The Role of School Leadership in Promoting Student Voice at an Urban High School

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Background

- A school climate that promotes student voice encourages civic engagement and democratic thinking and increases student agency that can be transferred to future civic identities.[1,2,7]
- Despite this, students from traditionally marginalized communities, including ethnic minorities, students from low socio-economic backgrounds, and those with fewer educational resources or expectations, often have inequitable access to civic learning and student voice efforts.[3,4,6]
- School site leaders are fundamental to communicating shared goals and community ideals as well as supporting teachers' agency to enact ideas that promote student autonomy and voice, like project-based learning (PBL), peer critique, and service learning.[1,5,8]
- This case study explores site leadership's (principal, assistant principals, counseling team, department chairs) efforts to effectively improve school climate at a large, urban, low SES Southern California high school through promotion of student voice.
- As part of a districtwide effort to become a California Democracy School and sustain that designation, site leadership has instituted strategies for promoting student voice and civic engagement, including two school-wide leadership initiatives.

Research Questions

- **RQ 1: In what ways does the school leadership promote student voice?**
- **RQ 2: What are teacher perceptions of the two schoolwide leadership initiatives: advisement period and the TED Talks project?**

Data & Methods

Context
- Data gathered during the 2019-20 school year
- School site: 2,785 students, 84% socioeconomically disadvantaged, 21% ELL, 88% Latinx, 93% graduation rate, 1% suspension rate
- Study occurred in a research practice partnership (RPP)

Participants & Data Sources
- Teachers (68% white, 26% Latinx), counselors, and administrators (n=70) completed a school climate survey including open ended questions
- Teachers, counselors, administrators (n=10) participated in semi-structured interviews

Data analyses
- Codebook created using four domains of school climate[1], descriptive codes from interview analysis; magnitude codes were applied to open-ended survey questions
- Researcher coded qualitative data using dedoose
- Member checks with the RPP school site team occurred three times during data analysis

Results: Research Question 1

Open door policy with students, teachers, and staff

> [Students] *felt comfortable enough to come and seek that help and I think that says a lot about our culture, right? If they feel comfortable walking into this center … like "I need help" or student bringing in a friend and saying "my friend needs help" - I think that speaks volumes of what we're doing.* -- Counselor

> *I've never felt restrained. I've always felt empowered to go and propose problems and or solutions … I've never ever felt any, you know, pressure whatsoever to not exactly speak my mind or that my opinions weren't being valued or taken into account.*
> -- Teacher

An expectation for civic participation at the school and within the community

> *Kids step up and they come up with all kinds of clubs, service-oriented clubs, clubs to deal with their own transitions in life and all that kind of stuff... whatever they want to do, and then the teachers just encourage that...* -- Administrator

> *Many of them are very involved in organizations and charities and volunteer their time as well…*-- Teacher

Infusing student choice throughout the curriculum through practices like PBL, "voice and choice" and 'talk time" embedded in instructional practice

> *We are adding civic inquiry into our instruction and student-focused, student-centered civic inquiry and project-based learning into our everyday instruction, and that's particularly in the social sciences. But the key with civic learning and with a democracy school is you need to start seeing that embedded with other subject areas as well.* --Teacher

Promoting two schoolwide leadership initiatives: Advisement Period and the TED Talks Project

> **Leadership Initiative #1:** Schoolwide expansion of homeroom to include a 20-minute advisement period 4x/week for student discussion about socio-emotional topics as well as current events and issues.

> **Leadership Initiative #2:** TED Talk projects in ELA classes. Students identify an important issue facing society, the community the school. The process includes research, peer-critique, revision, and solution proposal.

Results: Research Question 2

Leadership Initiative #1: Advisement

Table 1. *Magnitude codes applied to open-ended survey question (n=70)*

Response Type	Frequency	Example	Summary
Positive	50% (35 responses)	*offers students a chance to think about issues they might not take the time to reflect on prior…* *helps to build a community between students and their teacher*	Opportunity for social emotional or civic learning as well as building relationships with students
Constructive	21% (15 responses)	*wish we could have more control over how we interact with our students.* *seems difficult for the freshman.....I don't get a lot of conversations......I think they are still learning to trust adults.*	Teachers are unsure of developmental appropriateness of topics and want to use the time to build relationships with students
Critical	20% (14 responses)	*Students are often trying to work on homework or are on their phones* *They do not take this advisement period serious nor do they try to learn from any of the lessons.*	Students are distracted and not engaged

Note: 9% neutral responses

Leadership Initiative #2: TED Talks Project

Table 2.*Magnitude codes applied to an open-ended survey question (n=70)*

Response Type	Frequency	Example	Summary
Positive	70% (49 responses)	*They empower students to express views they might otherwise not have the opportunity to do so.* *be civic-minded, and we expect them to take action about issues they are passionate about* *give them to chance to research and take to time to find out why the issue exists* *Students that **participate** encourage their peers to participate and become role models for them.*	Opportunity for social emotional or civic learning as well as peer leadership, encourages student creativity and critical thinking.
Constructive	12% (8 responses)	*wish more teachers could be involved, not just English* *would love to see innovation, new ideas for campus involvement, or ways to encourage success and well-being in all people at Katella.*	Interdepartmental interest in participating; teachers would like to see student creativity and innovation.
Critical	4% (3 responses)	*Students need to learn how to respect one another.*	Student listening and respect are concerns

Note: 14% neutral responses

Conclusion & Discussion

Conclusion

RQ 1:
- Respondents agree that leadership encourages four strategies to support student voice and that those strategies engage students, teachers, and staff.
- Student voice initiatives encourage participation and action within the school and community.
- Student voice is embedded in teaching and learning and within whole-school strategies.

RQ 2:
- Both leadership initiatives are meant to engage student voice, the effectiveness differs between the two.
- TED Talks are student centered, occur over time, and teachers may opt in and modify the process
- Advisement topics are chosen in a top down manner and are perceived to be superficial. This seems to create less buy-in for advisement.

Discussion
- Leadership's efforts toward promoting student voice are widely understood and seen as effective by faculty and staff. While there is room for improving advisement period by giving teachers more autonomy and engaging students more meaningfully, the school's efforts could serve as a model for other school sites seeking to increase student voice and improve school climate.

Limitations

- One staff interview and one administrator interview occurred via zoom after the school had closed due to COVID-19.

References

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