"WE THINK DIFFERENTLY": STUDENT REPRESENTATION AND VOICE AT THE LOS ANGELES UNIFIED SCHOOL DISTRICT BOARD OF EDUCATION

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Abstract

This article reports findings from a study that examined the addition of a student representative to the membership of the LAUSD school board in 2016, after the absence of such a position for many years. Using a framework drawn from critical theories of youth empowerment and critical discourse analysis, we examined data collected from three primary sources: 1) field notes from school board meetings attended in person or from review of recorded video archives, 2) local media coverage and district press releases, and 3) official recruitment and application documents that guide the student representative selection process. Based on our findings, we discuss emergent themes from the data that revealed contradictory messaging about the agency of youth in Los Angeles generally, and educational policy in the school district more specifically. This analysis highlights broader tensions around the (f)utility of advocating for change from within and outside formal policy structures. Our research demonstrates the ways that current practices allow school district leadership to benefit from the optics of student presence, but do not truly allow participation of students in decision making. We conclude with recommendations for policy and practice that offer expanded opportunity for student engagement with the official leadership processes of the second largest public school district in the United States.

Keywords: School boards, Youth empowerment, Youth participation, Policy processes, Policy discourses, Critical Discourse Analysis

Introduction

The power wielded by different local educational decision makers—defined by Bertrand (2014) as "individuals who occupy formal positions through which educational changes can be enacted, including principals, teachers, school board members, and district administrators" (p. 814)—varies by context and is impacted by shifts in broader political arenas. The Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) is the second largest school district in the United States as measured by student enrollment, and the largest in terms of geographic size. The main decision-making authority for LAUSD is the elected Board of Education, in contrast with several other large city districts, in particular New York City and Chicago Public Schools, which are under mayoral control. The influence of the LAUSD school board therefore makes it a key site to examine the input of student voice in policy processes that directly impact their educational experiences and daily lives in schools. As LAUSD student Airy Pulido, a member of a student activist group that advocated for the return of a student representative to the board said at a demonstration, "adults represent adults because they think like adults, they act like adults. We think differently. We act differently" (CBSLA.com, 2014). Examining processes at the school board level offers a lens through which to identify district priorities, examine the role of stakeholder input, and identify the impact of public dialogue or influence.

In this article, we report findings from a study that examined the addition of a student representative to the membership of the LAUSD Board of Education in 2016, after the absence of such a position for many years. In the following sections we first provide an overview of relevant contextual details about LAUSD and its Board of Education, and then position this study in research literature that explores the contemporary role of school boards in U.S. public education, and student involvement in educational policy making and implementation. We then describe the theoretical framework used to guide the research, which is drawn from critical theories of youth empowerment and discourse analysis, and provide an overview of the qualitative research methods used to collect and analyze data. We then present a summary and discussion of our findings, and conclude with implications of this study for practice and future research on the role of student voice in urban school district leadership. Through this study we demonstrate the ways that current practices allow school district leadership to benefit from the optics of student presence, but do not truly allow participation of students in decision making.

Background and Context

Almost 650,000 K-12 students were enrolled in LAUSD schools during the 2015-2016 school year, attending more than 1,000 campuses across a geographic area of almost 720 square miles (About LAUSD, 2017). Over 90% of students enrolled in the district are people of color, and over 94 languages other than English are spoken by LAUSD students and their families (LAUSD Fingertip Facts, 2016). The rate of students attending charter schools in LAUSD is double the state average (19% and 8% respectively; LAUSD Fingertip Facts, 2016; National Center for Educational Statistics, 2016). LAUSD's total General Fund expenses for the 2015-2016 school years was $7.08 billion, and more than 85% of the district's funding comes from the state of California (LAUSD Fingertip Facts, 2017).

The Los Angeles Unified School District Board of Education

Seven elected board members serve as the "governing, policy-making body of the Los Angeles Unified School District" (Understanding Board Meetings, 2017). Home to a population of almost 5 million people, LAUSD's boundaries include almost 30 other cities and unincorporated areas (LAUSD Fingertip Facts, 2016). LAUSD Board of Education representatives' districts are significantly larger than those of the 15 Los Angeles City Councilpersons, and larger than the districts served by state legislative representatives in many other states in the country. LAUSD is the largest school district in the U.S. with an elected school board (LAUSD Fingertip Facts, 2017). New York City and Chicago, the two other largest school districts in the continental U.S., both operate under mayoral control. Unlike most local board members in the over 13,800 school districts in the United States governed by such bodies (Maeroff, 2010), board members in LAUSD are paid an annual salary commensurate with that of a beginning teacher in the district if they do not hold full-time outside employment. LAUSD is also part of the less than 2% of districts in the country that enroll more than 25,000 students—in fact, two thirds of school board operated districts in the U.S. have less than 2,500 students (Maeroff, 2010). On its website, the LAUSD Board of Education describes its responsibilities and functions in the following manner:

> Members of the Board make decisions on matters relating to public education in the City of Los Angeles and several surrounding communities. All Board meetings are open to the public, and all Board business takes place in public except for discussion on some specific topics where the Board meets in Closed Session. … Most official business of the Board is conducted during regularly scheduled meetings on the second and fourth Tuesdays of the month. … Regular Meetings begin at 1 p.m. [and] take place at the District Headquarters in the Board Room unless otherwise indicated (Understanding Board Meetings, 2017).

Although technically open to the public, board meetings are difficult for a majority of LAUSD stakeholders to access. As documented in other research (see Mattheis, Soto & Vidarte, 2017), the time and day of week at which regular meetings are scheduled and the small capacity of the board room create barriers to entry. LAUSD school board meetings are live-streamed via Internet video, and available on public access television; however, given our understanding of discourse as encompassing more than just words that are spoken but extending to the way that messages are received, the limited physical interaction between elected representatives and their constituents in these meeting spaces is a barrier to participation. The use of parliamentary procedure to structure the communication among board members themselves and with members of the public further encourages the maintenance of the space as one guided by White, middle-class, hetero-patriarchal traditions.

A Brief History of Student Representation on the LAUSD Board of Education

This study examines the implications of the addition of a student representative to the LAUSD School Board in 2016; a precedent for such inclusion existed in the district but students had not had a representative at the Board since the 1980s (Garcia, 2014). California State Education code provides for one non-voting student member on each elected school

board in the state (Holman, 2014). The original system in LAUSD involved a rotating group of student representatives who took turns, attending three meetings consecutively (Szymanski, 2016). This approach was abandoned shortly after it was implemented. Led by students involved in a United Way-sponsored activity that promotes civic engagement, a petition was signed by over 3,000 LAUSD students in 2014 asking the Board to pass a resolution that would add student representation (Kohli, 2016). This resolution, titled the "Student engagement and empowerment resolution of 2014" (LAUSD BOE, 2014) was sponsored by Board member Steve Zimmer, a former high school counselor in the district. Prior to the Board's vote on April 7, 2014, student activists camped out on the sidewalk outside the Board meeting room and LAUSD central office headquarters, and placed dozens of empty desks in the street to protest the large numbers of students who are pushed out of district schools each week (CBSLA.com, 2014). One of the students, Ramiro Peña, was quoted in press coverage of the event as stating: "Who knows better what happens to students in the classroom than the students? Teachers can speak for us, but they don't know how we feel" (Garcia, 2014). The resolution as written was not passed (with a 2-4 vote), but an amendment that called for the LAUSD Superintendent to develop an alternative system within 120 days was proposed and did pass by a 5-1 vote) (LAUSD BOE, 2014).

Existing California state law requires local school boards to establish a student position if "10% of students in the district, or 500 students, whichever is less, sign a petition" (S.B. 532, 2015). No action was taken by the LAUSD superintendent or the Board, however, for more than a year after the April 7, 2014 vote. State Senator Connie M. Leyva then proposed Senate Bill 532, titled "Protecting Students' Voices" in the California state legislature in 2015. This bill was co-sponsored by the California Association of Student Councils and supported by the California School Board Association, and effectively required the LAUSD Board to act on the student petition and request for representation. Following the passage of this bill, a process for selecting a student representative was outlined. Messaging about the campaign to add a student member to the Board was inconsistent, but tended to favor the existing power structure's version of events. Three documents from April 8, 2014 serve as a case in point. ABC news coverage (Garcia, 2014) used the phrase "student representative nixed" in its headline, while the local CBS outlet titled its piece "LAUSD School Board approves students' pleas to have peer rep. after protests" (CBSNews.com, 2014). The official press release distributed by the LAUSD Office of Communications and Media Relations was titled (in bold font) "LAUSD Board moves closer to including student representative," followed in smaller and regular (not bold) font "members approve amendment calling for a report on establishing the position" (LAUSD, 2014). The district's release begins with the sentence, "By a 5-1 vote, the Los Angeles Board of Education approved an amendment Tuesday, calling on the Superintendent for the Los Angeles Unified School District to submit a report in 120 days regarding the establishment of a formal student voice on the board" (LAUSD, 2014). The report did not address the original vote on the proposed "Student Empowerment and Engagement Resolution of 2014" that four of the six Board Members present voted against (LAUSD BOE, 2014). Such wording discursively presented the Board Members as acting on behalf of students by creating a resolution, while the true outcome of their actions was to silence student input. The action taken by the Board members was to delay a discussion for another 120 days, while students were literally camped out on the sidewalk during the meeting. The CBS article further infantilized the youth activists while centering adult White male authority:

> The kids were hoping to have a voice in such matters but the board voted against their proposal, which included a democratic selection process of a student board member. Instead, it will be up to Superintendent Deasy to decide how that position will be filled (CBSnews.com, 2014).

An official LAUSD news release dated January 12, 2016 made no mention of the previous tension or state level intervention, rather stating matter-of-factly, "California Education Code permits at least one non-voting student member to be elected or appointed to a school district's governing board" (LAUSD 2016b). Currently, the student body president from each high school in LAUSD is eligible to vote in an election to choose between seven candidates (one from each school board district) (McKenna, 2015). Following this process, three LAUSD high school students have been selected to serve as the official student representative. Leon Popa was sworn in on January 12, 2016 (Wanlass, 2016) and served until the end of the 2015-2016 academic year; Karen Calderon was sworn in on July 6, 2016 (Kohli, 2016), and has served for the 2016-2017 academic year, and Benjamin Holtzman will serve during the upcoming 2017-2018 school year (Morgan, 2017).

Literature Review

Critical scholars have for decades pointed out the ways that "democracy" in the United States routinely falls short of ideals of representation and transparency (see, e.g. Bowles & Gintis 1976, 2002; Kumashiro, 2008, 2012). We acknowledge the tensions present in employing critical perspectives to analyze processes fundamentally rooted in pragmatic goals, and therefore turn to literature that examines how public constituents engage with existing systems of decision making and corresponding government structures. In this section, we situate the present study in the context of educational research that has examined the role of local school boards in policy development and implementation and student involvement in democratic processes.

School Board Leadership in Contemporary Contexts

In his book-length discussion of local school boards as a "flawed exercise in democracy," Maeroff (2010) described public schools as "the ultimate expression of American democracy" (p. 1), and highlighted local control of schools as a distinguishing feature of U.S. education. These decision-making bodies, however, remain relatively under-researched in the educational policy and leadership literature, particularly from perspectives informed by critical theory. Turner (2015), for instance, noted the gap between equity-oriented research on urban school politics that attends to power imbalances between privileged and marginalized groups, and research on central district office leadership which tends to lack an analysis informed by an acknowledgment of the impact of race and class differences. In her case study of how an urban school board's decision-making processes were impacted by the enactment of high stakes-accountability standards, Trujillo (2012) found that such pressures led leaders to "eschew democratic governance processes in favor of autocratic behaviors" (p. 334). Pappas (2016) argues that in New York City, where mayoral control replaced a decentralized system of multiple community districts and a seven-member, district-wide school board in 2002,

neoliberal market forces have reinforced contradictions between the "ideal of deliberation and the reality of the policymaking process" (p. 4). Ravitch (2010), however, calls for a *re*-commitment to this idea, and cautions that removing locally elected school boards is a step toward turning over entire systems of democratic governance to individuals and groups heavily influenced by corporate money and organizations that promote privatization of public sectors.

Although LAUSD remains under the control of an elected school board (despite attempts by former mayor Villaraigosa to take over control of the schools, mirroring actions in Chicago and New York), tensions about the nature of "representation" are ongoing. Because of the financial demands of running for office in large cities, and the politicized nature of these races, individuals elected to the school board in urban communities tend to not be reflective of the majority of the population. As Plecki, McCleery and Knapp (2006) found, "urban school board members are rarely fully representative of the wide variety of constituents found in the extremely heterogeneous communities they serve," and "tend to be more educated, more affluent, and substantially whiter than those they represent" (p. 18). The differences in identities of school board members and their constituents can have important implications on how such boards make decisions on behalf of children attending local schools. Turner (2015) argued that racial meaning-making was central to the practice of leaders (including elected school board members) of two districts in Wisconsin with changing demographics, while Trujillo (2012) found that "when effectiveness is narrowly defined in terms of standardized test scores, district leaders' notions about success and learning can be equally restrictive" (p. 353)—and that this narrowing can have disproportionate impacts on students of color, immigrant students, and those from low-income families.

Shifts in national and state policy priorities can have disproportionate impacts on high-need urban school districts. The capacity of these districts to adapt to such changes is related to leadership practices and structures (Datnow, 2005; Holme, Diem & Welton, 2014). Plecki et al. (2006) encourage scholars and practitioners to clearly distinguish between the nature and role of educational leadership and educational governance; they describe governance as "...creat[ing] the framework through which high-quality leadership can be exercised throughout the educational system" (p. 3). In the current policy context, however, flexibility in governance is frequently constrained by increasingly rigid federal and state accountability requirements (Mizell, 2010), while leaders are simultaneously charged with developing innovative modes of practice. Trujillo (2012) has stated that "school board governance, in urban contexts, becomes inescapably less democratic in character" (p. 354) due to these constraints. Bringing in more voices, rather than restricting who has input in the implementation and development of new policies, can expand the ability of school boards to navigate these challenges. For instance, in their study of how community advocates used a variety of strategies and types of knowledge to push for change in local districts, Sampson and Horsford (in press) found that school board members in three U.S. Mountain West communities played a "dual role as community advocates prior to and during their tenure as official school district leaders" (p. 16). Examining the changing role and behaviors of school boards in urban districts provides opportunities to better understand school governance and leadership. Despite his assessment of school boards as poorly understood and often lacking in true authority to enact educational reform, Maeroff (2010) notes that "anyone seeking to improve schools ignores the power of school boards at some peril" (p. 3).

Student Involvement in Democratic Educational Policy Processes

Ginwright, Noguera and Cammarota (2006) have broadly described civic engagement or civic participation as "a range of activities that strengthen social ties, build collective responsibility, and benefit society as a whole" (p. 267). Working within such a definition, many researchers have focused on the role of young people in civic engagement. In their review of research on student involvement in formal school decision-making processes, Mager and Nowak (2012) used the following definition of "participation":

> …student involvement in collective decision-making processes at the school or class level that included dialogue between students and other decision makers. This definition does not use the term 'participation' to mean 'taking part' or 'being present' but instead suggests that students have some influence over the decisions being made and actions being taken. According to this definition, one-off consultations and simple forms of pupil participation such as answering questions and taking part in activities are not considered participation [nor is] individual decision making (p. 40).

Other authors have used expanded understandings of student participation, beyond the school-level impact studies examined by Mager and Nowak (2012). Rogers, Mediratta, Shah, Kahne and Terriquez (2012) included examples specific to South Los Angeles to illustrate an understanding of "civic engagement" as necessarily involving political participation as part of a broader discussion of organizing for high school youth of color from low-income families. Cote (2014) has argued, on the other hand, that given rising economic inequality and political marginalization, a broader understanding of "youth-as-class" may offer a useful theoretical perspective. In their discussion of how young people in marginalized communities are keenly aware of social problems, and have been deeply invested in finding solutions to these problems, Torre and Fine (2006) have pointed to both the practical and abstract significance of involving student voice in community-wide participatory decision making:

> ...there must be adequate opportunity for adults and youth to help design, reflect upon, and challenge (as necessary) social policies of intimate impact. Democratic policy formulation insists upon deep participation—of rigorous investigation, dialogue, dissent, and public debate (p. 269).

Given the opportunity to engage in critical consideration of existing practices and suggest opportunities, youth are quite capable of developing innovative policy solutions or leading change efforts. Many studies have shown how young people have contributed to school-level change and decision-making processes. Conner, Ebby-Rosin and Brown (2015) for example, highlighted the actions of student journalists to ban the use of a word considered offensive to Native Americans to refer to their high school's sports teams in their newspaper. Mitra (2007) documented how students participated in three reform efforts at northern California high schools in different ways. At Seacrest, students were involved in a review of achievement data, but their input was limited as adults were responsible for all final interpretation; at Whitman, students were more deeply involved in contributing to plans to address low graduation rates in the school and engaged in both teacher-focused and student-focused activities; Unity of Youth was a multi-school collaborative that was almost entirely

youth-led and developed campaigns that involved diverse constituencies in a range of initiatives (Mitra, 2007). Mobilize 4 Change, a similarly community-based program in the Upper Midwest, developed students into activists for social change in their schools, advocating for changes that had direct material impact on their daily lives (Taines, 2012).

The inclusion of student voice in district-level activities and reforms is less common. Mitra, Serriere & Kirshner (2014) contrasted the United States with European countries as an "outlier" in terms of efforts to involve youth participation in such discussions, and have highlighted the ways that youth could have community-wide impact on school policies. Yonezama and Jones (2007) documented a systematic strategy for facilitating student input on district-wide school reform in large school districts in California, and in New York City the Student Voice Collaborative (SVC) involved students in review of school leadership and governance, including analyses of campus climate and academic programming, across a network of several schools (Sussman, 2015). Bragg (2007), however, cautions that if student voice is compatible with government and management objectives, it may be a sign that youth are being manipulated by the interests of those in control. Given the challenges of urban school districts relative to student performance and experience, school boards have much to gain from including student voice, but must do so in a way that respects youth autonomy.

Theoretical Framework

Given LAUSD's student population and our interest in challenging political systems based on histories of white supremacy, we adopt critical perspectives that interrogate the impact of racial, ethnic, socioeconomic, and linguistic identities on the agency expressed by individuals from different backgrounds in public fora. LAUSD's current student enrollment reports the following racial and ethnic distribution: 74% Latino, 9.8% White, 8.4% African American, 6% Asian, and less than 1% Pacific Islander and American Indian/Alaskan. Of the total student population, 75.7% of students qualify for free or reduced-price meals, and 141,490 are English Learners (LAUSD Fingertip Facts, 2017). Critical youth studies specifically address the ways in which identity categories are used to mark some youth as deviant and in need of discipline, and other youth as innocent and "in need of protection" (Quijada Cerecer, Cahill, & Bradley, 2013, p. 217). We deem it imperative to employ theoretical frameworks that support our efforts to expose how some young people's voices are prioritized over others based on social constructions of identity, including, but not limited to, race, class, ability, gender, language, and sexuality.

Although the present study examines youth engagement in pre-existing policy decision-making structures that weren't developed with youth participation in mind, we are informed by examples of Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) that have created spaces for youth to engage with social problems relevant to their lives. We borrow from this literature to inform our exploration as YPAR theories are "particularly relevant to a critical youth studies framework" (Quijada Cerecer et. al, 2013, p. 218). Participatory action research acknowledges that participants are best suited to speak on their own experiences; we hold the view that young people should be empowered to advocate for themselves and they are active agents of change. Fox et al. (2010) call for an explicitly intersectional approach to examining the opportunities available to young people of color and those living in poverty to engage in formal civic participatory structures, and point out that "lack of access" should not be

interpreted as "lack of motive." Using four YPAR case studies as examples (including the L.A.-specific South Central Youth Empowered through Action), Fox et al. (2010) detail five "threshold commitments" that underpin their vision of critical youth engagement: "1) youth carry knowledge; 2) critical analysis toward critical consciousness; 3) youth leadership in partnership with adults; 4) intersectionality; and 5) collective action for social change" (p. 630). As described by Cammarota and Fine (2008), critical youth studies is an important field of academic inquiry because it goes "beyond traditional pathological approaches to asset that young people have the ability to analyze their social context, to collectively engage in critical research, and resist repressive state and ideological institutions" (p. 4).

In our analysis of the participation of students in LAUSD school board processes we have adopted Jennings, Parra-Medina, Hilfinger-Messias, and McLoughlin's (2006) formulation of a theory of Critical Youth Empowerment (CYE). As described by the authors, CYE is a framework based on "the integration of youth empowerment processes and outcomes at the individual and collective levels" (Jennings et al., 2006, p. 33); such processes involve six key dimensions: 1) a welcoming, safe environment, 2) meaningful participation and engagement, 3) equitable power sharing between youth and adults, 4) engagement in critical reflection on interpersonal and sociopolitical processes, 5) participation in sociopolitical processes to affect change, and 6) integrated individual- and community-level empowerment. We also agree with Mitra's (2015) proposition that young people be legitimized as "policy actors rather than as clients" in educational systems (p. 238). Because LAUSD predominantly enrolls students of color with many other diverse identities, perspectives that interrogate the impact of racial, ethnic, socioeconomic, and linguistic identities on the agency expressed by individuals from different backgrounds in public spaces are also essential.

We additionally utilized critical discourse analysis (CDA) both as a theoretical lens and an analytic approach to examine power-sharing dynamics at the Board. CDA's focus on social change in progress within institutions, as well as structures in relation to agency (Fairclough, 2015), allows us to consider multiple factors that contribute to the empowerment or disempowerment of youth within LAUSD. We not only seek to explore LAUSD's institutional and social structures, but also "the relationship between texts, processes, and their social conditions" (Fairclough, 2001a, p. 21) and how students are positioned within said structures. Guided by these frameworks, this research explored the following primary research question: *How does the implementation of student representation at the LAUSD School Board encourage or discourage critical youth empowerment?*

Methods

This study used modes of qualitative inquiry of public processes and spaces guided by critical content analysis to examine the role of student voice at the LAUSD Board of Education. We examined a set of data primarily focused on a specific time period (early 2016 to early 2017) to investigate how power worked through the physical and figurative space of school board meetings. Our qualitative approach allowed for the identification of emergent themes and examination of the impact of context on local understanding (Maxwell, 2013; Merriam, 2009).

Researcher Positionality

As a research team, we bring distinct points of view that complement, align, and distinguish our individual interpretive analyses from one another. Allison Mattheis is a faculty member in the college of education at California State University Los Angeles, a regional public comprehensive institution of higher education. She attended public schools from grades K-12 and spent eight years as a middle school classroom teacher before completing a Ph.D. in Educational Policy and Leadership. She has lived in Los Angeles for four years. Yanin Ardila is a second grade teacher in LAUSD who works primarily with students who are immigrants or refugees who have recently arrived in the country. She graduated from Woodrow Wilson High School in LAUSD, and is currently engaged in dissertation research that explores how policy shapes educational experiences for undocumented students. Like Yanin, Sivan Levaton also attended LAUSD schools, from fifth grade until graduating from Ulysses S. Grant High School, and has a younger sister who is currently an LAUSD high school student. She works in the nonprofit sector to support higher educational access and research and evaluation efforts. All three of us have parents born outside the country, while Yanin and Sivan themselves both immigrated to the U.S. as children. The different insider and outsider perspectives provided by our lived experiences impact the ways we relate to political systems at the federal, state, and local levels, as well as the values we prioritize relative to public education.

Description of Data and Analytic Approach

Following Fairclough's (2015) conceptualization of political discourse as distinct from other forms of discourse in that it is primarily argumentative, and the ontological acknowledgment of unequal power distribution as a base of critical theory, we collected data that would allow us to identify dominant messages about the role of students at the LAUSD Board of Education and demonstrate how they are transmitted through various communicative modes. Combining this identification of both dialectical and relational elements is a key feature of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) as described by Fairclough (2001b); in diagnosing a problem, it is negative, but in identifying "hitherto unrealized possibilities" that could help address the problem, it is positive (p. 125). Therefore, the goal of our analysis is to describe flaws in the current state of power dynamics relative to student participation and voice at the LAUSD Board, but also to propose actions that could expand and improve this role.

Document analysis. In order to go beyond academic sources to understand the social context of political discourse (Fairclough, 2001), we reviewed popular press media coverage of the return of a student representative to the LAUSD school board. Sources included mainstream publications such as the Los Angeles Times and local TV news outlets, as well as school-specific websites. We also reviewed official documents from LAUSD, including press releases from the district. Finally, we examined the application materials used to solicit student participation as Board representatives. As written texts, these documents allowed us to identify the semiotic significance of specific vocabulary, grammatical features, and textual structures (Fairclough, 2001a). Fairclough (2015) identifies metaphors as an especially important vocabulary tool in political discourse; we therefore paid particular attention to identifying instances of metaphorical and euphemistic language in these selected documents.

Board of Education meeting observations. In addition to attending in person and live-streaming a small number of meetings, we reviewed archived video footage for Board meetings that took place between January 12, 2016 and March 14, 2017. We also examined associated agendas, minutes, and materials posted online following these meetings. Following a directed approach to content analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2015) we observed the student representative's presence and participation and took analytic notes that connected relevant statements, activities, and behaviors to the six dimensions of Critical Youth Empowerment described by Jennings et al. (2016).

Cross-comparison of the content of news coverage, official LAUSD documents, and Board meetings provided internal reliability checks, while the collection of data from these different sources employed triangulation to ensure validity (see Maxwell, 2013). Further, these combined sources allowed us to examine how discourses about student representation in different contexts and expressed by different individuals creates interdiscursive recontextualization (Fairclough, 2001b) through which discourses are transformed to transmit hybrid meanings and messages.

Findings and Discussion

In this section, we present and discuss two emergent themes from analysis in order to reveal how different discourses around the role of a student representative at the LAUSD Board of Education reflect broader power dynamics. First, we focus on the selection process by which the individual student representative is chosen each school year. We then examine the way that school board meeting interactions—and the way information is presented at these meetings—impact the potential for student voice in the space.

Student Representative Selection Process

As Maeroff (2010) has pointed out, there are few safeguards in place to ensure that individuals elected to positions such as school board member are qualified or sufficiently knowledgeable about the issues on which they will be required to make decisions. In contrast, student representatives are in some ways held to a much higher standard of vetting and selection in the process of joining the LAUSD Board, even as a non-voting member. A copy of the announcement recruiting students as representatives and application instructions and guidelines for the 2016-2017 school year are included in Appendix A. Informed by Fairclough's (2001) suggestions for examining how social practices are evident in texts, we identified the use of underlining certain words and phrases in these documents as evidence of an underlying assumption on the part of the document writers that students will be careless and submit incomplete or late applications. This contrasts with one of the listed benefits on the recruitment flyer, which promises students the opportunity to "contribute to the development of district policy," which assumes the student will be detail-oriented and responsible. Further, despite the description of the student member's role as "the voice of all LAUSD students," the application requires three letters of recommendation—one from a fellow student, one from a teacher, and one from the principal or designee. Requiring two letters from adults (who are in direct positions of authority relative to the applicant) and only one from a peer emphasizes that

adult voice dominates the process. In both the presentation of the opportunity and the selection of candidates for the position, the power to decide who will represent LAUSD's youth at the Board of Education is clearly held by adults, not youth.

Beyond the form of these documents, the application process itself clearly selects for a particular type of student—one who fits traditional expectations of appropriateness, and, often, physically appears to match adult preferences for youth leaders to dress and behave in ways that mimic their own. In a photograph that accompanied the announcement of the most recently elected student representative (Morgan, 2017), three of the students are wearing suits and ties, while another three wear other attire associated with white-collar occupations. It is likely that many, if not most, LAUSD high school students do not own such items of clothing, and this photograph therefore is more a representation of a handful of students who have chosen to perform a certain type of "professionalism," rather than a true representation of a typical high school student in the district. The motivation for students who wish to be heard in the space of the school board meeting, however, is apparent. In a study of educational decision makers' response to student voice, Bertrand (2014) found that adults' "inhibiting responses," or behaviors or language that discouraged, discredited, or questioned student input, were most frequently related to physical appearance or verbal delivery, rather than content of their speech. Clearly, if students wish to be selected as representatives, and potentially allowed to contribute to dialogue at the school board meetings, they are expected to dress, speak, and act in particular ways. In the context of the United States, these reflect dominant norms of Western European parliamentary procedures, formal English, and clothing associated with upwardly mobile white middle class norms.

Potential conflict also exists in the fact that the school district controls the student representative selection process, but the "elected" representative is then directed to participate through presence at Board of Education meetings. As a publicly funded entity controlled by an elected Board, district leadership typically carefully avoids intervening in board member elections; the fact that central office administrators—and not these elected officials—are responsible for selecting the student representative indicates that the position is not intended to have the same outsider perspective. Rather, the selection process emphasizes the fact that the student is a representative of *LAUSD* students specifically, not youth of Los Angeles in general. By requiring the representatives to match traditional expectations of a "good student" in terms of GPA, the large number of students from marginalized backgrounds who are poorly served in many ways by the current system are systematically denied access to this position. In this way, the selection process is not aligned with Jennings et al.'s (2006) criterion of "integrated individual- and community-level empowerment" as the representative is instead encouraged to compartmentalize these affiliations. Wholey and Burkes (2015) documented the work of "the Rethinkers," a group of majority African-American middle schoolers in New Orleans who used political organizing and critical pedagogy strategies to draw attention of the press, and eventually, school reform leaders at the district level post-Hurricane Katrina. In the case of that research, young people were encouraged to engage across schools and neighborhoods to develop collective goals and build influence. The LAUSD student representative process instead encourages competition among young people who under different circumstances could combine their skills to work together.

The focus on the representative as a *student* first, rather than a young community member, creates a potentially difficult situation for the student representatives, who need to

curry favor with district administrators to achieve and maintain their positions, and may therefore be reluctant to critique district practices. Additionally, because they are treated as non-voting "guests" rather than true participants in the board meetings, they may interact with the adult school board members in a similarly deferential manner. Due to existing power imbalances across many categories of social identity, having only one youth representative effectively isolates the sole student as the most vulnerable member of the decision-making body, and does not provide true representation. This is also problematic because of the diverse demographics of the communities in which students attend LAUSD schools. As Bertrand (2014) argues, "…Students of Color are uniquely positioned to reveal the multiple ways in which systemic racism is enacted in schools" (p. 817), but one representative alone cannot speak on behalf of the multiple and intersectional identities of all students.

Participation in Meetings

Our analysis documented that student representatives have played a limited role in actual school board meetings, and are typically silent throughout most of the meetings they attend. One notable exception is the practice of inviting the student representative to lead the rest of the board members, staff, and audience in reciting in the Pledge of Allegiance. This is a powerful reminder of the presence of nation-state authority in the space, which is also reinforced by the requirement that all visitors to the board assembly room pass through a metal detector and have their belongings searched, and the constant presence of armed police officers during the meetings. Along with other procedures, such as the use of Robert's Rules of Order, the space does not meet the criterion of a "welcoming, safe environment" called for by Jennings et al. (2006) as necessary for critical youth empowerment.

The audience present in the board assembly room varies depending on agenda content, community attention to certain issues or crises, or controversial items to be decided during a meeting. The presence of other LAUSD students in the meetings also varies widely. Even in meetings where several other students were invited to speak to the board, the student representative was not highlighted or provided additional opportunities to participate in the meetings, and these instances frequently reiterated adult expectations of what qualifies a young person as a "good student." On November 15, 2016, for example, four students addressed the Board during the first 30 minutes of the meeting. During a presentation about the implementation of Restorative Justice practices at a South L.A. high school, three Black young women took turns praising their school's administration and spoke of their intentions to attend college following graduation. The first student, Cory, spoke of learning to "control my attitude," followed by Robin who said that "my attitude has gotten better," and Alexandrea who thanked an educator for "helping me with my attitude." We find this demonstration of how students were molded into "appropriateness" quite disturbing, particularly given the fact that a school administrator had provided school demographic data that indicated that only 9% of the student body was African-American, while 90% of students were Hispanic. No Latinx students, and no boys, were included in the school's presentation to the board. As Morris (2007) has demonstrated, controlling Black girls' modes of communication seeks to discourage behavior viewed as outside the norms of traditional (Western) femininity, and can limit their ability to achieve academic and occupational success. In the face of documented disadvantage in a schooling system that devalues Blackness, these girls have strong reason to comply with

the behaviors expected of them, and being invited to be praised publicly reinforces this socialization.

Later in the same meeting, Superintendent Michelle King (notably, the first Black woman to serve in this position in LAUSD), gave a lengthy statement recognizing another high school student who had earned a perfect score on the Advanced Placement Spanish language exam. She invited the student, Genesis, to the podium along with "her board member, Ref Rodriguez" and secondarily, Genesis' parents. The room gave a standing ovation following the superintendent's remarks, but before the student was invited to speak. When she did so, her statements contradicted the individualistic focus of the administrator's praise; rather she thanked her Spanish teacher and all the other educators at her high school, and also congratulated her classmates, noting that "everyone passed the exam." Despite Rodriguez' comments that she was "quite shy," Genesis instead appeared poised and confident. The adults' attempts to minimize her statements, which could be read as a call to recognize the collective power of (bilingual) youth rather than single herself out as an exception, demonstrate almost instinctive resistance on the part of elected representatives to critique meritocratic ideals. Following Genesis' statement, her parents were invited to speak. Immigrants from Nicaragua, they thanked the Board for recognizing their daughter and her school for supporting her education. No translation was provided for non-Spanish speakers in the audience, effectively dismissing their words as less important.

At no point during these presentations was the student Board representative Karen Calderon, herself a bilingual English-Spanish speaker, invited to engage in conversations with other board members or able to address her peers at the podium. We do not wish to suggest that we believe Calderon disagreed with the content of the meeting, but instead want to note that under circumstances in which adults in the room believe themselves to be engaged in positive and supportive actions, it would be quite risky for a student representative to express a difference of opinion. Given the selection process described in the previous section, it is also likely that the student representative shares these adults' expectations to at least some extent. In order to avoid tokenizing the role of the student representative—or even the young person serving in the role as an individual—adults at the school board who wish to make space for youth voice must work to adjust *all* practices that reinforce traditional hierarchies.

Based on our observation of meetings in which the student representatives were *not* present, we also find little evidence that the school board members changed their behaviors or style of communication to accommodate youth voice. Given the age-based hierarchy that exists in schools, making adjustments on behalf of the student representative would be a step toward another of Jennings et al.'s (2006) criteria, that of "equitable power-sharing between youth and adults." Other evidence suggests that the student representatives' perceptions of their influence differs from those of the adult board members. In an article dated July 11 (Kohli, 2016), board members were described as unable to think of a time when the student representative's presence had changed a vote; in an April 15 post released by LAUSD's Office of Communication that included an interview with outgoing representative Leon Popa, however, he described having influenced the Board's vote on the 2016-2017 academic year calendar (LAUSD, 2016c). An article from the L.A. Daily News about the calendar vote makes no mention of Popa's input directly, but notes that board member Monica García cited his concerns (Gazzar, 2016).

Implications for Practice

Our findings demonstrate the ways that the current strategy used by the LAUSD school board to include student representation fails to meet the standards of critical youth empowerment as proposed by Jennings et al. (2016). Although likely not the result of an intentional plan to block student participation, the existing system effectively tokenizes one student out of 650,000, while providing this individual little opportunity to have a say in decision-making processes. Based on the research presented in this article, we offer two suggestions for practice that could increase the degree to which student voice has a presence at the LAUSD school board.

School Board Subcommittees

Current practice only involves the student representative in regular LAUSD Board of Education meetings, yet five subcommittees meet regularly to focus on specific district issues, and also include community representatives beyond the elected board members. These committees are the Budget, Facilities, and Audit Committee; the Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment Committee; the Early Childhood Education and Parent Engagement Committee; the Special Education Ad-Hoc Committee, and the Successful School Climate: Progressive Discipline and Safety Committee. The last of these is particularly significant for secondary school students given the heavy presence of police and security officers on campuses, and the large number of LAUSD students currently incarcerated in local juvenile detention facilities. California Education Code (Section 35012b) states that student representatives may attend all board meetings except for executive ("closed board") sessions; in a district as large as LAUSD the student representatives may benefit greatly from participating in these committee meetings, where other stakeholders share decision-making power with the elected school board members. Investigating the impact of sharing representative space with community-based educational advocates, as well as people serving in roles that students encounter on a daily basis (including school principals, teachers, and law enforcement officers) may increase the potential for student participation to lead to critical engagement and empowerment.

Creating Additional Student Representative Positions

As one of LAUSD's own news releases reported (LAUSD, 2016b), state law allows for *at least* one student representative on the board. The first and the third representatives elected to the position so far are White boys; these individuals are certainly committed and sincere young people, but their selection is most likely impacted by the overrepresentation of White men in elected positions of power in the United States. Implicit bias generated by socially reproductive processes frequently selects for White men as the default assumption of the type of person considered "qualified" to serve as an elected official. It is also likely that students from more affluent socioeconomic backgrounds, living in wealthier neighborhoods, have had increased opportunities to become familiar with formal political processes and traditional modes of civic participation. It is therefore unsurprising that the current process is likely to over-select for White students, despite their minority status in the district (less than 10% of the total student population). Given the fact that two of the three student representatives have also attended a single high school on the Westside of Los Angeles, geographic

representation also does not seem guaranteed by the current system. We recommend that the district consider expanding the number of students eligible for participation, potentially by electing one student for each of the seven districts represented in the regular Board. This suggestion mirrors an element of the Student Engagement and Empowerment Resolution of 2014 (proposed by Board member and later president Steve Zimmer), which called for the establishment of a seven-member advisory council, from which students would take turns attending regular board and governing committee meetings. Based on our understandings of discourse as encompassing physical as well as linguistic space in policy processes, we believe the presence of seven students in the board member meeting space to be an important change. In recognition of the time-consuming nature of parliamentary procedure and the large number of agenda items considered at each meeting, one student could serve as spokesperson during the meetings, with this position rotating among the seven representatives, but the increased physical presence of students could have a discursively significant impact.

Conclusions

In their examination of how the Philadelphia Student Union (PSU) was effective in organizing to influence school reform efforts at the local level, Conner and Zaino (2014) found that those outside the group viewed its strengths in different ways, but emphasized that the youth themselves should be able to tell its story. They concluded by reiterating that young people should be viewed as acting on and within educational policy, not merely as "beneficiaries or targets of specific legislation," and emphasized that youth need not only to have a voice, but "an audience that listens to them" (Conner & Zaino, 2014, p. 201). Future research should include the voices of the LAUSD Board of Education student representatives themselves[i], and explore the nuances of internal board politics, which are often not easily visible from an outside perspective.

Conceptualizing student voice at the Board as part of broader youth-organizing processes based on relationship development, research, action, and evaluation could expand possibilities for participation. In Dolan et al.'s (2015) work with young people in San Bernardino County, for example, YPAR was only one aspect of a larger effort to address employment and educational opportunities in their community. Youth organized meetings to which decision makers (including school board and city council representatives) were invited, rather than the other way around (Dolan et al., 2015). Imagining the possibilities presented by applying critical youth engagement theory and YPAR activities, we pose the question: What would such an analysis look like if youth were engaged in such a study of practices at the LAUSD Board of Education? Bertrand's (2014) identification of reciprocal dialogue among students of color and educational decision makers as key to creating new approaches to address systemic racism is particularly important in a district that enrolls predominantly students of color, yet is led by adults (from classroom teachers to district administrators) who frequently do not reflect student demographics. Attending to the discursive importance of physical presence in decision-making spaces, we ask another question: What are the implications for student voice if students of color are not adequately represented in even symbolic roles?

As Mitra (2015) has summarized, engaging in structured inquiry practices can create spaces for student voice to impact current practices. Therefore, the Board may benefit from working with the student representatives to explore issues of concern that are relevant to

upcoming decision-making responsibilities through engagement in YPAR activities. Student representation on the LAUSD Board of Education has only recently been reinstated in the district after three decades without such a presence, and the impact of this shift remains to be seen. The work of all elected school board members working on behalf of the millions of constituents invested in the Los Angeles Unified School District is essential and enormously difficult; the creativity and expertise that students themselves can bring to these spaces should not continue to go underutilized. Youth voice has the potential to play a critical role in LAUSD educational policy decision-making processes.

Notes

1. Because Leon Popa and Karen Calderon were both currently enrolled high school students in LAUSD at the time of this research, we did not consider it ethically appropriate to involve them in a critique of school district processes. We welcome the opportunity to learn from their perspectives and experiences, and those of current student representative Benjamin Holtzman, after they graduate.

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Appendix A: Application Materials, Instructions and Guidelines for Student Representatives

Be the voice of all LAUSD students by becoming the:

STUDENT MEMBER OF THE BOARD OF EDUCATION !

APPLICATIONS ARE DUE

Monday, April 25th, 2016

no later than **5:00 PM**

applications must be emailed or faxed to

Dr. Brenda Manuel

email: brenda.manuel@lausd.net

fax: 213.481.3392

APPLICATIONS ARE AVAILABLE ONLINE

achieve.lausd.net/pcss

APPLY!

FOR MORE INFORMATION EMAIL OR CALL DR. BRENDA MANUEL • brenda.manuel@lausd.net • 213 481-3317 or LORENA FRANCO • afranco@lausd.net • 213 481-3301

PARENT, COMMUNITY AND STUDENT SERVICES

BENEFITS

- Become the voice of all LAUSD students
- Be a recognized student leader
- Contribute to the development of District policy
- Gain practical direct experience from our District leaders
- Develop new skills and refine others
- Learn how to empower and influence others

Empowering Student VOICE

LOS ANGELES UNIFIED SCHOOL DISTRICT
PARENT, COMMUNITY AND STUDENT SERVICES
DIVISION OF INSTRUCTION

STUDENT MEMBER OF THE BOARD OF EDUCATION
APPLICATION PACKET FOR THE 2016-2017 SCHOOL YEAR

INSTRUCTIONS and GUIDELINES

A COMPLETE application packet will include the following:

1. **Application**
2. **Written response**
3. **Most recent high school transcripts showing current grades**
4. **Three (3) letters of recommendation from the following stakeholders:**
   a. **Student (from your school)**
   b. **High school teacher (from your school)**
   c. **Principal or designee (from your school)**

DEADLINE
Application packets are due to the Parent, Community and Student Services by 5:00 PM on Monday, April 25th, 2016.

Packets may be emailed or faxed to:

Dr. Brenda Manuel
Email: **brenda.manuel@lausd.net**
Fax: **213.481-3392**

Eligibility: Only LAUSD high school students who will be seniors (12th Grade) in the 2016-2017 school year are eligible to submit an application.

Please email or fax complete application to:
Dr. Brenda Manuel
Email: brenda.manuel@lausd.net
Fax 213.481.3392

LOS ANGELES UNIFIED SCHOOL DISTRICT
PARENT, COMMUNITY AND STUDENT SERVICES
DIVISION OF INSTRUCTION

APPLICATION DEADLINE:
April 25th, 2016 5:00 PM
All materials must be received no later than 5:00 PM on April 25th. Only complete application packets will be considered. See instructions for packet contents.

STUDENT MEMBER OF THE BOARD OF EDUCATION
APPLICATION FOR 2016-2017

WRITTEN RESPONSE

Please use separate sheets of paper to answer the following questions. Your responses must be included in your application packet. Limit your responses to no more than three (3) pages in total.

1) Tell us about yourself – list your academic achievements, honors, extra-curricular activities, and work experience (if applicable).

2) Identify and discuss what you consider the most challenging issue that is affecting students in the public education system in Los Angeles. Why do you consider this a challenge for students? What can students do to make a difference?

3) Why do you want to serve as the Student Member of the Board of the Los Angeles Unified School District Board of Education? What contribution will you make in this role?

Thank you for your interest in becoming the next LAUSD Student Member of the Board of Education. Please review your packet for accuracy and completeness. We wish you the best of luck in this and all future endeavors.

Please email or fax complete application to:
Dr. Brenda Manuel
Email: brenda.manuel@lausd.net
Fax 213.481.3392

LOS ANGELES UNIFIED SCHOOL DISTRICT
PARENT, COMMUNITY AND STUDENT SERVICES
DIVISION OF INSTRUCTION

APPLICATION DEADLINE: April 25th, 2016 5:00 PM
All materials must be received no later than 5:00 PM on April 25th. Only complete application packets will be considered. See instructions for packet contents.

STUDENT MEMBER OF THE BOARD OF EDUCATION
APPLICATION FOR 2016-2017

Eligibility: Only LAUSD High School Students who will be seniors (12th Grade) in the 2016-2017 academic year are eligible to submit applications

NAME (Last, First, Middle Initial)	BIRTHDATE (mm/dd/yyyy)	HOME PHONE NUMBER (Include Area Code)
HOME ADDRESS (Street, City, State, Zip Code)		
STUDENTS' LAUSD EMAIL ADDRESS	PARENT(S) NAME	PARENT(S) CONTACT NUMBER
NAME OF HIGH SCHOOL	NAME OF PRINCIPAL	
SCHOOL ADDRESS (Street, City, State, Zip Code)		
SCHOOL PHONE NUMBER (Include Area Code)	LOCAL BOARD DISTRICT #	
APPLICANTS' GRADE LEVEL FOR 2016-2017 – (only seniors are eligible) ☐ Senior	GENDER: ☐ Male ☐ Female	

ETHNIC/RACIAL GROUP (Response is optional)
☐ American Indian or Alaskan Native ☐ Filipino ☐ White, not Hispanic
☐ Asian ☐ Hispanic ☐ Other _____
☐ Black, not Hispanic ☐ Pacific Islander

Three (3) letters of recommendations (1. fellow student, 2. High School Teacher and 3. High School Principal) MUST accompany your application. In the spaces below please, provide information about your three references. Transcripts MUST also accompany your application.

1	NAME	CONTACT PHONE NUMBER (Include Area Code)
	ADDRESS (Street, City, State, Zip Code)	PLACE OF EMPLOYMENT AND POSITION
2	NAME	CONTACT PHONE NUMBER (Include Area Code)
	ADDRESS (Street, City, State, Zip Code)	PLACE OF EMPLOYMENT AND POSITION
3	NAME	CONTACT PHONE NUMBER (Include Area Code)
	ADDRESS (Street, City, State, Zip Code)	PLACE OF EMPLOYMENT AND POSITION

SIGNATURES

I certify that the essays written and submitted with this application represent my work.

Date _____ Signature of Student _____

I understand that my support will be essential in making my son/daughter a successful Student Member of the Board of Education.

Date _____ Signature of Parent or Guardian _____

APPLICATION CHECKLIST

Have you included?

☐ ***COMPLETE APPLICATION***

☐ ***WRITTEN RESPONSE***

☐ ***TRANSCRIPTS***

☐ ***THREE (3) LETTERS OF RECOMMENDATION (STUDENT, TEACHER, PRINCIPAL)***

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