LISTENING TO STUDENT VOICE: TOWARD A MORE HOLISTIC APPROACH TO SCHOOL LEADERSHIP

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Abstract

The purpose of this article is to illustrate the value of student voice in ethical educational leadership research and practice. While much research has explored what it means to be an ethical leader or what it looks like to lead schools for social justice, it has rarely considered the student perspective as an integral component of leadership decision making. In fact, as this paper argues, listening to the student voice is indispensable to ethical leadership responsibilities. This article provides examples of what we believe is a more ethical approach to researching and leading in schools. It operationalizes ethical and socially just leadership practices that are student-focused and hold promise to sensitize our research efforts, destabilize oppressive school leadership structures, and create positive and innovative environments for students.

Introduction

Research on educational leadership and social justice rightly contends that it is imperative for school leaders to recognize the ways in which their leadership practices may reproduce marginalizing conditions (Dantley & Tillman, 2009). Indeed, it is essential that school leaders critically examine the social, cultural, and economic dynamics of their school communities and reflect on how personal attitudes and beliefs are influenced by their own position of privilege and oppression (Rodriguez & Fabionar, 2009). Moreover, research demonstrates if school principals make their students' identities an integral part of their leadership practice, the result will inevitably be a more caring pedagogy where children who find their realities represented in school curriculum, class dialogue, and school policies are encouraged to engage and connect to school and learning, and in turn, experience greater school success (Shields, 2004; Halx, 2014; Halx & Ortiz, 2011; Quaglia & Corso, 2014; Santamaria & Santamaria, 2015).

While much research suggests that listening to student voice facilitates a more insightful approach to educational research and practice (Fielding, 2001, 2004; Mitra, 2004; Paris & Alim, 2017, Qualia & Corso, 2014), the student perspective is not prioritized in most educational leadership research and practice. Including and honoring the student perspective not only yields richer and more authentic results, it also increases student engagement. Yet, as Sands, Guzman, Stephens, and Boggs, (2007) have noted, ''Despite intense endeavors to promote educational change to affect student achievement, one voice, perhaps the most critical voice that could inform the debate of how to increase student achievement, is sorely lacking: that of students themselves'' (p. 324).

The purpose of this article is to illustrate the value of student voice in ethical educational leadership research and practice. While much research has explored what it means to be an ethical leader or what it looks like to lead schools for social justice, such research has rarely considered the student perspective as an integral component of leadership decision making. We argue that listening to the student voice is indispensable to ethical leadership, and we provide examples of what we believe is a more ethical approach to researching and leading schools. Listening to and considering the voice of the student inherently operationalizes ethical and socially just leadership practices that are student-focused and hold promise to sensitize our research efforts, destabilize oppressive school leadership structures, and create positive and innovative environments for students.

Student Voice Literature

Much current U.S. education policy at the federal and state levels encourages educational research activity that is intended to advocate for students by utilizing quantitative testing data to shed light on achievement gaps. Further, research inquiries that reach beyond quantitative test score analyses tend to prioritize researcher interpretation over the perspective of the research participants themselves (Fielding, 2001). As such, educational policies and research that represent students as statistics and numerical ratings disregard the contextual realities of students, trivialize the student experience, and fall short (on many levels) of achieving their purposes (Fielding, 2001). Surveying students and counting their responses does not yield an authentic picture of the educational reality of the individual students; it provides only a portrait of an amalgamated, ''average,'' nonexistent being. Similarly,

surveying students, and then interpreting their words, is comparably inauthentic. Researcher advocacy efforts to emancipate students are certainly at least partially negated when the researchers speak for students rather than letting the students speak for themselves (Fielding, 2001). And that begs the question: Is overlooking the student voice an ethical and just way to approach educational leadership decision making? Can educators adequately evaluate current school reform efforts without prioritizing students' perspectives?

For the last several decades, student voice has played a significant role in igniting social and educational change in the United States and throughout the world. In 1960, the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) organized the first series of sit-ins at lunch counters where Black students were denied service. In 1968, the Brown Berets' students and supporters organized the first high school walkout to challenge the treatment of Chicano students–for example punishment for speaking Spanish in school–in the California educational system. Chicano youth continued to use walkouts as demonstrations of resistance to aversive policies such as SB 1070 (the Arizona anti-immigration law). In 1995 high school students in Salt Lake City, Utah, in order to counter state and local board of education resistance to the establishment of gay-straight student alliances, staged walkouts and facilitated community and teacher education workshops on the challenges LGBTQ student face (Mayberry, 2006). Most recently, the Black Lives Matter movement encouraged peaceful student protest over inequitable treatment in schools and in the community (White, 2016). Internationally, youth protests in Greece and Egypt in 2011 roused consciousness concerning undemocratic sociopolitical, structural, and economic issues. These events illustrate the ways in which students across the globe have demonstrated that they are capable of impacting leadership and affecting change.

Defining Student Voice

There is some disagreement among student voice scholars as to what ''counts'' as research and practice that speaks with (rather than for) students (i.e., research that is grounded more in a democratic belief system than a more neoliberal/capitalism-based business model which desires to control students and meet accountability standards). For example, Michael Fielding (2001) argues teachers and other adults ''speak too readily and too presumptuously on behalf of young people'' (p. 123). And, Mitra (2008) laments, ''most schools are not structured in ways that encourage student voice'' (p. 24). Mitra (2008) argues that age and ability segregation, coupled with unmanageable school and class sizes, increases student alienation.

Scholars have recognized that the potential of student voice in research and practice can be represented on a continuum (see Fig. 1) that moves from using students as simple data sources to empowering students to lead the research team that defines and directs school reform efforts (Fielding, 2001, 2004; Mitra, 2008; Mitra & Gross 2009; Sands et al., 2007; Schultz, 2011). Mitra (2008) identified three levels of student voice. At the most basic level, students share their opinions concerning school problems. At the next level of intensity, the students collaborate with adult practitioners to identify and address school reform. The most intensive student voice initiatives train students to assume leadership roles in researching problems and in identifying and implementing solutions. Mitra and Gross (2009) also outlined three levels

of student engagement with school improvement processes: (1) being heard; (2) collaborating with adults; and (3) building capacity for leadership (p. 523).
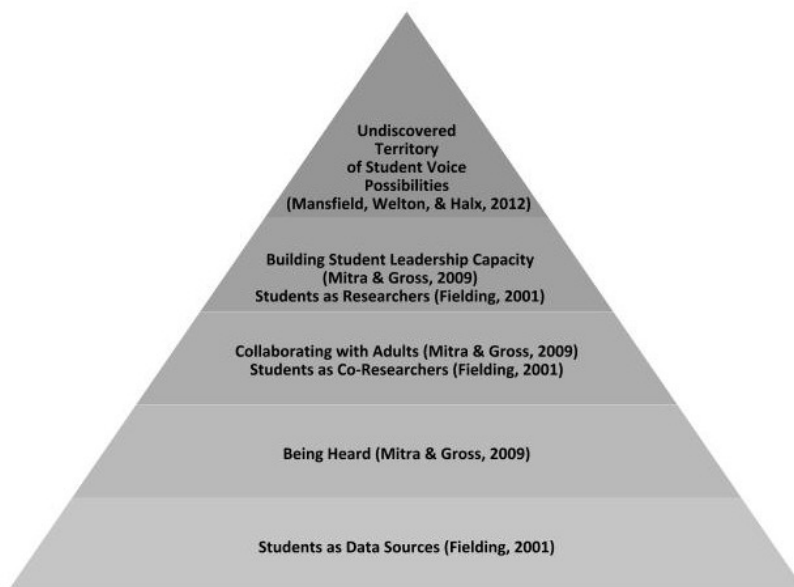

Fig. 1. The Student Voice Continuum.

Mitra (2004), and Mitra and Gross (2009), suggested that conducting surveys and focus groups with students is clearly a viable means to improve practice. While asking what students think is important, Mitra (2004) went on to suggest ''young people [collaborate] with adults to address the problems in their schools'' (p. 651). Shifting the focus to research with youth rather than on youth (Torre & Fine, 2006) and speaking with students rather than for students (Fielding, 2001, 2004) is not only appropriate developmentally (Sands et al., 2007) but is a more comprehensive and ethical way to approach educational research and school improvement efforts (Fielding, 2001, 2004; Sands et al., 2007). Torre and Fine (2006) made the case succinctly: student voice initiatives ''counter neoliberalistic perceptions of marginalized youth as disengaged, passive, and blind consumers who lack connection'' (p. 269). Indeed, instead of being positioned as ''the problem,'' students identify issues and offer solutions (Irizarry, 2009, 2011b). Thus, student voice and engagement become a strong force of resistance against hegemonic structures that reproduce societal inequities (Ginwright, Noguera, Cammarota, 2006; Giroux, 1986, 2012; Schultz, 2011).

Advantages of Including Student Voice

There are several important reasons to change the ways in which we engage educational research and practice. For example, there is empirical evidence that allowing the students to have a voice, even at the most basic level, results in the development of civic habits essential to democracy. Moreover, engaging students at a higher level results in curricular improvements and strengthens teacher-student relations (Fielding, 2001, 2004; Mitra, 2008; Mitra & Gross, 2009; Sands et al., 2007).

According to Lenoir (2011), personal and academic resilience is strengthened when students are their own advocates. Indeed, as Welton (2011a) argued, ''As educational leaders, we must listen to, collaborate with, and assist youth in taking power over navigating their educational trajectories'' (p. 4). Numerous researchers agree that ignoring student voice results in feelings of alienation, anonymity and powerlessness, and disengagement on the part of the students (Fielding, 2001, 2004; Halx, 2014; Halx & Ortiz, 2011; Mitra, 2008; Mitra & Gross, 2009; Paris & Alim, 2017; Qualglia & Corso, 2014; Sands et al., 2007). Moreover, disengaged students exhibit lower self-esteem, lower academic achievement, and higher dropout rates (Mitra & Gross, 2009; Valenzuela, 1999).

Seeking student voice is also supported by motivation theory, self-determination theory, and constructivist learning theory. In other words, involving students is simply good pedagogy that supports active student engagement and feedback to the educational process (Sands et al., 2007). In addition to strengthening their civic skills, positioning students as transformative intellectuals helps build written and oratory skills and contributes to college aspiration (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008). Students who are given voice also learn how to be agents of change in their communities (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008), which positions them to work within a framework of social justice in youth policy. Student voice inherently facilitates personal critical awareness of oppressive societal structures, and thereby it encourages marginalized youth to reclaim some sense of power through collective action (Ginwright, Cammarota, Noguera, 2005). ''Enabling youth to interrogate and denaturalize the conditions of their everyday oppression inspires a process of community and knowledge building'' that benefits all (Torre & Fine, 2006, p. 269). The greater the interaction and leadership of students in school reform efforts, the greater the return will be (Fielding, 2001, 2004; Mitra, 2008; Mitra & Gross, 2009; Quaglia & Corso, 2014; Sands et al., 2007).

Student Voice Theoretical Framework

In the model shown in Fig. 1, we illustrate our interpretation of the student voice framework based on our readings of the literature. The pyramid represents a continuum of the level and role of student involvement in educational leadership research and practice. Level one, students as data sources, is seen as the lowest level and level four, students as researchers/building capacity for leadership, is seen as offering the highest level of student involvement. We purposely left the apex as an unknown entity because we believe that future work in this area will certainly add to our understanding.

Limitations of the Model

While the model in Fig. 1 outlining the student voice literature is helpful, there are some limitations that should be acknowledged and explored. For example, we do not believe that the current student voice literature adequately explores issues of identity, power, and context. Nor does the current model do an adequate job of explaining why, in certain circumstances, higher levels of student participation are achieved. Thus, we revisit the literature to discover and explain the missing elements that might serve as a better model for future educational leadership research and practice.

Issues of Context and Power

Although Fig. 1 indicates the added value of elevating all students' voices, it does not address the fact that in particular settings certain students' voices have less power than others. Marginalized students' voices are often muted by the dominant forces in institutional contexts (see Irizarry, 2011a; Valenzuela, 1999). While the framework above does allude to more democratic fostering of the students' own research involvement and leadership capacity, Scheurich (1998) suggested that social justice-minded researchers and practitioners use caution when endorsing democratic rhetoric in schools because democracy does not always guarantee equity. In fact, when democratic ideals are practiced in educational contexts where both students from dominant groups and students from historically marginalized groups are in attendance, resistance is inevitable, and those interested in listening to the student voice must contend with the struggle among groups over whose cultural capital will ''count'' as meaningful or whose cultural capital ''will prevail in legitimating particular ways of life'' (Giroux, 1986, p. 50).

Educational settings often tacitly facilitate the silencing of students from marginalized groups (Delgado Bernal, 2002). Institutional and structural classism, racism, homophobia, and xenophobia silence students who are not members of the dominant group, and in many cases students are rendered virtually invisible in a given context. The silencing of students from non-dominant groups comes in many forms. For example, micro-aggressions (Nadal, et al., 2011; Solórzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000)–or subtle, daily discriminatory acts toward any student from an oppressed group–and blatant racial stereotyping clearly have a negative impact on the academic performance of students of color (Steele & Aronson, 1998) and incline them toward silence. Students who identify as LGBTQ often experience overt forms of school-sponsored silencing via tolerated bullying and harassment, and when schools fail to address this abuse, LGBTQ identified youth experience lower levels of belongingness, higher levels of truancy, and contemplate suicide more than straight-identified students (Robinson & Espelage, 2011). Moreover, a number of researchers have documented the ways in which inequities such as course tracking, teacher attitudes, the policing of students' native language, and egregious disciplinary sanctions deplete the positive capital of students of color (Irizarry, 2011a, 2011b; Rubin et al., 2006; Valencia, 2010; Valenzuela, 1999).

While struggle might be inevitable, we believe school leadership practices can act as mediating factors that bridge student voice efforts in challenging contexts. A socially just educational leader must challenge the power structures that silence the voices of students, especially those who are marginalized in a particular educational context. In the following sections we highlight elements of educational leadership literature that specifically address issues of identity, power, and context when underscoring students' voices. But first, we lay the foundation by exploring the ethics literature.

Leadership Practices as Mediating Factors

Neoliberal policies such as No Child Left Behind and the ideology of global competitiveness place school leaders at odds with holding to established democratic principles (Hursh, 2007; Lipman, 2004). As a result, schools have detoured from what Giroux (1986) called the ''Deweyan vision of public schools as democratic spheres'' where students can

express, interact, negotiate, and ''engage the politics of voice and representation'' in ''order to make sense of their lives in schools'' (p. 48). The school leader is pivotal in fostering student voice and the restoration of such democratic ideals. In this section we highlight specific concepts within educational leadership literature—democratic practices, transformative leadership, leadership for social justice, and critical pedagogy—that serve as critical mediating factors for addressing issues of identity and power in schools with an eye toward increasing student voice.

Just as the student voice literature points out that students are more engaged and stay in school when power is shared with them, the school leadership literature points out that when principals practiced democratic or shared leadership, they found teachers felt a higher level of commitment and greater sense of effectiveness (Miller & Rowan, 2006). In fact, several researchers (Bogler, 2001; Brooks & Miles, 2008; Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Dantley & Tillman, 2009; Deal & Peterson, 2009; Marks & Printy, 2003; Miller & Rowan, 2006; Shields, 2004; Tschannen-Moran, 2004; Welton & Freelon, 2017) advocate a leadership stance that emphasizes democratic or shared leadership since that stance usually produces the most positive, balanced school climate.

According to Bogler (2001) and Copland (2003), leaders who managed by democratic or distributed leadership principles fostered collaboration, trust, professional learning, and reciprocal accountability that grew over time. Furthermore, group-made democratic decisions establish an atmosphere of trust and inspire individuals to become personally responsible for the specific elements of the collective goals (Ouchi, 1981). We argue that these democratic leadership principles hold true for students as well as teachers and administrators in educational settings. According to Brooks, Jean-Marie, Normore, and Hodgins (2007):

> social justice leaders strive for critique rather than conformity, compassion rather than competition, democracy rather than bureaucracy, polyphony rather than silencing, inclusion rather than exclusion, liberation rather than domination, and action for change rather than inaction to preserve inequity. (p. 400)

Furthermore, the essence of a democratic environment revels in the multiple voices, identities, and perspectives of the school community (Dantley & Tillman, 2009). Thus, leaders practice democratic leadership by laboring to ''see democratic practice and equitable treatment of all members of the learning community, regardless of race, gender, class, ability, age, or sexual orientation'' (Dantley & Tillman, 2009, p. 26). The development of democratic coalitions within schools and other community organizations provides strength to disrupt and undo oppression. Lott and Webster (2006) purported that:

> The practicing of democracy can take place within young people's groups, classrooms, businesses, and local community groups. This involves supporting access, inclusion, and participation in processes and decisions. Having one's capacities respected, and having access to multiple roles and responsibilities can be a powerful stimulus to engage in social action for justice. (p. 132)

As such, democratic schools and societies consider the design and implementation of socially just policies as the only assured method to globally sustain and build capacity for tolerance, peace, and harmony (Zajda, Majhanovich, & Rust, 2006). The leadership for social justice

literature is clear that school leaders who are transformative recognize contextual issues and practice self-reflective behavior in order to lead schools more justly (Dantley & Tillman, 2009; Shields, 2004). As school leaders, we must critique how our ''educator voice'' may silence the ''student voice'' and explore the ways that our ''educator voice'' can help empower the ''student voice'' (Giroux, 1986, 2012). A transformative leader recognizes the notion of power and privilege in schools and provides space for change-agent dialogue that challenges and dismantles oppressive structures (Shields, 2004, 2010). Furthermore, transformative leaders use critical pedagogy and dialogue as a means to enhance, not subtract, students' lived experiences and cultural assets (Shields, 2004). Rightly, a socially just educational leader must challenge the power structures that silence the voices of students who are most marginalized in any given context.

Alternate pedagogies, like critical pedagogy (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008; Freire, 1970; Kincheloe, 2008; Lac & Mansfield, 2017; McLaren, 2003), provide additional insight into the value of student voice. Critical pedagogy builds from a student's cultural knowledge base and ''fundamentally repositions students as actors and contributors to the struggle for social change'' (Duncan- Andrade & Morrell, 2008, p. 13). And, as Irizarry noted, ''education should be about helping students learn more about how the system works and working with them to develop a voice to speak up against issues they find troubling or in favor of ideas they support'' (p. 119). However, when educators help students develop a voice, they must also listen to it. A more critical pedagogy sets the stage for more authentic teacher and administrator engagement with the students. Critical pedagogy requires a level student-teacher dialogue that creates an authentic and engaging educational environment. Students live and speak authentically, and that authenticity is worth hearing. Where traditional lecture-style pedagogy fails to take advantage of the perspective and lived experience of the student, a more critical pedagogical approach requires and honors student voice. Pedagogical reform that privileges student voice must be advocated by educational researchers and practitioners who see students as the subject, not the object, of their research activity and leadership decision-making practice. But this requires ethical leadership, not just in theory, but in practice. Personal and professional ethics lay the foundation for all mediating practices that make a difference in whether sustainable transformation occurs.

Moving Toward a More Ethical Theory for Research and Practice

The notions of democratic research and practice are well represented in both educational leadership and the student voice literature; hence, we propose a unification of the two in order to develop a more comprehensive theory. Research on ethical leadership and social justice affirms that leaders who nurture democratic spaces enjoy the greatest gains in school personnel effectiveness and student achievement. However, we believe it is clear that educational leaders need a greater arsenal—the voices of students—to contend with a history of educational policies that have only deepened the ''education debt'' (Ladson-Billings, 2006) they owe to students. In Fig. 2, we graphically illustrate this theoretical unification of *The Student Voice Continuum* with the literature on *Leadership Behaviors as Mediating Factors* while also showing how these frameworks fit with issues of *Power Relationships* and *Contextual Complexities*. We argue that all of these pieces are important to include if one is aiming for a more holistic vision of educational leadership research and practice. If one

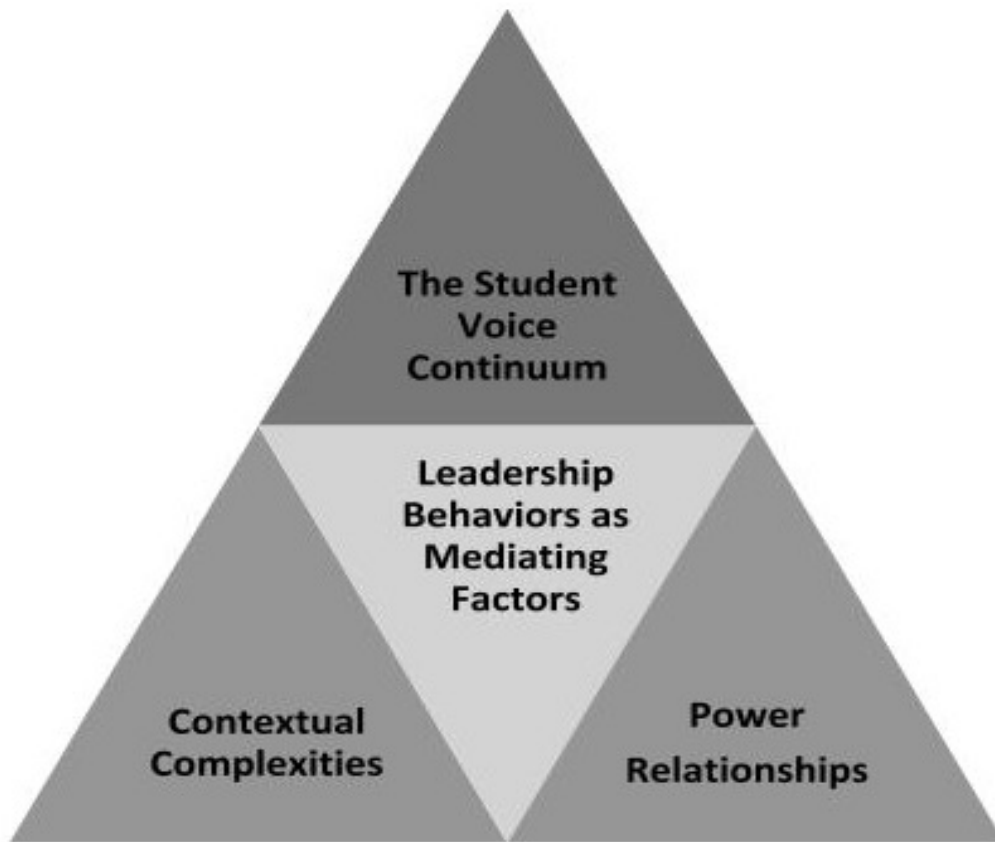component were missing, there would be an obvious gap, resulting in a collapsing of the overall structure.

Fig. 2. Integrating the Missing Pieces Toward a Holistic Vision of Research and Practice.

From The Field: Empirical Examples As Illustrations

As demonstrated in the previous sections, we assert democratic practices, critical pedagogy, transformative leadership, and leadership for social justice are critical components of the ethical educational leadership that fosters student voice and leadership capacity. In addition to engaging conceptually with the research literature, we also reflected on empirical findings from our own research experiences (see Halx, 2014; Halx & Ortiz, 2011; Mansfield, 2011, 2013, 2014; Welton, 2011a, 2011b). In the sections that follow, we share how our research exemplifies the conceptual theoretical framework presented in Fig. 2 as well as critique our work in terms of its limitations. We conclude the discussion section by suggesting further study as we work toward a more inclusive model of student voice for educational leadership research and practice.

One Student's Voice Raps and Resonates

In a study conducted by Halx and Ortiz (2011), one voice is especially clear. It is the pure, unenhanced, and uninterrupted voice of one student participant: Alejandro, a selectively chosen non-completer (sometimes disparagingly termed, ''dropout'') student who had much more to say than the researchers sought or were expecting to hear. How ironic, fortunate for the researchers, and yet at the same time disturbing, that this young man had written and memorized a rap song that conveyed his feelings about education and his status in life. Alejandro's thoughts might never have been heard/read by educational researchers or practitioners if the students' voice had not been purposefully sought. Alejandro was interviewed for a larger study on the viability of critical pedagogy in urban south Texas schools. In response to the question, ''How does the education here at your high school make you feel?'' Alejandro asked if he could answer in a rap lyric that he wrote. Below is a portion of Alejandro's response.

> Wanna wait, but I'm dreamin' weeks pass my thoughts, but I'm schemin' of completing great achievements, and with all my unforeseen demons, trying to deal with what I'm given, so now just look at me singin', look, I don't care, I ain't worried, but in reality, I'm hurtin', living's becoming a burden, I'm stressed out, I'm agitated, the life I lead's complicated, what's up ahead there's no tellin', can you direct where I'm headin'?

The import of this example, and the story conveyed by this one student, serves both as a detailed presentation of a life being lived, but it also inspires the notion that there may be many other students who feel as he does, yet who do not show it outwardly. Alejandro was an 18-year-old high school ''dropout'' who made the decision to return to school. Like the other participants in the study, Alejandro took a while to warm up and engage more fully with the interviewer, and he initially answered the questions as would be expected. However, when the researcher engaged Alejandro and asked him to reflect on his emotional reaction to his school experience, Alejandro responded authentically through his rap music. The authentic student perspective is too often missing from quantitative educational research and traditional school leadership decision-making practice.

A Collective Voice for Change

Welton (2011b) conducted a year-long case study of the educational opportunity networks of students and school personnel at Green High School, a high-poverty, high-minority (HPHM) semi-rural high school. Green High School was in its third consecutive year of poor academic performance under NCLB federal and state accountability guidelines. This ''academically unacceptable'' designation placed the school under review by the state education agency, which required immediate improvement in student academic achievement.

The first academically unacceptable designation lowered the morale of school personnel and students and mandated principal and teacher turnover. The stigma of low performance that plagues many HPHM schools (see Reddick, Welton, Alsandor, Denyszyn, & Platt, 2011) affected Green High School cultural climate as both teachers and students were

embarrassed of the ''ghetto'' school stereotype. Then, a new principal, and a few dynamic teachers, took charge and began to serve as transformative leaders. They decided that empowering student voices would be the best way to improve school's cultural climate while at the same time serving to ''internally motivate'' students.

A coalition of teachers and students initiated the Students for Change project by facilitating a series of student-led dialogue sessions where students problem solved and crafted action plans to improve school climate. Students designed motivational posters that were placed all around the school to advertise the Students for Change agenda. Students also designed a number of incentives for creating positive peer relationships as well as incentives for increasing student academic engagement. Finally, the students crafted a teacher advocate program in order to enhance student belongingness and academic support. Each student selected a teacher advocate, and the student and teacher advocate signed a contract that included agreed upon student short-term and long-term goals. Though social justice observers might question accountability ratings as a mechanism to determine the fate of a school, Green High School was elevated to academically acceptable the following school year and remained open largely as a result of the Students for Change initiatives.

Democratic Leadership and Student Engagement

In a study emphasizing the utility of student voice, Mansfield (2011) conducted a two-year ethnography at a public school for young women. Mansfield's study emphasized the importance of democratic engagement in the development of school culture. In this study, school leadership sought input from adult stakeholders and was committed to engaging students in the decision-making processes at the school from the start. For example, at the end of each year the principal administered a school-wide student survey entitled, ''How are we doing so far?'', seeking feedback to gauge student opinions on a wide variety of important issues.

In addition to seeking feedback from students on school climate, the principal also included students in the selection process for faculty hires each spring. School leaders conducted training sessions where students helped select interview questions and practiced the art of interviewing. Students asked interviewees tough but important questions. The prospective faculty members also presented lessons during the interviews, and the student interviewers offered critical feedback. Students were given a figurative and literal voice in the selection of new faculty members.

All voices in this study, including those of students, described a school culture devoted to learning and flourishing—a place where people respected each other, grew, and learned together. Interestingly, it was not until Mansfield (2011, 2013, 2014) interviewed students directly that one of the most important themes emerged. The students shared that neighborhood peers disapproved of their academic attitudes and behaviors, which resulted in name-calling and rock throwing. Prior to these conversations with students, school administration was not aware that this harassment was occurring, and thus, was not in a position to intervene. As a result of shared findings from this study, the school administrators are developing coaching programs to address the students' needs. The willingness of school leadership to extend student voice efforts from paper-pencil surveys to interviews with a researcher facilitated social justice efforts that directly addressed student needs that might have otherwise gone unnoticed.

Acknowledging Limitations

While each of these research vignettes offers an example of how our proposed theory in Fig. 2 can be put into practice, we also acknowledge limitations in our own work as we critically reflect on ways in which students' voices could be included even further. In our first example (Halx & Ortiz, 2011), the pursuit of student voice enabled Alejandro to express his schooling experiences in a way that would not have occurred through conventional quantitative surveys or structured qualitative methods. Alejandro's authentic voice, like that of several other students in the study, exposed his internalized oppression. These students blamed themselves for their academic stressors, and they did not consciously recognize how school structures and curricula contributed to their stress. A more critical pedagogy would offer students an opportunity to critique their schooling experiences, and allow their voice to be shared with school leaders and personnel. This more comprehensive engagement would facilitate a critical examination of how leadership practices contribute to students' disconnectedness from school while at the same time connecting leaders more holistically to the school.

In our second example (Welton, 2011b), the principal and teacher leaders were transformative in the sense that they empowered students to change the school climate and challenge negative school stereotypes. However, there was insufficient interrogation of contextual constraints, and students were still framed as part of the problem. It was the students who in large part recognized the changes that were necessary to improve school climate, but school administration did little to use this opportunity as a means to reflect further on how their practices also contributed to the stigma of failure. Several school staff members still viewed the students' community and home lives as the source of the school's academic struggles. The school administrators failed to exhibit authentic transformative leadership by failing to engage in critical self-reflection and recognize how student-level inequities can often largely be attributed to greater institutional and school-level forces (see Shields, 2010).

Study three (Mansfield, 2011) offered a robust example of how integrating concepts from the literature (democratic practices, transformative leadership, leadership for social justice, critical pedagogy, and student voice) can give students a safe space to excel academically. However, the somewhat serendipitous discoveries that illuminated student struggles are disconcerting. The latent nature of the student voice findings serves as a poignant reminder of the importance of strategically and purposely giving students an opportunity to candidly converse with teachers, principals, and other adult stakeholders. Moreover, while the school in this study can offer a ''safe academic space'' (Mansfield, 2013) for those lucky enough to win such an opportunity via the magnet school lottery, a troubling question lingers: What about the others? Students who do not have the luck-driven privilege of gaining access to this school must continue to contend with disempowering school experiences. Too often, school leadership, at the highest levels, is not practicing democratic leadership; and thus, most students in this district, and other districts like it, are left to contend with the unsatisfactory status quo.

These research examples, taken in aggregate, illustrate that listening to the voice of the student is not only vital toward the advancement of socially just policies, but it also provides valuable insights toward immediate improvement in student performance, retention, and progress. One student voice illuminated internalized oppression that could potentially be

addressed by pedagogical reforms. Multiple student voices helped to dramatically reform a failing school that might have otherwise closed. An inclusive school administration created an environment that enabled the discovery of discrimination that might have otherwise hindered student safety and success.

The recurring theme that links all of these research studies was that listening to student voice not only facilitated solutions to the problems of individual students and student groups, but it also positively impacted the overall school environment, the decision-making processes of the school leaders, and by extension, the well-being of the surrounding community. A more socially just community begins with listening to the students who will soon become the leaders within it.

Implications and Recommendations

Much of the literature demonstrating how to engage student voice and practice comes from the field of teacher education (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008; Irizarry, 2011b). Though we shared snapshots of how we incorporate student voice in our scholarship, the field of educational leadership still has a way to go in offering more examples of educational leaders who integrate student voice with their personal theories of action. Hence, we proposed a means to do so via an enhanced model for student voice by adding principles of democratic practices, leadership for social justice, transformative leadership, and critical pedagogy from educational leadership literature.

We recognize that forefronting student voice and contesting the status quo is challenging and difficult. As Marshall and Anderson (2008) noted, school leaders are often discouraged from engaging in matters of social justice activism for fear that being identified as an open activist might negatively impact their careers. In fact, many school districts and educational leadership preparation programs urge current and future school leaders to take a neutral stance or refrain from political engagement altogether. Yet conversely, in 2015, the Professional Standards for Educational Leadership adopted by the National Policy Board of Educational Administration encouraged learner-centered leadership and political advocacy. Since then, the latest draft of the National Educational Leadership Preparation (NELP) standards, which are designed to guide program design, accreditation review, and state program approval, include a section on advocacy in the building-level standards: "Element 5.4 ADVOCACY: Program completers understand and demonstrate the capability to advocate for the needs and priorities of the school, district, students, families, and the community" (DRAFT NELP, 2016a). In addition, the district-level standards espouse: "Element 5.4 REPRESENTATION: Program completers understand and demonstrate the capability to represent the district and engage various stakeholders in building an appreciation of the overall context in which decisions are made in the service of student learning and development" (DRAFT, 2016b)

Regrettably, educational leaders often receive little or conflicting instruction on how to engage in matters of social justice because leadership preparation programs tend to avoid dialogue on social justice leadership practices (Marshall & Anderson, 2008). However, as demonstrated by our review of the student voice literature in this chapter, encouraging student voice is one method in which school leaders can at least make micro political ripples that align with their personal social justice values (see Marshall & Anderson, 2008; Santamaria &

Santamaria, 2012). Thus, it is evident that school leaders should consider the student perspective if they hope to make enduring changes to equity in schools.

Educational leadership programs should commit to providing school leaders with the skill sets necessary to integrate student voices—especially those from marginalized groups— and mediate the political backlash that may arise from the dominant population. Educational leadership programs can move beyond the restrictive pedagogy of current school ''reform'' and accountability and move toward innovative and creative instruction that recognizes how student voice is instrumental to school improvement and policies. As Pasi Sahlberg, author of the book Finnish Lessons has noted, ''Accountability is something that is left when responsibility has been subtracted'' (Partanen, 2011, p. 2). School leaders have the responsibility to include students in the process of school leadership. As the studies above suggested, schools that embed student voice in school improvement efforts will inevitably flourish because student voice not only helps develop leadership capacities and critical consciousness of students, but it also builds positive relationships between those students and school personnel (Delgado & Staples, 2008).

The future success of social justice pursuits depends on researchers and practitioners who are willing to step outside the conventional box and try something that might seem counterintuitive. It is indeed ironic that sharing power with others actually strengthens one's power, and that engaging students in school leadership actually enhances the outcome of that leadership, but these ironies are nonetheless true. Professors in school leadership programs and current school leaders must step back from the *expected* and allow the often *unexpected* student wisdom to help them do their job.

The pursuit of excellence is important, but should not supersede the pursuit of equity. This notion may also seem counterintuitive, but empirical studies in Finland and elsewhere provide evidence that excellence follows equity (Partanen, 2011; Sahlberg, 2011). However, we believe that both equity and excellence are concurrently achievable in our schools. The model we have proposed is just one means to facilitate that process. Listening to student voice is equity and excellence in action. Social justice-minded educational researchers and school leaders do not need to reinvent the proverbial wheel. They just need to start listening to the students.

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