THE ROLE OF STUDENT VOICE IN A QUALITATIVE STUDY ON EARLY COLLEGE HIGH SCHOOL PRINCIPALS

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Abstract

This paper examines the role student voice played in a study that examined three principals at schools that participate in the early college high school (ECHS) initiative. Democratic leadership (Dewey, 1916; Rusch, 1995) and social justice leadership (Freire, 1970; Brown, 2006) provide conceptual lenses for the study. Data is drawn from three student focus groups that focused on how ECHS principals promote student success. Results show that students at one school believed their voice was stifled and the principal valued achievement over creating meaningful relationships with students. However, students at the other two schools felt empowered to be active participants in school improvement processes. These findings are relevant as the ECHS initiative expands nationally into high schools that normally might not include students in decision making and school improvement processes. Findings are also relevant because practical research on student voice and leadership is needed.

Introduction

The purpose of this special issue is to highlight scholarly work and praxis that brings the intersection of student voice and school leadership to light. To this end, the current paper explores the role of student voice in a qualitative study on the leadership of three early college high school principals in North Carolina.

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. The impetus to include students in the current study came from the author's desire to make sure that their voices, perspectives and opinions were not silenced or ignored.

As a teacher with over fifteen years of practice, including two years at an early college high school, the current author experienced numerous mandates, policies, rules and procedures that impacted students, yet student's voices, perspectives and opinions were not consulted prior to implementation. Most adults that work with students in a school would prefer that students sit down, remain quiet and do not get involved in grown folks business. Instead of empowering students to be leaders, many school officials treat them like second- or third-class citizens that cannot be trusted to be honest, mature or insightful. As a practicing K-12 educator, the author does not hold these beliefs and welcomes dialogue, debate, curiosity, questions, different perspectives, diversity and equality. When this author conducted a study on principal leadership in an early college high school, she was determined that student's opinions and voices would have as much importance as a teacher or parent's opinion when investigating how early college high school principals promote the success of the students they serve.

With this in mind, the current paper derives from a larger study that examined three principals at early college high schools and how they promote the success of the historically disenfranchised, underserved students they serve. The current paper includes background information on the purpose of early college high schools and how their design encourages student leadership and voice. Next, student perspectives on how principals did or did not demonstrate the qualities and characteristics of a democratic, socially just leader are included. Finally, the actions and practices school leaders took in order to increase student voice and agency in school decision-making processes will be highlighted. Therefore, the current paper answers the following question: *How do early college high school leaders encourage or discourage student voice in decision-making and school improvement processes?*

Literature Review

Early College High Schools

Started in 2002, early college high schools (ECHS's) are public high schools usually located within or near two- and four-year colleges that target first generation, students of color and low-income students who have traditionally been underserved in traditional schools or are underrepresented in higher education (NC New Schools, 2012). ECHS's are classified as schools of choice because parents must apply for their children to attend the school. Students usually enroll during their ninth grade year and after receiving intense academic support and passing qualifying exams like the COMPASS® or ACCUPLACER®, then students are eligible to take up to two

years of college classes that are transferable to other colleges across the country (NC New Schools, 2012).

ECHSs are designed in a way that encourages student voice and leadership. First, shared leadership and collaboration are fostered at all levels. ECHS teachers typically meet regularly during a common planning time to discuss everything from lesson plans to student achievement and how best to serve their students. Since many ECHSs use project-based learning, students come up with assignments and topics that appeal to them and conduct research or write papers on issues that appeal to them. Student leadership through community service and participation in student organizations are promoted as ways for students to practice leadership and have a voice in decision-making processes.

Second, most ECHSs enroll 500 or less students, so many students may find that it is easier to be involved in leadership because there are fewer students vying for leadership roles when compared with traditional high schools that enroll thousands of students.

Finally, students that are as young as 13 or 14 years old attend and successfully graduate from ECHSs after four or five years with both a diploma and a college degree. Most of the time these students took classes on college campuses with people that are two or three times older. ECHS leaders and teachers try to prepare students for this experience by treating them like adults when they first arrive on the ECHS campus. This includes helping students with everything from time management to how to advocate for themselves with college professors to how to safely move around on a college campus. Requiring students to take on this amount of responsibility is a unique feature of ECHSs because at most K-12 schools parents or guardians, not the students, are expected to be personally involved or advocating for the child. ECHSs do encourage parent participation, but accountability and responsibility for a student's success rests on everyone's shoulders.

Student Voice and Educational Leaders

The origin of student voice in school improvement processes dates back to the 1890's and led to the formation of student government associations (SGAs) in schools. The purpose of these first SGA's was to give students an opportunity to learn about and practice democratic citizenship. As such, school leaders rarely called on this organization to help with school processes and procedures. However, this changed in the 1960's as students sought greater voice, participation and representation in school and local boards. Conversely, since the 1970s, many SGAs have little power and are not included in core school improvement decisions. Today, however, there seems to be a shift throughout America to seek ways to include students in reform movements since any actions taken to improve the school will ultimately affect students the most (Mitra, 2008).

Mitra (2008) posits that:

> Increasing student voice in schools also can encourage schools to more closely align their mission, goals, and activities with a social justice focus…young people tend to broach subjects that adults are reluctant to discuss, such as equity issues that tend to get swept under the rug by administrators (p. 10).

When examining the level of student involvement and voice within a school, Mitra and Gross (2009) provide a model for analysis. The *pyramid of student voice* presents a tiered approach to student involvement. At the bottom of the pyramid are students that are *being heard* because school leaders listen to student's school experiences. Next, the middle of the pyramid represents

students collaborating with adults to collect data and form plans to address school problems. Most research on student voice focuses on this level of student voice. Finally, at the top of the pyramid is *building capacity for leadership* where students critique or protest structural and cultural injustices within a school. This final level of student voice is rarely practiced, especially considering the hierarchical nature of school leadership where traditional school leaders are actively at the top and students are passively at the bottom.

School Leadership that Encourages Student Voice

According to Harris and Chapman (2002), successful principals promote student success when they create a personal vision for their organizations that is aligned with their values, invest in staff development and build or maintain relationships including professional learning communities that connect home, school and community. Goldring & Greenfield (2005) posit that four conditions distinguish the work of school principals from administration work in other contexts and present unique challenges for today's school leaders. First, leaders are conscientious of the moral dimension of educational leadership, including how resources such as time, money, materials, and staff effort are dispersed in ways that promotes success for all students. Second, principals must act as advocates for the students they serve by encouraging communities and business leaders to elect officials that adopt policies and practices that improve circumstances interfering with a student's ability to succeed in school. Third, school leaders are cognizant of their role as stewards of the public's trust, guiding and developing the public's understanding of and support for the role public education plays in developing a more socially just and democratic society. For example, principals serve as stewards when they challenge the anti-intellectual belief that academic learning is useful only for a few and not needed by all. Additionally, principals must help communities, particularly the voting public and elected officials, understand that schools must ensure that all students learn regardless of what they look like or where they're from and that accomplishing this goal will require changes in how schooling occurs. Finally, principals must cultivate support for the development of cultural competence among students as a goal of public education. One way principals can accomplish this goal is to help teachers understand that students of color and White students respond differently to engagement strategies; therefore, schools should foster an environment where learning for all truly happens using culturally-responsive teaching and practices (Ladson-Billings, 1995). How principals navigate these challenges to promote the success of all students, particularly students that have been historically underserved and disenfranchised, represents the greatest challenge for today's and future principals.

According to Marshall and Oliva (2009), school leaders can respond to these challenges by shifting their thinking about diversity and understand that inequitable outcomes are not necessarily the result of deficiencies in the students, or their communities. Today's schools need principals that are trained to foster practices which promote success for all students, especially students that have been traditionally underserved and disenfranchised in schools. Today's schools need critical leaders that demonstrate three behaviors. First, they recognize and understand critical issues as well as work to help others understand. In addition, they create safe spaces for conversations, reflections, and actions (Mansfield, 2015; Santamaria & Santamaria, 2011). In addition, they promote student success, combat deficit-thinking, and seek equitable outcomes for all students (Mansfield, 2013). With this background in mind, a conceptual framework that couples the

concepts of democratic leadership with leadership for social justice is outlined that provided the framework for this study.

Democratic Leadership

Philosopher John Dewey believed democratic beliefs and practices that existed in society should be nurtured in schools so a free society would be possible (Dewey, 1916; Rusch, 1995). These beliefs provide the origin for democratic leadership practices in today's American schools. Democratic leadership is characterized by participatory, interactive, and collaborative practices that allow everyone's voice to be heard and included in school-based decision-making processes (1995).

According to Leithwood and Duke (1999), a school leader's values and beliefs on student success and achievement drive the actions and steps they take during school improvement initiatives. Democratic school leaders are active and visible within their schools because they know that the only way a school can improve is by working with and listening to others within and outside the school as action plans or agendas are formed (Johansson, 2006).

Principals also face challenges when working with students because many believe they do not have a voice in what happens within schools (Johnson, 1988; Wasley, 1992; Conley, 1991). Additionally, most students believe that no one is advocating for them especially since most communication within schools emphasizes compliance and non-confrontation over inclusion and democratic practices (Blasé, 1991). Therefore, democratic leaders seek to ensure that this is not the main communication pattern in their school and that major decisions are made only after everyone has had a chance to provide input.

Socially Just Leaders

According to Paulo Freire (1970), a Brazilian educator and advocate for critical pedagogy in schools, education should be a reflective, mutually beneficial exchange between teachers and students. This exchange and engagement would lead both to act within and outside the educational environment to foster continuous, equitable learning environments for all. Another way that a socially just school environment is fostered is through open communication among everyone. Freire wanted students to engage in dialogue that helped identify places where oppression was evident before forming plans that challenged the status quo within a school.

Additionally, Theoharis (2007) posited that socially just leaders have an eye towards respect, caring, recognition and empathy. Socially just principals work to eliminate marginalization and push inclusion for *all* within their schools.

Furthermore, taking a social justice stance in educational leadership leads to conversations with students about the impact race, ethnicity, class, gender, sexual orientation, disabilities and socioeconomic status have had on their experiences (Mansfield, 2015; Marshall & Oliva, 2009; Lalas & Valle, 2007; Theoharis, 2007).

Finally, according to Lalas and Valle (2007), this social justice lens includes the following concepts all school leaders should utilize:

1. Funds of knowledge (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992) – the interconnectedness or networks and lived experiences students bring into schools. These funds of

knowledge can increase learning opportunities and improve school experiences for *all* students;
2. Resilience – students rely on their culture, family, peers and ethnic communities for support and affirmation;
3. Politics of caring and connectedness (Valenzuela, 1999) – developing trusting and meaningful relationships that promote student's learning and academic success.
4. Social networking (Stanton-Salazar, 2001) – encourage open, continuous communication between student's home or community and the school.
5. Critical pedagogy (Freire, 1998) – using dialogue, vision and compassion to advocate for the democratic rights that will create a more positive, productive learning environment for students.
6. Critical inquiry – seeing students as having the capacity and competence to expand their reasoning and become active thinkers that question the status quo and act to promote social justice.

Research Design And Methods

Site Selection and Participant Information

After gaining IRB approval for the larger study, which included parent permission forms and parent and student consent forms, the author set out to choose sites and participants. The current study employed purposive sampling using the following criteria to select three participants: they served a student body composed of 40% or more students of color. Additionally, the principal had to serve at an early college high school that carried a Title I designation, which indicated that the school served a high number of students that participate in the national school lunch program. Finally, in order to show how the principal's practices impacted student voice and leadership over time, the principal must have served at the early college high school for four consecutive years and had seen at least one class graduate and transition out of the school. These criteria narrowed participation to 12 schools. The researcher contacted each of the 12 principals to see if they were willing to participate. After numerous calls and emails, three principals agreed to be a part of the study.

School A

Principal Joan Robinson, an educator with fifteen years of experience, had served as School A's principal for four years at the time of the study. School A is located on a community college campus in a small, North Carolina city with approximately 40,000 residents. The median family income of the city's residents is $39,000 and 20% of the city's population live below the poverty level. While many of the city's residents have a high school diploma (85%) approximately 30% have a bachelor's degree or higher.

One unique feature about School A is the number of immigrant families that have settled in the area because of potential religious or political persecution in their home country. English is the second or third language for many School A students and families.

School A serves as a school of choice for a three-county area and has 360 students. The gender breakdown of the school is 64% female and 36% male. The school is classified as Title I

because 53% of the student body receive free or reduced lunch. Approximately 80% of the students that attend the school would be classified as first generation college students.

School A's student focus group included five students that were 17 years old and classified as juniors at the time of the study. Three of the five students are first generation college students. The gender identity of the five students included three males and two females, with one student identifying as Latina, one student identifying as White, and three students identifying as Asian. Two participants were members of the student government association and three participated in the school's band program. One participant also served on the partner community college's student leadership board.

School B

Principal Karen Lewis, who worked in education for almost 30 years, had the distinction of being a part of the community group that wrote the grant that created School B. School B is the sole high school located in a rural North Carolina town that has a population of less than 1,000 people. The median family income of the town's residents is $28,500 and 24% of the town's population live below the poverty level. The percentage of the population that has at least a high school diploma is 61% while only 7% of the population has a bachelor's degree or higher. The majority of residents commute 30 minutes to an hour away to work.

School B transitioned from being a traditional high school to one that started a school-wide early college program seven years ago. The principal and teachers reported that the program did not really take off during the first four years because of issues working with the partner college. After those issues were resolved, the school's program has since flourished. At the time of the study, approximately 80% of all students at the school participated in the early college program while the remaining 20% were enrolled in the school's career and technical education (CTE) program. For the first time since the program started, the entire ninth grade decided to enroll in the early college program this past year.

School B's partner community college is 90 minutes away from the school, so college classes are broadcast daily to students at the school. Students sit in one of two classrooms that are equipped with huge screens and cameras. Students are able to see the college instructor and college classes in session on the monitor while those in the college setting can see the School B students. A facilitator sits in the room with the students to monitor their progress, help with discipline, and act as a test administrator during exams. Once a month, partner community college instructors travel to the school and instruct students face-to-face while broadcasting their classes back to the on-campus community college students. School B started a 1:1 laptop initiative two years ago thanks to a grant written by the principal, so all 140 students at the school have Chromebooks that they use daily in both their high school and distance college classes.

School B's gender breakdown is 56% female and 44% male. School B was classified as whole school Title I after the free or reduced lunch rate exceeded 60%. Approximately 95% of the students that attend the school would be classified as first generation college students.

Although the researcher preferred to speak with older students because they would have experienced Principal Lewis' leadership the longest, School B's student focus group consisted of six students that were 15 or 16 years old and classified as sophomores and juniors. Four of the six students were first generation college students. The gender breakdown of the student focus group was five females and one male. While more homogenous in terms of gender identity, the student

focus group was relatively ethnically diverse with one Latina student, one White student, three Black students, and one Biracial student. Student participants were involved in numerous activities on campus such as band, chorus, athletics, honor societies and newspaper. Students explained that they were encouraged to join at least one club or organization as a way to make them more well-rounded and marketable when it was time to apply for college.

School C

School C Principal James Washington had a storied 40-year career in education at the time of the study. Like Principal Robinson, Principal Washington also was a part of the community group that helped start School C. School C is located on a community college campus in a North Carolina town with approximately 15,000 residents. The median family income of the city's residents is $26,000 and 36% of the city's population lives below the poverty level. While many of the city's residents have a high school diploma (74%), approximately 15% have a bachelor's degree or higher.

The county where School C is located has a history of high dropout rates and an unstable economic base. The county used to be a former textile and agricultural center and was once able to accommodate uneducated and unskilled workers in large numbers. After numerous plant closings and agricultural consolidations over the last 20 years, the county is now ranked in the top 10 on the state's unemployment list.

School C serves approximately 200 students. The gender breakdown of the school is 57% female and 43% male; the free or reduced lunch rate exceeds 60%. Approximately 90% of School C students are classified as first generation college students.

The student focus group included five students that were 18 or 19 years old, classified as fifth year students or "super seniors" that still attended the school but were enrolled only in college classes. Three of the five students were first generation college students. The demographics of the student focus group were four females and one male. The student focus group was more ethnically diverse with one Latina student, one White student, and three Black students. Since all participants were solely taking college classes, their leadership and involvement at the ECHS was limited. Three of the participants, however, were part of their college's student government association. One participant was on the community college's golf team while another volunteered at the college's daycare.

Data Collection and Analysis

The current study followed research protocols from The International Successful School Principals Project (ISSPP), an international network that compiles research on successful principals around the world (Day, 2004). The goal of the ISSPP project was to collect data from multiple perspectives, including students, and compare effective leadership in various contexts while identifying the personal qualities and dispositions that leaders shared (Day, 2004). After obtaining permission from the principal investigator for the ISSPP project, who was located in the United Kingdom, the current study used the ISSPP protocols, but included questions centered on the context where the three principals served (early college high schools). Although data was collected from each principal, parents/guardians, teachers and college officials, only findings from the three student focus groups will be reported here.

All focus group recordings were transcribed in their entirety and analyzed using NVivo 10. Analysis of the transcripts began with open coding (Glaser and Strauss 1967, Strauss and Corbin 1990). Open codes were then sorted into axial codes (Glaser and Strauss 1967, Strauss and Corbin 1990) and combined with data collected from field notes and document analyses. Field notes were taken on observation data and researcher's thoughts while shadowing each principal over a two-day period. School brochures and handouts, combined with student achievement information provided on the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction website, served as documents for analyses. Using a variety of data sources of and including a variety of participants across three cases contributed to validity and aided in establishing patterns and commonalities between and among cases (Lunenburg & Irby, 2008).

Cross-case Analysis

Patton (1996) defines cross-case analysis as a way to group answers to common questions from various people or to analyze different perspectives on issues. According to Patton (1996), "…for scholarly inquiry the qualitative synthesis is a way to build theory through induction and interpretation [but] for evaluators, the purpose of the qualitative synthesis is to identify and extrapolate lessons learned" (Patton, 1996, p. 425).

Miles and Huberman (1994) stated that one purpose for doing cross-analysis was to enhance generalizability. Even though some researchers believe that generalizability should not be a goal of qualitative research (Denzin, 1983; Guba & Lincoln, 1981), cross-case analysis can help answer questions that extend beyond individual cases in a study (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

Miles and Huberman (1994) provided three strategies for conducting a cross-case analysis. In the case-oriented strategy, one case is studied in-depth while additional cases are studied to find common patterns and themes based on the first case. Secondly, the variable-oriented strategy seeks themes that exist across all cases. The final strategy combines the previous two and uses a set of variables across the several cases from which matrices are constructed for analysis. "It's possible, and usually desirable, to combine or integrate case-oriented and variable-oriented approaches" (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 176). The current study utilized the final strategy to examine how students viewed the leadership practices of their principal and how those actions promoted or discouraged student voice and leadership.

Findings

School A

Student participants at School A, who were handpicked by their principal to participate in the study, were initially reluctant to share any information about their experiences with or thoughts about Principal Robinson. Once I assured them that nothing they said in the room would be shared with Principal Robinson (except if they were going to harm themselves or someone else), they soon loosened up and proceeded to share insights on Principal Robinson's leadership promoted or discouraged students' voices.

Interaction does not equal inclusion in school decisions. Students believed that when compared to other principals they had in the past, Principal Robinson was "more interactive" and always talking with students; however, the tone she used at times was "abrasive." One female

student thought that Principal Robinson received criticism because she constantly held meetings with students that many viewed as unnecessary. Part of the reason students found some meetings unnecessary, according to one male student, was because she would "talk *at* the students instead of *with* the students" (using same emphasis as the student).

Participants believed that they had a voice in the school "to an extent" but when it came to taking action based on what students said, "she does what she wants." One student explained that when they want to start a club or plan homecoming events, they would turn to their assistant principal who is "more laid back" to speak with Principal Robinson on their behalf. One female student, who also was involved with the student government association, provided an example of how their voices and opinions are not considered prior to Principal Robinson making a decision:

> We're part of student government here, and so within our senior class, our fundraiser was a flag football thing, which is powder puff, and then it just got complicated the way like we had it set up, it just got changed like by her, so then it just never happened.

Another student explained that Principal Robinson's idea to have male students attired in skirts and dresses to play the game would have been offensive to the school's transgender students. All the students agreed that they did not want to offend anyone at the school and that, upon reflection during our focus group discussion, maybe her decision to cancel plans was the best one. However, all participants thought that "a lack of communication between the senior class members and her" left many students feeling frustrated and upset that their idea was shot down with no explanation from Principal Robinson.

Minimizing the influence of student-led organizations. Another reason student participants did not believe the student government association had a voice in school affairs was because of the group's advisor and her relationship with the principal. One male student explained:

> When I was president of SGA, whenever we proposed ideas, the whole topic of the floor became, "Do you think Robinson would approve that?" Like, whenever we proposed something, that's the first thing she (the advisor) would say, is, "Do you really think Robinson would approve of that?" It wasn't a question of, "Alright, let's take it to her and see what happens." It's like, "No, it's probably not going to happen."

The student went on to explain that they believed this type of exchange meant that Principal Robinson required the SGA advisor, not the students, to directly bring ideas and projects to her. The student said this further helped him see that Robinson really was not interested in what students wanted. Another student, however, differed in her opinions about Principal Robinson. She believed that the principal cared too much about her students and did not want them to get hurt or be offended.

Achievement outweighs building meaningful principal-student relationships. All students agreed that Principal Robinson cared about their achievements, but that celebrations or parties to acknowledge their achievements rarely took place. One female student explained how Principal Robinson encouraged their achievement:

> If she knows there's a trend with a large amount of students not being good in certain classes, she'll usually call a meeting to talk to students about doing better.

Students also pointed out that failure at the school was not an option. According to one participant:

> The point of coming to the school is to succeed, so I'm not sure if she says anything about failure, but she always has the spirit for all of us to achieve and excel into the future.

As far as Principal Robinson being involved in their lives outside of school, students said that she did come to their games at the school and asked about their families or if they had received any information from colleges they applied to. Despite these interactions, however, focus group participants did not believe their needs or feelings drove Principal Robinson's actions or that students were her passion. According to one male student:

> I really do think she enjoys being the principal of a school that has a 100% graduation rate except for the ones that go back to their traditional high schools, but then they graduate from there and that's kind of the same thing. She really enjoys being the principal of a school with some of the statistically highest ACT scores and where students graduate with a two-year degree and last year she was named principal of the year and stuff like that, so I mean, if we strive for excellence in what we do, I think the same could be said about her.

Based on this student's assessment, excellence, achievement and being on top are what drove Principal Robinson rather than relationships with the students as evidenced by one student saying that "half the time students get along with her and half the time they don't."

School B

Student participants were quite enthusiastic and eager to speak with me about their principal, Ms. Lewis. They were chosen to participate in the study on the first day of data collection and, after returning parent permission slips the next day, formed School B's student focus group. When I asked them to describe Principal Lewis to me, they used three words: *caring, energetic*, and *fashionable.*

Advocating for students. One female student shared a story that demonstrated how Principal Lewis cared for her students:

> She cares about our education and also cares about our personal experiences because the only reason why I'm wearing this (pointing to her hoodie) is because of her. She literally called for the Board of Education to allow us to be more open with clothing, because if not, we wouldn't be able to wear these things.

She explained that the hoodies originally violated school dress codes policies that were set by the county. The problem with the policy, however, was that many students were not following it especially as temperatures dipped below freezing during the winter months. The student commented:

> In a way, I kind of feel as people were getting kind of upset, and they were not following their rules like they're supposed to, so she was all like, "Okay, I'm just going to make this easier. Slack off the uniforms, so then it will be less strict and you guys will stop worrying about it."

Once Principal Lewis recognized that a policy was not working for her students at that particular time, she advocated for the policy to be changed at the county level and now students are allowed to wear the hoodies as long as the hoods are not on in the building, the color matches approved school colors, and there are not gang or offensive words on them.

Pushing students to excel. Another way that Principal Lewis showed that she cared for students was by singling out students that were slacking off academically or that needed an extra push. The male participant said:

> She targets certain students. Like, you know how you have certain students that just want to slack off? She actually pulls them in, tries to talk to them, make deals with them, like "I'll do this if you do that."

This example showed that she was emphatic and tried to help students see the benefits of performing well even if it meant offering tangible rewards.

Including students in decision-making processes. When it comes to explaining how Principal Lewis was energetic, a student said that she "always was happy and bouncy in a good way" and that she was willing to compromise with the students. One example a female student provided was:

> If you and a teacher have a fall out, she's willing to listen to both sides and see whether the student was incorrect in what they may have done, or whether the teacher was a little too harsh on the student, because maybe the student perceived it in a different way.

Students appreciated the fact that Principal Lewis would seek their opinions and perspectives on discipline situations instead of just apply zero-tolerance disciplinary policies all the time. Student participants said they understood that when they were wrong, that they deserved to be, and were, punished, but that being able to talk about situations before being punished made a difference.

Showing genuine concern and care for students. When it came to discussing how involved Principal Lewis was in their lives, students shared that she was very involved in their lives inside and outside of school. One student replied:

> [Principal Lewis] holds ceremonies and she really expresses at the ceremonies like how proud she is of us, and she uses our school's averages to make us feel like we're actually improving.

Although the students understood that getting good grades was important and should be celebrated, they also appreciated the fact that Principal Lewis acknowledged how much growth and progress students were making throughout the year.

As far as Principal Lewis' involvement with the students outside of school, several students shared stories of how she showed that she cared about more than their academics:

> **Example 1:** I think if you have your problems, she's willing to talk to you about it and try to help you as much as she can with your personal life.
> **Example 2:** My grandmother passed away. She called my mom and made sure I was okay and asked was I going to be at school and if you were moving, because I usually stay with her, so she really did really get involved.
> **Example 3:** She's checked if my brother was at school, and she'd ask me if he was okay.
> **Example 4:** One time we had a family member go to the hospital, and I was all upset and freaking out and she consoled me and told me everything was going to be fine.
> **Example 5:** She helps me because I'm pregnant. I'm having a baby, so she's trying to make me get my credits all together and not miss much school.

All the examples above pointed to a principal that was involved not only in the student's academic lives, but also their lives and experiences outside of school. The pregnant student, who was 14 at the time of the study, also shared that it meant a lot that Principal Lewis did not judge her and was helping her do whatever she could to finish the ECHS program with a diploma and at least one semester of college classes completed.

Driven by her love for students. When the participants were asked what drives Principal Lewis, most participants said something to the effect of: "Us. Because she loves us like her kids." In relation to the hoodie issue, one student commented:

> A lot of people are telling her, "Don't give them this and that, because they're just going to take it and run with it." And she was all like, "We're going to show them that you guys are responsible enough to do this."

The students appreciated the fact that the principal trusted them to be responsible and not take advantage of situations despite naysayers that believed the students could not handle the increased responsibility.

School C

No-nonsense leadership approach. School C student participants — who were chosen during the first day of data collection because they chose to stay at the school for a fifth year — had one word to describe Principal Washington: *cool*. Several students explained why this word epitomizes Principal Washington's character:

> **Example 1:** He encourages you to learn.
> **Example 2:** He's like one of us. He makes sure you get your work done, but he's not a strict person, and I think that's what everybody likes about him.
> **Example 3:** He basically tells you, and it's up to you to make the decision. He's like, "Look, this is what I've got laid out for you. It's either you do it or you don't. It's up to you. If you choose not to do it, then it's basically your fault." He lays it out for you. He

> tells you that you're going to benefit from it. I mean, I don't know what much more to ask for from him, because he basically helps you out. This is your decision.

Students appreciated Principal Washington's no-nonsense, straightforward approach to leadership because it put the responsibility and push for success back on the students. Since focus group members were adults that attended all college classes, they saw this as the main reason why they felt so prepared to be in a college environment.

The students explained that Principal Washington let them know on day one that the experiences they would have at the ECHS would be different than the ones they had in the past. One participant shared her story:

> He treats us like adults even from the start, which I think is a big deal because if you go to any other type of school, it doesn't matter if you're 18 or 19 getting ready to graduate, you're still not an adult in their eyes. I think that's one of the reasons a lot of people are successful here is because the teachers and the principal both realize that we are more responsible because we're taking on more responsibilities and they don't necessarily baby us along the way. You have to figure out things for yourself, but I think…that it helps you to become more independent and realize that you have to step up and do what you need to do, and I think it's important that he treats us that way, because if he didn't, I think a lot of people would slack off a lot more because they could get away with it, because they could say it wouldn't fall on them.

This participant believed that having increased responsibility and being treated like an adult benefitted her and other students immensely because it helped them figure out how to cope with real-life situations and circumstances. Student participants said that they believed all high schools, even large ones, could benefit from letting students learn how to take responsibility for their own learning and achievement instead of constantly thinking that students would not or could not be successful or responsible.

Showing genuine care and concern for students. When it came to explaining how much Principal Washington interacts with or are involved with the students, several shared stories of the actions he takes to let them and others know how much he appreciates their presence. Two participants shared:

> **Participant 1:** He greets you when you come in the front, he greets the parents, he greets everybody every day.
> **Participant 2:** Since we're a smaller school, I feel that he interacts with us more than like a regular school would. He might come to class and be like, "Hey, Sally" or just tap you on the shoulders. But at a normal school, a principal would just walk in and be like, "Oh, hey, Sally. Hey, Sue. Hey, Amy." I know [Mr. Washington] could go in every classroom in the school and call anybody by their name and you don't find principals that do that.

Students appreciated the fact that their principal valued them enough to learn their names and greet them every day at the front door of the school because they did not believe other principals would be willing to do that.

Serving as a role model for students. All the participants believed that the school would not be the same if Principal Washington ever left. Since Principal Washington was nearing retirement age at the time of the study, the students realized that his departure from the school probably would happen within the next couple of years, but since they were fifth year students, they rationalized that this would not impact them. According to two participants:

> **Participant 1:** I think there are other people out there who could do the job, but I don't think there's anybody out there who could do it better based on his personality type, because it's really clear that he cares about us individually, not just as a school.
> **Participant 2:** We're not just a statistic, or a test score, or a number to him, and it's pretty obvious because some schools, they don't really care about what your name is unless you're making them look good, whether it be through sports or anything that will put them on the map where they get the chance to glad hand reporters and everything. But [Washington] doesn't really care about that. I think if it were to be another principal here, it would have to be somebody who thought along the same lines of it's not about making yourself look good or making the school look good. It's about making sure the kids get an education.

Both participants believed that Principal Washington cared more about making sure the students earned a sound education than accolades or achievement, which they thought was the opposite of most principals. Upon asking what they believed drove Principal Washington, they all stated "the students." One student explained:

> He just cares about us so much, and he knows everything we do. Like, if we didn't come to school one day, he notices it. Like a day I didn't come to school, he's like, "Sue, where were you at? I missed you." He notices everybody.

The student said that she realized part of the reason Principal Washington was able to recognize if students were absent was because of the school's small numbers; but, she also thought that even at larger schools, many students still could benefit from someone noticing when they were not there or were going through a difficult time. Overall, the student participants ended our meeting by saying they thought that Principal Washington was an excellent leader that really was one-of-a-kind, and the right kind of leader for their school.

Discussion

A cross-analysis of the three principals' leadership based on student participants provides insight into the actions or practices each principal took that encouraged or discouraged student voice and leadership.

According to Mitra and Gross' pyramid of student voice (2009), School A Principal Joan Robinson's approach to student voice does not fall on the pyramid. Principal Robinson would speak with students and had constant class meetings to discuss problems at the school, but she did not use student suggestions before making decisions. This made students believe she was not genuinely interested in their input or feedback. Conversely, Principals Lewis and Washington heard their students and collaborated with them on numerous decisions such as wearing hoodies in the building or making sure they are equipped to take college classes and function in an adult

environment. None of the students, however, reported that their principals pushed them to the final level on the pyramid, building capacity for leadership.

Next, Principals Lewis and Washington worked to lobby the communities and write grants that started their schools. This showed that their vision was aligned with their visions on what they believed historically disenfranchised and underserved students could achieve (Harris & Coleman, 2002). Both principals also advocated for their students at the school and district levels even when other adults in the school did not appreciate it (Goldring & Greenfield, 2005). For example, Principal Lewis fought for her students to wear hoodies at school after students complained that the policy was impractical because of the weather. Also, the district's hoodie policy was interfering with the students' ability to succeed in school because students were being placed in detention or being written up because of one clothing item. Although Lewis's decision to speak up on behalf of students about the hoodie issue was not popular, her efforts showed how principals and students could work together to bring about meaningful changes in school policies and decisions.

Thirdly, students reported actions and decisions that revealed how all three principals possessed varying levels of democratic leadership. All three were active and a constant presence in their schools and all sought student input when making decisions (Dewey, 1916; Rusch, 1995; Leithwood & Duke, 1996). Students at School A, however, did not believe that anything they said mattered to Principal Robinson. School A students also were concerned about the diminished influence (and voice) of their SGA; yet, none believed they could speak directly with her about these concerns and instead relied upon an intermediary (the assistant principal) to speak with her on their behalf (Johnson, 1988; Conley, 1991; Wasley, 1992; and Mitra, 2008). On the other hand, the students at Schools B and C reported being able to bring problems, concerns or ideas to their principals and they would be heard and included. These democratic practices helped students have a voice in procedures and processes similar to ones they would encounter as adults in a democratic, participative society.

Finally, students at Schools B and C shared that Principals Lewis and Washington navigated the politics of caring (Valenzuela, 1999) and connectedness in ways that increased student voice and leadership at both schools (Moll et al., 1992). Students at both schools trusted their principals to make the right decisions for them within and outside the school. They also appreciated that their principals met them where they were and pushed them to become better students and citizens. Conversely, students at School A did not believe that Principal Robinson genuinely cared for or was connected to them. Principal Robinson pushed students to strive for excellence and they knew she was proud of their achievements, but not because it would benefit them positively. These findings support Fielding's argument on high performing organizations and the purpose of relationships in such an environment (2007). The purpose of relationships in high performing organizations are less about caring and consideration and are more about interacting to increase performance and outputs. Therefore, Principal Robinson interacted with and learned enough about her students intentionally to help raise student achievement and not because she cared or were connected with her students.

Overall, student participants provided invaluable, unique insight into leadership practices of their principals. Their voice in the current study allowed the researcher to see not only how they viewed each principal, but also what each student valued and respected in a school leader. Even though students typically are not included in studies on school leaders, this study showed that

student participants can offer a mature, poised and highly informed perspective on school leadership.

Conclusion

In closing, school leaders must understand that students will rise or fall to the expectations placed on them. As students are faced with increased academic rigor and more accelerated learning programs such as early college high schools, it is reasonable to expect students to be better informed citizens. Including their perspectives and voice in policy and practice decisions will offer a fresh pair of eyes on how to improve a school, especially since they are the ones most impacted by the decisions everyone else makes around them.

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