Check for
updates

Student Voice and Adult Manipulation: Youth Navigating Adult Agendas

Carlos P. Hipolito-Delgado[1]

Abstract

Student voice can be a powerful tool in urban schools. Student voice programs engage students in the educational policies and practices that impact their lives and provides educators a glimpse into the experiences and needs of students, particularly those from marginalized backgrounds. However, successful student voice programs rely upon adult partnership and too often educators and administrators act in ways that stifle the voice of youth. In this article I employed narrative inquiry to examine the experiences of a group of students of color in an urban school district as they advocated for student voice in school safety policies in their district. As these young people attempted to work with school leaders, district administrators and school board members, they encountered manipulation, threats, and tokenism. This article highlights the importance of youth learning to navigate adult agendas, the strategies educational leaders use to silence student voice, and the importance of supportive adult relationships in promoting student voice.

Keywords Student voice · Youth adult partnerships · Student activism · Action civics

> I've been able to learn how to read relationships that adults have with students. It's kind of like a bullshit detector. It's like...I know this person is actually for students. Oh, this person's just using them, you know?...folks are going to come to you and be like, "Oh, that'd be amazing if you can help us on this campaign," and all they want is your face on the campaign. They don't want your voice in it. (Fatima, Senior at Malcom X College Prep, at her end of year interview).

Student voice can be a powerful tool for urban school reform, but when youth must navigate adult agendas to have their voices heard, some of this power can be lost. Student voice programing generally include strategies for sharing power with

---

✉ Carlos P. Hipolito-Delgado
carlos.hipolito@ucdenver.edu

1   University of Colorado Denver, Campus Box 106, P.O. Box 173364, Denver, CO, USA

youth in schools and using youths' experiences to promote meaningful change in educational policy (Conner et al., 2016; Czerniawski, 2012; Kirshner, 2015). In student voice initiatives youth are positioned as educational researchers to investigate issues in their schools with the hopes of presenting recommendations that are responsive to students needs to educational leaders and policy makers (Conner et al., 2016). Though the focus on student voice is rightfully on youth, the support of teachers, counselors, and administrators provide opportunities for mentoring and alliance building (Conner et al., 2016; Sussman, 2015). Working within school systems comes with challenges—resistance of school leaders to student voice, understanding adult political spaces, and navigating adult agendas.

Alas, there is a lack of research on how youth successfully enter into the world of adult politics (Larson & Walker, 2006). This article addresses this void by exploring how a group of students learned to navigate adult agendas. Using narrative inquiry, I present the story of students' efforts to impact school safety policies and the manipulation they encountered from school leaders, district personnel, and school board members. This article contributes to the field by presenting a detailed account of the challenges youth face in trying to impact urban educational reform, the lengths some adults will go to stifle student voice, and the importance of supportive adult relationships.

Student Voice in Urban Schools

Zion (2020) described student voice as school-based programing where students: "inquire about the root causes of problems in their schools and communities and take action to address them by working with adult allies to develop and implement better policies and practices" (p. 4). These programs might occur in a classroom, as part of a civics or social studies course, or as a lunch or afterschool club. In most districts student voice programing is typically limited to a singular club or to a specific teacher who might implement a program in their classes (Hipolito-Delgado et al., 2022). Most student voice programs entail a partnership between youth and adults, who prioritize student autonomy and initiative and, simultaneously, foster youth academic learning and civic engagement (Zion, 2020). The adult partner (usually a teacher) acts as a mentor who provides youth with resources and instruction related to root cause analysis, research methods, and policy development (Stickney et al., 2022). Student voice programing is grounded in the theories of community organizing, youth development, critical theory, critical pedagogy, and sociopolitical development (Hipolito-Delgado et al., 2022). Additionally, students voice experiences might rely on a youth participatory action research or action civics frameworks to guide young people through root problem identification, research, and policy development processes. The ultimate goal is for students to exercise initiative to address an issue that impacts them in their school or community.

Student voice programs are particularly scarce in urban districts (Bertrand et al., 2020). Even when student voice initiatives exist, there are limitations on who participates (Kirshner, 2015). Czerniawski (2012) argued that high achieving students and those whose values most aligned with school leaders were more likely to be involved

in youth voice activities. As such, a rare few students gain the opportunity to learn about functioning in adult spheres (Larson & Walker, 2006).

This is unfortunate as urban schools could be spaces for youth civic training, but instead reproduce the social status quo (Booker, 2017; Kirshner, 2015; Lac & Mansfield, 2018). It is atypical to find examples where schools encourage youth civic engagement and include student voice in decision making (Kirshner, 2015). Urban schools tend to focus on controlling youth: The rules of most schools are imposed on students, with young people having no real power over important decisions (Lac & Mansfield, 2018; Sussman, 2015). Regrettably, hierarchies of power are entrenched in American school systems (Conner, 2016) and this constrains the practice of student voice initiatives (Bertrand & Lozenski, 2021; Ozer et al., 2013; Sussman, 2015). Student voice in schools is seen as a threat to the status quo of school power structures, leaving few adult leaders willing to engage (Booker, 2017; Mitra, 2009). Kohfeldt et al. (2011) argued that tension is an inevitable aspect of student voice as youth push against systems that have limited their participation. Unfortunately, this youth empowerment opportunity is sacrificed for the comfort of school leaders, but it is not all that is lost.

Student voice initiatives could benefit all educational stakeholders including students, administrators, and teachers (Bertrand & Lozenski, 2021; Salisbury et al., 2020). In regard to students, there is ample evidence of the positive impact of engagement in student voice programs. Bertrand and Lozenski (2021) argued that student voice engagement was associated with critical reflection skills and political engagement in youth. Student voice programs are also linked to youth achievement, academic self-efficacy, identity development, critical reflection skills, political efficacy, and engagement in activism (Hipolito-Delgado & Zion, 2017; Hipolito-Delgado et al., 2022; Kirshner, 2015).

A topic that has received less attention, is the benefit of student voice for educational administrators and teachers. What is often missed is that student voice includes the largely untapped and insider experience of youth that might raise awareness of and address systemic inequities in schools (Conner, 2016; Sussman, 2015). Students of color, in specific, possess knowledge on the operation of schools that is unknown or ignored by white leaders (Lac & Mansfield, 2018; Salisbury et al., 2020). Alas, even when proclaiming a vision of social justice and inclusion, many school leaders take an adult-centric approach that excludes student voice (Lac & Mansfield, 2018). Creating equitable urban schools requires the voice of students, particularly those most impacted by inequity (Bertrand et al., 2020; Sussman, 2015).

One key to unlocking the benefits to student voice is partnerships between youth and adults. Though youth should guide key aspects of student voice initiatives, adults are needed for support (Mitra, 2009; Ozer et al., 2013). Adults serve as role models and knowledgeable mentors by providing training and encouragement (Mirra et al., 2015). A prerequisite for this is a caring and trusting relationships between youth and adults (Mirra et al., 2015; Mitra, 2009).

While partnering with students sounds straightforward, enacting this partnership is challenging (Ozer et al., 2013). It is hard to determine how much support adults should provide youth, balancing giving youth space to figure things out and the benefit of learning from experience (Sussman, 2015). Buttimer (2018) described how

the lack of training led educators to enact strategies that ran counter to student voice goals. What is clear is that educators should not drive the agenda of student voice projects (Kohfeldt et al., 2011).

Barriers to Student Voice in Schools

The existence of hierarchies between students and educational leaders in schools makes power sharing challenging (Ozer & Douglas, 2015). Unfortunately, many educational leaders will use these hierarchies to their advantage in efforts to stifle student voice. The most common strategies employed by educational leaders to limit or discount student voice include double speak, discourse of surprise, decorative student voice, and interest alignment.

Doublespeak

Doublespeak describes the phenomenon where educational leaders claim, sometimes vigorously and publicly, to support student voice, but are unable to provide examples of when they have worked with youth on significant policy (Conner et al., 2016). Despite an espoused commitment, some leaders actively undermine student voice through a lack of transparency with youth, controlling meeting agendas, and ignoring youth generated policies (Salisbury et al., 2020). Salisbury et al. (2020) documented how educational leaders used social media accounts to give the public perception of youth partnerships, while these adult leaders took steps to limit youth voice in district decision making.

The challenge with doublespeak is the public perception that student voice is taken seriously in a school or district—often earning leaders praise. While the public is oblivious to what is really happening, only those youth that are involved know their voice is inconsequential. The outcome is a lack of student voice, but public perception of youth/adult partnership.

Discourse of Surprise

Even more pernicious than the illusion of partnership, is discourse of surprise–when adult "decision makers express surprise or amazement at aspects of students' involvement in…student voice efforts" (Bertrand, 2019, p. 1371). In essence, discourse of surprise captures the phenomenon when school leaders and policy makers express gushing astonishment over the abilities of youth engaged in student voice projects (Bertrand, 2019). Specifically, Bertrand (2019) addressed how discourse of surprise (1) was indicative of lowered expectations that adults had of youth and (2) how these lowered expectations diverted attention away from the message of students.

Whether intentional or not, discourse of surprise permitted decision makers to seem supportive of youth, but ignore student advocacy. Instead, school leaders focused their attention on how youth have exceeded their expectations as

researchers, policy crafters, or presenters. Unfortunately, discourse of surprise sustains the ideology that youth of color are unmotivated, unprofessional, and unscholarly (Bertrand, 2019).

Decorative Student Voice

Decorative student voice describes when youth sit on school related boards, but their input is not solicited nor taken into account (Conner et al., 2016): here school leaders use youth to validate or co-sign the leader's or the district's agenda (Salisbury et al., 2020). Under this paradigm the mere existence of youth voice programming is viewed as a success by decision makers (Conner et al., 2016). Youth are not viewed as contributors to policy creation, rather leaders make overtures to gain support for existing or proposed policy (Conner et al., 2016).

Though students might have opportunities to interact with adult decision makers while sitting on these decorative boards, the youth rarely have their voice incorporated into policy (Conner et al., 2016). Again, there is public perception of student voice and collaboration, but the reality is that youth at best provide feedback and at worst serve as co-signers.

Interest Alignment

Interest alignment describes the strategy when school leaders promote student voice only when students' interests align with theirs. In a study of adult decision makers' consideration of student voice, Conner (2016) found that school leaders ignored youth policy solutions when they disagreed with the policy or when the youth challenged the political agenda of those in power. Alternatively, Conner et al. (2016) provided examples of decision makers promoting student voice when the message of youth served adult interests.

Though competing motivations between adults and youth within student voice projects can reinforce power hierarchies (Bertrand et al., 2020), Czerniawski (2012) described how school leaders gave credence to student voice when it followed the "party line" and the status quo (p. 135). With interest alignment the illusion of student voice in decision making exists, as those policies that support educational leaders' interests are promoted publicly. Through interest alignment, student groups might choose to partner with adults who share their agenda, such a strategy might be tenuous, as diversion from the party line can lead to a loss of support.

To date there is limited research on how students navigate adult decision-making contexts (Booker, 2017). Additionally, most youth are unfamiliar with these contexts and require support to learn about educational bureaucratic systems and how to navigate them (Booker, 2017; Larson & Walker, 2010). This article addresses the above needs by detailing the experiences of a group of students learning to navigate the adult sphere of educational policy, the length some adults went to silence student voice, and the role of supportive adult relationships in promoting student voice.

Method

Narrative Inquiry

Narrative inquiry studies the lived experiences of individuals as told by those who lived the events (Clandinin, 2006; Ollerenshaw & Creswell, 2002). The task of the researcher in narrative inquiry is to describe the events of a story as interpreted by the researcher and participants (Coulter & Smith, 2009). Narrative inquiry also entails restorying (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990), which is the gathering of information from participants, analyzing for key elements, and rewriting events in chronological order (Ollerenshaw & Creswell, 2002).

In narrative inquiry, context, the relationship between researcher and participants, and the timeline of events are key aspects. The context of events allows the reader to feel as if they are experiencing the story along with the character and can consist of physical environments and actions of characters (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; Coulter & Smith, 2009). Narrative inquiry should also occur in the context of a relationship of equity between the researcher and participants—where both parties have a voice in shaping the relationship and the narrative (Clandinin, 2006; Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). As such, the researcher first listens to the story of the participants and participants contribute additions and corrections to the narrative (Ollerenshaw & Creswell, 2002). The timeline of the narrative generally presents the chronology of events, but can be modified to suit the story—though the researcher might move back and forward through the timeline of the story (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). It is also expected that the timeline includes significant events within the story.

Narrative inquiry was selected for this article as narrative is known for providing authority and validity to the voice of the participant (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990)—something that is typically denied to students within educational systems. Another reason for using narrative was to capture the subjective experiences of participants with the goal of increasing understanding of the phenomena (Coulter & Smith, 2009). As such, this narrative highlighted how students learned to navigate educational policy systems and the challenges they faced from school leaders.

Positionality

I identify as a Chicano, cisgender, heterosexual, professor, of upper-middle socio-economic status, in his mid-40's. I was specifically interested in observing this student group because of their progressive policy proposals, the students were largely Black and Latinx, and the group was known for being student-led. I was also curious about how the student group might be impacted by their limited adult mentorship.

My role was primarily as an observer. I typically sat alone in one end of the room and tried to capture, in my fieldnotes, all that was going on in the room.

However, I participated when invited, such as during check-in questions or when the students had specific questions about research. I also, occasionally, offered help to the students when the students seemed stuck or if I had a resource to share. In these cases, I might text a link to one of the student leaders or raise my hand to speak.

Setting

This study took place in the western region of the United States within the Western Public School District (WPSD) at Malcom X College Prep (MXCP). WPSD is the largest urban district in the state and enrolls approximately 89,000 students across 207 schools. The district is predominantly Latinx (over 50% of students), with the next largest groups being White (25%) and Black (14%).

MXCP is located in the farthest eastern side of WPSD, in a neighborhood that is low income and has a high immigrant population. Schools in this area have the reputation of being low performing and the neighborhood is known for having gang problems. At the time of my observations MXCP enrolled approximately 1,300 students. The school was 59% Latinx and 25% Black with small Asian, White, and Pacific Islander enrollment. MXCP ran on a college preparation model—encouraging students to participate in concurrent enrollment to earn college credit while still in high school. MXCP was unique in that the school leadership was almost all Black.

WPSD houses a student voice program called Student Voice in Education (SVE). SVE uses an action civics model where students engage in the process of identifying, investigating, and proposing a policy solution to an issue of equity facing their school. At the time of the study, SVE programming was offered in 25 high schools to approximately 300 students. Each SVE team consisted of 5–12 students, a coach (usually a teacher who served as an adult ally and provided training to the team), and 2–4 student representatives who participated in district wide meetings to receive additional training on behalf of their team.

The SVE team at MXCP was called Power to Young People (PYP). PYP operated as an after-school club, meeting twice a week from 3 to 4 pm. They were coached by the MXCP parent and community liaison. Their coach had a reputation for being hands off with the team. The student leaders described picking him as their coach because he would allow the youth to take control of the team and they could count on his support should they really need it.

Participants

This narrative focuses on the experiences of the four PYP student representatives. These four students were selected as they were the identified leaders of PYP and were central to the events in the narrative. Two representatives identified as male and two identified as female. One identified as Black, one as Chicana, one as Latina, and one as biracial. Three were Seniors and one was a Junior. Pseudonyms were used to protect the identity of participants, the school, and the school district. See Table 1 for pseudonyms and brief demographics of all participants.

Table 1 Pseudonyms, role in the district, and additional demographics

Pseudonym	Role in district	Demographics
Fatima	Student	Senior at MXCP, PYP Student Representative, Chicana
Amnesty	Student	Senior at MXCP, PYP Student Representative, Latina
Me	Research Partner	University Professor, PYP Researcher, Chicano
Gary	Student	Junior at MXCP, PYP Student Representative, Bi-racial Male
Chuck	Student	Senior at MXCP, PYP Student Representative, Black Male
Simone	Administrator	SVE Director
Heller	Administrator	WPSD Chief of School Security
Pearman	School Principal	MXCP Principal
Estefan	Superintendent	WPSD Superintendent
Morrissey	Administrator	WPSD Student Engagement Director
Jackson	Board Director	WPSD Schoolboard Member
Lila	Administrator	Coordinator for SVE

Data

In narrative inquiry data can include field notes, journals, interview transcripts, observations, storytelling, class plans, and pictures (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). For this study, data consisted of field notes, interviews, pictures, video, and documents. I collected 14 field notes by writing detailed descriptions of the meeting activities (timestamped in 10-min intervals). Field notes included direct quotes from participants and my interpretations of activities (italicized to distinguish from direct observation). I collected field notes at eight PYP meetings and six SVE sponsored events.

I conducted seven interviews as part of this narrative. I interviewed three of the four PYP representatives, with two being interviewed twice. The student interviews took place at the middle and end of the academic year. I also interviewed the MXCP Principal and SVE program director at the end of the year. All interviews were semistructured, audio recorded, and transcribed for data analysis.

Additionally, I collected documents, took pictures, and recorded videos. I collected email exchanges between students and myself, news stories related to the events of the narrative, and student developed materials such as meeting notes and research surveys. For this narrative I also used eight pictures that included the layout of meeting locations (to help describe context), student meeting board, and pictures that documented school safety protocols. Finally, I used four video recordings of student presentations and SVE meetings. Video was particularly useful for describing interactions between students and district personnel during meetings.

Though I am part of a larger student voice research team that, at the time, included three education faculty and three graduate student researchers, all activities associated with data collection, data analysis, creating of the narrative, and authorship of this manuscript were conducted by me. Data collection for this study occurred over a period of 10 months. The research team did play a role in reviewing data and the narrative—this will be discussed in the trustworthiness section of the manuscript.

Data Analysis

Ollerenshaw and Creswell (2002) suggested that narrative researchers begin with analyzing raw data to create a chronology of events. Through this process there is the need to identify key participants, settings, and focal plot points that convey the lived experiences of participants–this process is referred to as restorying (Coulter & Smith, 2009; Ollerenshaw & Creswell, 2002). To this end, I reviewed all data and organized it into a sequential timeline. I identified 10 time periods in the narrative. Within each time period I then organized data that highlighted what occurred in that time space.

Ollerenshaw and Creswell (2002) recommend writing of interim texts that serve as drafts of the participants' lived experience. Once I completed the above data analysis, I developed a first draft of the narrative.

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness describes the authenticity and consistency of interpretations (Creswell, 2013). There are various methods for achieving trustworthiness including the use of outside auditors and member checking with participants. To ensure the accuracy of my interpretations I presented data and draft narratives to my research team. They provided feedback on how to improve the narrative and ensure its accuracy.

In narrative inquiry, researchers are called to collaborate with participants to ensure accuracy of story and meaning making (Ollerenshaw & Creswell, 2002)—this is a form of member checking. After I completed a draft of the narrative, I shared it with two participants and asked them to read the narrative and provide feedback. One student took it upon herself to share the narrative with the remaining representatives. She also organized a time for the four students to meet to review the narrative. Upon completing their reading and discussion, they invited me to join them for a debrief. They felt they were accurately represented in the narrative and provided additional details about two key events (for example, clarifying why one of the students left PYP).

Based on their feedback, I wrote a second draft and shared it with the four representatives. Two responded to my request for feedback. Though they approved of the changes made, they asked me to include additional details about the events of a meeting I had not attended. I arranged a follow-up interview with one of the representatives and with the SVE director to gain additional insight on the previously described meeting. Based on this new information a third draft was created.

Findings

At the time of this study, my research team was engaged in a multiyear project with SVE where we attempted to understand learning environments that supported student voice and the socioemotional outcomes for youth who participated in student voice programing. This narrative examines the experience of one SVE student team.

Getting Started

There is a rhythm to my team's student voice research in WPSD. The school year starts in mid to late August, there is a period of acclimation for students and teachers and mid-September we reach out to coaches to give informed consent presentations to students and start fieldwork observations. I first reached out to the PYP team coach in early September, but did not hear back from him. I asked for the SVE staff to help arrange an introductory email—still no response from him. After four attempts to reach him, I got worried and tried a different tactic.

During the first SVE meeting of October, I approached the PYP student representatives and requested permission to attend their meetings. They shared that they hoped to start meeting in two weeks. I got the email addresses of two of the student reps (Fatima and Gary), sent them an introductory email, and asked for them to please let me know when they started meeting. I sent a follow up 10 days later. After my follow up email, Fatima responded inviting me to their meetings. We exchanged emails over the next few days and made arrangements. Fatima shared her cell phone number and said it was easier to contact her by phone. From this point on, Fatima was my point of contact for the team. This was a unique arrangement; in most cases my point of contact was the team coach. At the time I did not realize it, but this was the first sign of how truly student led PYP was and the importance of Fatima's role in leading this group.

The Early Meetings

From the outside MXCP looks like a large, tan colored, cinder block, two-story square. There are two main entrances at the north and the south. There is a large parking lot at the north entrance where students and faculty park and buses pick up students at the end of the school day. I entered through the southern entrance passing a smaller parking lot, for administration and staff. Walking to the southern entrance, the doors looked thick and heavy, and the windows wore graphics that obscured the view into the building. During my first visit, I met Fatima and Amnesty, another student representative, in the main office, which was just to the right of the southern entrance. I did not know them well, but I had met both previously.

I met Fatima the previous year during a SVE event. Fatima identified as Chicana and was shorter in stature, maybe 5 feet tall. She had dark brown eyes and long brown straight hair that was usually parted in the middle. When I think of her, I see her large hoop earrings and dark mascara and lipstick. At the time she was a senior at MXCP. Fatima exuded energy and passion, she walked confidently, and spoke with authority. She spoke in a slower cadence–like a homegirl from East LA, where I grew up. Speaking of her accent, she once said that she used to be self-conscious about it not sounding "academic"—she worried that because it was not "standard English" that people would think she was not smart. She went on to say that she has learned to embrace it. In her mid-year interview, she described her role on PYP: "I'm the annoying one…But it has to be that way. If there's not an annoying one,

then shit doesn't get done. You've just got to remind them…yes, we're having a meeting…I feel like I'm the mom."

I also met Amnesty, now a senior, the year prior, first at a SVE event, then at another youth voice organization. She identified as Latina, was also shorter in stature, close to Fatima's height. Her shoulder length hair always stood out to me as it was incredibly curly. She was blunt when she spoke: she would get straight to her point, in few words.

In contrast, I towered over both Fatima and Amnesty. I am about 6 foot 4 inches tall and have a wide frame. I am a brown skinned, bald-headed Chicano with a gray beard. The students told me I had a deep voice and I spoke very loudly. During visits I typically wore dark blue jeans, a guayabera, Air Force 1's, and a fitted baseball cap.

Fatima and Amnesty led me down the hallway and past various classrooms. Typically, a teacher or administrator stood in the hallway, occasionally they greeted me, but only once did they stop me. In the spring, a male administrator asked if I needed help. I introduced myself and explained I was there to visit PYP, he let me pass. Given the events that would transpire that year, it is odd that administrators were so casual about security.

Fatima and Amnesty led me to their coach's office—where PYP would meet. The office, rectangular in shape with exposed cinder block walls, had a long table with multiple desktop computers on its eastside; I usually sat along this wall in a black plastic school chair closest to the coach's desk—it provided a good vantage of the entire room. Rarely did anyone join me on this side of the room. A large bulletin board, small flat screen tv, and white board on wheels sat along the southern wall. The white board was used to list the agenda and take notes during meetings. Typically, student reps stood flanking both sides of the white board. To the wall opposite the computers was a bean bag, a small black sofa, and an armchair. Typically, four or five students sat here. Gary was often on the bean bag when not presenting.

Gary identified as bi-racial (white and Latino), he was of medium height, maybe 5′10″, with blondish brown hair, and lighter brown eyes. He was a Junior. He tended to keep his hair short on the sides and a bit longer on the top, parted on the right side with hair sweeping left. I remember him wearing a hoodie and a pair of Air Force 1's. Early on he tended to hang back and let the other reps lead meetings. He was also the most soft-spoken of the student representatives.

In the middle of the room was a high table surrounded by six tall chairs. The students who were most engaged, but a bit more quiet in meetings, sat at the high table. While the youth on the couches tended to be more outspoken, but more easily distracted. The PYP roster listed 14 students, though there were usually 10 students in the space: the four student reps, four consistent team members, and some mix of the rest of the team.

Today the PYP meeting began with a check-in, "What is your weather?" This would be a popular check-in question over the year. Students described their current mood based on weather conditions: cloudy meant you were feeling down or windy meant you had a lot going on. I was then allowed time to introduce myself, my team's research on student voice in WSD, and informed consent. Aside from conducting student surveys, I would not be on their agenda again.

Early on the PYP team lacked a clear vision for their student voice project. At that first meeting students led presentations on potential topics such as English language learners, bullying, and project-based learning. Aside from the student who proposed a topic, there was not much excitement for these proposals. In his mid-year interview, Chuck, another student representative, noted this lack of energy and excitement for topics: "we talked about the other policies and all those other five, six different things, it was always kind of bland…you could always feel it that the whole team wasn't really with it."

Chuck was a tall Black male. Chuck had dark eyes and black hair. His hair was always faded on the sides and a bit longer on top, which he wore natural. I remember him with a big smile and two diamond stud earrings. At the time of this work, he was a Senior. He was more chill than either Fatima or Amnesty: He spoke more calmly and was always very polite and welcoming to me—though he forgot my name often.

The second PYP meeting I attended lacked energy: no one seemed excited to be there—Amnesty stated as much at the end of the meeting—and there was much less discussion as there was in the previous and in subsequent meetings. This lack of energy could be because the meeting was on Halloween and neither Chuck or Fatima were there. The goal of the Halloween meeting was to finalize the topic of their student voice project. During this meeting the team voted on various topics from project-based learning, special education, discipline, and school culture. Amnesty created polls on her phone and sent them out to the team via a group chat—each time cell phones alerts rang out in unison in the room. A given topic never won by more than one vote and the group always seemed unsatisfied with the result. This led to more discussion and more options being presented. I sensed myself getting frustrated through this process. These topics felt out of line with the type of projects I had seen PYP tackle in the past. Unfortunately, voting and discussion consumed their meeting time, and no decision was made.

Aside from the lack of excitement around project topics, from these October meetings it was clear that PYP was student run. I learned representatives met ahead of meetings to plan the agenda. The representatives also facilitated the meetings, which followed a pattern of check-in question, the business of the day, and announcements. They were also serious about starting and finishing meetings on time. Lastly, their coach rarely spoke in meetings. If the students needed specific information, for example data on school demographics, or access to resources (such as school issued laptops), they would ask their coach; otherwise, he was occupied on his computer or left the room for large portions of meetings.

The Incident

The incident happened after school, about a block away from campus. On an afternoon in mid-November, a student was shot outside of MXCP. The student, who was not the target, was shot in the leg in a drive-by. Fortunately, she recovered. Though the story was covered by local media, it was described very matter of factly. Very

different from the shock, outrage, and outpouring of prayers that are expressed when shootings occur at more affluent white schools.

I learned of the shooting from Simone, the director of SVE, prior to the start of the Fall Showcase—an event where SVE teams shared the focus of their student voice project, discussed plans for research, and received feedback from district personnel and community leaders. Simone shared that PYP would not be in attendance that night. I texted Fatima to see how she and the group were doing. She said she was okay and thanked me for checking in on her.

Members of PYP rarely referred to the shooting directly, more often they called it *the incident*. It took me a while to pick up on this. At a later meeting, I asked the students why they called it the incident? Fatima said that she did it out of respect for the student who was shot. No one else offered a rationale. In retrospect, I shouldn't have been surprised by the student's not directly addressing the shooting, especially since school leaders didn't address it. In a text exchange the day after the shooting, Fatima said it was business as usual at school, no one took time to process what had occurred.

I visited MXCP less than a week after the incident. The office felt empty and quiet—there were fewer students than usual and the white board was missing. Fatima started the meeting, thanked everyone for making it, and instructed the group to go outside. On the walk out, I noticed the white board with Chuck and Gary standing on opposite sides of it. I sat with a group of students on the blacktop facing the young men. Another group chose to stand behind us. Though the sun was out, it was a cold day and there was a frigid wind blowing.

Fatima stood in front of the board. Hyper focused, she did not tolerate side conversations and quickly brought the group back when they got sidetracked. When a student complained about being cold, Fatima quickly offered her jacket and went back to facilitating the meeting. She asked the group why they thought they were outside? A student said he thought that it was about what happened last week. Fatima asked what it was like to be a student in a community where a person literally got shot down the street from where they were. After a few seconds of silence, Fatima said that on their group chat they agreed to change their topic to school safety.

Chuck said that since the group had changed the topic, that they would need to find a new project fast. Then he asked, what was written on the board as the question of the day: "how do we make it so the youth of our community don't feel the need to be in a gang?" The group provided a range of answers from you can't, to giving alternative opportunities, to providing support. Fatima asked probing questions to inspire students to think more critically about gangs and violence.

Then Fatima asked the group how they wanted to address the issue of school safety. A student mentioned a clear bag policy. Another said that she wanted metal detectors. I was a little frustrated that they moved to solutions so quickly, I wanted them to dive deeper into the problem.

After more students complained about feeling cold, the group went back inside. Once inside, they brainstormed for another 15 min; proposing a program to help youth with their home life, a youth center, community events, sports teams, and mentorship programs. Without a final decision, the meeting ended at 4 p.m. During

a post meeting check-in, Fatima said she liked how the meeting went and Chuck said he was excited.

During her mid-year interview, I asked Fatima about how the shooting impacted PYP's selection of a focal problem. She said:

> I've always thought this was an issue...it's becoming more clear to everybody now...the day of the incident, someone on the team was like...what if we work on the safety of us...Yes, it was definitely the shooting. Because I feel like I've dealt with gang violence a lot of my life, but you're not able to—you can't say you want to help the issue until it impacts you...So I feel like that day they felt it, so then they wanted to heal it.

Though the group would pivot once more, the incident had brought the problem of school safety into focus.

My final observation for the calendar year was in mid-December. The PYP students were crafting a survey to assess students' perceptions of safety on campus. They worked on a shared document, with each student on a laptop. They debated questions to ask and the wording of items. After 10 min of observing, I felt like they were stuck, I did an internet search for surveys to assess students' perception of school safety. I found one that looked promising and texted the link to Fatima. She looked at the survey on her phone, then read some items from it out loud to the group, and, eventually, sent the whole survey to the team. Sharing the survey was the first time I impacted PYPs process. The group seriously considered the survey instrument and ultimately adapted the items.

After the meeting, I talked with Fatima and said that if any of the stuff I shared was excessive, to let me know to back off. I told her I wanted to be helpful, but I didn't want to intrude in their space. Fatima told me she realized, when they were working on the survey, that they had a professor in the room and should have asked me questions, but she was not sure what my role was supposed to be. I explained that my role is primarily to be an observer, but whenever she had questions, I was happy to help. When they finished creating their survey, they asked me to review it and provide feedback, which I gladly did.

Theater Security

The next PYP meeting I attended was the first week of January 2020. I was surprised by a new security protocol at the school—clear backpacks, the kind that are made of plastic and completely transparent. In one student's bag I saw his highlighters neatly arranged and a stack of notebooks. Most students did not understand my surprise. During his mid-year interview Chuck intimated that the changes in security were opportunistic: "We knew that our principal…was already trying to put reforms in on safety. We knew that she was already trying to push things on students, but we didn't really see an issue until that girl got shot." So perhaps the lack of reaction was from seeing this policy coming. Another important part of Chuck's quote was the idea that these security policies were being imposed on students, without their input. Gary called the new security measures "theater security"—meant for show, but not

actually making things safer. He said that if he really wanted to, he could still sneak a weapon into school in his pants.

It was at a district wide SVE meeting later that week that I understood the scope of the new security policies. During a small group discussion on school safety Chuck shared how new safety policies at MXCP had limited the freedoms of students. Chuck told the group how students were only allowed to enter through the southern doors on campus—even though the parking lot and bus drop off was outside the northern doors. He also said that the Deans were doing more hall sweeps and there had been more discipline against students. Chuck also described the Yondr pouches students were required to use to eliminate phone usage during class. Once placed inside the teacher locked the pouch magnetically. The other students responded with audible shock. A student from another school said that the White parents at her school would never allow this. Another student asked what happened if there was an emergency and my family was trying to get a hold of me?

Chuck said that all the security decisions of the Principal were based on fear as opposed to how to make the school safer. Fatima, Chuck, and Gary all acknowledged that the new security policies were a problem, especially since these changes came without student input. The three stated that new policies would eventually need to be addressed, but shared there was a more pressing concern related to safety—the presence of police in schools.

The Intergovernmental Agreement

Before the winter break PYP was invited by Simone to meet with Heller, the WPSD Chief of School Security—Gary, Fatima, and Amnesty attended. Heller attended with three Campus Safety Officers (CSOs)—school district hired and managed security personnel (not police officers). Gary said that the vibe at the meeting was weird. Simone described being put off by the CSOs having guns and by what she perceived as their defensive attitude.

During the meeting Heller was critical of many of the security measures MXCP and other schools had imposed, such as metal detectors and clear backpacks, but was particularly critical of local police officers being in district school. Simone recalled Heller saying that WPSD spent too much money on the contract with the local police department and that police officers should be removed from school. According to Gary, Heller expressed that CSOs were a better security option, with superior training in school safety.

During her mid-year interview Fatima discussed how at this meeting PYP learned that the intergovernmental agreement with the Western Police Department (WPD), that allowed WPD officers to be assigned to and operate in WPSD, was set to expire in 2020. She explained how members of PYP wanted a greater say in any new intergovernmental agreement: "Since the contract ends in 2020, we want to have a say in what that looks like, because yes we have this gang violence in our neighborhoods, but then we also have to deal with police presence…".

Student voice in the intergovernmental agreement became the focus of PYP during the Spring semester. Fatima recognized that this shift would cause conflict with

her school principal: "like we're saying we don't want police officers in the school and she's a big advocate for police officers in schools. There's going to be conflict… but we've got to stick to what we want." In the spring the conflict between PYP and their principal came into clearer focus.

It's All About Tokenization

I interviewed Pearman, the MXCP Principal at the end of the school year. I asked her about her views on student voice, the role of student voice in school reform, and the history of student voice at MXCP. She described her relationship with PYP:

> In the past...they would come in, talk to me about ongoing issues; what their political stance was and what their goal was that they were working towards; presenting, finding research on and what their solution was…They would work with and meet with my admin team, and we made sure that we supported them 100%.

She shared that she valued student voice; that anytime MXCP presented to the school board that PYP students were invited to join them.

Students described a different relationship though. Fatima called Pearman manipulative, threatening to expose Fatima's disciplinary history if she was too critical of Pearman or MXCP. I heard similar stories of Pearman's threats from other students.

One late-January evening I received a text from Fatima asking to talk—I was immediately worried as she never asked to speak by phone before. Amnesty joined us on the call and shared that she was called into Pearman's office over a social media post. In the post, Amnesty criticized MXCP for the lack of representation of Latinx culture. According to Amnesty, Pearman was mad and ordered her to delete the post if Amnesty did not want her undocumented status exposed. Amnesty was furious and terrified. The three of us talked for at least a half an hour. The students vented their anger and fears. We talked through possible next steps. I encouraged Amnesty to look out for her safety first, to consult with Simone, and offered to support her however I could.

During interviews, Fatima and Chuck both said that school image and alignment of interests influenced when Pearman provided PYP with support. Chuck stated: "It's all about tokenization…Whenever we were doing something big, something that would like—is good to tokenize, something that it's like, 'Oh, this is going to make MXCP look great,' she was on board." Student voice was amplified at MXCP when it made the school look good, else student voice was met with resistance or as Chuck said "Pearman will come to try to do us dirty".

At my next site visit in late January the white board listed: "weather check, survey, practice speeches, go upstairs". I was curious about the last two items, but did not have a chance to ask Fatima, who had me go straight into administering the survey. As soon as students completed the survey, we were making our way upstairs. As we climbed stairs to the second floor Fatima offered a quick update; they were going to practice speeches for the WPSD Board.

When we got to the meeting room upstairs, there was a group of school staff present. As we walked in the door, one woman asked, no one in particular, who I was. Amnesty answered nonchalantly, "He is our researcher". The lady in a surprised tone said, "You have a researcher?" I later learned that Amnesty frequently referred to me as their researcher. Being their researcher felt like a sign of acceptance, I enjoyed my given title.

The students took seats across two rows, I found a spot in the middle of the room next to Amnesty. Pearman arrived a few minutes later and Amnesty irritatedly commented to me about how Pearman was late and was so casual as she walked in. Pearman gave brief instructions and one by one the staff practiced their speeches. From what I could gather the staff wanted a vetting system for students transferring in the district: In their comments I heard how too many high-risk students were placed at MXCP and how this had eroded school safety. In their comments some teachers sounded angry and others cried.

After about 8 staff members practiced their speeches, it was 4:10 pm—10 min after PYP meeting usually ended—and Amnesty asked if the students could go next as many had to leave. Pearman, matter of factly, said that another group of staff had to go first. Amnesty looked aggravated by this response. Later, in their speeches two of the PYP students invoked the distinct value of "students first"—students being the priority of the district. I found it sad that the PYP students were not a priority in their school.

After 4:20 p.m. it was the students' turn to practice their speeches. In his speech, Gary addressed school safety and particularly the role of CSOs and School Resource Officers (SROs; WPD police officers who are assigned to schools, but are hired and managed by the police department). Gary explained that he, many of his classmates, and some teachers felt that cops did not belong in schools. He proposed that either SROs be required to take WPSD training and be managed by the district or that the school board terminate their contract with the WPD.

Once the students finished, Pearman asked if anyone had feedback for them. One teacher focused on Gary, telling him to watch his "ums" and that it was important that his comment be written in advance. Pearman asked Gary about the possible contradiction of asking for SROs to be removed from school while still asking for more training for SROs. Gary calmly clarified that he wanted the district to reject the contract with WPD, but wanted to at least compromise by requiring additional training for SROs.

As this interaction continued, Amnesty whispered to me that she thought the student speeches were the best and questioned why so much time was spent on critiquing them. I, too, was confused. Gary had notes prepared and at least two staff members acknowledged not having completed their speeches. Amnesty, in an annoyed tone, asked Pearman why they were spending so much time critiquing the students when some of the adults had similar concerns. Pearman said that she would address concerns directly with the adults. Clearly it was okay to critique students in shared space but not adults.

This was the last time I saw Amnesty at a PYP event. It was hinted that Amnesty's other involvements claimed her time. Later, Amnesty told me that she was called into the school office every couple of weeks and threatened with disciplinary

infractions from long past violations. She interpreted this as retaliation for her involvement with PYP. Ultimately, she decided it was safest for her and better for PYP if she left the group.

In her end of the year interview, Fatima told me that Pearman tried to convince Gary to change his speech:

> They were trying to get Gary to change his speech because he was saying... that we don't want police in our school...and we want to have a say on the contract...Gary was like, "Should I change it? Should I change it?" And I was like...Do you want to say this? He's like, "Yes, but..Pearman was saying, Don't say this..."

Fatima texted me the night of speech practice, asking for feedback for the students. I commended their passion, suggested that they present a focused message, and suggested they have a clearer call to action from the school board.

Ultimately, Gary delivered his speech calling for the removal of SROs from schools or student input in future intergovernmental agreements between the district and police. The students said it was strategic to have Gary call for the removal of police: he had a clean disciplinary record, so Pearman had no grounds to threaten him.

On a Mission

In mid-February the SVE staff hosted a winter roundtable. This was another opportunity for students to provide updates on their student voice projects and receive feedback from district personnel and community leaders. The event took place in the lunchroom of a local high school. Tables were set up around the room and organized by topics, for example school safety, campus climate, and testing and accountability. Teams visited two tables that corresponded with their project, spending 35 min at each. At each table students presented their project, answered clarifying questions from others at the table, and discussed next steps.

I arrived early and ran into Fatima, who shared she had new information on intergovernmental agreement—though she did not share what the information was. Fatima wanted to approach Estefan, the WPSD Superintendent who would be there that night, to ask about the intergovernmental agreement. Fatima asked what I thought. I said that it seemed like a good opportunity to speak with Estefan directly and get questions answered.

During the first rotation I joined the table themed school culture. There were four school teams, Jackson (a Director on the WPSD Board), a community organizer, and two teachers. I set up my phone to video record the conversation and used my laptop to take notes. Though everyone at the table introduced themselves, no one asked who I was (I knew most of the students at the table and both teachers), so I didn't introduce myself.

After the other teams shared their work, Gary told the group about the shooting outside of MXCP and how PYP's project focused on the intergovernmental agreement between WPSD and WPD. He asked Jackson if he knew when the district

would be working on that agreement. Jackson, with a coy smile, responded that he had some information, but it was a longer story, and they would get to it in the questions period.

When it came time for questions, Gary asked Jackson about the information he had on the intergovernmental agreement. Jackson, in a very casual tone, said that depending on the size of the intergovernmental agreement, the board might have control over the contract, but he would have to look into that. He encouraged the students to reach out to their school board members because he was only aware of two who were in favor of removing SROs from schools.

The community organizer asked Jackson who could help Gary's team get a say on the contract. Jackson immediately responded, "The superintendent". He said to email Estefan and started to give her email address when Gary interrupted and said that she was right over there—pointing to the next table over. Jackson recommended that the students talk to her and if they didn't get the answer they liked, to contact him. He began to say that he was Estefan's supervisor, but was cut off by Gary, who said: "her boss". Jackson agreed and said, "Yes, her boss." As he was speaking, Jackson was fidgeting with his tablet computer, flipping it back and forth slightly, and looked content—particularly when he referred to being Estefan's boss.

The community organizer then asked Jackson if there was a timeline for the intergovernmental agreement. Jackson did not know and reiterated that he only knew of two school board members who wanted to eliminate SROs in schools. He finished his remarks by stating: "You guys should bombard our emails to end cops in school, and I bet it gets done".

During the break between rotations, Fatima and Gary met and decided they would skip their assigned rotations in favor of joining Estefan's table—which was themed school accountability. They each told me they were "on a mission" to get their questions answered.

I followed Gary and Fatima to their next rotation. At this table were three other school teams and the coach from another team. Additionally, there were three WPSD staff members, including Morrissey (Student Engagement Director and supervisor of SVE staff) and Superintendent Estefan. After brief introductions the teams shared about their projects. Fatima introduced PYP's focus on school safety and student voice in the WPSD and WPD intergovernmental agreement. Morrissey asked her to say more about why they wanted a say in the agreement. Estefan added "or what you would like to see in the contract". Fatima said that they would like WPSD to have more authority over what WPD can do in schools. As she spoke Fatima had a pen in her right hand, she was also using her fingers to count off the points she made, and, though she had her laptop in front of her, she kept eye contact with Morrissey and Estefan. Gary looking down at his note sheet, added that they wanted to see students involved in the restructuring process of the contract and "Jackson told me you were the person to talk to about that." As he said this final point, he lifted his head and with a straight face looked directly at Estefan. There was an uncomfortable chuckle at the table in response.

As someone spoke, I oriented my camera so that they were in full view. Again, I had not introduced myself, I knew most people at the table, including Morrissey, but had not met Estefan. Estefan made eye contact with whoever spoke, but

avoided looking directly at me or the camera—though her affect remained flat, I sensed she was uncomfortable.

Early in the question period, the battery on Fatima's computer died. She whispered to the student next to her, asking to borrow a charger. I heard this and offered Fatima my laptop, passing it over to her. After about a minute she passed it back and whispered that it was okay and that she did not want to log me off.

There was a brief moment of silence after the other teams finished their questions. Gary looked down at his notes and squirmed in his chair. Fatima broke the silence and confidently asked who had a say in the intergovernmental agreement? When she finished, she slowly cracked her knuckles.

Estefan asked if everyone knew what Fatima meant about the intergovernmental agreement, in a tone that felt patronizing to me as an observer. Gary and Fatima later told me they felt similarly. Estefan explained that the intergovernmental agreement is the contract that WPSD had with WPD, largely paid through grant funding and some district dollars around the presence of SROs in schools.

After the students asked their remaining questions, Morrissey was looking down and writing notes; He quietly asked Estefan, "You alright?" She said yes and looked towards him briefly. Still writing notes and he said, "Good questions." Estefan smiled briefly.

Estefan said let's start with the safety questions. Estefan, looking at Fatima, noted that they were operating under an intergovernmental agreement that was crafted before she became superintendent. She offered to follow up, because she did not know how frequently they updated that. Fatima immediately interjected that the contract would expire in 2020 and that WPSD was renewing it this year. Estefan said that they could be in the process of doing that and their safety team would take the lead in negotiations. Estefan added that a place for input from community, school board members, school leaders, and from students would be valuable. Morrissey noted that he was a part of the team that worked on a previous agreement and that community voice was a part of that process. At the end of this exchange, Estefan gave a stern look at Morrissey.

In my post-meeting notes I wrote that Estefan seemed annoyed that Fatima knew that the contract expired at the end of the year and that Morrissey shared about community involvement in previous intergovernmental agreements. Similarly, Fatima and Gary seemed frustrated that Estefan did not directly answer their questions.

Gary later told me that PYP learned a new intergovernmental agreement between WPSD and WPD was signed the week after the roundtable. Despite Jackson and Estafan's claims of not knowing the status of the agreement, the students heard that negotiation had been on-going for some time.

She Felt Attacked

Following the recommendation of Jackson, at the next PYP meeting, the day after the winter roundtable, each PYP team member emailed Estefan with follow-up questions: "1: Who has a say on the intergovernmental agreement?…3: How are we

including student voice in the intergovernmental agreement?" Not finding Estefan's email, the student emailed a general WPSD Board address, which sends a message to every board member and the Superintendent.

Simultaneously, Pearman and another group of MXCP students were meeting with the school board. Fatima explained: "it just started a lot of confusion and… It made it seem like we were trying to attack them…Jackson asked our principal, What's going on?" Fatima added that Jackson pressed Pearman and the MXCP students present at the meeting with questions about the emails. Fatima said that this led to some drama between PYP and Pearman. I learned from Simone that PYP had been reprimanded by both Pearman and Estefan. Chuck was pissed off, feeling that Jackson had turned his back on them. Gary also questioned how Jackson could be so upset when PYP was following the advice Jackson gave them a day earlier.

Estefan was also upset. I learned that Estefan felt attacked and Morrissey validated her concerns. I remember seeing Estefan and Morrissey speaking in the parking lot after the event. Estefan did not like that the students pressed her with questions on SROs. Estefan also did not know why I was filming her, questioning if the session was being live streamed. Further, Estefan interpreted the incident where I offered Fatima my laptop as the two of us conspiring. Simone spoke to both Estefan and Morrissey and shared why I was there in an attempt to smooth out tensions.

A couple of weeks later (late-February), at a PYP meeting, I saw Fatima as I was walking in. I asked how she was doing and about the fallout from the roundtable. She said there was drama, that Estefan felt attacked. Fatima said that me filming, her whispering with another student, and her and I passing my laptop made Estefan feel targeted. Additionally, Fatima told me that after the meeting she spoke with Jackson who told her that the only way things got done by the board was when they were pressured by emails. Which was why PYP decided to email Estefan and the board.

I feel guilty for how things went down; my role was to support PYP and instead I aggravated the situation. The students maintained that I did not need to apologize. Reflecting back, Fatima noted that maybe it should have been Gary and her to send the emails, not the whole team. Gary also felt that repercussions might not have been so bad if Pearman had supported PYP with Jackson and the school board.

Fatima and I finished our conversation and entered the meeting. Fatima started by explaining that she hit up Simone and asked what they could have done better and how they could improve the situation. She said that Simone advised her not to apologize but to be cordial with Estefan. Fatima told the group that she sent Estefan an email asking how they might be able to better work together and invited Estefan to attend a PYP meeting in March. During his second interview Chuck said that this meeting was ultimately canceled: "Oh, we had it scheduled until…I'm not going to try to bash her, but Estefan being Estefan, she canceled it." In Fall of 2020 Estefan resigned as superintendent, it was reported in the news that tensions between her and the school board became unmanageable.

The COVID-19 Pandemic

My last observation with PYP was at the end of February. I had planned to attend a meeting in early March, but it was canceled. By mid-March, the COVID-19 pandemic took hold in the Western state. In response, WPSD moved classes online for the remainder of the year. I emailed the PYP coach and asked if the team would transition to online and if I could continue observing. He told me that PYP stopped meeting. Chuck explained it a little differently at his end of the year interview: "we did get caught in a little bit of a rut just because it's hard…try to gather everybody to try and do work that's so seemingly minuscule to what's happening right now."

Ending the Contract?

On May 25, 2020, police in Minnesota murdered George Floyd. Protests erupted across Western city. There were calls for police reform and defunding the police and violent clashes between protestors and police. These demonstrations went on nightly for weeks.

In early June, Simone informed me of a press conference organized by Jackson to announce his proposal to end the contract between WPSD and WPD. Gary was an invited to speak in support of the proposal. I documented the event—taking field notes and video recording.

The press conference took place on the steps of a local high school. Jackson was at the podium. Behind him were a couple of school board members, two SVE student speakers, and representatives from local organizations. To Jackson's right was Estefan. In front of him was a bank of news cameras and reporters. There were approximately 100 people in attendance, most were spread out on the lawn to the right and left of the podium.

Jackson described the purpose of the news conference and acknowledged those in attendance. He said: "We want a school system where students are greeted by nurses, with full time mental health supports, with restorative practice coordinators, and not the WPD." He stated that today he was introducing a resolution that ended the contract with WPD. His comments were met with thunderous applause.

Estefan briefly spoke, addressing the need for school safety and having heard from teachers and administrators who saw SROs as vital parts of their schools. Speakers from local organizations lent their support for the resolution.

Gary was one of the final speakers. Reading from his notes he stated:

> We must remember that it isn't just a fight against the police…Ending the contract marks the first real step to ending the school to prison pipeline, but is far from the last that needs to be made…student voice needs to be heard in the process. Being that us students feel the effect of policies being implemented, we have the insight into what needs to be changed in our schools…Now is the time to enact the first step of all this in removing all police that are a plague to the culture of WPSD.

He received a large ovation from the crowd. When he was done, he looked up from his notes and smiled at the crowd. I felt proud for Gary—over the year I saw him grow as a leader and as a speaker.

At the end of the news conference Jackson fielded a question from a news reporter on the timing of this resolution. Jackson said:

the events of this week kinda set it off. This was something that has always been in the works, but the events this week for me personally, as somebody who was at the protests...and watched our students be innocently shot at with rubber bullets and gassed...was my breaking point.

Jackson became the face of this resolution and received the credit for the termination of the intergovernmental agreement. I was frustrated that Jackson never mentioned the work of PYP. Lila, one of the SVE coordinators, best captured my frustrations with the lack of recognition of student voice in this process:

young people were presenting really great ideas, but many times adults are not ready to meet [students] and create change…It is not hard to see how all this work came from [students]. They do not want [students] at the table to create change.

In Fall of 2021 WPSD introduced a proposal to arm CSOs and provide them the authority to ticket students. Reflecting on that December 2019 meeting with Heller, Simone now felt that Heller wanted to remove SROs so his team could assume their authority. In fact, Gary said that PYP got the idea to focus on removal of police from schools from Heller. Gary said it was Heller who suggested that police were the problem.

Discussion

This narrative documented the challenges youth faced when navigating adult spheres. As Booker (2017) and Larson and Walker (2010) noted, youth are often excluded from adult spheres and, as such, lack knowledge on how to navigate these spaces. In this narrative I show how the PYP youth encountered manipulation, threats, and tokenism. What is also evident is how supportive adults might aid youth in navigating adult politics.

How Educators Silence Student Voice

The story of the PYP highlighted how some educational leaders might use youth to advance their own agendas—a phenomenon not readily discussed in the literature on student voice. Though Salisbury et al. (2020), Conner (2016), and Bertrand (2019) described strategies school leaders use to diminish student voice, this narrative illustrated how some school leaders might seek to manipulate youth. In the case of Jackson, he encouraged PYP youth to confront Estefan and to bombard the school board with emails: Actions that led to the PYP being

reprimanded by Pearman and Estefan, but served Jackson's purpose to increase conflict in the school board. In the case of Heller, though he did not explicitly tell the PYP youth to call for the removal of SROs, the information he provided led youth to pursue an agenda that ultimately served his desire to have his CSOs assume police responsibilities in school. Even two years removed from these events, the youth were still upset at the realization they were used by Jackson and Heller. Additionally, as Fatima acknowledged, in the quote at the start of this manuscript, the youth recognized the challenge of learning adult politics and the need for support to navigate these spaces.

This story also showed the extent some school leaders will go to silence student voice. The literature described interest alignment (Conner, 2016), discourse of surprise (Bertrand, 2019), and decorative student voice (Conner et al., 2016) as methods adults use to minimize student voice. This narrative highlighted how one school leader resorted to threats to squash student voice. Despite statements of supporting student voice, the PYP leaders all spoke to how Pearman would silence voices that were critical of her or MXCP. Fatima shared how Pearman threatened her with disciplinary action for being too critical. What is worse, Amnesty left PYP due to fears of her undocumented status being exposed by Pearman. This narrative also documented how youth learned to navigate these threats. In this case, the PYP representatives had Gary make the controversial call for the end of the intergovernmental agreement, because Pearman had no leverage on him.

This narrative also documented how school leaders might feel threatened by students. Existing school hierarchies dictate that students are controlled by school administrators (Kohfeldt et al., 2011; Lac & Mansfield, 2018). This narrative illustrated what happened when this hierarchy was challenged. In the case of the spring roundtable, we saw how Estefan felt attacked by Gary and Fatima. Granted the tension at the table was escalated by my filming and Jackson's encouragement of Gary to push Estefan for information, but it was evident that Estefan was flustered by the questions she received from the students. Unfortunately, this highlights yet another challenge that students face when trying to engage in adult spheres, when they challenge hierarchies they must deal with adults feeling threatened.

Conner et al. (2016) described the notion of decorative youth voice, where adults are unwilling to work with youth as contributors to policy creation, but seek youth voice to support their policies. This narrative demonstrated how school leaders used decorative voice to promote and advance their agendas. The PYP sought the support of Jackson in including student voice in the intergovernmental agreement between WPSD and WPD. Rather than collaborating with the PYP on the intergovernmental agreement, Jackson withheld information on the status of contract negotiations. Furthermore, once he developed his own proposal to terminate the agreement, Jackson invited youth to speak in support of his policy. Sadly, Jackson received credit for removing police from school and he did not recognize the work of students in pushing for the termination of the intergovernmental agreement. Although Gary received applause for his powerful speech, he did not receive the experience or recognition of contributing to school policy.

The Importance of Adult Relationships

This narrative also reinforced the importance of supportive adult relationships in student voice initiatives. Adults can be mentors to youth, helping them learn how to advance their policy proposals (Larson et al., 2005; Mirra et al., 2015; Mitra, 2009). In this narrative I show how Simone was an important ally for Fatima and the PYP youth. Simone brokered meetings for the PYP with district leaders, including Heller, in the hopes of helping the students learn more about district policy. Additionally, Simone interceded with Estefan and Morrissey to de-escalate conflict after the spring roundtable. She also consulted with Fatima on how to work with Estefan.

Mitra (2009) noted the importance of adult partners attending to the personal aspects of students' lives, noting that student voice work can be derailed when the youth are also dealing with personal problems. The narrative highlighted the importance of attending to these personal concerns. In the case of adults at MXCP, there appeared to be minimal attention to students' well-being following the "incident"—a point Fatima made in a text to me. Although I was an imperfect adult partner (complicating things for the students when I filmed Estefan at the spring roundtable event), I was able to support Amnesty when she needed to talk through the threats she faced from Pearman. I was also happy to support Fatima when she needed feedback.

It is tempting to critique the PYP coach for his lack of involvement with students, but a number of factors should be addressed. The students selected this coach as he allowed them the most freedom—leading them to be the most student run of the SVE teams. They also purposefully excluded him from many of the PYP actions, to save him from any professional repercussions he might have faced from Pearman. Although a more involved coach might have helped the PYP navigate adult spheres, it is easy to understand the students' decision for selecting their coach.

Further Considerations

In presenting this narrative it is important to consider that these findings represent the experience of one group of students at one period in time. What is also unique about this case is that the SVE program operates within the district, giving these youth more access to high-ranking administrators. Most student voice programs operate in an out-of-school setting, as such these findings might be more reflective of students involved in voice programming within a school district. Also, the SVE program utilizes an action civics model, which entails engaging in original research and developing policy proposals. As such, students who participate in more traditional school boards or student government might not have similar experiences. Therefore, more research is needed on the experience of other student groups in navigating adult politics.

It is also worth noting that my presence influenced the course of this narrative. Whether it be sharing research resources with Fatima, consulting with Amnesty, or my video aggravating Estefan, my involvement impacted the events of this story. My being a Brown skinned man likely also impacted the ease with which the PYP

students accepted me, seeing me as their researcher and not some outsider. From my end I can attest that my identity and positionality impacted why I wanted to observe this group of students.

Additionally, I cannot definitely know the intentions of adults such as Pearman, Heller, Estefan, and Jackson. As such, they might not agree with my characterizations of them in this story. Simone did review the narrative and agreed with my analysis. Also, I gathered information from various sources, including interviews, observations, video recordings and document analysis to present a fair depiction of events. Most importantly, the focus of this narrative was on the experience of the students: Therefore, I privileged their interpretation of events. Future research might include more adult perspectives on youth navigating adult spheres.

Conclusion

Student voice provides urban school administrators with the unique insights of those most impacted by educational practices. Supportive adult relationships are necessary for student voice programs to flourish. Too often, educators resort to hierarchies of power which they use to discount or eliminate student input. What is worse, this narrative documented how some school leaders resorted to manipulation and threats to advance their own agendas and silence student criticism.

Though this narrative presented the story of one group of students, I believe these young people are not alone in this experience. More research is needed to document the challenges that youth face as they seek to impact educational policy and practice. I hope this article opens dialogue about the experiences of youth engaging in adult spaces and the need for more supportive adult decision makers in centering student voice.

References

Bertrand, M. (2019). "I was very impressed": Responses of surprise to students of color engaged in youth participatory action research. *Urban Eduction, 54*(9), 1370–1397. https://doi.org/10.1177/0042085916648744

Bertrand, M., Brooks, M. D., & Domínguez, A. D. (2020). Challenging adultism: Centering youth as educational decision makers. *Urban Education*. https://doi.org/10.1177/0042085920959135

Bertrand, M., & Lozenski, B. D. (2021). YPAR dreams deferred? Examining power bases of YPAR to impact policy and practice. *Education Policy*. https://doi.org/10.1177/08959048211019975

Booker, A. (2017). Contingent authority and youth influence: When youth councils can wield influence in public institutions. *Revista De Investigación Educativa, 35*(2), 537–562. https://doi.org/10.6018/rie.35.2.274841

Buttimer, C. J. (2018). The challenges and possibilities of youth participatory action research for teachers and students in public school classrooms. *Berkeley Review of Education, 8*(1), 29–81. https://doi.org/10.5070/B8813383

Clandinin, D. J. (2006). Narrative inquiry: A methodology for studying lived experience. *Research Studies in Music Education, 27*(1), 44–54. https://doi.org/10.1177/1321103X060270010301

Connelly, F. M., & Clandinin, D. J. (1990). Stories of experience and narrative inquiry. *Educational Researcher, 19*(5), 2–14. https://doi.org/10.2307/1176100

Conner, J. O. (2016). Pawns or power players: The grounds on which adults dismiss or defend youth organizers in the USA. *Journal of Youth Studies, 19*(3), 403–420. https://doi.org/10.1080/13676261.2015.1083958

Conner, J. O., Ober, C. N., & Brown, A. S. (2016). The politics of paternalism: Adult and youth perspectives on youth voice in public policy. *Teachers College Record, 118*(8), 1–48. https://doi.org/10.1177/016146811611800805

Coulter, C. A., & Smith, M. L. (2009). The construction zone: Literary elements in narrative research. *Educational Researcher, 38*(8), 577–590. https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X09353787

Creswell, J. W. (2013). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches* (3rd ed.). Sage Publications.

Czerniawski, G. (2012). Repositioning trust: A challenge to inauthentic neoliberal use of pupil voice. *Management in Education, 26*(3), 130–139. https://doi.org/10.1177/0892020612445685

Hipolito-Delgado, C. P., Stickney, D., Zion, S., & Kirshner, B. (2022). Transformative student voice for sociopolitical development: Developing youth of color as political actors. *Journal of Research on Adolescence, 32*(3), 1098–1108. https://doi.org/10.1111/jora.12753

Hipolito-Delgado, C. P., & Zion, S. (2017). Igniting the fire within marginalized youth: The role of critical civic inquiry in fostering ethnic identity and civic self-efficacy. *Urban Education, 52*, 699–717. https://doi.org/10.1177/0042085915574524

Kirshner, B. (2015). *Youth activism in an era of education inequality*. NYU Press.

Kohfeldt, D., Chhun, L., Grace, S., & Langhout, R. D. (2011). Youth Empowerment in context: Exploring tensions in school-based yPAR. *American Journal of Community Psychology, 47*(1), 28–45. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10464-010-9376-z

Lac, V. T., & Mansfield, K. C. (2018). What do students have to do with educational leadership? Making a case for centering student voice. *Journal of Research on Leadership Education, 13*(1), 38–58. https://doi.org/10.1177/1942775117743748

Larson, R. W., & Walker, K. C. (2006). Learning about the "Real World" in an urban arts youth program. *Journal of Adolescent Research, 21*(3), 244–268. https://doi.org/10.1177/0743558405285824

Larson, R. W., & Walker, K. C. (2010). Dilemmas of practice: Challenges to program quality encountered by youth program leaders. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, *45*(3–4), 338–349. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10464-010-9307-z

Larson, R., Walker, K., & Pearce, N. (2005). A comparison of youth-driven and adult-driven youth programs: Balancing inputs from youth and adults. *Journal of Community Psychology, 33*(1), 57–74. https://doi.org/10.1002/jcop.20035

Mirra, N., Garcia, A., & Morrell, E. (2015). *Doing youth participatory action research: Transforming inquiry with researchers, educators, and students*. Taylor & Francis Group.

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), 311–335. https://doi.org/10.1177/0044118X08316211

Ollerenshaw, J. A., & Creswell, J. W. (2002). Narrative research: A comparison of two restorying data analysis approaches. *Qualitative Inquiry, 8*(3), 329–347. https://doi.org/10.1177/10778004008003008

Ozer, E. J., & Douglas, L. (2015). Assessing the key processes of youth-led participatory research: Psychometric analysis and application of an observational rating scale. *Youth & Society, 47*(1), 29–50. https://doi.org/10.1177/0044118X12468011

Ozer, E. J., Newlan, S., Douglas, L., & Hubbard, E. (2013). "Bounded" empowerment: Analyzing tensions in the practice of youth-led participatory research in urban public schools. *American Journal of Community Psychology, 52*(1), 13–26. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10464-013-9573-7

Salisbury, J. D., Sheth, M. J., & Angton, A. (2020). "They didn't even talk about oppression": School leadership protecting whiteness of leadership through resistance practices to a youth voice initiative. *Journal of Education Human Resource, 38*(1), 57–81. https://doi.org/10.3138/jehr.2019-0010

Stickney, D., Cordova, E. M., & Hipolito-Delgado, C. P. (2022). Get out of your own way: Sharing power to engage students of color in authentic conversation of social inequity. In J. C. Lo (Ed.), *Making discussions work: Methods for quality dialogue in the social studies* (pp. 192–209). Teachers College Press.

Sussman, A. (2015). The student voice collaborative: An Effort to systematize student participation in school and district improvement. *Teachers College Record, 117*(13), 119–134. https://doi.org/10.1177/016146811511701312

Zion, S. (2020). Transformative student voice: Extending the role of youth in addressing systemic marginalization in U.S. schools. *Multiple Voices: Disability, Race, and Language Intersections in Special Education, 20*(1), 32–43. https://doi.org/10.5555/2158-396X-20.1.32

Publisher's Note Springer Nature remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.