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# Multidimensional Ethical Analysis of the Magic City Acceptance Academy: Giving Voice to Student Perspectives

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This article focuses on the student experience of attending the Magic City Acceptance Academy (MCAA), a unique, public charter school designed to explicitly address the social, emotional, and academic learning needs of LGBTQ students and others who may have experienced disenfranchisement, bullying, and violence in previous school settings. Researchers conducted a focus group with students from MCAA to explore their perceptions of and reflections on their time in attendance at MCAA. Student reflections and comments were analyzed using a multidimensional ethical framework (Shapiro & Gross, 2013; Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2022; Starratt, 1994). Students overwhelmingly expressed positive comments about their experiences at MCAA due to their newfound freedom to be their authentic selves, feelings of mutual respect between teachers and students, and teacher attention to and regard for addressing individual learning, social, and personal needs of students. The multidimensional ethical decision-making framework was applied as an analytical tool in a unique way to reflect upon and present these student voices. Researchers conclude that opening MCAA was a highly ethical endeavor and is an especially unique model for how to build an ethical school. The article contributes to the literature and knowledge base on ethical educational leadership by applying the multidimensional ethical paradigm in a unique way and by providing a poignant example of what an ethical school looks like in practice.

The purpose of this article is to shine a light on student experiences and perceptions of attending the Magic City Acceptance Academy (MCAA), a public charter school with an explicit mission to address the academic and social needs of LGBTQ and other students who have been disenfranchised in previous school settings. This study reports only a portion of findings from a broader, qualitative case study of MCAA, focusing specifically on student voices. Students who participated in the focus group freely expressed their perceptions and experiences at MCAA as overwhelmingly positive and supportive, especially in comparison to experiences in previous school settings.

This article provides a unique contribution to the literature on ethical educational leadership in its presentation of student voice relative to their experiences at MCAA, analyzed through a four-pronged, multidimensional ethical paradigm (Shapiro, 2013; Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2022; Starratt, 1994). Shapiro, Stefkovich and Gross substantially strengthened the construct of a multiple ethical paradigm (Starratt, 1994) by explicating each of the previous ethics (care, critique, justice) and adding a fourth ethic (profession) to develop this highly effective and helpful decision-making framework for school leaders. By working through each of the four ethics, P-12 school leaders can reason through critical aspects of ethical dilemmas with which they are faced daily in any school leadership position.

Typically presented as a decision-making strategy for school leaders (Shapiro, 2013; Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2022), the multidimensional ethical paradigm was uniquely applied in this article as an analytical framework to organize and reflect upon student comments and experiences at MCAA. Hammonds (2018) wrote, “Most studies on school leaders include voices of numerous stakeholders such as teachers, administrators, support staff, and parents or guardians. Few studies, however, provide student perspectives on the actions and practices of school leaders” (p. 100). In this article we do just that, presenting the student voice by focusing on how students perceive their schooling experience at the MCAA through the multiple ethical lenses (Brasof & Mansfield, 2018; Hammonds, 2018; Lyons & Brasof, 2020; Mitra, 2009, 2018; Mitra & Gross, 2009).

### Background and Context

In the fall of 2021, MCAA opened its doors as a unique and innovative public charter school for LGBTQ and LGBTQ-affirming secondary students (i.e., grades 6 through 12) in the southern region of the United States, near Birmingham, Alabama. MCAA (2023) was established through the efforts of the Birmingham AIDS Outreach (BAO) and other organizations supporting educational innovation in the state of Alabama. The goal was to support and inspire students to “embrace education, achieve individual success, and take ownership of their future in a brave, LGBTQ-affirming learning environment” (para. 1). Though all students are welcome, the vision at MCAA was established to “engage students who have dropped out, are not thriving in traditional schools, or are enrolled in homeschool programs” (para. 2).

### Rationale for Establishing the School

A group of key community leaders and stakeholders (*Exploring How the School Environment at the Magic City Acceptance Academy Fosters Community among Formerly Disenfranchised Youth*, under review) drew motivation from recent literature reporting that LGBTQ youth, individuals who identify as non-heteronormative, and other students perceived by their peers as *other* or nonconforming in their school environments, suffer much higher-than-average rates of bullying, harassment, and violence in their school settings (Colvin et al., 2019; Earnshaw et al., 2020; Espelage, 2014; Kosciw et al., 2020; Polizzi & Frick, 2023) and are more susceptible to dropping out of school (Strayhorn, 2018). For these students, school environments contributed to feelings of fear, isolation, disconnectedness, and distress daily (London & Ingram, 2018). Leaders at MCAA sought to establish a school that welcomed and supported students who were disengaging from their previous school settings due to these hostile or unwelcoming school environments (*Exploring How the School Environment at the Magic City Acceptance Academy Fosters Community among Formerly Disenfranchised Youth*, under review; Polizzi & Frick, 2023). These leaders’ desire was to facilitate school connectedness, a factor particularly important for young people who are at increased risk for feeling alienated or isolated from others, including “students with disabilities, students who are

lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender or question their sexual orientation, students who are homeless, or any student who is chronically truant due to a variety of circumstances” (American Psychological Association, 2014, para. 3).

### **Unlikely Context for the School**

It is powerful to note that MCAA was established as an LGBTQ-affirming, public charter school near Birmingham, Alabama, a city located in the deep South of the United States. Despite its engagement in the struggle for civil rights during the 1960s and beyond, Birmingham is in the center of Alabama, a state (and region) known for its history of racism and prejudice against individuals who do not conform to the typical White, Christian, politically conservative norm. Most would think it unlikely that a school such as MCAA would have been established in a region of the United States renowned for its intolerance and even violence against individuals from the community who have historically been *othered*, under-represented, and often mistreated, even violently. We will return to this context later in our discussion based upon students’ comments relative to the political context in which the MCAA resides.

### **Schools with Similar Purpose**

Some schools in the United States are intentionally working to increase sensitivity to the emotional, social, and academic needs of LGBTQ students (Cosier, 2009; Hornbeck & Duncheon, 2022). Educators in these schools continue to work to establish positive and supportive spaces for LGBTQ students and allies (Milwaukee Public Schools, 2023). Few, if any, however, have included LGBTQ and allied youth specifically in their purpose or mission statements, such as MCAA.

Some notable schools in the United States have adopted a similar purpose to provide safe spaces for LGBTQ students (Cosier, 2009). Among these are two schools that have donned the name of Harvey Milk, the first openly gay man elected to public office in California. The Harvey Milk Civil Rights Academy (HMCRA), a K-5 elementary school, was established in 1996 in the Castro District of San Francisco, CA. Enrollment during the 2022-2023 school term was approximately 228 students (San Francisco Unified School District, 2023). The HMCRA was established with a mission to provide comprehensive training to students in engagement and advocacy for civil rights, acceptance, and social justice. Though LGBTQ youth are certainly included in the school mission of celebrating diversity, LGBTQ youth are not specifically identified in the school mission.

Similarly, the Harvey Milk High School (HMHS) was established in the East Village of New York City in 1985 to provide a safe space for students in grades 9-12. Beginning with eight students in two rooms, the HMHS increased its enrollment to 59 students in the 2020-2021 school term (New York City Public Schools, 2023). HMHS currently has an integrated LGBTQ Community Counseling Center among its impressive list of resources for

students. The HMHS was designed for, but not limited to, LGBTQ youth and provides support specifically for LGBTQ youth identified as at-risk for school failure.

Hornbeck and Duncheon (2022) reported teacher and school administrator perceptions of how their schools supported the needs of LGBTQ students and their allies in several Early College High School (ECHS) settings in Texas. ECHSs are typically small (enrollments ranging from 350 to 450 students); are often located off-site from a comprehensive high school setting; do not include student programming such as competitive sports; and include a rather rigorous, academic focus and curriculum. Because of these features, and often to escape bullying and mistreatment students have experienced in their traditional high school settings, school personnel reported that a disproportionately large number of LGBTQ students choose to attend ECHS. This was true despite the absence of any targeted marketing or attempt to recruit LGBTQ students to the ECHS. These educators have found themselves growing increasingly sensitive to the needs of their LGBTQ students, and actively developing relationships, support services, and school functions and clubs to support LGBTQ youth and their allies (e.g., Gay Straight Alliance). The limited number and presence of schools in the United States that specifically target LGBTQ students in their purpose statements underscores the importance, power, and phenomenal achievement of opening MCAA in the heart of Alabama.

### **The Charter Bargain**

As a charter school, MCAA is a public school, open to all students, and bound by state requirements for meeting academic standards. However, the charter school contract allows MCAA to operate with autonomy to make choices regarding curriculum, personnel, and budgets without adhering to certain state regulations. Charter school advocates refer to this arrangement as the “charter bargain”: more freedom for more accountability (Prothero, 2018, para. 3). Notable differences between MCAA and other public schools include its use of trauma-informed curriculum and restorative justice for student discipline as well as its commitment to providing a brave and LGBTQ-affirming learning environment (*Placing Student Success and Well-Being at the Center of the Educational Process: How the Magic City Acceptance Academy Promotes an Ethical and Caring School Culture*, under review).

### **Conceptual Frame**

Our research team, consisting of three professors specializing in educational leadership, public health, and mental health counseling, employed a multidimensional ethical conceptual framework (Shapiro, 2013; Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2022; Starratt, 1994) to guide our reflection and analysis of the data collected from MCAA students. In 1994, Starratt developed a multidimensional conceptual framework for educators in establishing an ethical school. Starratt’s framework consists of three *ethics* of school leadership which Starratt encouraged educational leaders to apply in their daily practice

of decision-making, policy development, and leadership. Starratt explained that the multidimensional ethical framework comprises the *ethic of justice*, the *ethic of critique*, and the *ethic of care*. The application of the ethic of justice encourages ethical educational leaders to consider whether a law, policy, or individual right is involved in an ethically charged situation. The ethic of critique encourages leaders to consider who may have written that law or policy, who benefits from its application, and whose voice(s) may be silenced or left out. The ethic of care, according to Starratt (1994), “requires fidelity to persons, a willingness to acknowledge their right to be who they are, an openness to encountering them in their authentic individuality, [and] a loyalty to the relationship” (p. 52).

Beginning in 2001, Shapiro and Stefkovich (2022) and Shapiro and Gross (2013) enhanced Starratt’s (1994) multidimensional ethical model by adding an *ethic of the profession*. The ethic of the profession applies directly to school professionals in addressing ethical dilemmas or in making ethical decisions in their daily practice. Stefkovich and O’Brien (2004) provided further explication for school leaders in defining the professional ethic as decision making in the *best interests of the student*. These authors developed a *Best Interests* model for decision making exhorting school leaders to be mindful of the three Rs, that is, each student’s *rights*, *responsibilities*, and *respect*, when addressing ethical dilemmas in their daily work in schools.

The professional ethic further charges educators to consider the expectations and norms of the educational leadership community such as those included in the Professional Standards for Educational Leaders (PSEL) (see also, Shapiro & Gross, 2017) and in the National Educational Leadership Preparation (NELP) standards promulgated by the National Policy Board for Educational Administration (2015, 2018), to the community mores of the school in which they practice, and of the community in which the school is located. While each of these four ethics (justice, critique, care, profession) identify a unique set of considerations for ethical decision making, they often overlap and, at times, represent an intersectionality of ethical reasoning. Starratt, Shapiro, Stefkovich, and Gross all agreed, however, that this intersectionality is to be expected and can help to strengthen the analysis process for educational professionals when considering how to resolve ethical dilemmas in the best interest of students. These ethics experts advocated the routine use of this four-pronged conceptual framework by educational professionals in analyzing ethically charged situations that occur in a school setting. Such a model can broaden and deepen leader understanding of the situation and facilitate stronger, more ethical decision making.

This article makes a unique contribution to the educational leadership literature by adapting this multidimensional ethical paradigm, not as a decision-making strategy (Shapiro, 2013; Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2022), but as an analytical framework and applying it to our analysis of the data collected. Though our team neither intended nor needed to make any decisions regarding ethical dilemmas or circumstances, we applied this multidimensional ethical

paradigm in our analysis of a unique set of data: data collected from a focus group session with students attending MCAA. We analyzed student comments regarding their experiences at MCAA and report it here through these multiple lenses of the paradigm. In conducting this research, we hope to identify inclusive practices that might be transferrable to other school contexts (Hornbeck & Duncheon, 2022; Singh & Kosciw, 2017).

### Methodology

Our research team conducted a multifaceted phenomenological case study of MCAA. The full case study includes document analysis, observations, individual interviews, and focus group sessions with various stakeholder groups including faculty, staff, administrators, key community leaders, students, and parents. Data reported in the present article represent only a portion of the data collected. These data are derived from a focus group session we conducted with MCAA students. Again, the team applied a multidimensional ethical decision-making framework (Shapiro, 2013; Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2022) in a new way as an analytical frame to reflect upon and present these student voices regarding their experience at MCAA.

Our team worked with MCAA administration to identify a purposive sample of students ( $n=9$ ), ranging from grades 6-12 (Creswell, 2013), and representing as broadly diverse and representative sample of the student body as possible. The focus group session lasted approximately 60 minutes and was recorded using digital recorders; recordings were transcribed by a third-party vendor. At the time the focus group was conducted there were 381 students enrolled in MCAA.

Participation in the student focus group was strictly voluntary. Both parent consent and student assent were obtained, in writing, from each of the participants prior to participating in the session. Names and identities of participants are masked with pseudonyms in this report to ensure confidentiality. Student participants ranged in grade level from 6<sup>th</sup> grade to 12<sup>th</sup> grade. Students identified as gay, straight, nonbinary, and transgender and represented multiple ethnic backgrounds, including White, Black, and Hispanic. Consistent with the current style convention, we used the singular “they” to refer to individuals who self-identified they/them as their pronouns of choice (APA, 2020, p. 120). This study was approved by the University of Alabama at Birmingham Institutional Review Board: IRB-300008486, by the Birmingham AIDS Outreach Research Council, and by MCAA administration.

The research team reviewed transcribed notes line-by-line to identify emergent codes and themes and to categorize data according to the multidimensional ethical paradigm. As expected, many student comments could be categorized across two or more of the ethics we used to organize and frame our findings. When this was the case, we included the comments in multiple categories, verbatim. All three researchers discussed disagreements of coding until consensus was reached. Consistent with best practices in

qualitative research, we used multiple methods of verification to ensure trustworthiness of the data, including peer debriefing, bracketing, and an audit trail (Yin, 2011).

### Findings

The multidimensional ethical framework (Shapiro, 2013; Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2022; Starratt, 1994) was designed to be taught by educational leadership preparation programs as a guiding structure for decision-making as school leaders and other educational professionals analyze ethically charged dilemmas they encounter in daily interactions with students, teachers, and other school stakeholder groups. The model can be used effectively to deepen a school leader's perspective, understanding, and analysis of relevant aspects of a dilemma from multiple lenses. For example, when a school leader receives a disciplinary referral of a student, the leader may use the multidimensional ethical paradigm to consider whether any rule, right, or policy has been violated by the student (ethic of justice) or how any decisions made regarding the referral might be informed by professional expectations for ethical leadership (ethic of the profession).

In the context of this project, however, our research team applied the multidimensional ethical paradigm differently. The research team used the ethical paradigm as an *a priori*, conceptual framework to sort student comments into categories. Using the paradigm in this way provided researchers with a unique understanding of how students perceived a particular ethic (e.g., justice, critique) in the context of their lived experiences at MCAA or in their previous schools. In other words, by sorting student comments into one or more of the ethics in the paradigm, researchers were able to give voice to the student experience as it related to each of the ethics in the paradigm and to the overall ethical climate in their previous school settings and at MCAA. Researchers found that application of the paradigm in this way facilitated our understanding of and gave voice to what students experienced in response to school leaders' efforts (or lack thereof) to build an ethical school culture (Shapiro, 2013; Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2022; Starratt, 1994), and to exercise ethical educational leadership. In this section researchers first revisit each ethic in the paradigm then provide direct quotes from students that apply to that ethic.

### Background of Students

Before we present findings relative to the multidimensional ethical framework, we want to provide some context for the reader regarding where these students have come from, why they chose to attend MCAA, and why MCAA is so important to them. Though we intentionally did not ask students to divulge personally identifying information for reasons of confidentiality, during the focus group interview, several students shared personal details about themselves and about their previous schools and educational experiences.

The student focus group included nine students, from grades 6-12, from a variety of ethnic groups, including White, Black, and Hispanic. Though the research team did not ask students about their sexual or gender orientation, some volunteered that they identified as gay, straight, queer, transgender, and non-binary. Students also reported having attended a variety of public secondary schools situated in rural, suburban, and urban settings. Two students reported having attended private or Catholic schools, one reported having attended a “career tech” school, and several reported having been homeschooled. One student said her parents used a “church” homeschool curriculum. Several students reported having had multiple experiences in several school settings over time.

Students recounted various motivations for applying to MCAA, ranging from having been bullied in their previous settings, to one student who reported simply being attracted to the philosophy of MCAA, despite having been successful in their previous setting. Several students shared that they had not been successful in their previous educational settings, especially when they asked teachers for help. Students reported that teachers would often not only refuse to help them, but that teachers and other students made them feel “stupid” or “isolated” just for asking. Several students mentioned that they were not able to be their “true selves” in previous school settings, unable or too afraid “to come out” or to be “authentic.”

Students spoke of the environment at MCAA as being markedly different from their previous settings, in that they received individual attention and help from caring teachers and administrators who accept them for who they are. Matt said, “There’s a lot more openness [at MCAA], it’s a comfortable environment. I can be myself. There’s a lot of people like me here.” Multiple students shared that MCAA felt like a safe place. One 12<sup>th</sup> grader, Chris, shared that MCAA has been “my only safe place, ever.” Chris added, however, that “fear is setting in of what’s going to happen when I leave [MCAA] because this school is a safe place.” Chris expressed concern that, after leaving MCAA, they would have to return to hiding who they were. They said, “wearing a pronoun pin on your shirt here is a lot different than wearing it on your apron at work.”

These students came to MCAA from a wide spectrum of educational environments that did not meet their learning or social emotional needs, and that resulted in them feeling “alienated,” “isolated,” “afraid,” and generally academically unsuccessful. They came to MCAA and found a very different learning environment where they felt safe, secure, and supported academically, socially, and emotionally and finally able to be who they are.

### **The Ethic of Critique**

We begin with the ethic of critique. The ethic of critique, as mentioned above, is “aimed at [schools’] own bureaucratic context and the bureaucratic tendency to reproduce the status quo” (Starratt, 1994, p. 46). Critiquing a school environment or culture through this lens helps to uncover injustice or dehumanization inherent in the school environment. When we asked students



about how their experiences at MCAA were similar to or different from experiences in their previous schools, comments from students provided critical points of comparison between schools for consideration. Two prominent themes emerged from student comments: *Student Mental Health* and *Freedom to Be Authentic*.

**Student Mental Health.** One theme that emerged from students related to the ethic of critique was that of student wellbeing and mental health. Kevin stated his opinion that MCAA has “put student wellbeing in the top position where I think it belongs.... Students are functioning much better in environments that support them and accept them.” Matt agreed, stating:

[In my previous school] no one was really open about mental health and how [students] were feeling inside. ...I was not out at my old school. I did not feel comfortable coming out...because I heard stories of people getting bullied. And, overall, it was a very different experience when I came [to MCAA]. There’s a lot more openness. I just feel like it’s a lot more of a comfortable environment. I could be myself and I don’t really have to shield my likes and interests anymore. There’s a lot of people here like me.

Jamie stated that there had been a high rate of suicide in the school they attended previously. Jamie shared that one of the students in their previous school who committed suicide was their friend. They concluded, “Okay. I need to stay here [at MCAA] because I’m not safe anywhere else.” These comments and others demonstrated an application of the ethic of critique clearly, reflecting on the environments of schools attended previously, and of the environment at MCAA.

**Freedom to Be Authentic.** Students also expressed a newfound freedom to simply be who they are in school. Like Matt stated above, students felt that in the schools where they had been previously, this freedom was not present. Angela shared that, though she made friends in her old school, too, she had made a lot of new friends in her new school setting:

It’s better just to know that I don’t have to hide my true self...because sometimes they’d make jokes that I didn’t find very funny. ...At this school, I don’t have to be afraid to be who I am. At my old school, I always felt like I had to hide who I am because people would just find some way to make fun of me and pick out my flaws.

Similarly, Calvin, a gay, transgender student also shared, “I love being out as both of those, and just being in a school environment where I’m not the only one.” Calvin also said, however, that even though MCAA was a more open and accepting environment, “it doesn’t mean that sometimes I can’t still feel alienated just as I did at my old school.”

Jamie shared a coming out experience which happened in their previous school. Jamie also felt alienated and decided to come out to one of their friends in their previous school. Jamie told us, “One time I came out to my friend as bi, and then they were like, ‘That’s gross.’ But here...people are actually like, ‘Okay, cool.’ That doesn’t really impact me any. So, Okay.” Angela responded to Jamie’s statement:

I’m really glad that when students come here, they feel safe enough to show who they truly are. It makes me really happy because I feel at other schools they would be like, “You can’t wear this, or you can’t say that, or you can’t act like this.” But at this school, it’s like they embrace it.

Relative to the ethic of critique, when students compared their experiences in previous schools to those at MCAA, it was clear that their experiences in their new school were much more welcoming, student-centered. The ethic of critique involves looking critically at how schools and organizational cultures can dehumanize and rob certain organizational members of their voice. Previous schooling experiences of these students clearly demonstrated feelings of being dehumanized by a lack of attention paid to their mental health needs, and feelings of fear coalescing around students’ ability to be their authentic selves in the environment.

### **The Ethic of Care**

The ethic of care focuses on how students feel cared for by the teachers, staff members, and administrators in their school. Starratt (1994) defined the ethic of care as one that holds the individual persons in the organization with absolute regard and respect. Starratt went further to state that the individual is held sacred. Prominent themes that emerged relative to a culture of care included *Responsiveness to Personal Needs of Students*, and *Mutual Respect between Teachers and Students*. We present each of these themes and evidence from the students’ comments here.

**Responsiveness to Personal Needs of Students.** First, students expressed a great deal of appreciation for how responsive teachers and other adults at MCAA were to student needs, not just academic needs (which will be addressed later), but also to personal needs. Matt shared:

My history teacher is probably one of the most trusted adults I’ve met in my life. He has been very kind and beneficial, has taught me adulting stuff and has taken the time to just fill us in on what is happening in the world.

Kevin explained that teachers at MCAA often took time out of their day to talk to students about personal struggles or challenges they may be experiencing. Kevin said, “[Teachers here] will actually try to talk to you and try to help you through it.” He explained that, when a student needs a break from the classroom environment, or just a moment to collect their thoughts

and emotions, teachers would allow students to “step out, go to the library, or go down to the wellness suite we have here.” Kevin said, “They understand. They let us go.”

Students further relayed that teachers at MCAA are willing to talk to students and to set up specific circumstances to address student needs, which creates a much more caring learning environment. Due to this attention to student need, students expressed that it was much easier to develop relationships with their teachers and to establish open lines of communication. One student told us that their history teacher even bought them groceries once when they were not sure how they would eat.

**Mutual Respect between Teachers and Students.** Calvin related teachers at MCAA respected students and allowed them to express themselves. “We are allowed to speak our minds. It’s the first school I’ve been to where I’ve been able to cuss in front of a teacher and not get crucified.” Chris said:

Over the last year and a half [since MCAA opened], I have learned what it meant to have people that you trust wholeheartedly, people that I would give anything for. My friends, teachers, staff here are some of the most incredible people I’ve ever met.

Calvin explained what a “culture shock” it was to, for the first time in his life, go to a school where he had a Black male teacher. Calvin shared that he had never experienced this, and previously had been taught by mainly White women. Calvin continued:

I could actually relate to [this teacher], he was someone I could actually talk to about my personal gripes with being Black inside a mainly White environment. ...I see him as my mentor...because he took me under his wing because he could see, I’ve never really had a major Black influence.

Virtually all students agreed that there is a strong sense of mutual respect from teachers for their students, and from students for their teachers. Many students spoke highly and fondly of their teachers at MCAA.

### **The Ethic of the Profession**

According to the literature base and best practices, the ethic of the profession involves consideration of the school community standards and norms, and the standards, professional norms, and indicators of professional leadership (Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2022). These professional expectations are carefully articulated in the Professional Standards for Educational Leadership (NPBEA, 2015). It is upon these standards and indicators that our research team leaned when analyzing student comments from the focus group. This approach to the analysis of these data warrants some further explanation here. Our conceptual framework guided us to sort certain student comments into the professional ethic category because the comments related to the daily,

professional practices of teachers, staff members, and administrators at MCAA. Professional behaviors such as providing help to students who were struggling with course content, or professional behaviors that helped to keep students safe emotionally we counted as relating back to the professional ethic. These behaviors we interpreted as professional, rather than behaviors that addressed personal needs of students which we sorted into the category of the ethic of care above.

That said, we turn to reporting student comments relative to the professional behaviors of teachers and school leaders at MCAA. From these comments emerged three separate themes relative to the ethic of the profession: *Providing Help to Students*; *Providing a Safe, Respectful Learning Environment*; and *Quality of Teaching*

**Providing Help to Students.** This theme emerged clearly from several participating students. Students repeatedly expressed often how, in their previous school settings, asking for help from their teachers regarding course content with which they were struggling resulted in them feeling intimidated, ignored, or ridiculed. For example, Matt shared extensively:

In my [previous school environment related to academics] asking for help wasn't really normalized, and set you apart from the group, made you feel like the idiot, which made me struggle a lot. And then I came here and I've excelled in Calculus and that was just huge for me because a lot of my interests involve places like NASA and other big government institutions. And so, getting a good education where I could actually ask for help and have a teacher break things down without my whole class laughing at me, that was really great. And, now I'm accepted at a fairly prestigious college.

Angela agreed, "At this school I feel a lot more confident to ask for help because the teachers will actually find a way to help you understand and talk you through it." Angela claimed, "At this school, it's helping me a lot more."

**Providing a Safe, Respectful Learning Environment.** Several student comments contributed to this second theme. Generally, students expressed the perception that they felt respected by the teachers and administrators at MCAA. One student shared an experience with a "White lady" teacher from her previous school who, the student felt, treated her differently from the other students because of the student's color, size, and the things she liked. "She treated me differently from all the other students because of what I looked like. ...but at this school I feel I'm actually being treated like a human being." This sentiment was echoed by another student mentioned earlier relative to feeling seen and supported by having Black teachers to relate to and to whom he could turn for mentoring and perspective.

Students referred to how they felt safe at MCAA and complimented the teachers and administrators on how they handled certain disciplinary situations. Calvin reflected on a situation where "a lot of crap hit the fan

and a lot of drama just boiled over.” Calvin shared his perception that “the staff handled it well...in a professional way.” He proceeded to explain that when a fight broke out, administrators put the school on lockdown, “which is something my old school would not have done.” He felt the staff addressed the incidence of violence at MCAA “accordingly.” Chris shared that personally they felt much safer at MCAA than in their previous school settings. Chris stated, “This school is a safe place. But it’s been my only safe place, ever.”

One student clearly dissented from the rest of the group. Jamie said, “This is going to sound not real, but I have been bullied here more...than in all [my] six, seven years of being in school combined.” Thus, our team discovered that, even at MCAA, different students have differing perspectives and experiences, regardless of the professional practices and procedures put in place.

**Quality of Teaching.** The final theme in this category emerged relative to the freedom that teachers felt at MCAA to teach in ways that engaged students, and that students experienced as intriguing and even fun. Kevin spoke about this experience:

I feel teachers come to the school because they have their own vision of how they want to run a classroom or how they want to make or change their own classroom experiences. And the school is made to give teacher that opportunity to be able to make the classroom their own and teach what they want and teach the ways they want, which I think it has just made a very large difference in our interactions with them. And, so, everyone’s here because they want to [be] and for a good reason.

Several students followed-up on Kevin’s observation, reporting that their teachers at MCAA tried diligently to make students’ learning experience fun and engaging. Matt said, “And so getting a good education where I could actually ask for help and have a teacher break things down without my whole class laughing at me, that was really great.” Kel added, “The teachers here are completely different. They make things engaging and they make things fun.”

### **The Ethic of Justice**

Finally, our research team looked through the lens of the ethic of justice more extensively in describing the development and opening of the MCAA elsewhere (*Overcoming Obstacles to Provide a Brave, LGBTQ-Affirming Learning Environment: The Magic City Acceptance Academy*, under review; Mathur & Corley, 2014). In another article (in review) by the current authors, we reported the experiences of MCAA key leaders who faced two approving bodies, one at a local level, and one at the state level, that denied the application to establish MCAA as a charter school. In that article, our team described how key MCAA leaders faced opposition from governing bodies, despite their excellent application and substantial funding support from a variety of organizations committed to opening the MCAA as a public charter school.

For this article, however, we focus on data gathered from students at MCAA and their perceptions of justice as they experienced it in the charter school. Mathur and Corley (2014) wrote, “Schools need to create environments conducive to developing values of caring and justice rather than only focusing on catching and punishing transgressions” (p. 145). Our team found indications that this is exactly what is happening at MCAA. Themes that emerged relative to the ethic of justice included: *Operating in a Political Environment*, and *Concerns about School Discipline*. We explore each of these themes below.

**Operating in a Political Environment.** Students acknowledged that, despite MCAA operating as a public charter school designed to address the learning and social needs of LGBTQ students and other students who had experienced a lack of success in traditional school settings, the school is still situated in a highly conservative setting often characterized by racism and prejudice. Calvin spoke to this point:

A lot of people don't realize that just because [MCAA] is a leftist environment, we still were all raised in Alabama. It doesn't matter how left you are, even as a White person, you're still going to have an increment of racism and prejudice, no matter how much education you get. ...Compared to a public high school, it's obviously better, ten-fold. But, obviously, we're still in Alabama and so there are still going to be problems.

Kevin shared that, despite his parents being very accepting of him, and preaching more liberal values to him and his brother, he still appreciated MCAA for providing a needed sense of safety, despite a sometimes-turbulent political environment. Kevin said that he would have probably been okay at his old school, but that he was “grateful to get to be a part of this space. And I just want it to stay around for the people who actually need it and are in situations that need to be changed.”

**Concerns about School Discipline.** The second and final theme related to an ethic of justice centers around student perceptions of student discipline practices at MCAA. Despite the positive remarks shared above in the section on the ethic of the profession, several students expressed concern about the way student discipline is handled at MCAA. Jamie said that they wished student discipline were handled better. “A lot of it is just, ‘Hey, don’t do that’ and not actually, ‘You did something terrible. You need to own up to it.’” Jamie suggested that MCAA was almost “too much of a safe space, because it’s like you can do literally anything that you want.” They shared, “There is very little actual punishment here. You get away – scot-free – pretty much, no matter what.” Several other students agreed with Jamie. For example, Callie said, “Personally, I don’t feel like [student discipline is] that good because they don’t do anything when you tell them unless you actually start fighting back against that student that keeps messing with you.” Kevin said, “There were

times when I feel some Black children were disproportionately punished.” He qualified this statement by adding that such treatment may have been due to an individual rather than a school-wide practice.

Jamie and Calvin both shared that they thought there might be too much freedom for students. Calvin expressed that he couldn’t stress enough “how much freedom we’re allowed to have at this school. And, of course, we have restrictions; it’s a school, not a daycare.” Jamie added, “I feel there’s a point where freedom of speech almost shouldn’t be so free because people will say the most outlandish things here.”

### Discussion

Having analyzed the comments and observations of students at MCAA who participated in the focus group session, in this section our team offers several reflections and conclusions for consideration. Here we offer our reflections on some of the more poignant themes identified in the findings. Later, we will present some general thoughts about the overall findings of the study.

#### Reflections on Selected Themes

First, we turn to discuss some of the specific themes that emerged from the student voices. The themes discussed here are of particular interest and power in their resonance and frequency with focus group participants.

**Students Free to Be Authentic.** MCAA student participants spoke powerfully about their experiences of finally being their *authentic* selves in their school environment. Our research team chose to describe this theme using the term authentic which we agreed aptly described comments directly from the students themselves. Students described their relief at not feeling like they had to hide who they truly were any more. This finding is strongly confirmatory of recent literature on LGBTQ youth and mental health (Hornbeck & Duncheon, 2022; Kosciw et al., 2022; Ormiston & Williams, 2022). As described above, Hornbeck and Duncheon identified teachers and administrators who worked with many LGBTQ youth in the Early College High School setting. These educators reported that their LGBTQ students often grew more comfortable being themselves as they found support and security in the relationships built with their teachers and ECHS peers. One teacher from the study mentioned that their students “could be whoever they want, we just consider them individuals” (p. 9).

Compared to their experiences in previous schools, MCAA students talked about their ability to live authentically in ways that were free from retribution. This finding is consistent with data from the 2021 National School Climate Survey in which 97% of LGBTQ+ students reported hearing negative, homophobic, or other anti-LGBTQ+ remarks from their peers, which contributed to a hostile or distressing school environment (Kosciw et al. 2022). In addition to biased language, Kosciw and colleagues (2022) identified student experiences of harassment and assault as well as experiences of discriminatory school policies and practices based on SOGIE characteristics (sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender expression). We suggest that

MCAA has fostered a school environment in which these behaviors are unacceptable and non-negotiable, which, in turn, allows students to express themselves freely without typical repercussions.

**Respect Between Students and Teachers.** Another strong theme that emerged from students was the sense of mutual respect between themselves and their teachers. Nearly all student focus group members spoke of their teachers fondly, acknowledging these feelings of mutual respect. But we focus here on one student who spoke of the “culture shock” they experienced, and how powerful it was for them to have a Black, male teacher as a mentor at MCAA. This statement from the MCAA student resonates with Redding’s (2019) work regarding the power and positive impact of student-teacher racial/ethnic matching relative to student behavior and academic performance in schools. In addition to increases in standardized test scores, Redding wrote:

Black students are more likely to benefit from assignment to Black teachers in terms of a reduced risk of exclusionary discipline, an increased likelihood of being assigned to a gifted and talented program, improved attendance, and a decreased risk of dropping out of school. (p. 524)

Similar findings are reported by Bristol and Martin-Fernandez (2019), and by Griffin and Tackie (2017).

**The Political Environment.** MCAA students spoke of the political context in which MCAA exists, one that is primarily governed by White, conservative, Christians, and is known to be discriminatory of anyone who does not fit that mold. In a separate article, we have described the process that BAO went through to apply for a charter and gain approval to open MCAA (*Exploring How the School Environment at the Magic City Acceptance Academy Fosters Community among Formerly Disenfranchised Youth*, under review). The application was denied three times (despite the submission of an extremely strong application, ample funding, and an identified location) and was only approved when BAO lawyers threatened to sue the governing board for discrimination. The school was approved, built, opened, and is now running successfully in this highly charged political environment due in no small part to a strong coalition of stakeholders (Bolman & Deal, 2021) who are committed to the mission and vision of MCAA. Students acknowledged the presence of this political environment, especially with comments indicating that, even though they felt safe within the confines of the MCAA school building and grounds, they knew that upon leaving the school, they were back in an environment that has often been personally and politically hostile, even dangerous.

Hornbeck and Duncheon (2022) outlined the grim political landscape for LGBTQ students across the United States currently, noting that most states not only do not have any laws protecting LGBTQ students in schools, but the political and policy environments are openly hostile to LGBTQ students.



These authors wrote, “Strengthening school-level supports may be even more important in a state context that is politically and socially less affirming of LGBTQ populations” (p. 6). This is understated.

**School Discipline at MCAA.** Finally, we turn to the issue of school discipline which the students discussed. Students expressed mixed views about the discipline they had observed carried out at MCAA. On one hand, they felt that teachers and administrators handled rather touchy disciplinary situations skillfully. On the other hand, some students suggested that school discipline was too lax and not stringent enough. After this conversation, our team wondered if MCAA students had a clear understanding of the espoused Restorative Justice disciplinary approach at MCAA (Hopkins, 2003).

Most schools (and homes) adhere to punitive discipline system (Simson, 2013). Palmer and Greytak (2017) stated that often LGBTQ students, under a punitive system, experience victimization in schools, and thus interact more frequently with school administrators and experience greater school discipline than do other students. Thus, MCAA students were perhaps used to observing this punitive system and thus interpreted what they saw at MCAA as a more relaxed rather than restorative system of discipline. According to Hopkins (2003), Restorative Justice in schools is defined “not in terms of those who are to blame ‘getting their just desserts’, but as ‘all those affected by an offence or incident being involved in finding a mutually acceptable way forward’” (p. 144).

### **General Reflections from the Research Team**

The purpose of this article was to give voice to students at MCAA and to learn about their perceptions and experiences. Educational experts agree that providing an opportunity for students to express their perceptions and opinions openly can help foster student leadership and can also inform educators and school leaders regarding paths to be taken toward organizational improvement (Brasof & Mansfield, 2018; Lyons & Brasof, 2020; Mitra, 2009, 2018; Mitra & Gross, 2009). Brasof and Mansfield (2018) stated, “Though this concept of student voice has existed for quite some time, it is often overlooked in educational leadership” (p. 5). We hope that, by presenting these student voices, this article may contribute to educational leaders’ understanding of how to solicit the voices of their own students, particularly about their experiences with the ethical climate and culture of their schools.

Our research team was impressed by the pervasive sense among students that MCAA is a good and supportive space for students. Because the purpose of establishing MCAA was to address the needs of LGBTQ and other students who had not found success and support in a traditional school setting, it appears that the school is having success in meeting that purpose. Students shared repeatedly how much more comfortable they felt at MCAA than they did at their previous school(s), for a variety of reasons, including feeling disrespected by adults and other students, and feelings of being threatened or unsafe in their school environment (Polizzi & Frick, 2023).

Another conclusion drawn by our research team is that students feel comfortable and safe being their authentic selves at MCAA. Through the lens of the ethic of critique, we interpret student comments about how they were treated at previous schools as *dehumanizing*. At MCAA, students expressed feeling comfortable being who they truly are with their teachers and around other students at MCAA. This ability to be authentic, for students who previously felt a need to hide who they were, seems to have resulted in students feeling secure, comfortable asking for help, and that they are benefitting from their instruction from their teachers at MCAA.

Perhaps the strongest message from MCAA students was their perception that their teachers and school administrators genuinely cared for them as individuals. Students shared that their teachers cared enough about them to help address personal or individual needs presented by students, whether those needs were physical, emotional, or academic. MCAA students perceived that their teachers care for them and are willing to go out of their way to help them succeed. Such an environment of care has resulted in feelings of mutual respect between students and adults in the MCAA environment, again facilitating student wellbeing and success.

Teachers understand their ethical responsibility to reach out to students and to help them when needed. Teachers were reported to be very responsive to students' academic learning needs, breaking down complex content matter, extending extra explanations and help as needed. Such an ethical response from professional educators resulted in students feeling safe and respected, which again undergirds their ability to be successful academically.

As we analyzed student voices at MCAA through the lens of justice, we assert that students everywhere have a right to feeling safe in their schools, a right to gain the assistance they need to learn the academic content, and a right to be themselves without feeling that being who they truly are will result in isolation, bullying, ridicule, and sometimes violence.

### Conclusion

This article contributes to the ethical educational leadership literature by intentionally collecting and carefully analyzing student voice, comparing these data to a framework of what it means to build and maintain an ethical school (Shapiro, 2013; Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2022; Starratt, 1994). By analyzing student comments and observations through this multidimensional ethical framework, our team concludes that MCAA is truly an ethical school, founded and firmly rooted in a practice of operating in the best interests of the students (Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2022; Stefkovich & Michael O'Brien, 2004). Future researchers are encouraged to apply this multidimensional ethical framework as an analytical tool to other school settings to explore stakeholder perceptions relative to the various ethics and the ethical climate in their schools.

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