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By: Katherine Cumings Mansfield

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Keywords: Safe space | student voice | gender | race/ethnicity | social class | leadership for social justice | urban school reform | single-sex schooling | diaspora

Article:

***Note: Full text of article below

The importance of safe space and student voice in schools that serve minoritized learners

Katherine Cumings Mansfield
Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, VA, USA

Abstract
This article is based on an ethnography conducted over a six year period that used participant observation, photography, focus groups, and interviews to discover and describe the emergent school culture and the lived experiences of female secondary students in an all-girls college preparatory school. This article shares the story of a group of women educators who created a novel school culture, and the female students who meet them there, to disrupt and transform the dailiness of sexism, racism, and classism. Through a commitment to building a supportive school culture that includes developing robust relationships and forefronting the voices of women, this community of learners is working in a very socially just way so as to confront the past and interrupt the present, and revolutionize future trajectories of historically minoritized peoples.

Keywords: *Safe space; student voice; gender, race/ethnicity; social class; leadership for social justice; urban school reform; single-sex schooling; diaspora*

The importance of safe space and student voice in schools that serve minoritized learners
Educators across the globe are struggling with the seemingly intractable achievement gaps between groups of students based on race/ethnicity and economic background. Importantly, educator beliefs and attitudes influence schooling policy and practices, which, in turn, mediate student levels of access and achievement (Clark, 2014; Jean-Marie & Mansfield, 2013; Mansfield, 2015; Valencia, 2010). However, international research has shown that all students can succeed at high levels, regardless of minoritized status, if and when they are provided with the right opportunities, including quality instruction and appropriate academic programming (Clark, 2014; Jensen, 2006; Mansfield, 2015; Skrla, McKenzie, & Scheurich, 2009). An important step in this reform process is educators partaking in courageous conversations about the relationship between identity and privilege and working to dispel unwarranted beliefs about minoritized students (Brooks & Arnold, 2013; Jean-Marie & Mansfield, 2013; Mansfield & Jean-Marie, 2015; Singleton & Linton, 2005; Valencia, 2010). Only then, can educators begin to disrupt the seemingly intractable achievement gaps and begin to implement schooling practices that meet the needs of minoritized learners (Jean-Marie & Mansfield, 2013; Smith, Crawley, Robinson, Cotman, Swaim & Strand, 2011).

The purpose of this research article is to illustrate one example of such a reform. This particular reform was founded upon the value of developing what the literature refers to as "safe space" and "student voice" to achieve social justice aims in schools serving minoritized learners. I tell the story of a group of women educators who created a novel school culture, and the female students who meet them there, to disrupt and transform the dailiness of sexism, racism, and classism. Through a commitment to building a supportive school culture that includes developing robust relationships and forefronting the voices of women, this community of learners is working to confront the past, interrupt the present, and revolutionize the future trajectories of historically minoritized peoples.

This research is important because, while girls and women have made substantive progress economically and otherwise, many girls, "across race and class lines continue to struggle with issues of identity and the trivialization of their leadership abilities" (Healthy Girls Healthy Women (HGHW),

2001. p. 6). Moreover, schools and other youth programmes are often sites of reproduction that continue to perpetuate outdated norms (HGHW, 2001; Smith et al, 2011; Valencia, 2010). Some educators now recognize that students, generally (Fielding, 2001, 2004; Mansfield, Welton, & Halx, 2012; Mitra, 2008; Mitra & Gross, 2009; Sands, Guzman, Stevens, & Boggs, 2007), and minoritized females in particular (HGHW, 2001; Mansfield, 2014a, 2014b; McNae, 2014; Welton, Brock, & Perry, 2014), need, and should be provided with, a safe space where the "isms" of society are questioned and/or where their voices are heard. "Programs working with girls must develop new approaches that address girls' needs for support and connection, view girls as assets, help them come to voice, and offer space for critical thinking" (HGHW, 2001, p. 6).

Foundations

Minority or minoritized?

I refrain from using the word, "minority", since many of my teaching and researching experiences have been in majority-minority schools. Also, definitions of "minority" students have changed over time. For example, according to local archives, in the early to mid-twentieth century, "Italian" was considered a separate race in the community in which I studied. Thus, I use the word, "minoritized" to indicate the fluidity of the concept as well as to indicate that individual and group minority status labels are designated by those in power. It is also important to note that minoritization of students, across the globe, usually includes students from lower socio-economic backgrounds and a variety of racial/ethnic identities, rather than relatively wealthy counterparts of Western-European descent

The minoritization of students varies across international contexts; for example, the Indigenous peoples of the Americas (First Nations, Inuit, Métis), the Māori in New Zealand, and former colonized peoples or diaspora of Africa, Asia, Europe, and the Americas. Common across the continents is the tendency of minoritized students to live in racial and economic isolation, as well as the propensity of the schools serving these students to be under resourced, resulting in inequitable outcomes when compared to more privileged groups. The minoritized learners featured in this particular study live in a North American region that was formerly colonized by Spain, France, Mexico, the Republic of Texas, the United States of America, and the Confederate States of America. Consequently, they self-identify as one or more of the following: Hispanic, Latina, African American, Black, Indian, White, and Creole, with all qualifying for the US government free lunch services.

Safe space

In the context of this research, safe space is defined as a "girl-only" space where: girls have access to a supportive environment; their physical, psychological, and emotional needs are met, and; where they can express themselves without repercussion (Baldwin, 2011; Goal Programme, 2009; Greene, Cardinal, & Goldstein-Siegel, 2009; HGHW, 2001; United Nations (UN) Women, 2012). While the concept of safe space takes into consideration physical features and space usage by ensuring that girls feel protected and secure, planning for safe space goes beyond consideration of physical characteristics to the evaluation of how certain spaces bolster gender inequality or advance gender equality (UN Women, 2012). For example, how space is used often determines whether and how it becomes gendered: "When certain groups, like women or girls, do not use a space, it is usually an indication that the space feels insecure to members of that group" (p. 1). Feelings of security (or lack thereof) can include whether girls have experienced and/or fear sexual violence as well as whether the space is viewed as a place that facilitates social relationships and is specifically designed to support girls and women. Thus, space (schools, homes, city buses, etc.) is not gender neutral. Rather, space "reflects specific social, economic and historical characteristics that are

unique to local women's situations" (p. 3). Therefore, to truly activate a "safe space" for girls, concerned groups must purposefully create them.

Schools that create safe spaces for girls should pay attention to four interrelated elements: 1) building robust relationships between and amongst teachers and students; 2) engaging critical conversations that address societal norms and entrenched "isms"; 3) providing adequate time and space to listening to girls' voices, and; 4) building mentoring and networking programmes (Baldwin, 2011; Greene, et al., 2009; HGHW, 2001; Mansfield, 2011, 2014a, 2014 b; Mansfield & Jean-Marie, 2015).

Building robust relationships

For many girls, the arrival of puberty is marked by a decrease of freedom of movement and, subsequently, a lack of access to friendship groups and supportive networks (Baldwin, 2011; Greene et al., 2009; UN Women, 2012). This is partially due to the fact that girls, more often than boys, become the caretakers of younger siblings or aging family members, restraining their educational and extracurricular activities (Baldwin, 2011; Greene et al., 2009; UN Women, 2012). Even girls who stay in school lack the opportunity to develop robust relationships because they waver between their educational and home responsibilities (Baldwin 2011; Greene et al., 2009; UN Women, 2012). Also, most schools and community programmes fail to pay adequate attention to the specific needs of girls to build the hearty friendship and social networks that girls need to flourish (HGHW, 2001; UN Women, 2012). Thus, careful attention to building relationships amongst peers and teachers is essential to creating a safe space for girls in schools (Mansfield, 2011, 2014a, 2014 b).

Critical conversations

Engaging in critical conversations about how youth experience gender, race, and class is essential to creating a safe space for minoritized learners (Mansfield & Jean-Marie, 2015). While critical examination of societal "isms" is important for all youngsters, it is especially important for girls (HGHW, 2001; Mansfield, 2011, 2014a, 2014b) because "the gendered nature of how girls experience race, class and culture means that we must pay particular attention to girls' self image and gender stereotyping" (HGHW, p. 7).

> To understand how to include fully the voices and power of all girls…we must understand the social limitations based on …gender, race, class and sexual oppression…youth programs need to support girls as they negotiate these complex intersections and explicitly address the multiple identities each girl carries with her. (HGHW, 2001, p. 7)

Student voice

Related to facilitating critical conversations is the importance of listening intently to students within this safe space. The process of engaging students in critical conversations and forefronting students' voices is difficult but essential work (Mansfield, et al., 2012).

> While struggle might be inevitable, we believe school leadership practices can act as mediating factors that bridge student voice efforts in challenging contexts. A socially just educational leader must challenge the power structures that silence the voices of students, especially those who are marginalized in a particular educational context. (Mansfield, et al., 2012, p. 28)

Leadership practices which support these conversations include examining space to ensure that the environment is conducive to girls' self-expression as well as one that promotes productive conflict resolution (HGHW, 2001). Further, listening to student voice adds moral authority. That is, students are capable of speaking for themselves, and can give adults in their lives important insights into the challenges

they face (Greene, et al., 2009; Mansfield, et al., 2012). Thus, rather than speaking *for* students, adults speak *with* students. However, understanding girls' unique situations means listening to girls and paying real attention to what they have to say…a girl's-eye view of her barriers can point the way to the highest-priority interventions. Girls' opinions reinforce a forbidding reality: they cannot change their lives on their own. Families, teachers, mentors and community attitudes are central to unleashing girls' potential (Greene, et al., 2009, p. vii).

Mentoring and networking

While building relationships with peers and teachers is essential, it is also important to go beyond the school walls by developing mentoring and networking relationships within and beyond the community. Mentors serve as role models for girls and can include intergenerational efforts to build individual competencies in health behaviour education, sexual violence prevention, financial literacy, and tips for negotiating higher education environments (Baldwin, 2011; HGHW, 2001; Mansfield, 2011, 2013).

In addition, it is essential that schools committed to creating a safe space for girls also reach out to families and community organizations to develop a network of *girl champions* (Greene, et al., 2009) who "prepare the terrain for long-term, sustainable change" (p. xxvi) to enable a cultural environment that facilitates girls' civic participation and self-expression as well as socioeconomic development. It is difficult for organizations to help girls take advantage of safe space if they do not also work with families and communities to negotiate programme responsibilities with family/community obligations (Baldwin, 2011; Green, et al., 2009; HGHW, 2001). Taken together, the four interrelated components above represent a way for schools to

> support girls' social change efforts by creating opportunities for girls to actively represent their communities, engaging girls in critical thinking about issues affecting their lives, and framing social change as a continuum from community service to direct action…particularly true for girls disadvantaged by poverty and other obstacles in their lives. (HGHW, 2001, p. 7)

Methods

As stated prior, the minoritized learners featured in this particular study identify as a variety of racial and ethnic groups that represent formerly colonized peoples in North America. The secondary school, Young Women's Leadership School (YWLS), is located in Centro Urbano Independent School District (CUISD) in one of the ten largest urban centres in the U.S. and was founded to meet the specific needs of minoritzed learners living in lower economic circumstances. The grade 6-12 curriculum of YWLS is an advanced programme that focuses on three primary areas: 1) Rigorous college preparation, especially coursework in STEM (science, technology, engineering, and math) fields; 2) Health and wellness guidance that emphasizes preventing drug abuse, pregnancy, and obesity, and; 3) Training to prepare young women for leadership positions in careers and campus life (Foundation for the Education of Young Women (FEYW), n.d.; YWLS, n.d.). The school is the result of a public-private partnership with the Foundation for the Education of Young Women who partially funded and facilitated the development of six public all-girls schools in urban school districts across the region.

Data collection

Like Wolcott (2008), I believe ethnography is "ideally suited for studying small-scale, isolated, tribal cultures" with an "emphasis on cultural particularism" (p. 28) and local context. Indeed, ethnography was useful for accessing the "black box" of this particular school to answer questions such as, "What is going on here? What does it mean to be a member of this group?" (Jeffrey, 2008; Walford, 2008). Following the

ethnographic tradition, I used three primary means of discovery: *experiencing, enquiring,* and *examining* (Wolcott, 2008). Generally, *experiencing* emphasizes the first-hand familiarity of the researcher by describing what is discovered through the senses when conducting observations in the field. *Enquiring* entails taking a more active role by asking questions during informal conversations or more formal, if casual, interviews. *Examining* refers to collecting and probing cultural artifacts such as school newsletters and faculty lesson plans at the local site as well as policy documents and newspaper articles available from online and traditional archives.

Data analysis and interpretation

It is important to note that description, analysis, and interpretation were not mutually exclusive nor did they necessarily follow this particular order. Similar to Wolcott (1994), I engaged a fluid process of analysis and interpretation, whereby I constantly collected data, made sense of them, and then revisited analysis of data in light of new experiences. This non-linear, circular process proceeded akin to a conversation between the researcher and the data.

Following a process outlined by Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw (1995), I conducted open coding, which entailed reading field notes, interview transcripts, copies of documents, and diaries/journals line-by-line to note consistent themes or story lines. I then enlarged the account beyond description by identifying key concepts and their interrelationships, focusing on both culture and context. I then implemented "focused coding" that consisted of additional readings of the data to carefully filter initial impressions. I strived to achieve what Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (2002) called a balanced tension between having the confidence to observe, name, and verify patterns in the data while remaining grounded in the lived experiences of the participants. Eventually, key ideas were grouped into broader topics, referred to by Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997) as *repetitive refrains*.

Findings

Speaking with school administrators, teachers, parents, and students illumined the various ways Young Women's Leadership School (YWLS) was developed as a safe space where the voices of women and girls were respected, supported, developed and deployed. This particular safe space was made possible by building robust relationships more akin to "familia" and "sisterhood." For example, on numerous occasions, the principals and teachers of the school emphasized the importance of building a school "culture" that "feels like a family" so that girls know they "have a place to go." Across the board, participants believed that it would be impossible to address educational and social issues if students did not feel well cared for.

Parents, like the teachers and principals, seemed to recognize the importance of creating sustaining relationships at the school as well as establishing a rigorous curriculum that addressed the contexts of girls' lives. Parents described profound admiration and appreciation for the principals' and teachers' commitments to their children. When I asked Mr. Pēna a parent who agreed to participate in the study, what he liked the best about YWLS, he remarked: "Sisterhood – I like the fact that they are all considered sisters and take care of each other…we are one big family…"

During a different interview, parents Mr. and Mrs. Ortega both talked of their appreciation for the way building intimacy also strengthened educational outcomes at this school. Mr. Ortega remarked,

> *…they know their personalities. They know their quirks. They know their everything. And to me, that's the ultimate school, you know what I mean? Because the teachers know you. They know what you're capable of. They know when you're down. They know when you're happy…they're not a number but a name... They are not just teachers they are like family.*

Mrs. Ortega agreed and added,

> The teachers… honestly care… For these kids to be able to have their [phone] numbers to say: "I don't know how to do this." And they walk them through on the phone. Or these kids can call them: "I'm having these problems. I don't know what to do. I can't talk to my mom or my dad." They've got an outlet that a lot of times these kids don't have out there. They don't let these girls fail. They push them so that they can succeed. And that's what we need. We need women in the world that can succeed and will succeed.

When students told me this school was "weird in a good way" and "opposite" of other schools they have attended, I asked them to elaborate. One student described the faculty and principal as "angels who floated down from heaven." Several students in different focus groups also discussed "how you can just be yourself" and "how being smart" was cause for celebration rather than ridicule at this school. While some students did complain that a small school often meant an increase in "drama" because "everyone knows your business," they clearly appreciated how the small size of the school enabled them to "know everybody" and helped them feel more like "sisters" or members of a "family." For example, Hannah Beth described how at prior schools she did not know her teachers: "But here, I started to create more than just a teacher-student – the way I see it – it's more of a mother-daughter situation." Jane added, "I think here we're more like, close; we're more like, sisters and family. Like, we're more like, relatives and we can have very open conversations." Mixtli added, "Yeah, it's like, we're really close and you actually know almost everybody in the school; whereas, your other middle school, you know this certain group, but you don't know the other groups."

As the voices of participants illustrate above, the development of safe space where people felt known and cared for, led to having very "open conversations." Findings that illumine the ways voices were developed in this safe space are reported in three bilingual themes: 1) Recuperar el Habla (To Find One's Voice); 2) Hablar en Contra de (To Speak Against); 3) Escuchar a Otros (To Listen to Others), which are reported below in greater detail.

Recuperar el Habla (To find one's voice)

An important component within safe space for minoritized learners is providing adequate time and space for developing student voice. For example, Principal O'Keefe and I were chatting and she brought up the importance of being flexible with class time to meet the needs of students to talk about "real life." She said, "Sometimes the teachers just have to scrap their lesson…our math teacher was just talking to me about that. Yesterday, she goes, 'I just want you to know I scrapped my lesson.' I said, 'Sometimes you have to.'"

Teacher, Ms. Fakhoury, would agree, noting that she felt one of her major duties, despite its absence from the formal curriculum, was teaching students how to advocate for themselves as women.

> At our school we give them many workshops…about how to present themselves, how to talk to people, how to act in a math class, how to act in a class, period! How to back up what you say with research… But I think that's what makes our campus so unique…the fact that we actually realized that, okay, knowing the plan…getting good grades… It's not going to take them anywhere if they cannot face their professor…If they cannot [advocate for themselves as women], I don't care how great a student they are: They will not succeed at the university level and that's what I'm preparing them for.

Indeed, Ms. Fakhoury confessed that sometimes she regretted leaving engineering. She wondered if her path would have been different had she been taught to advocate for herself. She admitted that she had a difficult time "practicing what she preached."

I wonder if I have been taught all those skills that it would have been different…And I went to an all girls' school! I was taught how to be a lady [but] never really how to sit down and talk to an authority figure and develop that courage to [stand up for myself]…If I can teach them how to voice their opinion and how to back up their facts…You know, to me that is more crucial than algebra, calculus, statistics.

Parents also spoke about the importance of their daughters finding their voices and forging their own identities and how the value system at YWLS facilitated that process. For example, while interviewing Mr. and Mrs. Rios, Mr. Rios said,

They tend to stress that you…are important. And they try and encourage your education…and, of course, being a strong woman growing up and where there are your opportunities. These are the things that you can learn. And I think [our daughter] recognized very quickly [these] values that she could appreciate. I think that's what attracted her to [YWLS]…were the things she was missing before.

I then asked Mr. Rios what he thought was missing in his daughter's prior school experiences. He answered,

I think she wanted an outlet to grow and find herself, her own identity. Because she's very much different from either one of us…So we all are very strong-willed about what we want to do. And I think she wants to create her own identity. And I think being able to participate, being able to do…art class, gifted and talented… clubs…Girl Scouts…she wanted to create her own identity. And I think she's able to do that here.

Mr. and Mrs. Ortega had similar things to say about their impressions of YWLS. The Ortegas told me that, prior to their daughter enrolling at YWLS, they never let her go out for sports. Some of this was due to the Ortegas' distrust of their prior schools; whether their daughter would be properly supervised and, thus, safe. Additionally, with their long work hours, Mr. and Mrs. Ortega lacked much of the support they needed to enable their daughter to stay after school in prior years. However, since coming to YWLS, Mrs. Ortega said her daughter "never played sports but now she wants to play sports…and I let her go full force." While, Mrs. Ortega is grateful for her daughter's safety and wellbeing, and the emphasis of the school on developing the girls physically and intellectually, she also explained that having her daughter in after school activities can be very challenging. She went on to explain that her daughter had to do most of her homework in the car to and from the school. "I would pick her up at 5:30 and I still had errands to run." Her stepfather adds, "She did homework to and from school…all night if she had to." The Ortegas expressed that, while challenging, their daughter's new lifestyle was important to support any way they could because she was learning important leadership and responsibility skills that would carry her into the future she was trying to build.

Another parent, Mr. Pēna explained that he really appreciated all the practice his daughter was getting in leadership skills. He said the emphasis on leadership "has made my daughter grow tremendously." He went on to explain that his daughter has "always been very shy and afraid of public speaking." Mr. Pēna felt his daughter's experiences at YWLS were helping her to literally find her voice. For example, the day before she spoke in front of their church. In addition, the school is teaching her how to market her entrepreneurial skills and she is using that knowledge in her volunteer work in the community. Mr. Peña said,

[She] was the type of person that would walk in and you'd talk to her and she was very shy… yesterday [at church] they were telling her that they were so proud of her because she got up in front of the congregation to give an announcement…she created this [shoe] on the converse line and she put the name of the church. It's green because the church is trying to "go green." So

they're going to send a pair to the Bishop! And she got up and made this presentation in front of everybody and everybody said she spoke real loud.

Hablar en Contra de (To speak against)

Related to developing student voice is providing time and space for teacher-facilitated critical conversations that speak against discriminatory societal norms and entrenched "isms." There was a conscientious effort on the part of the principals and teachers to incorporate what some educational circles refer to as, "critical pedagogy." In layperson's terms, I observed what appeared to be an open and transparent exchange between faculty and students about some of the barriers students might face either as a person of color, or as a woman (or at the intersection of ethnicity, sex, and socioeconomic status). In addition, the informal curriculum included giving students the tools needed to combat some of the obstacles they might face; from learning how to professionally introduce oneself to learning how to defend oneself if physically attacked. Principal Santiago remarked, "I think that it's a social injustice if you don't let people know what [they're up against], what they need to be aware of in their lives, [and how to overcome that]."

Mrs. Barnes, an English teacher, spoke often about her quest to integrate feminist ideals and concepts into the formal curriculum. In addition to pushing for variety and balance in the selection of literature, Mrs. Barnes integrated what she called, "a strong women's studies component into all I do." For example, rather than merely have students memorize the definitions and spellings of weekly vocabulary words, Mrs. Barnes also interrogated the origins of words and how and why they have been used throughout history.

> *I mean, there's hero-heroine. I said, "Can we think about this for just a second?" I asked the girls, "What's a hero? Who's a hero?" They come up with words like: men, strong, brave, adventurous, and so on. And then I say, "What's a heroine? Who is a heroine?" And they're like, "a female who is a hero?" And I say, "Look it up! Find 'heroine' in the dictionary! Tell me where that word comes from!" And so they did. And you know what they found? (They were pissed!) They found out that "heroine" is the diminutive of hero! I mean, what's up with that? Why does the male get to be the great big hero and the female just a little bit of a hero? I mean, sexism is in the words we use every day!*

Mrs. Barnes also challenged the girls to understand and interrogate literary concepts traditionally taught in English courses. For example, when studying plot, and the variety of roles that are assigned to characters, the students found that – even in the most highly-regarded texts – female characters were usually given very stereotypical roles. However, male characters were usually afforded a plethora of complex characteristics and identities.

> *They find out that they only get to be the virgin or the whore or the sexless matron! But the guys get to play all kinds of roles. They are not one-dimensional. They get to be so much more! They get to be more like real life. But the women: they are relegated to the very few stereotypes that men name for them. That is just wrong and I want them to see it for what it really is!*

Ms. Barnes then explained to me how she uses these examples from the curriculum to discuss real-world problems the girls are facing.

> *We have had long conversations… about how women are expected to fall into those usual literary roles…And we talk about how when they are adults and try to break into new fields of study…that other people will try very hard to place them back into those neat little categories where they think they belong….and how they are going to have to fight tooth and nail to not let that happen…*

Principal O'Keefe shared the importance of also discussing issues of nationality and language with students. She shared that her father had a "first-grade education" while her mother had a "sixth-grade education" before they emigrated from Mexico to the US. Mrs. O'Keefe told many stories of how her parents may not have been "educated" in the formal sense, but they were very hard workers who appreciated the value of education and pushed her and her siblings to go as far as possible in higher education. She recalled,

> I know when my older siblings – they were about ten to eight years older than me – they went to the East Coast. My brother went to Columbia in the seventies where it was unheard of for minorities to be going to Ivy League schools. And then my sister went to Harvard. So when I was in the ninth grade, I went to see her graduate. They took me to all the Ivy League schools. And I remember my friends in school saying, "Well, why are you visiting those schools?" And I said, "Well, that's where I want to go!" I said, "Yeah, I'm going to get in!"

Mrs. O'Keefe viewed her older siblings as revolutionary in that they fought an uphill battle as first-generation Americans facing racist and classist attitudes so that she, and others like her, would not have to beat down the doors to opportunity like they did. She explains,

> But it's about teaching kids to believe in themselves because sometimes they go home, unfortunately, and they have people telling them, "Why are you staying up late reading? You're not going to college. You're going to work in a restaurant." And they don't aspire to more so they expect their daughters not to aspire to more. And that's the battle that we fight. But it's a battle that we're good at fighting… I think also that I've been very blessed to where I had [parents and] educators tell me, "You can do this." And just – I just had a great support system growing up. You know, my older siblings also were great role models when I saw them do it. "Oh, my God, they're getting on a plane and flying all the way to the East Coast." You know, where a lot of my friends never went to college.

One of the school counselors, Ms. Saaveda, experienced "isms" differently from Mrs. O'Keefe, her principal. Ms. Saaveda's parents viewed education as important. But not for her,

> My older brother went off to A&M. I stayed here in [Centro Urbano] and attended [a local, unrated school], and then my younger brother went to Yale, and then is now in medical school in Chicago…I was the pretty one. I was in pageants. I was like, not very smart and [my parents] kind of let me know that very quickly…not saying like, "You are dumb," but just like… "It's OK. Just stay with us. We will take care of you."

Ms. Saaveda expressed her desire to critique what she saw as traditional roles that she was encouraged to take on while growing up and sees her "calling" as helping her girls work through similar cultural prejudices. She shared,

> The things that happened have a lot of to do with my paternal grandmother, who just saw fit for me, you know, to crochet, sew, cook, clean. I mean, at the age of 10, I was pretty much running the household… I would take care of my brothers… so a lot of the things that have happened to me growing up, things that I have seen, the prejudices that I faced. Even within my own nuclear family. As a female, as a Latina…you know what is expected of you, all of the pressures that you constantly have, society-wise, but also family and culturally… It falls along the same patterns of the students that I work with.

Escuchar a otros (To listen to others)

Another important component to developing voice in this safe space included opportunities to listen to women in the community tell their stories of how they learned to find their voice, work against societal prejudices, and

reach their full potential. Creating leadership training experiences for girls, such as externships whereby youth shadow a professional career woman on the job, is important but should not preclude earlier experiences where girls listen to other women, accompanied by mentoring and networking programmes that strengthen familial and organizational collaborations.

Listening to women's stories started with the school's founding principal, Ms. Santiago. She emphasized with me, on more than one occasion, how important it was for her to "tell her story" to the teachers, students, and parents so as to "set the tone" and adequately communicate "why I was there and my motivation and why I was going to do whatever it took for the kids to be successful." Principal Santiago explained that she "related to the girls because I grew up in a very similar circumstance. I grew up in poverty and had very little opportunity in terms of school." She also remarked how she saw many of her friends "end up either pregnant or married or just didn't get through school" for a variety of reasons and how sad she felt seeing friends with great potential not meet the dreams they set out to reach at earlier ages. Ms. Santiago also admitted to being a "nerd" growing up and how she shares her lifelong love of learning with the girls, and tries to make it "acceptable for them to be different, to be smart." That, along with growing up poor, was something that was "very personal" to her.

Ms. Saaveda, the college counselor, also spoke of the importance of "sharing her story" with the girls so that they, indeed, would know she "gets it." She emphasized that her "story" was not an "act" to get the girls' attention:

> We literally have been like to the same bakeries on Sunday morning, gotten the same things, seen the same lady that is mute and sells candy apples, you know, from time to time, in the hot, hot sun, and how our dads always either bought the candy apple or gave her money. Like, we had the exact same stories. And, they are like, "Wow, you are me, Miss. You're me!" And, I said, "That is what I am trying to say. Yes, yes. You're me." And, I said, "Yeah, like I am not kidding when I tell you I get it. I lived there." I showed one of them my house… "that's literally my room on the other side of that window…you know I used to sleep on the floor, too, because eight houses down, the girl got shot [by a drive-by shooter] and paralyzed from the waist down, when I was in like the fifth grade. And, you know, I could not ride my bike on those two streets there…" They were like, "You are really not kidding." "No, I am not kidding you. It is not like this thing that I get up and do, like a little spiel in front of you, kind of thing." So…I think that really makes a difference, when the teachers can really relate to the students.

In addition to the principals and teachers sharing their stories with the girls, there was also a commitment to bringing in women from the community who, like them, may have faced seemingly insurmountable obstacles in their quest to make their dreams come true. The founding principal emphasized the importance of connecting her students to each other, and other women in the community, who could act as role models. Ms. Santiago shared:

> One of things that we talked about, actually, with the advisory board early on… is that women helping women is a big important piece that we wanted to stress to the girls. And that sense of giving back, caring for one another…So it was very important that we set the girls up to be good to one another, but also to understand just to be a good woman to other women. So it was a very purposeful thing to consistently push that with them. We had conversations about it …made sure that they understood that you treat other people with respect. You need to treat your sisters well…So from the very beginning it was very intentional, and we had a lot of our guest speakers that first year talking about that topic as well…women that inspired them and

who would help [them], so that the girls could see that it really is about those connections… That those women in your life really are what help propel other women forward, and we wanted the girls to have that understanding…

The school's second principal, Mrs. O'Keefe, spoke about how important it was to establish "First Fridays" to give students opportunities to learn from successful businesswomen in the community. During these sessions, guest speakers talked about their struggles with sexism or financial challenges growing up and shared advice on how to work within life's constraints and break through barriers. Mrs. O'Keefe noted:

Today, we have whole bunch of women coming…big wigs from the Chamber of Commerce…and it's just about…that exposure to different careers and different lives that we want to give them…So many of them have challenges. You know, those financial challenges and then they'll say, "I can do that!" They might not know the world of business or technology and that's why this speaker series is so important to us.

I was present for this particular speaker series session and was astonished at the variety and calibre of well-known women who attended the mentoring sessions. Politicians, business owners, high-ranking military officers, and fulltime philanthropists took turns speaking to the student body (grades 6-10 at the time) about their past, present, and future trajectories. After the large group format, the speakers were assigned small group sessions with the girls for more intimate conversations. I attended the session that included a high-ranking army officer who leads a well-known military hospital. Students asked more personal questions about how she paid for college, handled the stresses of attending medical school, and now balanced work and family. I was very impressed with the apparently candid exchange between guest and students and the maturity of the questions that students asked. I wrote in my fieldnotes: "Wow. I sure wish I would have had this opportunity when I was a teenager. This woman is amazing!"

Discussion

Leading for social justice by creating safe space for these young women included a balanced attention to confronting the past, interrupting the present, and revolutionizing the future. Stakeholders' commitment to doing so was evident in their attention to building robust relationships and seeking to listen to the voices of women.

Findings to do with 'building relationships' emphasized the importance of creating an atmosphere more akin to a family or sisterhood. Within this culture, respect, trust, love, and openness reigned. It is questionable whether any school could really go to the next step of building student voice without having this foundation of familia in the first place.

Findings to do with 'voice' emerged in three categories that I named: 1) Recuperar el Habla (To Find One's Voice); 2) Hablar en Contra de (To Speak Against), and; 3) Escuchar a Otros (To Listen to Others). Finding one's voice meant literally learning to speak out loud one's thoughts and feelings. For some adults and students, it sometimes meant rising above shyness. For others, it meant, first, recognizing how past discrimination or social mores constrained one's voice and then re-learning behaviours that were formerly thought of as masculine (such as getting in front of a Catholic congregation and leading a social reform effort).

The next 'voice' stage, to speak against, was sometimes painful for participants. It meant having to face the fact that, perhaps, one's very own family had held prejudicial attitudes toward women. Furthermore, it often meant engaging in difficult conversations at school and at home about cultural expectations. It is doubtful whether just 'any' principal or teacher would have been able to successfully lead and teach in this school. I agree with Saaveda and other participants when they say it really makes a difference that they truly understand what their students are going through because they have literally

lived where they live. Also, it is doubtful whether a comparable safe space could have been created without the commitment of all the teachers (regardless of their personal backgrounds) to purposefully incorporate feminist ideals in the regular curriculum and fearlessly engage in critical conversations about race, sex, class, language, and so on.

Finally, with respect to Escuchar a Otros (To Listen to Others), this school chose to bring in speakers and mentors who are women, first of all, and oftentimes women who either have struggled financially, socially, or otherwise. While other schools incorporate similar programmes, the careful attention to "women helping women" is unique and enhances the characteristics of girls-only safe space. In this particular girls-only safe space, adults and students are able to disrupt and transform the dailiness of sexism, racism, and classism.

Future research includes continuing the present ethnography, now in its fifth year, following the first graduating class of 2014 to college. I hope to find out more about how creating this girls-only safe space influenced young women's college and career decisions and campus leadership behaviours.

Findings have implications for leadership preparation programmes as well as continuing professional development. Rather than leave these skills to chance, leadership preparation programmes across the continents can implement specific coursework that helps future leaders understand the importance of developing safe space and student voice as well as opportunities to practice specific skills that help them develop a more dialectic leadership stance that fluidly interacts with people and with systems.

Conclusions

Regardless of global context, it takes brave and loving school leaders to create a culture of resistance, along with critical teaching by knowledgeable teachers, to begin to disrupt the status quo and achieve more equitable schooling practices and outcomes for minoritized learners. For many students, as this research attests, it means purposefully creating a safe space that includes building social networks and cross-generational relationships as well as providing leadership opportunities to develop collective power. By doing so, girls, particularly, are able to take ownership as actors of their life stories and become healthy and whole.

Acknowledgements

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Author

Dr Katherine Cumings Mansfield (The University of Texas at Austin) studies educational and vocational access and achievement as related to identity intersectionalities (gender, race, class) across a variety of educational contexts. Katherine's interdisciplinary scholarship has been honoured with two prestigious awards from the American Educational Research Association and has been published in a variety of venues including: Educational Administration Quarterly, Educational Policy Analysis Archives and Journal of School Leadership. Katherine is a first-generation college graduate with over 20 years serving diverse populations throughout the preschool to postsecondary pipeline and has co-authored/co-edited three books, including: *Women Interrupting, Disrupting, and Revolutionizing Educational Policy and Practice*, Information Age Publishing, Inc.

Email: kicmansfield@gmail.com