student voice in secondary school contexts. Only 6 of the 70 studies they examined were specifically located in middle grade contexts. In addition to using databases for our searches, we directly consulted three major middle grade publications: *Middle Grades Review*, *Middle School Journal*, and *Research in Middle Level Education*. We searched the journal archives for research articles on student voice and agency. We also targeted the reference pages of select literature reviews (e.g., [5,17,33] to locate any additional articles on student voice and agency in middle grade contexts. In 2023, our search yielded 21 studies. In 2024, we located 45 additional sources. In sum, it was helpful to use multiple strategies to locate articles on student voice and agency that were germane to the overarching theme of our focus, "Middle Level Schools, Classroom Culture, and Learning Environment".

2.3. Phase II: Create a Review Framework for Each Article

We had 66 articles to review among our team of four. Each author took 15 to 18 articles to read and analyze—but we needed consistent ways to read them. For that, we

developed a Framework for Literature Evaluation (see Appendix A). The framework began with three questions designed to ensure that the article met our parameters: because we were reviewing the research literature, we did not include essays or practitioner pieces. We also made sure that the study was focused on young adolescents and their learning environments. The framework then asked 17 questions of each research article. The first seven questions (setting; focus; intent; access; representativeness; roles; responsiveness) were directly taken from findings from Holquist et al.'s [17] review and study of student voice (pp. 720–721). We used each of these seven facets as a way to extract the quality and nature of the voice and agency work being enacted in the study. For question eight, we drew from the recent work of Stickney and Ventura [5] to help us gauge levels of impact and involvement related to student voice and agency (e.g., Transformative, Symbolic, Consultative). The next seven questions (9–15) directly addressed the unique characteristics of middle grade children [19]. For example, we looked to see if and how articles considered ideas of equity and access, cultural responsiveness, tenets of young adolescent development, youth adolescent identity, sense of self and peers, social and emotional development, and international perspectives. The framework ended with a question about research methodology followed by an invitation to provide any additional comments, questions, or observations.

In order to test-run the framework, the research team randomly selected and reviewed 1 of the 66 research studies using a draft of the framework. We then met to negotiate understandings of the different aspects of the framework and suggested edits and additions. After all four authors agreed to each area of the framework, we divided the articles for review.

Unfortunately, almost half of our total collection of research articles (n = 66) on student voice and agency in middle grade contexts were eliminated from consideration. This included five articles that were literature reviews related to student voice and agency, but either focused on student voice and agency in general, or on voice related to a specific subject area (i.e., science). Other articles were eliminated because, on closer reading, they were essays, reports, or practitioner pieces (n = 8). Relatedly, youth organizing research or Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) was not included in our study unless the action research was related to middle grade students' school and/or classroom learning environments (n = 1). We excluded studies of secondary schools if there was not a focus on students in the middle grades and their unique characteristics as defined by The Successful Middle School [19] (n = 5), or if the study's perspectives on voice and agency focused on middle grade administrators and/or teachers (n = 5). Three research studies were eliminated because they were not inclusive of voice and agency and two were removed as duplicates. From our original cache of 66 articles, we were left with 37.

3. Results

We worked closely with the 37 articles, looking across the literature review framework for broad trends and characteristics, but we also looked closely at each article to discern *where*, *how*, and *why* student voice and agency was being used. Looking at student voice and agency in these ways provided a deductive framework that helped us create categories: the table below, Table 1, reflects these categories of student voice and agency found in our literature review.

After examining the categories comprising ways that student voice and agency were taken up in the literature, we created three overarching themes: (1) Passive Student Voice and Agency: Researcher-Driven Studies to Gain Understandings; (2) Active Student Voice and Agency: Partnering with Students to Improve their Learning Experiences; and (3) Activating the Inner Voice and Agency: Helping Students Reflect on their Own Learning. Taken together, as seen in Table 2, we can see the state of student voice in middle grade contexts, 2015–2024.

Table 1. Where, How, and Why Student Voice and Agency was Used.

Context	N. Articles	Sample Citation
Building	11	Coffey & Fulton, 2018 [34]
Content Classrooms	19	Braden et al., 2016 [35]
Elective Classrooms	04	Shilcutt et al., 2023 [36]
Student Surveys	03	Hassard et al., 2024 [37]
Focus/Intent	N. Articles	Sample Citation
Improve School Climate	06	Shriberg et al., 2017 [38]
Improve Teaching	05	Downes et al., 2017 [39]
Promote Self-Regulation	04	Hosek et al., 2024 [40]
Social Action Projects	09	DeMink-Carthew, 2018 [41]
Solicit Student Views	13	Brion-Meisels, 2015 [42]

Table 2. Overarching Themes in the Literature on Student Voice and Agency in the Middle Grades.

Theme	N. Articles	Sample Citation
Passive Student Voice and Agency	17	Anderson et al., 2019 [43]
Active Student Voice and Agency	15	Biddle & Mitra, 2015 [44]
Activating the Inner Voice and Agency	05	Davis & Hall, 2020 [15]

Findings from our literature review framework gave us a very broad overview of the ways that student voice and agency in the middle grades were invited, cultivated, analyzed and used within and across many topics and contexts. Using these findings to explore our themes helped us address our research questions: What are the qualities of scholarship related to middle grade students and voice? In what ways, if at all, does the research on student voice and agency address the unique characteristics of middle grade students?

3.1. Passive Student Voice and Agency: Researcher-Driven Studies to Gain Understandings

Many of the articles we collected (46%) were represented by this theme. We used the word "passive" to make it clear that while these studies solicited student feedback, a component of our definition of student voice and agency [18], the *collaborative* aspect—a feature that is more characteristic of the next set of articles wherein students "actively" engage in projects, problem-solving, and social action to improve or impact something in their learning environment—was not prevalent. The insights gained from "passive" student voice and agency studies, however, were crucial and important for helping us understand middle grade students' perspectives, needs, and desires.

A common feature of the articles related to this theme was the researchers' centering of student voice and agency in order to gain insights into students' perspectives, perceptions, and knowledge. Stickney and Ventura [5], in an effort to help educators conceptualize the ways that the term "student voice and agency" was taken up in the literature, created three descriptions: "Consultation student voice and agency" (p. 15) represented efforts to gain students' perspectives but usually without further involvement. "Symbolic student voice and agency" reflected groups such as student councils that usually planned social events. "Transformative student voice and agency" referred to practices wherein students "explore a school-based concern and participate in policy discussions with adults to make actual change, showing authentic and long-term student engagement" (p. 16). In this third level, students were active partners in making consequential decisions about their learning environments. As seen in Table 3 below, students' roles in passive student voice and agency research were generally described as "consultative" (n = 20) or "symbolic" (n = 5).

Table 3. Level of Student Voice Displayed.

Theme	N. Articles	Sample Citation
Transformative	12	Voight, 2015 [16]
Consultative	20	Swain et al., 2018 [45]
Symbolic	05	Nelson, 2022 [46]

It is important to note, however, that the *topics* of research often were important to young adolescents, and their voices drove the answers to research questions. Young adolescents shared their perspectives with researchers about a variety of issues, including ways that they experienced peer relationships [47,48], standardized tests [45], leaders and leadership [49], and tutoring [48]. Horn [50] captured middle grade students' experiences in a restructured Title I school, while Romero and O'Malley [51] secured the voices of over 20,000 Latinx students in California to see how school climate figured in their learning. As seen in Table 4 below, the intent and focus of many studies was to gain an understanding of students' perspectives, and that focus characterized this theme. Please see the table below for a summary of these trends.

Table 4. Seven Facets of Research and Range of Consideration.

Facet	Highly	Somewhat	Total Considered
Culturally Responsive Pedagogy	08	02	10
Equity and Access	12	06	18
International Perspectives	05	00	05
Sense of Self/Peers	11	04	15
Social/Emotional Development	11	10	21
Young Adolescent Development	12	25	37
Young Adolescent Identity	05	21	26

Researchers found middle grade students' views to be insightful and important. For example, Lavery and Coffey [49] gained students' perspectives on leadership and found that "middle school students have very firm views about what leadership is and is not" (p. 160), also realizing that students' conceptions of leadership "aligned with the work of Conant and Norgaard (2012) who contend that good leaders have particular dispositions" (p. 160). The alignment of students' and researchers' conceptions of leadership led the authors to conclude, "youth may well have a definite sense of what good leadership entails" [49] (p. 162).

Hassard et al. [37] had a similar experience when they realized student voice could provide evidence of program reforms and initiatives. Their work "gives voice to young adolescents...[and the] knowledge gained from this research will inform schools and education systems to enable students' transition and build confidence regarding the impact of the reform" [37] (pp. 17–18).

Leaning on students' voices for research inquiries can yield answers to important questions, such as Braden et al.'s [35] quest for ways to make science classrooms more responsive and Netcoh's [52] examination of how to help students negotiate choice in personalized learning classes. Student voices helped Yoon [22] answer her question about what educators can do to invite more English learners' voices into the middle grade classroom, as well as helped Brion-Meisels [42] figure out what learning supports work in middle grade classrooms. Student voices helped Phillips et al. [53] determine why middle grade students started to increasingly dislike physical education, and gave Anderson et al. [43] insights into why students' academic motivation and engagement tended to decline in middle school. All of these researchers relied on students' views, perspectives, and ideas to address and answer their research questions.

One article that did not fit neatly under this theme was "Tutoring support and student voice in middle school" [48]. This study recruited student voices in order to gain their

perspectives: a poll was created by the researchers that "invited the expression of student voice as input to their middle school's continuous improvement plan" [48] (p. 40). The poll was "modified and reexamined by students" [48] (p. 45), and the topic of "student tutoring" was highlighted by students as important. The topic of student tutoring, therefore, became the focus of research and an important part of school improvement. While the authors rightly claimed that "Listening to student voice can provide insights about ways to improve school achievement," [48] (p. 59), the improvement itself, which would have been "transformative" (see Table 3) and given us a sense of how students' voices were actualized in their learning environments, was not the subject of this article. The active engagement of students in the research topic for school improvement, however, was important. We raise this particular article as one that could be categorized either here or under the next theme, which highlights the "active" and collaborative component of student voice and agency.

3.2. Active Student Voice and Agency: Partnering with Students to Improve Their Learning Experiences

The articles collected under the theme of "active student voice and agency" comprised 40% of our research studies. In this portion of the literature, students were active participants in research or activities designed to improve teaching, improve learning, solve problems in the school, create social action projects, or improve the school environment. While there were different levels of student voice and agency included in these activities (i.e., all students, some students, a representative sample), this theme captures, in its most complete sense, the ethos of the definition of student voice and agency: not only are students providing input, but they also are active and collaborative partners and, in many cases, decision-makers. Furthermore, as we have seen in the "passive student voice agency" theme, students in the middle grades have important knowledge and the ability to think critically and creatively. Affording students spaces where they can make decisions, experience respect for their ideas and efforts, and feel a sense of autonomy helps build the kinds of learning spaces that welcome and honor their unique needs and characteristics.

When middle grade students are engaged as partners in the quest to improve classroom learning experiences and school environments, they can provide valuable direction. For example, when students are invited to voice their knowledge, they can partner with teachers in ways that help teachers to develop skills and abilities to be more responsive to students [54,55], as well as support important school and community initiatives [38,44]. Students' voiced knowledge can also be used to improve the classroom learning environment. For example, Patterson [56] examined the dialogic interactions in group work and made these visible to students, making it possible for middle grade students to understand how to address and transform inequities in collaborative group spaces. Students' voiced knowledge may also support and extend teachers' understandings of technology. As Downes et al. [39] suggested, "Many teachers quickly learn that their students often have key knowledge about technology and can play new and critical roles in helping technology-rich classrooms run more effectively," (p. 195), and many of the teachers engaged in Downes et al.'s [39] action research projects worked with their middle grade students to "demonstrate how meaningful and ambitious student involvement can help teachers navigate the novel and rapidly shifting landscape of technology integration" (p. 211). Such work can benefit both students and teachers while fostering mutual respect.

Partnerships with students that included action research [12,23,39,41,46] often led to tangible and beneficial experiences for middle grade students and their teachers. For example, in Rector-Aranda and Raider-Roth's [23] action research study of students exercising voice and agency in digitally simulated court cases, students actively worked on developing their character voice and talked about their challenges, in the real world, "with expressing their personal voices [and referred to] apprehensions about their abilities and shyness, as well as how they overcame these challenges" (p. 6) to become active, vocal participants in other school contexts. In other action research, students gained experiences using photovoice to understand how to meaningfully participate in social action and criti-

cal dialogue [12]; in another study, students worked with their teachers as "pedagogical partners" [46] to improve curriculum so that it was more responsive to their needs and interests. Youth partnership with a teacher in a dance club helped students take ownership of not only the learning environment, but of the curriculum as well [36].

Sometimes, action research projects with students resulted in benefits for the greater good. For example, DeMink-Carthew [41] worked with four middle school student teachers and their middle grade students to engage in a social action project. The 104 students who participated voiced their personal, community, and world concerns, and after analyzing these, student teachers and their students decided to take up the question, "How can we promote a positive school culture in our school community?" [41] (p. 8). Each student teacher and their homeroom students planned different ways to improve their school, including a spirit week, teacher appreciation week, and community day. Although not all of the students' ideas were implemented, students appreciated that "they had a voice in the experience" [41] (p. 12) and were respected for their ideas.

Echoes of benefits for the greater good also characterized the Participatory Action Research (PAR) projects enacted in schools, such as Voight's [16] study of how students identified problems and influenced some school policies, and Coffey and Fulton's [34] project around critical service-learning. In Renick and Reich's [57] PAR study, a group of students engaged in qualitative research with the purpose of gaining insights into their peers' post-COVID school environment experience. This co-research study led, amazingly, to this result: "The partnership built with Food and Nutrition Services allowed the students' data to be used for school meal decision-making and the principal felt strongly that the...project was the reason" [57] (p. 20). Although some might not consider school lunch a "transformative" experience, the topic mattered deeply to students; the research was driven by their passion and interest, and the school benefited directly from their efforts.

3.3. Activating the Inner Voice and Agency: Helping Students Reflect on Their Own Learning

This smaller set of articles (14%) emphasizes investigations into students' self-knowledge and self-understanding—not only of their academic learning, but also of themselves, including their identities, hopes, and dreams. Such work may address middle grade students' desire for autonomy and build on their growing abilities to think metacognitively and critically. In other words, because these studies are researcher-driven but student-experienced, this collection combines active and passive notions of student voice and agency to help students engage in reflective processes.

The emphasis on self-knowledge was evident in studies that engaged middle grade students in understanding their identity construction [58] and their personal experiences of racism [15]. Haag et al. [58] sought to co-research processes of identity construction with five middle level adolescents and found that "adolescents became more aware of those various dimensions [of identity development], thereby getting a better understanding of who they were" (p. 19). Davis and Hall [15] also focused on identity, asking racially diverse middle grade students to explore their inner lives. The study went further: students were encouraged to "use their voices as activists to confront American racism, seek racial identity affirmation, advance racial equality, and question racial oppression" (p. 6). In response, students created poems and engaged in powerful spoken word performances.

Other research encouraged students to gain self-knowledge. In Wilkie and Sullican's [59] study, for example, middle grade students reflected on their math learning: "some students referred to a wish for intrinsic change within themselves to be able to put in more effort to be more confident, to be smarter, and to learn more efficiently" (p. 252). Kim et al. [60] engaged in a case study of three 12-year old students who volunteered to teach younger students. The 12-year-olds deepened their self-knowledge and awareness by engaging in reflective questions about their teaching. Understanding what they did not know yet needed to know in order to be effective teachers provided a space for self-growth and understanding. Finally, Hosek et al.'s [40] study elicited students' understanding of

a design intervention, and in so doing, supported middle grade students' self-regulatory skills and motivation.

4. Discussion

In this SR, we asked the following questions: What are the qualities of scholarship related to middle grade students and voice? In what ways, if at all, does the research on student voice and agency address the unique characteristics of middle grade students?

Research on and with students' voices in the middle grades can provide powerful benefits to the research community in ways that directly and indirectly benefit students. While it was difficult to see the direct benefit to students under our first theme, which was characterized by passive student voice and agency, their topics of scholarship were indeed important for helping to build our knowledge of young adolescents. While these researchers relied on students' views, perspectives, and ideas to address and answer their research questions, we can see that out of the 37 studies, only 11 included student voice and agency in building-wide school community contexts (see Table 1). We see this as both a missed opportunity for practice and a gap in the literature. Students provided researchers with important and crucial information to help answer their research questions. Their ideas and knowledge can provide valuable insights into ways to improve school policy and community.

Additionally, our summary of facets considered in the research (see Table 4) demonstrates that while young adolescent development, including social/emotional development and topics related to identity, were strongly considered in the literature, fewer studies focused on students' sense of self and perception of their peers, and even fewer focused on culturally responsive pedagogies. What can students tell researchers about what matters to them culturally? What can they tell researchers about their perceptions of self and their peers? We know these topics matter deeply to students, and we know that students have sophisticated and important insights into issues. This is also vital to creating a school environment where young adolescents feel valued and respected [19]. Educators (and the researchers who engage with them) model their value of the students in their care by listening to their voices and speaking up for and with them to create equitable learning environments. We need more researcher-driven studies that build on middle grade students' voices to address the need for culturally responsive pedagogies and explore students' sense of self and peer perceptions.

The research literature characterized by active student voice and agency appeared to provide students with direct and transformative benefits. Furthermore, these studies tended to be responsive to different aspects of adolescent development. We were especially struck by the number of studies that took on issues of equity and access and directly addressed students' social/emotional development as well young adolescent identity (see Table 4). Studies that included students in thinking critically about topics such as racial identities and racial inequalities led to powerful and transformative experiences. This was especially evident in the articles included under our third theme, where researchers helped students activate their inner voices to help them reflect on their own learning. A clear need in this third theme, activating the inner voice, is to explore *with* students some characteristics of their inner voices, the processes of their critical and creative thinking, and perhaps why they have a passion for some interests and not others. Such inner-centered co-research with students has the capacity to transform understandings of self *and* others, and in so doing create safe learning spaces for social, emotional, and academic development—a key feature of successful middle schools [19]. Co-research on topics that are underrepresented in the literature on student voice and agency include culturally responsive pedagogies, international perspectives, and sense of self and peer perceptions.

We know that young adolescents have passions and interests that deserve attention and need to be heard—not only in classroom contexts, but in school-building community contexts as well. We have seen that students can provide important knowledge about their own and others' learning. The research literature that engaged students in acting on that

knowledge demonstrated respect for their thinking, their knowledge, and their very selves. Inculcating student voice and agency in this way can lead to better academic outcomes while helping students develop a positive sense of their own and others' identities.

5. Conclusions

As we mentioned at the beginning of this study, there was a need for a comprehensive review of student voice in middle grade contexts. The comprehensive literature review on voice in secondary school contexts undertaken by Holquist et al., [17] yielded only six studies specific to the middle grades. Most of the research on student voice and agency took place in high schools. While research that sought out and included student voice and agency was important in high school contexts, we contend that it is just as important—if not more so—to engage in active student voice and agency research in middle grade contexts.

As researchers who are passionate about middle level education, we were excited to delve into the 37 research articles on student voice and agency exclusive to the middle grades and located within the date range of 2015–2024. We were pleased to see that many of those were research studies that featured young adolescents actively engaging in their own learning experiences [n = 15]. We have seen middle grade students serve as knowledgeable and informed research participants. While passive studies on student voice and agency continue to be important, we would like to see active voice and agency research that builds on those studies. The active components of voice and agency are crucial for young adolescents and can provide a fulcrum for crafting responsive, student-centered spaces for teaching and learning.

Moving forward, we propose working with AMLE to develop criteria for the inclusion of student voice in middle level research, and working with MLER to encourage researchers to include student voice and agency in their research. In this way, advocates for young adolescents would expand to include practitioners and researchers in a more intentional way. As Brinegar et al. [2] assert in their introduction to the MLER SIG Research Agenda, "researchers have the power to define, improve, and reimagine the future of successful middle schools and middle level education for young adolescents" (p. 27).

Research questions on student voice and agency highlighted in the MLER SIG Research Agenda [2] home in on the need for studies that focus on ways that students and educators create "equitable, just, and generative learning spaces" (p. 39) and what such spaces mean for students' motivation and sense of belonging. The Research Agenda features ideas for inquiries that center on the understanding that actively engaging student voice and agency can be powerful ways to improve student learning in middle school. Taken together, this systematic review and the Research Agenda advocate for studies that focus on the following questions: (a) what does student voice and agency look like in successful middle schools?; (b) in what ways, if at all, does active student voice and agency impact one or more of these concepts: motivation, engagement, belonging, achievement, well-being, learning spaces, classroom teaching, or school climate?; (c) what does co-researching with middle grade students look like?; And, (d) how do student demographics figure in student voice and agency?

Additionally, we need research that analyzes the impact of student voice and agency in middle grade contexts and that considers marginalized demographics, language status, academic levels, school attendance, and behavior interventions. Such research also has the added benefit of highlighting the ways that co-researching with middle grade students and providing them with agency and voice in classroom and school environments can enhance teaching and learning opportunities for all. As we have seen in this review, contexts that invite, privilege, and study student voice and agency tend to have positive outcomes. We appreciate the 37 research studies focused on student voice and agency in the middle grades from 2015–2024: we would like to see more studies that feature and build on active student voice and agency in middle level classrooms and schools.

Conceptualization, M.B.S.; Methodology, M.B.S.; Formatting, K.D. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Appendix A. Literature Review Framework

Citation: (please use APA-7)

Is the article a literature review, essay, or practitioner piece? If so, please stop your review and use this link to explain why the piece will not be included in the review.

Does the study include middle school as part of a larger investigation of secondary schools? If yes, does the study consider the unique developmental characteristics of middle grade students? If yes, please include the study in the literature review. If no, please do not answer any more questions and use this link to explain why the piece was eliminated.

Does the study take place outside of the school? Setting is important for our literature review because of the overarching theme of our research: schools, classrooms, and learning environment. If the study takes place *outside* of the school environment (e.g., YPAR community activities unrelated to school, or academic researchers surveying students to understand their perspectives but do not provide feedback to the school) and does *not impact the classroom or other learning environments that students are experiencing*, please discontinue the review and use this link to explain why it was eliminated.

All articles that are eliminated for any of the reasons above, or for another reason not described here, please include in this document.

If the article is a research study situated in the middle grades, please begin answering these questions:

1. Setting: What was the context for this research? (e.g., classroom, student school policy group).
2. Focus: What practice, policy or activity was the inclusion of student voice attempting to target and/or influence? (e.g., schoolwide dress codes or classroom management)
3. Intent: Why was student voice included in this study?
4. Access: What was the extent to which students in the study had the opportunity to participate? (e.g., all students, some students)
5. Representativeness: To what degree was the inclusion of student voice aligned with benefits to students? (e.g., who stood to benefit from the inclusion of student voice?)
6. Roles: What levels of leadership did students experience? (e.g., was it mostly adult-led with students in passive roles, or did they share leadership)
7. Responsiveness: Did students experience change as a result of their voice practices? How? Or, how, if at all, did decision-makers explain to students how their voices contributed to change?
8. What level of student voice was displayed? (Transformative, Symbolic, Consultative)
9. To what extent were ideas of equity and access considered?
10. In what ways, if at all, was this research culturally responsive?
11. How, if at all, were the tenets of young adolescent development considered? (Highly, Somewhat, Not at All)
12. How, if at all, were ideas of young adolescent identity considered? (Highly, Somewhat, Not at All)
13. How, if at all, does the study address students' sense of self (peer perceptions)?
14. How, if at all, does the study address students' social and emotional development?

15. Did the research include, draw from, or display international perspective(s)?
16. What type of research was conducted? (Qual, Quant, MM)
17. Other comments, questions, or noticings?

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