

**STUDENT LEADERSHIP FOR RESISTANCE: PARTICIPATORY DEMOCRACY  
FOR RESPONDING TO HATE AT THE SCHOOL DOOR**

*Sue Feldman*

Lewis and Clark Graduate School of Education and School Counseling

*Mathew Grant*

Olympia High School

**Abstract**

This ethnographic counter-narrative presented from the perspective of the school principal, highlights ethical challenges engaging students and community members organizing a response to an aggressive announcement of an anti-gay protest by the Westboro Baptist Church at a suburban high school. Using the state leadership standards as a guide and the conceptual framing of distributed leadership this paper analyzes the school principal, students and community leaders work together to meet the school leadership standard of safeguarding the values of democracy, equity, and diversity to respond to homophobic and hateful protesters at the school door. This case was presented by the principal during an aspiring principals course on Ethics, Policy and the Law offering an example of how to help aspiring principals learn to be ethically courageous in their work with students. These leadership opportunities may be more plentiful as participation in democracy looks more like marching, rallying and counter protests than voting. In 2017 it may not be enough to engage student voice in decision-making about school matters. This paper provides an illustrative example for aspiring and sitting principals who encourage students to participate effectively in democracy.

## Introduction

“A democracy is more than a form of government; it is primarily a mode of associated living, a conjoint communicated experience” (Dewey, 1916, p. 87).

Public education is one of the only public goods afforded to all children in the United States; and public schools are intended to figure the social-political public life, often described as democratic. Although schools are rarely democratic institutions themselves, and schools tend to foster social control rather than participation and social empowerment (e.g., Apple, 2012; Aronowitz, 2004; Banks, 2002; Freire, 1985; Giroux, 2005; Leonardo, 2004; McLaren, 1998; McLaren & Kanpol, 1995), there have long been educators imagining ways to use public schooling as training for effective participation in democracy (Banks, 1997; Boggs, Kurshige, & Glover, 2012; Dewey, 1916; Freire, 2000; Goodlad, Soder, & McDaniel, 2008; Horton & Freire, 1990; Schaefer, 1967). While public schools may aim toward democratic ideals of participation (Apple & Beane, 1995), justice (e.g., Rawls, 2003; Solomon, 1990; Waltzer, 1994), and inclusion (Young, 2000), preparing ethically responsive school principals to lead schools that realize these goals is not straightforward (e.g., Brooks, 2010; Brown, 2004; Elmore, 2000; Feldman & Tyson, 2013; Knapp et al., 2003; Levinson et al., 2011; Marshall, 2004; Portin et al., 2009; Theoharis & Haddix, 2013).

Looking to the Oregon School Administrator Standards, which guide principal preparation program design, there is a state interest in schools promoting social justice and school leaders being able to assess the socio-political context and respond adaptively to unsafe, inequitable and unfair conditions inside and outside of their school. While these expectations provide some guidance, what is not conveyed in these expectations is the amount of risk and resistance principals need to be prepared for when they do stand up against socially controversial, unsafe, inequitable, or unfair conditions for students and staff.

Drawing primarily on public records and the principal’s perspective shared in a presentation to an aspiring principals course at Lewis and Clark Graduate of Education and Counseling, this article advances resistance as a possible additional tier for the pyramid of student voice (Mitra & Gross, 2009). Below, we consider how distributed leadership explains leadership in this case of principal, student, community organizing a response to an announced protest by the homophobic Westboro Baptist Church at a suburban high school. These hateful protests continue to spread so that a growing number of school principals are faced not only with hate from the broader community visiting their school but hate within their school emboldened by the current social and political context of the United States. This high school principal, Mr. Grant, was invited to tell his story of student leadership not as an exemplary model but as a counter narrative to the dominant narrative of school leadership as isolated, heroic, ahistorical and socially-politically neutral (e.g., Dantley & Tillman, 2010; Evans, 2007; Larson & Murtadha, 2002; Lopez, 2003; Parker & Villalpando, 2007; Theoharis, 2010; Theoharis & Haddix, 2011) as if school leadership is necessarily isolated from the injustices and inequities in the broader social and political context.

### A High School Responds to Hate at the School Door

This case begins with homophobia. Homophobia is common in high schools in the United States. Forms of heteronormativity and sexism inside schools form constant threats to the equity aims of most public high schools (e.g., D'Augelli, 1998; Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network, 2009). Heteronormativity, homophobia, heterosexism, sexism and gender-based bullying and harassment are all common features of social interaction inside and outside of high school (e.g., Pascoe, 2007; Walters & Hayes, 1998; Wilkerson & Pearson, 2009; Wimberly, 2015). While this is not a static condition of high school, it does seem to be constant and pervasive (Mayo, 2007). The normalization of heterosexism is just one of the ways we see the permeability of social life inside and outside of school. In other words, homophobia may not originate in school, but it is practiced in schools. Just as heteronormativity and homophobia are difficult to counter in broader society, it is not clear how a school principal might resist homophobia inside of school when it is sponsored in the broader community (e.g., Blackburn, Clark, Kenney, & Smith, 2010; Blackburn & McCready, 2009; Pinar, 1998).

To set the scene, on February 12, 2012, Washington state passed a marriage rights law protecting the rights of all couples to marry. The Olympia School District was notified shortly after the passage of the law that members of the Westboro Baptist Church planned to protest across the street from the Olympia High School. Their announcement letter was written by lawyers, and the language made it clear that this group was prepared to use the full extent of the law to antagonize the school community in protest of the support some students had shown for the marriage rights act. While ignoring the social production of heteronormativity and sexism more generally within school is common (Carpenter & Lee, 2010), in this case the school principal saw an opportunity to engage students in an open discussion about what, if anything, they wanted to do to respond to a planned, explicit expression of homophobia and hate at the school door.

Not all principals would have seen the immediacy of this external threat to the school's safety, democratic values, equity and diversity goals as an opportunity. It was the last week of school, the staff and the students were exhausted. The focus of the entire school was on graduation and winding down the school year. It was an inconvenient time, at best, to gather staff and students to organize a new event. Here is how the principal describes it:

Just when I thought my plate was entirely full and we were close to graduation, I was hand-delivered a letter from a police lieutenant. The letter, authored by Phelps-Chartered Attorneys at Law, informed me the Westboro Baptist Church was planning to protest in front of our school on June 7th from 7:15-7:45. I immediately remembered their hateful protests at the Matthew Shepherd Funeral. This group is known for their vile, homophobic displays at large public events such as funerals of veterans. They seize public opportunities to display messages of vitriolic hate directed at the LGBTQ community and many other groups. I was a bit stunned that they had picked our school to protest at, and I wondered what we were going to do.

In the immediate lead-up to receiving the letter from Westboro Baptist Church, there had been another recent concern about student safety at school:

We had had two lockdowns the month before; there had been a report of a person walking across our campus with a gun, with a rifle. So someone spotted it once, we thought that had to be a false alarm. Then it happened again, so we got bad press. Then a little bit before that, we had had a student light a trashcan on fire, smoke got everywhere, we evacuated the school, and you know, in 14 years, I'd never had incidents like that. We had three very unsettling events, so it felt a little unsettling at the time.

Just in this scene-setting introduction, the school principal's work is situated in the broader social-political context. Next, it becomes clear that the principal does not act alone. From his first move, we begin to hear how leadership is distributed in the search for information and ideas. Searching for information is a standard feature of organizational learning (March, 1988; Honig, 2008) in schools and school districts. No school leader knows everything, and knowing when and where to search for information is useful given how much time it can take. He searches the district office first:

My district office put me in touch with our legal counsel who told me to call the law office and ask them to go over their plans. It turned out the firm was a family of lawyers who were also Westboro Baptist members. I was told that the group "expected that their rights would be honored" and that they wouldn't hesitate to sue people who tried to violate their rights. I immediately understood the need to make sure no student got physically sucked into an ugly confrontation with the group and become bait for their scheme to win lawsuits.

These conversations, while informative, did not yield direction for Mr. Grant. The principal describes his search this way:

After the conversation with the lawyer/church member, I was still a little lost for what to do. I decided to start in my comfort zone, which was the STAND Club. I also invited a community organizer who has been a longtime leader to come to a STAND meeting. Six years earlier Nazis had come to town to recruit youth. The community organizer worked with STAND students to organize a rally downtown to combat the hateful messages that the Nazis were promoting. About 400 people showed up to a rally where about half a dozen students led the audience with powerful speeches and dialogue. This event helped me realize the power of our youth. It also taught me the power of partnering with community organizations that are committed to social justice.

### **Leadership Defined and Illustrated**

Stepping back from the principal's narrative, to situate his story thus far in the work of school leadership, the Oregon Leadership Standards define school leadership in part as promoting social justice, protecting the safety of students and staff and safeguarding the values of democracy, equity and diversity; but the standards do not expect principals to do this alone as a heroic one-person performance. Drawing on Distributed Leadership (Spillane Halverson,

& Diamond, 2004) to conceptually frame leadership, the *stretchy* quality of leadership can be seen in Mr. Grant's searching for consequential information to figure his response to this threat to student safety and the values of democracy, equity, and diversity. Mr. Grant did not find the response within himself; he connected with people with specialized expertise, perspective, and interest. Students, their parents and community organizations are in some ways better positioned to respond to social injustice and to create conditions that support (or constrain) ethical action. Spillane et al. (2004) explain it this way:

Leadership is not simply a function of what a school principal, or indeed any other individual or group of leaders knows or does. Rather, it is the activities engaged in by leaders, in interaction with others in particular contexts for specific tasks. In other words, rather than seeing leadership practice as solely a function of an individual's ability, skill, charisma and/or cognition, we argue that it can be understood as a practice distributed over leaders, followers, and their situation. Attending to the situation as something more than a backdrop or container for leaders' practices, we consider socio-culture context as a constitutive element of leadership practice, an integral defining element of activity. (p. 5-11)

From this perspective, leadership is not a process of handing out roles and responsibilities, but it describes leadership as a generative process that emerges in situated activity.

Just to clarify, from this perspective, ethical leadership could also be understood as distributed in situated interactions generated between people. This way we can see the values of democracy, equity, and diversity as participatory, interactive, and distributed activities. This is not a transaction perspective of doing to others what you want done to you, but a generative effort, better described as what we choose to do is the extent of democracy, equity, and diversity. Those values are not the stage on which we act out our values, but situations in which we *are* democratic, equitable and diverse. From this perspective, leadership is by definition *socially practiced* as are democracy, equity, and diversity. To this point, Mr. Grant was searching for resources, and in so doing he was practicing democratic leadership, not in a one-person-one-vote sense but in his participatory, choice framing, and social responsibility actions.

Mr. Grant next invited students to participate in this work, further combining leadership and participatory democracy. This is where Mr. Grant stretched both leadership and democracy across a broader group of participants. In turning to students, he was not looking to subjugate them; he was looking to activate their leadership. He still had no clear idea of what to do, but he expected that asking others would help generate ideas for figuring out what the right thing to do was. Here is how Mr. Grant described this first meeting with students:

Ten students showed up and they didn't know what to do. The community organizer talked to them about Unity in the Community, and I thought, "Oh, they're going to want to do something." However, they weren't sure how to respond. So I asked them to talk to their friends and come back for a meeting later in the week.

Then a community organizer, 10 students, and the principal were beginning to think about the situation. This is an interesting example of leadership stretching across people over time

(Spillane et al., 2004). Each of these people went on to talk to other people in their social networks, and as time passed, the conversation and ideas about what their response might be began to spread. Much of the talk was face to face, but there was also an emerging discussion on Facebook© as students messaged each other about the meeting and the upcoming protest by the Westboro Church. While this discussion was spreading there were no overt signs of student leadership emerging, but a growing number of students and community members were speaking about the topic. The principal next turned to the teaching staff:

I sent a communication out to our faculty and told them we would discuss possible actions with department heads during our Thursday meeting. This was a week before Westboro Baptist Church members were planning to come. Some teachers approached me saying, “We have to ignore them, we must ignore them, and we cannot give them the time of day.” In my department meeting, we disagree sometimes, and we’re okay with each other afterward. This situation felt different, and many of the department leaders were animated. Some of our department leaders felt strongly that we should not confront this ignorance. They were concerned about potential pandemonium in front of the school, and they did not feel any action of ours would be effective...in fact, they believed it would be counter-productive. I was surprised by the emotional opposition to confronting Westboro. To some, standing up to the Westboro Baptist Church meant putting themselves on the same side as LGBTQ people and other community members who wanted equal marriage rights. On the other hand, there was also another large, vocal and passionate group that thought we should do something. It was a lively debate, but I left feeling like we needed to respond in some manner.

At this point, deliberations had begun, and there was a lively debate: Students were talking with each other, and with their families, department heads were talking with each other and with their teachers and school counselors. There was no clear plan or direction. There were multiple points of view, and while the date of the Westboro protest is coming quickly, Mr. Grant seemed to trust that the process would lead to a satisfactory response and that it was not his work to decide what that will be. He had gotten the deliberations started and what happened next was still unknown to everyone. Mr. Grant was publically learning. Not knowing how to respond to Westboro, he was transparently searching for ideas inside the school and beyond the school. He had offered an authentic problem for deliberation, and he was in the dialogue with everyone else. Mr. Grant’s next move opened the leadership web further.

### **Students Take up the Leadership Mantle**

So far, the district office, students, and the school staff were all potentially involved in deliberations to design a response to the Westboro Baptist Church protest. Then Mr. Grant turned to YouTube© to search for schools that had already responded to the Westboro Baptist Church. He described it this way:

Since I was looking for direction on how to respond productively, I did what every professional who works with teenagers does and searched for answers on YouTube. I quickly found footage of responses and non-responses from other schools. In the

groups that ignored the Westboro Baptist Church, there were ugly confrontations of students and adults screaming and yelling which almost led to violence.

This seems important since some teachers and some district office administrators and peers were suggesting to do nothing. This non-action turned out to be decisive action that, at least in some schools, was unsafe and did not safeguard the values of democracy, equity, and diversity. Open transparent deliberations, though far from conclusive at this point, were generating a sense of support for, and perhaps a glimpse of, the potential of student leadership; but this would require formal leadership to let go of control and publicly acknowledge needing help to determine what the right response might be. The principal continued:

When I saw two examples of schools that created organized, pro-diversity rallies in response, I thought, “That’s what I want our school to look like.” One of the schools that responded was featured on the Not In Our Town (NIOT) website. When I reached out to NIOT, they put me in touch with a teacher who was a leader of one of the responding groups. When I asked her about her planning, she said that her students organized a rally. She said it was the best experience they had all year. She talked about how her student leaders were inspirational and led a whole movement in their school. I thought, “We’re going to do it.”

It is one thing to think to himself, “This is what I want to do,” but this does not get the work done. The first meeting with students was Tuesday; and they agreed to meet again at the end of the week. On Friday, just before the end of the school day, Mr. Grant announced the follow-up meeting on the intercom. At 2:35, more than 100 people, composed of students, staff, and superintendent, gathered for the meeting. Mr. Grant explained:

I had no formal plan except that we were going to do something. I was a little terrified but inspired by their enthusiasm. I started by showing the video of Gunn High School where they held a rally in response to a Westboro protest. Right after the video, we broke students up to brainstorm a theme of our rally. I suggested they come up with a visual symbol and be prepared to talk about it. After about twenty minutes, students started presenting. Most had themes about unity; it was all about supporting everybody in our school from all backgrounds. And then one group came up with an amazing picture that had hands wrapped around the words “Oly Love.” I was surprised that the entire group agreed that this symbol represented the focus our rally. It was about loving everybody in our community and standing up for all groups. Next, we broke into groups to discuss activities for a rally that would fit our theme. There were many ideas for student speakers, music, and other activities. By then it was getting late, and I asked students who were committed enough to work out a draft over the weekend. I told them I would meet with them on Sunday afternoon and see what they came up with.

The superintendent joined this meeting in the library to listen to students and observe the planning process; which was likely part of what Mr. Grant found terrifying. But beyond supervisory concerns, walking into a meeting with students with an authentically open plan that relied on listening and reacting responsively actually worked in this situation. The group

now had a symbol generated *by* students and *for* students. This is a step toward having a student-generated artifact that defined and eventually led the response. By choosing *Oly Love* and making it a statement about community and inclusion, students were themselves safeguarding values of democracy, equity, and diversity. There was plenty of homophobia in this high school, as in all high schools, but students were now beginning to define a stance for themselves that was crafted to reject a threat from outside of school that might also have some use inside of school. The *Oly Love* symbol was also in a sense an artifact of distributed leadership. If leadership is situated in interactions between people and artifacts, this artifact was a tool that generated student leadership. *Oly Love* clarified the focus of the response, and it gave the rally purpose. Another illustrative example of how artifacts can generate leadership came at the end of the Friday afternoon meeting. Mr. Grant described it this way:

The Friday meeting was one of the most energetic and unifying moments in my professional career. Despite not coming in with any agenda, a student handed me paper and said, "Here you go Mr. Grant." I said, "What is that?" She said, "It's the minutes from your meeting today."

For Mr. Grant, the meeting minutes were a profoundly symbolic artifact; documentation of students leading participatory democracy. School-based student voice work is often what we refer to as *democracy-lite*. It happens within a problematic space of teacher-student in which the students have no real options but to participate. Here was the possibility of students in a less subjugated time and place generating their participatory democracy. This student just took up the work for the group. Mr. Grant reported that the meeting minutes were still a valued artifact that reminded him that students rise to the occasions we open to them.

Children must be turned into students to enable teachers to enact teaching schema and the types of students that are created influence what particular teaching schema can be enacted. At the same time, the actions taken that enact various teaching schemas will create different kinds of students. (Feldman, 2004, p. 296)

When the teaching schema is telling students what to do and what to think, it generates students who look to adults to be told what to do and what to think. But this is situational. When the teaching schema is that we have a problem of injustice and we need each other to figure out how to solve this problem, it generates a form of participation that, in this case, generated social responsibility, or taking-up work for the group to help the group. By the end of Friday's meeting students were in charge of the work they had conceptualized for themselves, but they were not the only people planning actions in response to the Westboro Baptist Church.

### **Community-engaged Leadership**

Mr. Grant also engaged with the community organizations, first looking for supportive partners and later hoping to extend the students' unity message throughout the community:

On Saturday, I met with the *Unity in the Community* group who invited me to an organizing session for the response to Westboro. Since many in *Unity in the Community*

were also part of an Interfaith group, I was able to discuss the situation with several local religious leaders. I quickly found out that all the churches, progressive and conservative, didn't want to be associated with the Westboro Baptist Church either. At our Interfaith meeting, I had a wide assortment of leaders including the Rabbi, the leader of the Baha'i Faith, the Community Christian Center, a Lutheran Minister. This diverse group quickly agreed that we would sing a song. We picked songs that no faith group was tied to so all could feel comfortable. The group felt comfortable with this plan and committed to bringing their followers. I also remember a couple of fundamentalist Christian groups felt like they couldn't come but were still there to voice support. On the day of the event, one group came early in the morning to pray for us.

As the response was beginning to materialize, it's worth pausing to note that the leadership activity at this point was fully distributed across the community: Students have designed and produced the *Oly Love* image and associated message to focus this event and the work has spread beyond the school day and beyond the school as a meeting place. Although the principal was in attendance at these meetings, he is not in charge. There is instead a hetero-archical, and collaborative community emerging for the purposes of this response. It is not designed to sustain or to become a new organization; instead, it might be described as a flexible and nimble activity system with a responsive division of labor aimed at one event. That said, there does seem to be some capacity building for the students who are learning to quickly organize a response to hate. It is also worth noting that although this response has moved beyond the school day and the school house, it began at school and it began with the school principal and the school district superintendent in the room. Mr. Grant continued his narrative this way:

On Sunday we met again. The marketing group came up with a t-shirt with the *Oly Love* symbol with hands wrapped around the words that are shaped like a heart. And we agreed to put the symbol on that back of the shirt because we were all planning to turn our back on hate. One student drew the picture by hand and another student assisted by drawing the same symbol on a computer. It was amazing collaboration for a T-shirt. We decided to take a risk and ordered 300. On Monday, the 300 were gone instantly and we decided to order 400 more. Soon, those were gone too so we ordered 300 more and eventually sold over 1,000 shirts (the money from the shirts paid some expenses, and then we had the ability to donate to our local LGBTQ support groups). The marketing far surpassed my expectations and the symbol was an instant success on Facebook© as well.... On Monday morning, we met again and organized the agenda for the rally to include time for the Interfaith group. They gladly consented even though it felt strange to be inviting religious leaders to our school to participate in an event. But we were glad to have them at our rally.

### **Leadership as Mediation and Determination**

So far, we have described the deliberative process as the start of leadership distributing. It could also be described as the start of participatory democracy in this social-political event microcosm. Where participation meets leadership in a distributed analysis of leadership is interesting to consider. We have identified that important artifacts were generated by students,

important community members agreed to bring followers, and a variety of self-organizing groups formed to accomplish joint work. These are all activities that would be described as features of distributed leadership, but not in a social and political vacuum. These are features of distributed leadership within a democratic ethos: trust in open and transparent communication, seeking multiple perspectives, informed and deliberative decision making, the conviction that there are choices, an expectation of negotiation with superiors and the police, the authority within a school principal to take socially controversial topics to the students and the staff for consideration, the trust that people — including the Westboro Baptist Church, the students and all community members who may choose to participate — will abide by the laws and allow for free speech without antagonizing others. These are the conditions under which leadership is distributed. That is not to say that democratic values are necessary for distributed leadership. Quite the contrary. Theoretically, distributed leadership is what leadership is, no matter what the social goals of leaders are. An oppressive authority requires subjugated followership for leadership, just as a democratic leader requires participant followership. What is less clear in the changing democratic conditions of 2017 is what form student participation in democracy should take. As the school community's response began to take shape, the opposition also began to take shape:

The *Oly Love* shirts were cropping up all over the place and I started getting phone calls from people who weren't happy. We received lots of critical calls. I also received calls from some politicians and community leaders who were critical. Other principals told me what a big mistake I was making. It became stressful. I was thinking that many saw this as political support for gay marriage. While I wanted the school and community to show support for our LGBT[Q] students and family members, I also knew it was not appropriate for me as a public official to take a stance on a political issue, no matter what I believed personally. I was starting to second guess my decision. I took another blow when one of the leading principals across the state urged me not to hold the rally. He said our actions could lead to huge consequences. There was a whole group of students who came from families that didn't want to participate in the counter rally. Some parents even thought we were bullying the non-participants to get involved. So we had to make it okay to come to school on Thursday and work quietly in the Commons while the counter rally was going on. I didn't want to force people, and there was still a feeling of pressure by the students at the rally for all to participate. We had to undo some of the fervor and make some norms.

While students and community members were clearly in charge and leading much of the work for what they deemed a response to hate, the principal's role as buffer cannot be ignored. In other words, he may not have been in charge, but he was involved. He was fielding the concerns and buffering the student and community leaders from the critics:

We also discovered there was a great deal of misinformation that needed addressing. For example, even though we had no intention of letting WBC on our grounds, there was a petition going out to call for me not to let the Westboro Baptist Church on our property. But once misinformation gets on the internet it becomes a

reality. Over 100 people signed this petition even though the Westboro group was planning to set up on the sidewalk across the street.

And Mr. Grant continued to assess safety concerns:

We had to think of safety to ensure that our students wouldn't get themselves into trouble with the protesters. We told all of our students to follow these rules if they choose to participate: you have to be respectful and safe, you have to stay on the school side of the barricade (the other group was going to be across the street), you have to follow all school rules and state law, and finally they had to agree not to engage the protesters. Finally, the big blow came on Tuesday when the police met with my administration team and our district officers. In our meeting two days before the rally, they said, 'We're not going to support you if you're going to have a rally.' I was stunned and asked, 'So you're not sending any officers?' I happened to make eye contact with my Assistant Superintendent who gave me a nod — that was enough confirmation for me to say, "No way, you've got to give us support." The Lieutenant thought that it was irresponsible and that we were putting police in harm's way. I continued to push back and spoke definitively about our ability to keep students safe. Inside, I felt pretty isolated. The only thing that kept me going was that I knew my bosses were giving me support. The Lieutenant went back, spoke to his bosses and changed their minds the next day. In the end, they committed full support. Despite our initial differences, I could see where they were coming from given their responsibility to maintain law and order. This was an explosive situation politically and emotionally, so I respected the police for changing their minds.

Before this incident with the police, most of what Mr. Grant has described paints a picture of participatory democracy with deliberations, open, inclusive and transparent communication, open meetings with flexible, responsive agendas, self-organizing small groups and a sense of choice and multiple possibilities for decision making. As described in the above passage, the interactions with police also have democratic overtones, including even the possibility of negotiating with the police and stating disagreements with their approach without fear of reprisal. It is not that there was no fear or no imbalances of power, but with civil tones and listening to points of view other than their own, a reasonable, safe sharing of power was possible. This interaction with the police and all the other activity that went into this event could be described as actively safeguarding the values of democracy, equity, and diversity. By opening up this event to any student or staff member to participate, in a sense turning the after-school and just-outside-of-school into democratic space, but this is not easy work. Mr. Grant describes the final day this way:

This was really a hard time. I went back, talked to my assistants, and felt pretty strong again. I was able to ground myself in the vision I had of my community and what it stood for. I knew our students were showing us the way—to them, the rally was a way to show what we stand for and who we are. I knew we had to do it. I didn't sleep too well on Wednesday night. I heard a phone message from someone in the neighborhood who said they were blaming me for all the violence that would occur today. This person

said he would be hiding in the basement out of fear during the protest. People started showing up in masses and by 7:00 a.m there were 1,000+ people in front of our school standing in the pouring rain. It was packed, and the whole place was full of parents, alumni, church members, and students. It was an amazing site to see the sea of white shirts with *Oly Love* imprinted on the back. It was an amazing feeling to be on the front end of that when nobody turned around to confront them at all at least from our point. There's a great picture of a line of backs right in a row with *Oly Love* blocking the Westboro group from getting their words across. The day of the rally, some student made a giant *Oly Love* flag out of a shower curtain that we proudly flew in front of the school all day. I still have it and plan on keeping it forever as a symbol of the unity we felt at this time.

Mr. Grant continues:

My only role was to welcome everyone, and then I handed it off to our student leaders. I didn't want any adult, or non-student to speak but one of our faculty members insisted. She said, "We have to read a message from the faculty." She read it, and I thought it was well done. Then the students took over with powerful messages. They didn't engage with the Westboro protesters and instead spoke about the need for the people in front of them — our own school and community members — to look at themselves and what they could change in their own lives...what are you going to do when you hear homophobia, or racism, or sexism in the hallway? The students were saying, "Let's look at what we're doing to each other and confront that." Students asked their peers what they do when their friends say hateful things. They challenged their peers to make change even when it was hard. I loved their opening words and felt so proud of them and the work they had done.

### **Situating This Case In The Research Literature On Student Voice**

This case offers interesting contrasts to the student voice literature in five distinct ways. First, it was sponsored by the principal in opposition to what many teachers wanted and expected. This contrasts with most student voice literature that suggest teachers sponsor the work often without the support of school principal. Even the example of a successful response the principal found on the internet was a teacher initiated project. Second, the literature suggests that student voice projects take time for developing role expectations (Mitra, 2009), trust, (Mitra, 2008) and clarity of purpose (Mitra, Serriere, & Stoicovy, 2012). This project emerged and was completed within two weeks. Third, student voice work is generally focused on making improvements within the school (Brasof, 2015); this work was external to the school and aimed to cross the permeable barrier between schools and the broader social world. Fourth, student voice work generally aims to create a sustained change to the school, while this case aimed to organize one action as a rapid response demanding flexibility and a nimble forming and disappearing student and community partnership. What was sustained from this direct action with students, staff, neighbors, community organizations including faith-based organizations was the principal's learning from his actions and reflection. Fifth, student voice work is likely to focus on student participation in decision-making practices that are generally

defined by adults and accepted as the dominant practice of adults in the school (Fielding, 2001; Mansfield, 2014). Although it is intended to introduce students to decision making as an empowerment tool to participate effectively in otherwise adult decision making, these processes often reflect subjected or imaginary distributions of power and status and have been identified as a potentially problematic area for student voice (Cook-Sather, 2014; Fielding, 2004). This case did not teach decision making; it simply expected students to figure out their own decision-making practices and basically make necessary decisions as necessary. There was no attention given to what form of decision making would be used or what roles students would take in the work; instead, left to their own designs, decision making was fairly organic, sometimes resembling consensus, sometimes resembling the doer decides and sometimes voting using majority rules. This organic approach may have only been sustainable for a short-term project, but it did seem to work in this case. Lastly, student voice literature sometimes points to reflection as a component of the educators' experience with student voice, but rarely does reflection offer key insights for leadership development. As Dewey (1916) suggests, we do not learn from experience; we learn from reflecting on experience. By this principal's account, reflection is not something he generally takes time to do because action takes most of his time; however, presenting the case to an aspiring principals' course caused him to reflect. He reported that planning to tell this story to aspiring leaders, telling the story, and then reading the transcript of the story all helped him conceptualize his practice as participatory democracy.

If this case stands outside of the student voice literature in at least these five ways, what does it contribute to understanding student voice initiatives? First, it is a resounding positive case of student voice responding to hate with a message of unity and love. While this action may not have eradicated hate from the school, and some might say the message of unity and love pushed to the side what might have been a clearer and more specific stand against homophobia, this endeavor did climb the pyramid of student voice (Mansfield, Welton, & Halx, 2012; Mitra & Gross, 2009). Students' voices were elicited and listened to, students collaborated with adults and perhaps more importantly with each other and with community organizations. As they took over the design and enactment of the event, students not only increased their capacity to lead, they actually led this community-wide effort to resist intimidation. These actions and practices were not subjugated to the dominant culture of schooling in which student voice is elicited to increase their cooperation and participation without disrupting the still oppressive curriculum structures and non-democratic schooling (e.g., Apple, 1993; Aronowitz, 2004; Bowles & Gintis, 1976, 2001; Darder, Torres, & Baltodano, 2003; Spring, 2004). Resistance may be an additional tier for student voice called *leading resistance*. Resistance in this case was not aimed at the school but, similar to Lac & Mansfield's (2017) work, it instead used school as the place to learn to be socially and politically critical of and effectual in the broader social-political life of the community. Times have changed since 2012: Majority-rule decision making and modest deliberation may be insufficient to safeguarding democracy, equity, and diversity. Invigorating participation in resistance as democracy seems to be necessary, and there is a lot to be learned by principals and students about doing this well.

## Aspiring Leadership and Student Voice for These Times

Hate is not new at school, but school-level leaders have reported an increase in overt hate speech and violence expressed at school leading up to and following the 2016 presidential election. Given the overt and somewhat emboldened hate showing up in school communities, school leaders have a new need to figure out how to respond to explicit hate in and around school. Mr. Grant was invited to share his experience to help aspiring principals imagine their unmatched opportunity and responsibility to shape the conditions that prepare students to participate effectively in democracy. Below we highlight three areas for aspiring leaders to raise student voice beyond democratic-like decision making and beyond building capacity to lead, to a new tier for organizing the community within and beyond the school to respond to unsafe, inequitable and unfair homophobic encroachment on school.

**Learning from experienced principals.** In Ethics, Policy and Law courses it is typical to use case studies. These are generally well-crafted and appropriate for raising calculated and pre-determined ethical issues, but they can be overly scripted and lack the complexity of a real-life case brought by sitting principals. Choosing the experiences to learn from is a remarkable opportunity for professors of these courses. Professors can invite sitting and retired principals to share traditional cases of heroic, loyal conformity, or social status confirming leadership. However, doing so may affirm leadership schema but constrain aspiring leaders' imagination of ethical practice. With these leadership cases, the opportunities to generate democracy, equity and diversity may be invisible to aspiring school leaders who have no exposure to the possibilities for resistance.

Mr. Grant was one of five school leaders invited to present during an aspiring leaders' course. Leaders were chosen based on having weathered a publicly documented ethical challenge in which it was clear leadership that was not heroic-, status-, role-, or authority-based. These cases highlighted leadership generated between people in situations that enact resistance as a participatory democracy schema. The five cases in this course were: 1) transitioning a monolingual English workforce into a bilingual English/Spanish workforce over a four-year period; 2) responding to the request to stage the Mathew Shepard Story; 3) responding to the Westboro Baptist Church; 4) the elimination of a segregated school for students with significant medical disabilities and opening inclusion programs that supported medically-fragile students' interactions with their age peers; 5) in a successful historically African American school, resisting pressure from incoming white upper middle-class parents in a gentrifying neighborhood. Each of these cases modeled a different approach to working with students, their families and the broader community to address a complex, risky, ethical challenge that required some form(s) of resistance. Grappling with the social-political-ethical dilemmas inherent in these cases with the leader present to respond to student's questions offers aspiring leaders the opportunity to imagine themselves engaging in these situations and the pressure of leading while learning from ethical challenges. Interestingly, these case-presentation sessions turned out to be powerful learning opportunities for the experienced principals.

**Reflection.** Surprisingly, each of these school leaders began their case presentations saying something like, "This is the first time I have told this story." Each case presentation had

invited these experienced leaders to reflect on their experience and to more fully conceptualize that experience. Telling the story required sorting out multiple storylines and organizing them into a coherent and understandable series of events. Determining the main events, the main characters, the critical moments, even the beginning, middle and end of the story was helpful for these leaders, who explained that living through the experience was quite different than making sense of what happened or understanding their influences in the situation(s). The principalship is hectic and it is uncommon for principals to take time to reflect on their experiences. This process was not only useful for the principals to shape and craft a story that could be shared more broadly, but it also modeled for the aspiring principals that learning from your practice to improve your practices requires reflection. Doing good work is necessary but insufficient to learn without reflection on that work.

Additionally, highlighting learning while leading, not knowing what to do, and the associated ambiguity, humility, and vulnerability humanizes the work of school leadership both for the presenting principal and the aspiring principals. These are not only characteristics of leadership but this is perhaps what allows people to work well together when confronted with difficult, complex social challenges. Modeling reflection as leadership practice may help aspiring leaders see learning with and from students and the community as their work.

**Student voice and distributed leadership.** Highlighting situations in which leadership is clearly distributed between students, community and staff may help aspiring leaders notice the multitude of ways leadership distributes. Telling the leadership story from the positional leader's perspective may overemphasize this form of influence and limit the capacity of students to identify distribution of leadership. Practicums for aspiring leaders tend to encourage following the positional leader around observing what they do and trying to figure out how to become like them. Even in assisting their mentors in their work the distributive nature of leadership can be invisible if the aspiring leader is searching for individualistic, heroic, or status-promoting opportunities to make their mark. It is not that principals have no options for handing out responsibility or sharing power, but these are not the only or most productive ways leadership distributes. As was clear in Mr. Grant's case, following what he did alone obscures leadership. The students led much of the work outside his view, coming together only at appointed times to share information and make new plans. While Mr. Grant knew this work was happening, he was not privy to it and if he had shown up he would have potentially interrupted leadership.

Focusing on participation rather than the leader may help aspiring leaders identify, articulate, and explicate distributed leadership in practice. Moving away from following the leader to learn leadership and instead focusing on, who is helping whom, who is participating in work that is accomplishing goals, and what constitutes forms of interaction that generate interest, commitment, and action, might be ways to identify leadership distributions.

## Conclusion

This case offers an example of the intersection of student voice, distributed leadership and participatory democracy, particularly in these times that call for participation as resistance. Mr. Grant does not hand out roles, positions, and authority to students but instead uses the generative and distributed conditions of leadership and encourages students to

participate in promoting social justice, assessing the socio-political context, and responding adaptively to unsafe, inequitable, and unfair conditions inside and outside of their school. He is not taking a school leadership standard explicitly to the students but intentionally creating conditions for authentic student voice as school leadership inside and outside of school. For Mr. Grant, this situation made sense as a location for participatory democracy because homophobia was also an issue inside the school. He had been looking for ways to raise awareness about homophobia as a form of oppression that was present in their school, as it is in most schools. It was necessary to address the threat posed by this one event but it was not necessary to limit the work to this one event. Situating school as a place where students are able and even expected to safeguard the values of democracy, equity and diversity authentically connects the distributed nature of leadership to participatory democracy.

Mr. Grant is now a principal in Oregon. His state does not have standards that expect him to lead with cultural competency and equity in everything he does, but most state standards do expect principals to know how to assess the socio-political context and respond adaptively to unsafe, inequitable, and unfair conditions inside and outside of their school. While sexism and homophobia continue to jeopardize safety, equity and fairness in high schools, this does not go entirely unnoticed. Student and teacher protests do take place in multiple forms in and around school. While these activities may not be sanctioned by the school and are rarely led by administrators, this paper highlights a case in which a high school principal did find a way to design and enact student organizing against homophobia. This may be more doable than most principals imagine, but unless we teach aspiring principals that student voice and student organizing are necessary and important aspects of ethical leadership, they may not find their way to doing this work. Certainly most school principals do not.

## REFERENCES

Apple, M. (1993). The Politics of Official Knowledge: Does a National Curriculum Make Sense? *Teachers College Record*, 95(2), 222-241.

Apple, M. (2012). *Can Education Change Society*. New York: Routledge.

Apple, M., & Beane, J. (1995). *Democratic Schools*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

Aronowitz, S. (2004). Against Schooling. *Education and Social Class*, 22(No. 2), 13-35.

Banks, J. (1997). *Educating Citizens in a multicultural society*. New York: Teachers College Press.

Banks, J. (2002). Race, Knowledge Construction, and Education in the USA: Lessons from history. *Race Ethnicity and Education*, 5(1), 7-27.

Blackburn, M. V., Clark, C. T., Kenney, L. M., & Smith, J. M. (2010). Acting out: Combatting homophobia through teacher activism. *Teachers College Press*, 107(1), 89-113.

Blackburn, M. V., & McCready, L. T. (2009). Voices of Queer youth in urban schools: Possibilities and limitations *Theory to Practice*, 48(3), 222-230.

Boggs, G. L., Kurshige, S., & Glover, D. (2012). *The Next American Revolution: Sustainable Activism for the Twenty-First Century*. Berkeley Univresity of California Press.

Bowles, S., & Gintis, H. (1976). *Schooling in Capitalist Society*. New York: Basic Books.

Bowles, S., & Gintis, H. (2001). Schooling in Capitalist America Revisited *Sociology of Education*, 1-26.

Brasof, M. (2015). *Student voice and school governance: distributing leadership to youth and adults*. New York: Routledge.

Brooks, J. (2010). Educational Leadership and Glocalization: Literacy for a Glocal Perspective *Educational Policy*, 24(1), 52-82.

Brown, K. M. (2004). Leadership for Social Justice and Equity: Weaving a Transformative Framework and Pedagogy. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 40, 77-108.

Carpenter, V. M., & Lee, D. (2010). Teacher education and the hidden curriculum of heteronormativity *Curriculum Matters*, 6, 99-119.

Cook-Sather, A. (2014). The trajectory of student voice in educational research. *New Zealand Journal of Educational Studies*, 49 (2), 131-148.

D'Augelli, A. R. (1998). Developmental implications of victimization of lesbian, gay and bisexual youths. In G. Herek, M (Ed.), *Stigma and sexual orientation: Understanding prejudice against lesbian, gay and bisexuals* (pp. 187-210). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Dantley, M. E., & Tillman, L. C. (2010). *Social Justice and Moral Transformative Leadership*. Boston: Allyn and Bacon.

Darder, A., Torres, R., & Baltodano, M. (2003). *The Critical Pedagogy Reader*. New York: RoutledgeFalmer.

Dewey, J. (1916). *Democracy in Education*. New York: Free Press.

Elmore, R. (2000). *Building New Structures for School Leadership*. Albert Shanker Institute. Washington DC.

Evans, A. E. (2007). School leaders and their sensemaking about race and demographic change. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 43(2).

Feldman, M. (2004). Resourcing in Emerging Structures and Processes of Change *Organizational Sciences*, 15(3), 295-309.

Feldman, S., & Tyson, K. (2013). Clarifying Conceptual Foundations for Social Justice in Education In I. Bogotch & C. Shields (Eds.), *The International Handbook on Social (In)Justice and School Leadership*. Thousand Oaks: Sage.

Fielding, M. (2001). Students as Radical Agents of Change. *Journal of Educational Change*, 2(2), 123–141.

Fielding, M. (2004). Transformative Approaches to Student Voice: Theoretical Underpinnings, Recalcitrant Realities'. *British Educational Research Journal*, 30(2), 295–311.

Freire, P. (1985). *The Politics of Education*. Massachusetts: Bergin & Garvey Publishers, Inc.

Freire, P. (2000 ). *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Continuum International.

G.L.S.E.N. (2009). The experiences of lesbian, gay, bi-sexual and transgender middle school students.(GLSEN Research Brief). New York: Gay, Lesbian, Straight Education Network.

Giroux, H. A. (2005). *Schooling and The Struggle for Public Life*. Boulder, CO: Paradigm Publishers.

Goodlad, J., Soder, R., & McDaniel, B. (2008). *Education and the Maling of a Democratic People*. Boulder, CO: Paradigm Publishers.

Honig, M. (2008). District Central Office as Learning Organizations: How Sociocultural and Organizational Learning Theories Elaborate District Central Office Administrators' Participation in Teaching and Learning Improvements. *American Journal of Education*, 114(4), 627-664.

Horton, M., & Freire, P. (1990). *We Make the Road by Walking*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.

Knapp, M. S., Copland, M., Ford, B., Markholt, A., McLaughlin, M., Milliken, M., & Talbert, J. E. (2003). Leading for Learning. New York. Wallace Foundation.

Lac, V.T. & Mansfield, K.C. (2017, online first). What do students have to do with educational leadership?: *Making a case for centering student voice*. *Journal of Research on Leadership Education*, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1942775117743748>

Larson, C. L., & Murtadha, K. (2002). *Leadership for social justice*. Chicago: National Society for the Study of Education and University of Chicago Press.

Leonardo, Z. (2004). Critical Social Theory and Transformative Knowledge: The Functions of Criticism in Quality Education *Educational Researcher*, 33(6), 11-18.

Levinson, B., Gross, J., Hanks, C., Dadds, J. H., Kumasi, K., Link, J., & Metro-Roland, D. (2011). *Beyond Critique: Exploring critical social theories and education* Boulder, CO: Paradigm Publishers

Lopez, G. R. (2003). The (racially neutral) politics of education: A critical race theory perspective *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 39(1), 68-94.

Mansfield, K.C. (2014). How listening to student voices can inform and strengthen social justice research and practice. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 50(3), 392 - 430. DOI: 10.1177/0013161X13505288

Mansfield, K.C., Welton, A., Halx, M.D. (2012). Listening to student voice: Toward a more inclusive theory for research and practice. In C. Boske & S. Diem (Eds.), *Global leadership for social justice: Taking it from field to practice* (pp. 21-41). United Kingdom: Emerald Publishing.

March, J. G., & Levitt, B. (1988). Organizational Learning. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 14, 319-240.

Marshall, C. (2004). Social Justice Challenges to Educational Administration: Introduction to a Special Issue. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 40, 3-13.

Mayo, C. (2007). Queering Foundations: Queer and lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender educational research. *Review of Research in Education*, 31, 78-94.

McLaren, P. (1998). Revolutionary Pedagogy in Post-Revolutionary Times: Rethinking the Political Economy of Critical Education *Educational Theory*, 48(4).

McLaren, P., & Kanpol, B. (Eds.). (1995). *Critical Multiculturalism*. Westport: Greenwood

Mitra, D., & Gross, J. (2009). Increasing Student Voice in High School Reform: Building Partnerships, Improving Outcomes. *Educational Management Administration and Leadership*, 37(4), 533-543.

Mitra, D. L. (2008). *Student Voice in School Reform*. New York: State University of New York Press.

Mitra, D. L. (2009). Strengthening Student Voice Initiatives in High Schools An Examination of the Supports Needed for School-Based Youth-Adult Partnerships. *Youth & Society*, 40(3).

Mitra, D. L., Serriere, S., & Stoicovy, D. (2012). The role of leaders in enabling student voice. *Management in Education*, 26(3), 104-112.

Parker, L., & Villalpando, O. (2007). A race(cialized) perspective on education leadership: Critical race theory in educational administration *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 43(5), 514-519.

Pascoe, C. J. (2007). *Dude, you're a fag: Masculinity and sexuality in high school* Berkeley: University of California Press.

Pinar, W. F. (1998). *Queer theory in education* Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

Portin, B., Knapp, M. S., Dareff, S., Feldman, S., Russell, F. A., Samuelson, C., & Yeh, T. L. (2009). *Leadership for Learning Improvement in Urban Schools*. New York: Wallace Foundation.

Rawls, J. (2003). *Justice as Fairness: A Restatement*. Cambridge, Mass: Belknap, Harvard Press.

Schaefer, R. (1967). *The School as the Center of Inquiry*. Evanston: Harper and Row.

Solomon, R. C. (1990). *A Passion for Justice*. New York: Addison-Wesley.

Spillane, J., Halverson, R., & Diamond, J. (2004). Toward a theory of leadership practice: A distributed perspective. *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, 36(1), 3-34.

Spring, J. (2004). *American Education*. New York: McGraw Hill.

Theoharis, G. (2010). Disrupting Injustice: Principals Narrate the Strategies They Use to Improve Schools and Advance Social Justice. *Teachers College Record*, 112(1), 331-373.

Theoharis, G., & Haddix, M. (2011). Undermining racism and a Whiteness ideology: White principals living a commitment to equitable and excellent schools. *Urban Education*, 46(6), 1332-1351.

Theoharis, G., & Haddix, M. (2013). *White principals and race concious leadership* Charlotte, NC: Information Age Press.

Walters, A. S., & Hayes, D., M. (1998). Homophobia within schools: Challenging the culturally sanctioned dismissal of gay students and colleagues. *Journal of Homosexuality*, 35(2), 1-23.

Waltzer, M. (1994). *Thick and Thin Moral Argument at Home and Abroad*. London: Notre Dame Press.

Wilkerson, L., & Pearson, J. (2009). School culture and the well-being of same-sex-attracted youth. *Gender and Society*, 23(4), 542-568.

Wimberly, G. (2015). *LGBTQ Issues in Education* Washington DC: American Education Research Association

Young, I. M. (2000). *Inclusion and Democracy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.