

How listening to student voices can inform and strengthen social justice research and practice

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Abstract:

Purpose: The purpose of this research article is to illustrate the value of including students' voices in educational leadership and research practices, to more fully understand what students are actually experiencing in transformative learning spaces, and to determine what we might learn from them in terms of how to improve both leadership practice and our research efforts. **Method:** The first 2 years of an ongoing ethnography used participant observation, photography, a student survey, and focus group interviews to discover and describe the emergent school culture and the lived experiences of female secondary students in a single-sex public magnet school. **Findings:** Findings illumine why the young women in this study chose to attend an all-female STEM academy and what makes their schooling experiences at this particular school different from their prior experiences. Students' voices also bring to the fore unintended negative consequences associated with attending a school devoted to social justice praxis and point to the ways leadership practices must evolve to provide an even more powerful, transformative learning space that better meet students' needs. **Implications:** Findings have implications for leadership preparation programs as well as continuing professional development. That is, true transformative and social justice leadership is not static or linear. Rather, it is a fluid process that is dialectical and requires adaptation based on new knowledge and interaction with people and with systems. Moreover, findings implicate the need for educational leadership researchers concerned with social justice to include listening to students' voices in their research endeavors to more adequately capture the lived experiences of students as well as promote more inclusive research and practice.

Keywords: leadership for social justice | transformative leadership | student voice | gender | race/ethnicity | single-sex schooling | STEM

Article:

Research on transformative and social justice leadership rightly argues the impact of leaders' critical self-reflection (Dantley & Tillman, 2009; Rodriguez & Fabionar, 2009) and commitment to make students' realities an integral part of their leadership practice (Shields, 2004). Not coincidentally, the student voice literature argues that including and honoring students'

perspectives yields richer, more authentic research results as well as a more democratic learning space that fosters positive student outcomes (Fielding, 2001, 2004; Mitra, 2004). Yet, rarely has the social justice leadership literature offered seeking student voice as an integral component to leadership decision making in transformative learning spaces or educational leadership research endeavors (Mansfield, Welton, & Halx, 2012). This article argues that seeking student voice in leadership and research practice inherently operationalizes social justice practices that have potential to sensitize our research efforts as well as inform and strengthen social justice leadership and transformative learning spaces.

The purpose of this research article is to share the results from the first 2 years of an ongoing ethnography investigating the social justice leadership practices in and transformative learning spaces of Young Women's Leadership School (YWLS): a new all-girls' magnet STEM academy in an urban center in Texas. Specifically, this article details students' explanations of their lived experiences to illustrate the value of including students' voices in educational leadership and research practices, to more fully understand what students are actually experiencing in transformative learning spaces, and to determine what we might learn from them in terms of how to improve both leadership practice and our research efforts.

Context of the Study

Centro Urbano¹ Independent School District (CUISD) is located in one of the nation's 10 largest communities with a 2006 U.S. Census estimate of 1.3 million people. Eight school districts serve city residents with a total of 16 independent school districts serving the entire metro area. According to CUISD electronic archives, the district currently has the capacity to educate 80,000 students though the current enrollment is about 55,000. The total number of students enrolled as of 2008-2009 was 55,275 with a racial/ethnic composition of approximately 90% Hispanic, 7% African American, almost 3% White, and less than 1% Asian, Pacific Islander, and Native American. According to Texas Education Agency (TEA, 2010), YWLS student demographics² are listed as 78% Hispanic, 16% African American, and 5% White with 81% of all students labeled as "economically disadvantaged" (Mansfield, 2011).

According to CUISD archives, the largest enrollment ever experienced was 76,702 students during the 1968-1969 school years. While the Hispanic population hovered around 45,000 students between the years 1969 and 1984, the number of Whites attending CUISD schools during that time strongly indicated the "White flight" phenomenon experienced by most urban centers in the United States during the 1960s through the 1980s. For example, in 1969, Whites comprised 25% of the student population in CUISD. By 1974, that number dropped to just less than 17%. In 1979, the figures for Whites dropped to 12%, and by 1984, Whites contributed merely 8% of the student body. Interestingly, this urban district also experienced what some referred to as "Black flight" during the same 15-year period with proportions of Blacks constituting 25% in 1969 and only 8.5% in 1984. With raw numbers relatively constant, the Hispanic population grew proportionately from 60% to almost 78% during this time of demographic change (Mansfield, 2011).

¹ Except for "Foundation for the Education of Young Women," all names of places and people are pseudonyms.

² The author recognizes the fluidity of racial and ethnic constructs and, for the most part, has chosen to use terms that are currently used by U.S./Texas government entities.

According to a report in Centro Urbano's major newspaper, five high schools in CUISD are considered "dropout factories." Indeed, according to the CUISD website, the "Completion Rate" averages 76%, corresponding to approximately three fourths of CUISD students graduating in 4 years. CUISD was reported in print and TV news as the only district in the Centro Urbano metroplex with an "Unacceptable" rating after mandatory state test scores were reported for 2010 (Mansfield, 2011).

As these statistics suggest, Centro Urbano—similar to other major U.S. cities—is experiencing severe racial and economic isolation of urban students while suburban districts grow and diversify. As with other metropolitan areas, the troubling dropout rate accompanies curricula that lacks rigor. In addition, the district continues to experience significant enrollment decreases as families with financial means transfer to the outer suburbs and exurbs and relatively poorer families struggling to find affordable housing relocate to the older, inner-ring suburbs. Among the families who stay within CUISD boundaries, some choose to send their children to one of many private school options; especially during the middle-school years. Additionally, lingering fiscal difficulties hamper efforts to improve schools. In response, and as a part of a push to "re-purpose" empty school buildings, CUISD's long-term plans include the introduction of a variety of magnet schools from which parents of students in the metro's 16 districts can choose in an effort to bolster enrollment and curtail school closures (Mansfield, 2011).

One of these magnets is the innovative Young Women's Leadership School (YWLS). In 2008, district officials partnered with a community nonprofit organization, Foundation for the Education of Young Women (FEYW), to partially fund and otherwise support YWLS. The district aspires to meet long-term objectives for enrollment and building use by developing schools of choice, such as YWLS. Moreover, supporters of YWLS believe that female student outcomes (e.g., increase in high school graduation rates; decrease in teen pregnancy; increase in college attendance and graduation; increase in interest and success in science, technology, engineering, and math [STEM] fields) will significantly improve as a result of attending YWLS (Mansfield, 2011, 2013).

The Grades 6 to 12 curriculum of YWLS is a single-track, advanced program that focuses on three primary areas: (a) Rigorous college preparation, especially coursework in STEM fields; (b) Health and wellness guidance that emphasizes preventing drug abuse, pregnancy, and obesity, and; (c) Training to prepare young women for leadership positions in careers and campus life. The Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) between CUISD and FEYW outlines the mission and purposes of the school along with the expectation that there will be a "Women's Studies" component to the overall program (Mansfield, 2011). YWLS opened in 2008 with 75 sixth graders, 75 seventh graders, 4 core teachers, 4 specialists, and a principal. In 2009, 75 new sixth graders were inducted, bringing the total number of students to roughly 225 sixth through eighth graders. Each year, YWLS adds an additional class of sixth graders with the first graduating class of twelfth graders in 2014. Additionally, as student enrollment increases, so does the cadre of teachers and administrators.

Literature Review

Closing the achievement gap is impossible unless transformative leaders at all levels understand contextual complexities and work toward the dual goals of excellence and equity (Brown, Benkovits, Muttillio, & Urban, 2011; Dantley & Tillman, 2009; Furman & Gruenewald, 2004; Rodriguez & Fabionar, 2009; Shields, 2004, 2010; Young, Petersen, & Short, 2001). Furthermore, scholars should include students in their research efforts in order to understand the extent to which educational policies and practices *authentically* serve the constituents for which they are intended (Diaz-Greenberg, 2003; Fielding, 2001, 2004; Mitra, 2004). Unfortunately, “Despite intense endeavors to promote educational change to affect student achievement, one voice, perhaps the most critical voice that could inform the debate of how to increase student achievement, is sorely lacking: that of students themselves” (Sands, Guzman, Stephens, & Boggs, p. 324).

The Importance of Leadership

When searching the literature pertaining to the importance of leadership to achieving excellence and equity for all students, several terms come to mind, such as democratic leadership, shared leadership, transformative leadership, and leading schools for social justice (please, see Mansfield, 2011 for a more substantive treatment of the topic). Rather than share an exhaustive review of important leadership attributes and characteristics, the purpose of this section is to share a few concepts in the literature that dovetail with seeking student voice and provide sufficient background for the current study.

If the goal of public education is the “full and equal participation of all groups in society, where resources are distributed equitably, members are physically and psychologically safe, and members interact in a self-determining and interdependent manner” (Walker, 2006, p. 115), then a major effort is needed to transform our school cultures by educators who practice collective leadership while also engaging in discussions concerning racism and other forms of oppression (Singleton & Linton, 2006; Walker, 2006). The ability of the school leader to cultivate educational equity, access, and achievement in diverse contexts depends heavily on taking an explicitly activist stance while developing the school culture (Brooks & Miles, 2008; Brown, 2006; Dantley & Tillman, 2009; Marshall, Young, & Moll, 2010; Oliva, Anderson, & Byng, 2009; Theoharis, 2007). Likewise, it is imperative that school leaders recognize the “multiple contexts within which education and educational leadership exist” (Dantley, & Tillman, 2009, p. 22). As such, leaders must fully deconstruct the realities of students’ lives and the ways their leadership practices may or may not reproduce marginalizing conditions. In fact, it is imperative that “educational leaders develop a critical analysis of the socioeconomic landscape of their schools and communities” as well as reflect on how their attitudes and beliefs about poverty are “informed by their social location in a larger system of privilege and oppression” (Rodriguez & Fabionar, 2009, p. 55). Additionally, research demonstrates if school principals make their students’ identities an integral part of their leadership practice, the result will inevitably be a more caring pedagogy where children who find their realities represented in school curriculum, class dialogue, and school policies are encouraged to engage and connect to school and learning, and in turn, experience greater school success (Shields, 2004).

Social justice dialogue must engage several issues involving the intersection of student identities (e.g., race, gender, class, religion). Moreover, the ways these various intersecting identities form

the contextual backdrop for societal inequities should be readily recognized. School leaders with social justice awareness must be cognizant of the nested contexts of their schools and the ways in which societal norms translate to educational, economic, and political biases. School leaders should realize that schools do not exist in a vacuum. Rather, it must be recognized that schools can be sites of reproduction of, or resistance to, injustice found in the greater context (Dantley & Tillman, 2009; Lott & Webster, 2006).

Transformative leadership begins with questions of justice and democracy, critiques inequitable practices, and addresses both individual and public good. “Transformative leadership, therefore, inextricably links education and educational leadership with the wider social context within which it is embedded” (Shields, 2004, p. 559). It is connected directly to the work of educational leaders and aims to pave the way for more inclusive, equitable, and democratic conceptions of education. Moreover, the essence of a democratic environment is the “celebration of the multiple voices, identities, and perspectives of all those in the community” (Dantley & Tillman, p. 22). Thus, leaders practice democratic leadership by laboring to “see democratic practice and equitable treatment of all members of the learning community, regardless of race, gender, class, ability, age, or sexual orientation” (p. 26). Zajda, Majhanovich, and Rust (2006) are convinced that “social justice as a social policy is the natural aspiration of all democratic societies and remains the only long-term guarantee for developing and sustaining peace, tolerance and harmony in the world” (p. 15). Lott and Webster (2006) agree, noting the development of democratic coalitions within schools and other community organizations provides strength to disrupt and undo oppression.

It is also important for educational leaders to move from mere rhetoric to civil rights activism within their particular milieu (Dantley & Tillman, 2009). Brooks and Miles (2008) agree: “awareness of social injustices is not sufficient, school leaders must act when they identify inequity. School leaders are not only uniquely positioned to influence equitable educational practices, their proactive involvement is imperative” (p. 107). For instance, principals show their commitment to social justice when they boldly address race issues. Moreover, they provide ongoing “staff development focused on building equity, developing staff investment in social justice, hiring and supervising for justice, and empowering staff” (Theoharis, 2007, p. 235). In addition, principals walk the talk when they labor to create a warm and welcoming school environment that treats families, students, faculty, and staff with respect; especially reaching out to families historically marginalized in schools (Theoharis, 2007).

Taking an activist or transformative leadership stance presses further into unknown and sometimes uncomfortable territory (Beachum, 2008; Bogotch, 2008; English, 2008; Shields, 2004, 2010). For example, Beachum (2008) wrote that “social justice requires sacrifice, suffering, tireless struggles, and the passionate concern of dedicated individuals” (p. 41). Bogotch (2008) claimed that educators must become more critical, political, and action-oriented (p. 80) in their quest for a socially just school that meets the excellence and equity needs of all students—including cognizance of students’ material needs (p. 81). English (2008) emphasized the need for transformative leaders to look beyond “schooling interiorities” (p. 116) and learn to work within and against societal assumptions and practices (or schooling exteriorities). In other words, social justice-minded school leaders pay attention to what happens

outside of school in addition to what occurs within school walls. This enables leaders to adapt their practices to better meet the needs of students according to contextual complexities.

While the leadership practices outlined above are imperative, so also is forming authentic relationships with students and expanding shared leadership to include students (Mansfield et al., 2012; Mitra & Gross, 2009). Seeking student voice is another important component to school reform that is often missing from the current discourse on transformative or social justice leadership (Mansfield et al., 2012; Mitra & Gross, 2009).

The Importance Student Voice

Educational leaders, including principals and researchers, who aim to serve as student advocates, often use testing data to shed quantitative light on achievement gaps. Other data inquiries are designed simply to measure the implementation success of educational programs. However, these data gathering and reporting efforts often fall short. Simply asking students how their schooling impacts them, and counting their responses, is not sufficient. Advocacy efforts are limited when researchers and school leaders speak for students rather than letting the students speak for themselves (Fielding, 2001). Too often, youth—especially those historically marginalized due to race/ethnicity, gender, and socioeconomic status—are the *subject of* policies rather than *actors in* shaping policy. Thus, prioritizing student voice in educational research and leadership practices is the most authentic means of advocating for social justice and promoting change in communities (Mansfield et al., 2012; Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008; Ginwright, Cammarota, & Noguera, 2005; Torre & Fine, 2006). Rather than adult stakeholders positioning students as “the problem” and thinking of ways to “fix” students, students are given the opportunity to identify issues and offer solutions (Irizarry, 2009).

The literature refers to a “pyramid of student voice” or a continuum that endeavors to increase the participation of students in research/school reform efforts while also capitalizing on developmentally appropriate learning (Mansfield et al., 2012; Fielding, 2001; Mitra & Gross, 2009). For example, when conducting equity audits to determine achievement gaps and inequitable practices (Skrla, Scheurich, Garcia, & Nolly, 2010), adult stakeholders might glean more detailed information from students via surveys or better yet, they can interview them via focus groups. Consequently, students go from being positioned as a “data source” to active respondents given an opportunity to voice their experiences (Fielding, 2001; Mitra & Gross, 2009). Interestingly, seeking student voice to improve educational practice is supported by the literature in student development, motivation theory, self-determination theory, and constructivist learning theory because these fields recognize the importance of active student engagement in and feedback to the educational process (Sands et al., 2007). At the most basic level, student voice efforts result in the development of civic habits essential to democracy, while engaging students at higher levels results in curricular improvements and strengthens teacher–student relationships (Fielding, 2001, 2004; Mitra, 2006, 2008; Mitra & Gross, 2009; Sands et al., 2007).

Bridging Two Conceptual Frameworks to Address the Gaps

As can be construed from the short overview above, the educational leadership literature gives more than adequate attention to the importance of self-reflection and attention to contextual complexities. Yet, overall, inadequate attention is given to including students' voices in policy and practice in schools. (One notable exception is the work done by Dana Mitra and Steve Gross, 2009, who attempt to bridge the two literatures by offering that seeking student voice enables a more democratic schooling environment and leads to better actualization of school reform efforts.) Most research on effective leadership is adult-centric because most leadership practice is adult-centric. Educational leadership practitioners and scholars can benefit from additional studies that probe the role of seeking student voice to improve leadership practice to more fully understand what students are actually experiencing in transformative learning spaces to determine what we might learn from them (Mansfield et al., 2012).

Likewise, the student voice literature, while helpful, does have some limitations. For example, while the student voice literature advocates for more direct participation of students in school reform efforts, what's missing is adequate attention to contextual complexities, power relationships, and leadership attributes. The student voice literature is student-centric, for the most part, without adequate attention to the role and degree social justice-minded educators might play in the equation. We can benefit from further discussion about how and why some schools implement student voice initiatives with greater success than others and how and why schooling contexts facilitate differing levels of student engagement on a continuum: from using students data sources to collaborating with students as researchers to using student voice opportunities to build student leadership capacity (Mansfield et al., 2012; Fielding, 2001, 2004; Mitra, 2004, 2008; Mitra & Gross, 2009).

While both the leadership for social justice and student voice literatures may have a few gaps when examined on their own, both offer compelling arguments as to their importance and place in educational leadership research and practice when conjoined. Therefore, the two frameworks, as one, provide a rich framework for this study (Mansfield et al., 2012). Rather than limiting the current study to either framework, this study uses the strengths of both, demonstrating how concepts from the transformative and social justice leadership literature, along with the research on the importance of including student voice in school reform efforts, can be synergistically combined to more adequately operationalize social justice efforts in transformative learning spaces and provide a more inclusive framework for data collection strategies, analysis of data collected, and conclusions drawn.

Method

Like others (Crotty, 1998; Fischer, 2003; Yanow, 2000), I came to the research setting with the presupposition that neutral and objective science is not possible when conducting research in schools. Rather, human beings live in a social world that involves sensemaking, which, in turn necessitates interpretation. My epistemological assumptions are embedded in constructionism, the belief that humans create meaning as they interact with objects and the world; thus, subject and object are "partners in the generation of meaning" (Crotty, 1998, p. 9). My belief that human beings co-construct meaning led me to take an interpretive theoretical perspective in approaching this study. Thereafter, interpretivism interacted with my desire to study the meaning making of local stakeholders, which pointed to using ethnography to enable the collection of richer, highly

contextual data. Not only did this allow the inclusion of multiple voices in the data collection methods, but it fit with the belief that knowledge comes from a variety of sources, and that data collection, analysis, and interpretation are not value free (Crotty, 1998; Fischer, 2003; Yanow, 2000). The flexibility that ethnography enables was also an important consideration for me since I was committed to making my investigation “responsive and relevant” to research participants (Lassiter, 2005, p. 6).

Site Selection and Entrée

I selected Centro Urbano Young Women’s Leadership School (YWLS) because it represents one of six single-sex public magnet schools in Texas. News articles reporting the schools’ major mission as serving mostly Hispanic and African American female students living in poverty immediately caught my attention. I made the final selection after contacting Ms. Santiago, the director of YWLS, who expressed immediate interest: “It would be great if you could focus on the culture we are trying to develop here.” She then agreed to introduce faculty and staff for future observations and interviews and invited me to come back the following week to observe the inaugural faculty meeting.

Positioning the Author

I came to the research project with varying degrees of insider/outsider status because of my past and present circumstances. For example, I am an outsider because I am Anglo³ and my family’s present financial situation enables us to meet our medical and material needs. My children are not labeled “free or reduced lunch,” as their father was during his high school years; nor have I ever needed to use food stamps to feed my children as my mother did when I was a youngster. My present circumstances notwithstanding, I am also to some extent an insider in the research context because I know how it feels to be poor, hungry, without medical care, and homeless. But, I will never know what it is like living as a Latina or African American woman in Centro Urbano, Texas. That said, I consider it a position of strength to have approached this research endeavor as a mother raising a daughter and son the same age as the student participants. In addition, I am a certified principal and teacher with more than 15 years’ experience throughout the PK-16 pipeline. I believe my training and experience working with diverse students, along with my personal characteristics of mothering adolescent children, afforded me a certain insider status and bolstered my ability to conduct this study.

An important process undergirding the research was “sharing my story” with participants. In fact, the importance of “positioning” was first evident on meeting Principal Santiago. Ms. Santiago shared with me how she had grown up in an infamous part of town known for its extreme poverty and racial/ethnic segregation and how she eventually made it to college, studied education, and returned to her community to “pay it forward.” She expressed how telling her story was an extremely important part of her leadership style because it helped people understand her motivations and the passion with which she tried to create an environment conducive to both excellence and equity for students growing up in similar circumstances as she. I followed her

³ Here, I choose to use the word, “Anglo” to describe my racial/ethnic identity because it is the most commonly used term for people of Western European heritage in this particular region. However, it is important to note that the term *Anglo* can also be used pejoratively to denote those who colonized the region under Spanish rule.

lead by sharing my story on meeting members of the community. This enabled teachers, parents, and students to see me as a mother, teacher, and ally, rather than just a detached researcher, and allowed me to establish rapport with participants.

Participant Selection

Most of my experiences with students were in the form of participant observation over a 2-year period. Toward the end of my second year at the school, I conducted four focus groups with 18 students. The selection process was purposeful (Patton, 2002) in that, after consulting with Ms. Santiago, I invited all 75 eighth graders to participate, excluding seventh and sixth graders. The reasoning behind this decision was twofold: The eighth graders had been at the school for both years of its existence and they had attended a regular middle school during their sixth-grade year; thus, they had a framework for making comparisons. While seventh graders had been at the school 2 years, they did not have any experience at a prior middle school. And sixth graders had not been present the first year of implementation. We agreed eighth graders would share a more mature, nuanced, and complex perspective during focus groups as they were developmentally closer to adults physically as well as intellectually.

Classroom teachers accommodated short periods of time to conduct classroom visits with eighth graders to explain the study and the purpose of the focus groups. Spanish- and English-language parent consent forms, student assent forms, and a letter of explanation were distributed for students to take home. The sample then went from purposeful (Patton, 2002) to convenience (Henry, 1990) in that whoever returned their consent/assent forms were scheduled to take part in focus groups. It is important to note that since students opted-in to participate, selection bias is a concern to tease out. For example, students choosing to participate in focus groups could have done so for any number of reasons, including, (a) They wanted to eat free pizza; (b) They preferred to hang out with friends after school instead of doing homework; (c) They had “an ax to grind” concerning some element of the school and wanted to air their grievances with someone who would write about it; (d) They considered themselves “ambassadors” of the school and wanted to make sure a positive perspective was present at the focus group interviews; and (e) They liked the attention. Since the focus group transcripts reflect both positive and negative experiences as well as an air of familiarity and candor, I have no reason to believe students opting-in to participate tainted the data collected. Rather, the diversity of perspectives promoted energetic discussion that seemed authentic and representative of the variety of perspectives that might permeate the school.

All students decided to select their own pseudonym as well as self-identify their preferred race/ethnicity (Table 1). It is important to note the variety of words students selected to self-identify. Unlike official CUISD statistics, students do not necessarily view themselves as one descriptor among: “Hispanic, African American, White, or Asian, Pacific Islander, and Native American.” Rather, students are very aware of their biracial or multiracial heritages that include one, two, three, or all four of the above. Additionally, some girls preferred to be recognized as “Mexican” or “Latina” or “Creole,” which reflects not only the diversity and self-awareness among this particular group of students, but of the population at large, across a variety of socioeconomic classes, echoing my observations working and living in the region for almost a decade.

Table 1. Student Participants.

No.	Students' Chosen Pseudonyms	Age (Years)	Grade	Students' Self-Identification
1	Abby	14	8	Mexican
2	Abcde	14	8	Black/White
3	Amyranni	14	8	Mexican American/Hispanic
4	Angie	14	8	Hispanic
5	Aurora	14	8	Black, White, Indian
6	Bella	16	8	Latina
7	Brianna	13	8	Hispanic/Latina
8	Cupcake	14	8	Hispanic
9	Fanta	14	8	Black, Hispanic, Indian, and Creole
10	Hannah Beth	14	8	Indian, Mexican
11	Jane	13	8	Latina
12	Mercedes	13	8	Hispanic
13	Mixtli	14	8	Hispanic
14	Nevaett	13	8	African American
15	Sam	14	8	Hispanic
16	Stephanie	14	8	Hispanic
17	Vanessa	13	8	Black

Data Collection

I did not go into the field with particular hypotheses or research questions. I felt it was imperative to appreciate the embedded contexts of YWLS and become familiar with faculty, staff, students, families, and administration, which facilitated an emergent recognition of what various participants deemed important or significant. My original plan was to spend at least 1 year conducting participant observation, most likely followed by interviews with adult participants and perhaps surveying students. However, the research questions that emerged during conversations with parents, teachers, and school administration toward the end of the first year of operations necessitated reconfiguring my original plan. For the purposes of this article, I focus on just one aspect of this multi-year, multi-layered study and one set of the research questions that emerged during the first year: What are the students' lived experiences in this particular learning space? What are students' perceptions of their lived experiences in relation to their prior experiences? Why did students enroll in YWLS? What are the implications of their attendance at YWLS? These questions were pursued using a variety of collection tools that varied by how directly involved students were in the activity. For example, the first phase of data collection used participant observation and photography, Phase 2 used a student survey, and the third phase incorporated focus group interviews with students.⁴

Participant Observation. During the first year of operations, I conducted what Wolcott (2008) referred to as ethnographic reconnaissance. I began by observing meetings that involved teachers, parents, staff, and administration that occurred on a weekly or monthly basis. For example, I attended weekly parent education classes focused on helping families navigate social services networks and monthly PTA meetings. I also volunteered twice a week in the office and once per week in classrooms by answering phones, making copies, putting up bulletin boards,

⁴ Adding conversations with students was decided in concert with the school principal and my faculty advisor as the best way to elicit "student voice," which necessitated an amendment to the original institutional review board.

and so on. My consistent presence in the building in a variety of roles enabled me to become familiar with the community, build trusting relationships with stakeholders, and serve in whatever capacity the participants deemed suitable. I also attended special events, such as awards ceremonies and school dances. In addition to observing, taking notes and photographs, and chatting with teachers, families, and students, I helped with set up and clean up. Moreover, as a certified teacher, I facilitated a social studies class for 90 minutes, so the teacher could attend to an urgent situation. I attended special events such as the “Orientation” for new families and students on the weekend, the “White Rose Induction Ceremony” for incoming sixth graders in the evening, and the end-of-the-year “Carnival” with my family on a Friday night to help the school raise money for students who cannot afford to purchase school uniforms.

During the second year of ethnographic fieldwork, I intensified my efforts. I continued volunteer work at least 1 day per week, and added regular classroom observations at least 3 days per week. I spoke with teachers, support staff, and parents daily. My questioning became more “probing” as time went on. Concurrently, participants became more verbose in their sharing. After spending approximately 18 months at the school, I conducted recorded focus groups with students.

Photography. Harper (2005) defines the use of photography as “the study of social life using images” (p. 747). Harper and Margolis and Fram (2007) remind us that photographs are both empirical *and* constructed. Images are evidence of something seen, but accompanying captions are socially constructed. And the way photos are arranged within a text serve a particular author’s purpose. There is a theoretical juxtaposition between the empiricism of documentary photography and the subjective performance of the researcher linking specific images with text. Thus, photography “is both true and constructed” (Harper, 2005, p. 749). Visual methods can be used as “illustrations” to tell a story and as a form of “triangulation” that helps describe particular phenomenon (Harper, 2005; Wolcott, 1994). The intent in this study was to use photography to capture the lived experiences of students in terms of representative artifacts, such as posters, banners, and student work displays that capture the essence of this particular transformative learning space.

Student Survey. In February 2009, Ms. Santiago administered a school climate survey to all students titled, “How are we doing so far?” Ms. Santiago asked me to comb through the survey results and create informational displays that would help her communicate findings to a variety of stakeholders. Ms. Santiago used the information collected to address specific concerns as well as to elevate “what we were doing right.” Principal Santiago met with teachers and support staff as a group as well as individually to discuss survey results. Since I did not participate in survey construction, and cannot speak to validity and reliability issues, I used the survey as a secondary data source. Every student participated in the paper-and-pencil survey. If a student was absent, she filled out the survey on her return. All surveys were conducted and collected anonymously.

Focus Group Interviews. Ms. Santiago, noting the material need of most of the students, urged me to provide students a meal during focus groups. Following the relatively new Texas antiobesity policy, I limited the fare to sugar-free, caffeine-free soft drinks and pizza. The focus groups were recorded and conducted privately in the parent education classroom lasting between 60 and 90 minutes. The first 15 to 30 minutes were spent informally chatting with students while we ate.

I refrained from using a fixed set of questions, as the process was iterative (Weiss, 1995). Instead, I explained to students that I did not want to use a list of formal questions, but would like to have a conversation about a few general topics, such as, why they attended the magnet school instead of their neighborhood school and how they would describe their experiences at the school thus far.

Throughout the focus groups, I endeavored to recognize that students' personal knowledge and ways of knowing are critical to social interaction and hence, social analysis (Campbell, 2004). I tried to facilitate conversations that reflected an open, yet focused structure that elicited students' lived experiences. Eliciting subjective experiences was a goal—not a problem to be resolved (Merton, Fiske, & Kendall, 1990). Indeed, the “focused interview seeks to provide an easygoing and open occasion for the interviewee to express *[his/her]* sentiments and perceptions of a situation” (Merton et al., 1990, p. 61, emphasis in original, more inclusive language added). I emphasized my desire to hear about their experiences and give participants an opportunity to tell their stories. The reader will note that, oftentimes, specific pseudonyms are not included with direct quotations in the findings due to the difficulty of transcribing audio recordings of more than two or three voices speaking concurrently. I considered videotaping the student focus groups to more accurately align voices and pseudonyms but chose to only audiotape focus groups, foregoing accuracy to better protect participants' privacy (Morgan, 1997).

Findings

To help demonstrate the student voice continuum, findings are reported in three major categories: Understandings about students' lived experiences that can be gleaned via (a) participant observation and photography, (b) written communications via a student survey, and (c) oral communications via focus group interviews. Presenting the findings thematically within a framework that indicates levels of student involvement, helps communicate that the more students are involved with research efforts, the richer the data collected, and thus, the more detailed the findings and comprehensive the implications and recommendations that follow.

Students' Lived Experiences via the Lens of the Researcher

When one walks the halls of YWLS, one notices that, overall, it is clean and quiet. As one passes individual classrooms, one can hear the healthy buzz of teaching and learning occurring. In between classes, I observed girls greeting friends with hugs or walking to lunch arm in arm. Teachers can be seen conversing quietly with individual students while leaning casually against the wall in the hallways.

In addition to keeping notes of my observations in a journal, as the excerpt above shows, I took photographs of representative material artifacts to capture the many symbols and signs purposefully selected and placed in YWLS by a variety of stakeholder groups (Figures 1-4). These material artifacts communicated important messages to newcomers and visitors. They served as reminders to founding stakeholders the values, purpose, mission, and philosophy of the school. Since I was present onsite before opening day, I was in a unique position to hear and see

the founding members discuss the types of symbols and signs they would like to see around the school representing their values (Mansfield, 2011).



Figure 1. College banners line the hallways.

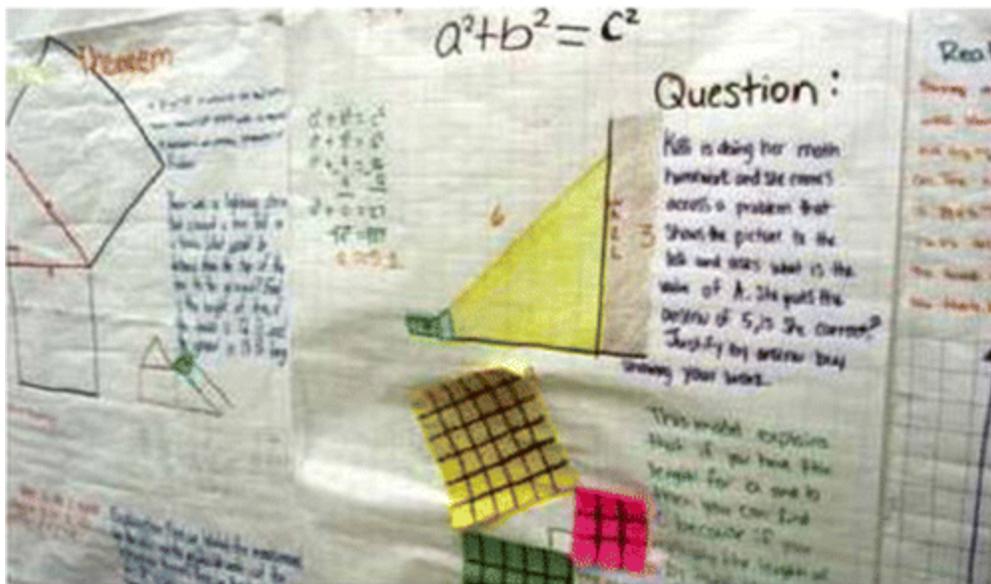


Figure 2. Mathematics display.

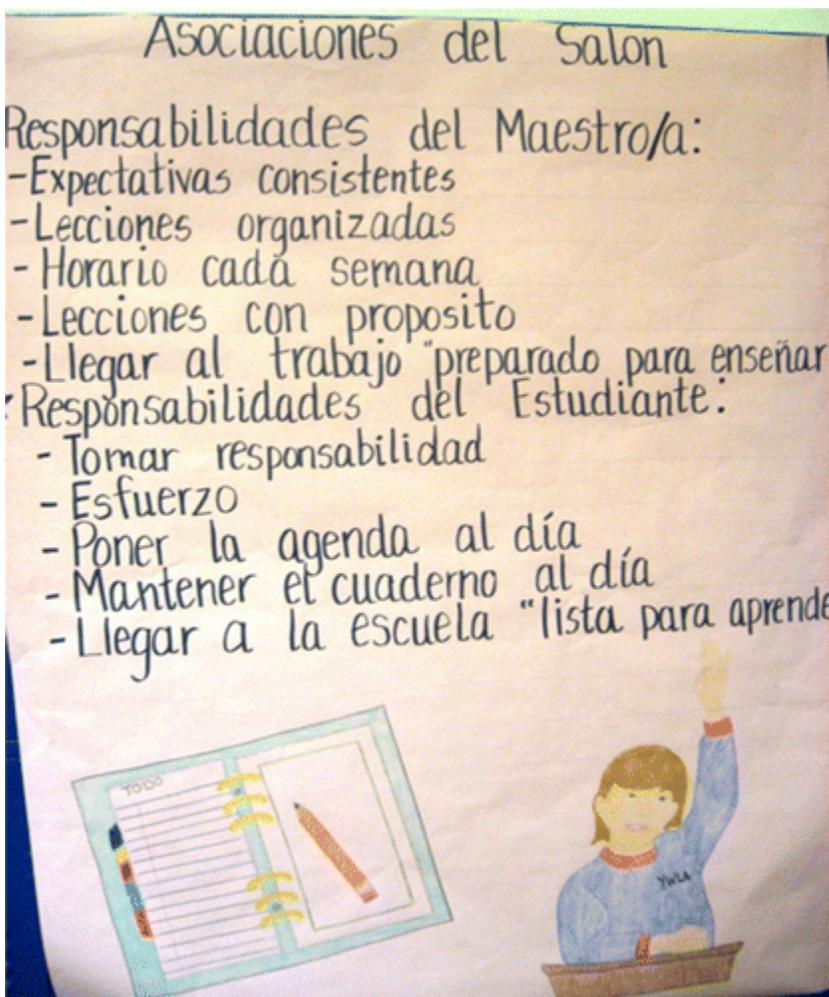


Figure 3. Important signs are displayed in Spanish and English.



Figure 4. The day after receiving the news of 100% passing rate.

Figure 1 depicts the college banners lining the hallways and on display in the library and lunchroom. Principal Santiago requested banners from a variety of public and private “Ivy Leagues” in addition to numerous other good colleges in Texas and the United States. These banners are a constant reminder to regulars and visitors alike that graduating from an excellent higher education institution is the primary mission of YWLS. Other signs and symbols in the hallways include large, framed photographs of students participating in the life of the school: field trips to universities, biology labs and dissection, technology camps, and fine arts shows alongside quotations from notables, such as Martin Luther King, Jr., Eleanor Roosevelt, and Maya Angelou. Student work in mathematics and the sciences is exhibited as prominently as artwork.

Figure 2 captures a display created by students who worked in cooperative learning groups to discover, describe, and model the Pythagorean theorem (a lesson I observed firsthand). Rather than “lecture” the material and have students memorize the formula, students were engaged in hands-on measurement activities that led to constructing the formula together.

As part of the mission of the school, teachers work to integrate women’s studies into the regular curriculum. Consistently, I observed posters of and books on female historical, scientific, and literary figures in a variety of classrooms. Teachers explained to me that the posters and books signify to students that women’s ideas and contributions are important to basic knowledge. I also observed teachers engaging students in discussions concerning sexism and racism. English and social studies classes seemed especially conducive to these discussions as they aligned with books they were reading such as *To Kill a Mockingbird* and *Brave New World*. But, I also took note of the math and science teachers engaging students in discussions addressing the pseudoscience of females’ supposed inherent lack of ability in STEM fields. The girls’ reactions were impassioned: Huffs of disgust, clicks of the tongue, and a loud “What-Ever!” During one math lesson in the fall, the math teacher was engaging her students in a rigorous and meaningful hands-on activity while pointing out, “See, some people think girls just can’t do this kind of

work. But, look! You're doing it. And you're doing it well." On one occasion, while observing a frog dissection lab in the spring, I noticed one girl said to her lab partner, "OK! Your turn!" The partner remarked, "Yup. My turn. Not my favorite thing on the planet. But, gonna do this. Gonna show myself I can do this!"

During my time at the school, it was not unusual to hear Spanish spoken on at least an hourly basis. This was not surprising since hearing Spanish in my neighborhood, at my children's schools, at the grocery store, and so on, was also common. However, seeing written Spanish in several forms throughout the school was different from my usual experiences. Spanish translation is part of the regular routine at YWLS; from PTA meetings to parent letters and handbooks to informational displays in classrooms.

The classroom sign captured in Figure 3 reminds participants of teacher and student responsibilities at YWLS. The teachers' responsibilities include having consistent expectations, organized and purposeful lessons, and arriving at school prepared to teach. Students' responsibilities include taking personal ownership of their learning, giving their best effort, and arriving at school prepared to learn.

In addition to documenting classroom artifacts, such as posters, books, and lesson plans, I also observed less "academic" activities taking place. For example, I noticed students would regularly help themselves to nutritious snacks, such as granola bars or yogurt from teachers' mini-refrigerators or drawers. Less regularly, I noticed students retrieving a large grocery sac and leaving the classroom for 10 minutes or so. When they returned, they would be wearing what appeared to be freshly laundered uniforms or new items, such as shoes or blouses that better fit their growing bodies. I later learned that in addition to teachers purchasing supplies, donations were also received at the school for students who could not afford them. Rarely, but notably, some students were either homeless or lacked access to laundry facilities. Teachers took turns integrating students' laundry with their own families.

The sign shown in Figure 4 represents an important celebratory event during my second year at the school: The announcement of the Texas Education Agency testing results. Every student passed all state-mandated tests. And the school was honored with the coveted "Exemplary" rating. A banner was immediately hung in the main entrance (Figure 4). I was at the campus when Ms. Santiago received the exceptional news that 100% of her students passed 100% of state-mandated exams, Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS) in all subjects (reading, writing, mathematics, science, and social studies) as well as all disaggregated groups: African American, Hispanic, White, and Economically Disadvantaged (TEA, 2010). Many parents were in the halls for end-of-the-year festivities. Students and teachers were milling about to-and-fro in the hallways for choir rehearsals and other logistics involved with the passing of another school year. Without exception, teachers, support staff, parents, students, and other visitors showed their pleasure with cheers and hugs on hearing the news.

In addition to informal celebratory events as outlined above, I also had opportunities to observe carefully planned public events that aimed to act as a cultural unifier (Deal & Peterson, 2009; Schein, 2004). For example, one of the most important formal rituals and traditions is the White Rose Induction Ceremony that takes place toward the end of the school year honoring

current fifth graders' acceptance to the school. This first introduction to the life of the school takes place in the evenings and is attended by all incoming sixth graders and their family members. Faculty, support staff, the principal and academic dean attend along with members of CUISD school board and officers of the FEYW. Moreover, current students volunteer as ushers and also take leading roles as speakers and singers. An excerpt from my field notes gives a glimpse into the lived experiences of the current students:

Tonight at the second "White Rose Induction Ceremony" of the incoming sixth graders, I met Angie and her mother. Angie was the chosen speaker for this important event. I was amazed by Angie's presence and the ease with which she spoke to the audience. No uneasy tapping on the microphone here. Only calm candor.

She welcomed the families of the students and expressed her pride for the students having been accepted through the rigorous selection process. She related to their nervousness, as she, too, has been in their shoes. She explained to the students that "there will be times when you feel like quitting . . . when you feel like you can't go on . . . but, don't give up . . . you can do it."

Angie shared that she "cried the whole first year I was at this school." A few gasps from the audience caught her attention and she chuckled lightly: "Let me explain." She went on to explain that she knew she was smart, yet at other schools she just didn't learn anything. Though she was far behind when she came to YWLS, with the help of the teachers and the principal at the academy, she caught up. Angie exclaimed, "But it was hard! I won't lie to you . . . But I promise you: You can do this! After all, look at me: I did! We will not let you fail at this school!"

In addition to listening to student speakers and listening to the choir perform, the ceremony included an "induction" whereby incoming students promised to "uphold the values of the organization" and to "treat our sisters with respect and support." The ceremony was reminiscent of my sorority induction during my college days, while in other respects reminded me of a First Communion or Confirmation in that the girls were very formally dressed; many wore white.

Students' Lived Experiences via Student Survey

The purpose of the survey was to give students an opportunity to evaluate the overall school climate as well as voice their concerns. Largely, the school climate of YWLS was rated high in terms of friendliness, quick response time to needs, and cleanliness. Additional student comments suggested that the ratings could have been higher if the bathrooms were more appealing. Negative comments related to the bathrooms being "dirty" or "smelly." Students also complained that some of the bathroom stalls were not private due to broken locks and/or door handles. One student suggested that the school spend some time and money to spruce up the landscaping around the school to improve its overall appearance. Another student asked if they could paint their lockers in colors other than beige to lighten up the atmosphere.

Students' Perceptions of Pros and Cons. When students were asked what they liked best about YWLS, they were given choices of: challenging classes, teachers, clubs/sports, administration

and support staff, and; friendships. Students were allowed to choose more than one and were also given space to write answers that were not represented in the statements given. Unsurprisingly, students selected both “friends” and “clubs and sports” as their favorite aspects of the school (72%). However, not far behind were “teachers” (69%). Several students wrote additional comments that reflected a positive attitude toward the school. For example, one student wrote that she would change “nothing because this school is absolutely perfect in so many ways! I love it here!” Another remarked, “Overall, I think [YWLS] is one of the best schools I’ve been to and in the past I’ve attended two Catholic schools and one public school,” while another student wrote, “The school is fun and Ms. [Santiago] is a good principle [*sic*].”

Students were also given opportunity to indicate what they would change about YWLS if they had the opportunity to do so. Students’ answers varied widely from requesting that the school add a photography class to including karate as one of the sports. About half the students suggested the school offer more classes and clubs in the fine arts, such as dance and other performance. Overall, there was considerable interest in learning additional languages besides the present offering of Spanish. Twenty-four students requested learning French while 12 students expressed interest in learning German, 8 students asked to learn Japanese, Chinese, or Korean, and 4 others asked to learn Italian or Latin. The next change requested most often was the addition of a “study hall” or “study buddy” program ($n = 22$) because students were struggling with the demands of the academic program.

Several students complained about wearing uniforms every day. Some remarked, “I would like to see more free dress days” while others requested that they implement a “spirit day” on Fridays that would allow them to “wear jeans with a school shirt.” One student suggested “more free dress days” as a reward for those who “have perfect attendance for a month.”

Students’ Perceptions of Their Teachers. Students were given an opportunity to rate their teachers in relation to their instructional abilities and overall level of helpfulness and friendliness. Overwhelmingly, students rated the four core faculty as organized and prepared as well as exciting or interesting. A handful of students reported math and science instruction as dull/not engaging. In terms of helpfulness and friendliness, no students rated their core teachers “poor,” but there were notable differences between the four teachers in the number of students who felt individuals were especially friendly and helpful. Students were two or three times more likely to rate their science and math teachers as average in helpfulness and friendliness when compared with their social studies and language arts teachers.

One student remarked, “Challenge is *not* fun and sometimes the teachers are in bad moods!!!!” While another student noted, “The school environment is awesome! The Best! Everyone is friendly and helpful. They do what you need right away.” An additional student wrote, “The staff is very inviting, caring, loving, and thoughtful of every soul at this school.” “This school is helpful. I don’t think I have come across a school that actually prepares girls for college, helping them to succeed and treat us with much love and care. Thanks, [YWLS]!” One student expressed concern that the individual attention she was receiving would diminish as the school grew, “The teachers I have this year are great and the school is very welcoming, but I do not want that to change next year with different teachers.”

Students' Perceptions of Program Rigor. Students also reported the level of rigor they were experiencing as well as their average time spent on homework in each core curricular area. Students were asked, "How would you rate the difficulty of the material presented in your class?" Overwhelmingly, students rated their language arts teacher as challenging while they rated their other teachers more balanced between challenging and average. Only rarely did students rate any of their core teachers as too easy or overly challenging.

Students were also asked, "How long does it take to complete homework on a nightly basis?" Most students reported spending between 30 and 60 minutes in each of the core areas or a total of 2 to 4 hours on homework per night. Overall, students reported spending less time per evening on science and social studies homework when compared with math and language arts. Students commented that they spent more time on homework at YWLS than they did at their prior schools. Some students requested teachers assign less homework or synchronize project due dates to alleviate cramming. Some appreciated that, while the material was difficult and the expectations of teachers high, teachers were available to help them when they asked for assistance.

Several students noted that they needed their own laptops. One student requested that the school allow a check-out process in order to take computers home: "Some of us don't have computers at home and not enough time after school in the library." One student requested a study hall to "help those who have siblings like me to do their homework." Other comments included statements such as "Sometimes I feel stressed coming to school. There are so many things to work on, like projects." Or, "I wish we were able to sit back and relax from time to time." One student even suggested the school implement "nap time." Others noted that the school is challenging, but "doable." One student wrote, "The homework is challenging but it is nothing [*sic*] I can't do. The teachers are really friendly and they really pay attention to you. You are given time to think and the teachers interact with you." Others remarked similarly: "I really like this school. Although it can be tough it is a really great place." Finally, students indicated feelings such as, "I love this school. It prepares me for college. This school tells me the kind of issues or problems in college and it teaches us how to go through it."

Students' Lived Experiences via the Voices of Students

The students' group conversations were marked by the high energy and lack of structure that reminded me of my own teenage daughter with her friends around the kitchen table over a pizza. Thus, it was relatively difficult to untangle students' incentives for attending YWLS from the relationships they were developing within the school and the conflicts they were experiencing outside the school. Also, at times during documentation, I was not able to authenticate and match individual pseudonyms and voices. In those cases, I refrain from using pseudonyms.

The students answered a short questionnaire at the start of the focus groups. In addition to indicating their preference for a pseudonym, students shared some basic information about where they attended school before coming to YWLS and indicated how they identify concerning race/ethnicity. I also gave students an opportunity to ask *me* questions. Students wanted to know if I was married, had children, and how old I was. After learning I had two children about their ages, they wanted to know more about them: where they went to school, whether they were

dating, and so on. They also asked me specific questions about working on my doctorate. The question I heard most often was, “Is getting a PhD hard?” The other most frequent comment I got was how cool I was because I wear Converse sneakers. Like the students from my former days as a classroom teacher, the girls said they looked forward to seeing which pair I would have on when they looked for me at school that particular day.

Why Students Wanted to Come to YWLS. Students were asked what their incentive was for applying for and enrolling in YWLS. Most everyone spoke about their desire to attend a school where they would be challenged because their former experiences lacked rigor. While most students reported going home and telling their families about their desire to attend YWLS after hearing a presentation about the variety of magnets at CUISD, I was somewhat surprised to learn that some students were “forced” to come to YWLS by their parents.

“Abcde” said she came to YWLS because “my mother signed me up to go here and I got accepted, so that’s why I attend [YWLS].” I asked Abcde, “I wonder why your mother would want to sign you up to go to [YWLS].” Abcde then shared that in her former parochial school, “We didn’t learn anything. We just sat there . . . and played games . . . we always got in trouble . . . our school was *wack!*” Stephanie said she “made the choice” to come to [YWLS] because of the additional “opportunities” she would be given by attending this “more selective school.” However, Aurora said that her mother enrolled her in YWLS without her prior knowledge.

Vanessa said she and her parents “made the choice together” after Ms. Santiago conducted an informational meeting at her former school. Vanessa said one reason she decided to attend YWLS was that she was allowed to “skip” seventh grade. She was very advanced relative to her YWLS peers and the principal and teachers took her individual needs into consideration in discussions concerning her placement at YWLS. Tatiana said she wanted to attend YWLS because “it is more challenging.” Cupcake expressed that despite the fact that her “mom made me” come to YWLS, she really appreciated the “preparation for college” she was receiving.

What Students Liked and How YWLS Differed From Prior Experiences. When asked how YWLS was different from their prior schools, students spoke about the close relationships they were building with teachers as well as the rigor of the program and how it was “preparing them for real life.” All 18 students shared the myriad ways their lives were “completely different now because of coming to this school.”

When asked how YWLS is different from other schools, Sam answered that at other middle schools “you have the gangs, the guns.” Nevaett interjected, “The pregnancy.” When asked how many girls they saw at their prior middle school who were pregnant, each girl had different answers according to her prior middle school: 1, 3, 5, and 10.

In addition to describing differences between their prior schools and YWLS in terms of gangs, guns, and pregnancy, students also said there were big differences in terms of academic emphases. Sam described going to three different middle schools before settling at YWLS:

I was supposed to go to [X Middle School] but that’s like a down school, you know? Like with TAKS scores and everything . . . sometimes I did bad things . . . that’s what I hated .

. . . I had to do some things basically in order to protect myself. There was a really good teacher there and the students, they mistreated her. They were disrespectful and didn't do her homework. When it was time for the test they would always cheat no matter what . . . so out of all the classes, there would be like only 2 or 3 people that would like to learn and it was just bad.

Mercedes said that at her other middle schools she “got good grades and everything, but there was like a lot of distractions.” I asked her, “What were some of the distractions that you were experiencing?” Mercedes answered, “Well, friends and like other people that don't like each other.” I then asked if there was fighting at school. Mercedes said there was a lot of fighting and admitted that she, too, had argued and exchanged blows from time to time.

Amyranni said, “My school didn't have fights or anything, but we didn't have any work either.” Amyranni went on to describe how her teachers would “only put up an agenda and then just sit at their desks and do nothing.” She said,

The reason that I came to this school from my other school is because my school was closed [due to low enrollment or reconstitution]. It was like a lot of different schools were closed [in Centro Urbano]. All the students from my school were combined with [another CUISD middle school] and that is like a horrible school.

When the rest of the girls moan in agreement and empathy, I ask, “So, y'all know this school. It has a reputation?” The four girls answered together with a loud, emphatic “yes!”

I also asked students *why* they thought YWLS was so different from their prior experiences. The girls offered that it is because of the way the principal and teachers act at the school. For example, the principal and their teachers might become aggravated sometimes, but they are always “calm and nice” and “never go up in our faces.” (It became apparent during the four focus groups that “getting in your face” was the supreme form of disrespect that angered the girls.) One student in the first focus group described the faculty and principal this way: “[Ms. Santiago and the teachers] are like little angels floating down.” Girls in the second focus group described YWLS as being “weird in a good way” and “opposite” of everything they were used to. In an ensuing conversation the students discussed “how you can just be yourself” and “how being smart and being a ‘nerd’” was cause for celebration rather than ridicule. While they did complain that a small school often meant an increase in “drama” because “everyone knows your business,” students 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.”

Hannah Beth described how at prior schools she didn't 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.” I asked the girls how they handled stresses in relationships differently here at YWLS. Jane answered, “I think here we're more like, close; we're more like, sister 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.”

During one focus group, a conversation ensued between students how cutting classes was a common occurrence at their prior schools. One student exclaimed loudly that cutting classes was easy: “All you have to do is give the teacher a soda and she lets you do whatever you want!” Other students agreed and remarked that “anything having to do with food or snacks” was effective as well. One student shared,

[I used to] skip to go to the counselor’s office as much as I could because I didn’t want to be in an environment with people that didn’t want to take the time to learn. Because all they were doing is like the girls were in the back like, flirting with the guys and like, I was in the front actually trying to pay attention . . .

The other students agreed and added that their former teachers “didn’t care” about them or “do anything.” One student stated that she thought the teachers at their former schools did not care for them because the students were “bad.” Another student agreed and stated,

They didn’t care at [at my school] either, because like, my one teacher, my math teacher, she’s like, “I don’t care about you all . . . so do whatever the hell you want.” Like every day she would tell us that, so . . . I would just go.

When asked how this made her feel, the student answered, “Well, it made me mad!”

Mercedes spoke of her conviction that despite missing prior friends, YWLS is much better for her and the other students. I asked, “Why do you think it’s better for you?” Mercedes answered,

Because of the way that we’re learning and the higher expectations for us, and it’s preparing us for college. And the other schools, they’re not really. They mostly mess around . . . And at the other school the teachers, they didn’t really care like these ones here. Like, they’re willing to sit for tutoring and help you. If you’re not passing a class they’ll let you retake tests and try to get better grades and help you stay focused on what you’re doing.

What Students Did Not Like and Had to Work Through. In addition to sharing how YWLS differed in positive ways from their prior schools, students freely discussed the difficulties they had adjusting to their new school. While they expressed happiness concerning the changes in their lives, they were also quick to note that these changes required significant adjustments on their part. They no longer had the amount of free time they had before, forcing them to negotiate their time and their focus in different ways due to the high expectations of the program. Some neighborhood peers teased them for being more academically oriented. Former friends also began to question their sexuality because of their choice to attend an all-female school.

Brianna spoke about her difficulties changing schools because YWLS is smaller and has different curricular offerings than she had come to expect in other CUISD schools. Amyranni had difficulties transitioning as well. However, her negotiation of change was more intense when she went from elementary school to middle school rather than from her prior middle school to YWLS; although, that was still difficult. Amyranni made it clear to me that referring to her experiences as a “hard transition” did not adequately capture her life events:

AMYRANNI: Fifth grade to sixth grade is a disaster.
MANSFIELD: Was that a hard transition for you?
AMYRANNI: No. It was a disaster.
MANSFIELD: It was a disaster.
AMYRANNI: It was a hurricane.
MANSFIELD: Tell me about your hurricane.
AMYRANNI: I lost everything! I used to study really well and I used to get good grades then all of a sudden sixth grade came and I did not study and I did not get good grades. I just sat down and watched TV. And from then on, I do not like to study.
MANSFIELD: What about now? Are you turning it back around?
AMYRANNI: I am trying.

Sam added to the other girls' thoughts on transitions, "I'll be honest. I like really hated this school when I first came here." She explained that though her prior school was bad, she still had a hard time getting used to things at YWLS. She was one of the students whose parents had forced her to come to YWLS because she was "going down the wrong path." Sam was angry about the move, which added to her difficulties transitioning and making new friends.

I mean, like, I kind of liked getting in trouble . . . it just like made you fit in and I wanted to fit in . . . And then by the time I hit seventh grade . . . I got in even more trouble and my grades started to go bad . . . And my mom, she broke the news to me saying, "I'm going to send you to an all-girls' school." I was like, "You better not!" because I wanted boys and girls . . . But when she transferred me I hated everything about it. A lot of people didn't like me at this school and I really didn't care . . . But now I'm okay. I'm all happy.

Sam's fellow participants agreed with her assessment. They expressed that she was very difficult to get along with at first, but now they have learned to get along and are becoming better friends.

In a different focus group, Angie shared that sometimes she felt like quitting. Three of the four girls agreed with Angie; remarking that they felt like quitting sometimes, too. I asked Angie, "What did you do when you felt like quitting?" She answered, "Cry." I then asked, "Did you tell your parents?" Angie replied, "Yes, and they said, 'Get over it.'" I pressed further: "So, was it kind of like a harsh, 'get over it!' or was it more like, sympathetic?" Angie clarified that it was a gentle, but firm response:

Just like pushing us a little bit because my mom said, "You need to get over it because it's gonna be like that. It's gonna be hard and there's gonna be times [like this] . . . so, you might as well get used to it now" . . . My dad says that when something hard comes to you, to never like, go aside . . . keep going, go through it so you can learn. I say he's wrong.

I then asked, "Why do you think he's wrong about going through it?" Angie responded, "Well, I think he's right, but I don't agree with him because I don't like hard things." A discussion among the participants ensued regarding the challenges of overcoming difficult circumstances. We

discussed that none of us enjoys hard things all the time and we all feel like giving up some of the time. We concluded that tough times aren't always fun, but they help us grow.

In addition to adjusting to change and new time constraints, the students spoke of the difficulties they were experiencing with their peers outside the school in terms of negotiating their intellectual and sexual identities. Students continued to ride the bus to their home campuses with their former peers from their neighborhoods. Two of the four focus groups brought up their strong discomfort at their "home" campuses. One of the focus groups reported that they have been severely harassed; even having rocks thrown at them. They said their YWLS uniforms make them a target for kids who disrespect them, calling them names such as "white," or "Oreo," or "lesbian," or "dyke."

Amyranni shared that many of her old friends have "totally changed" in the past 2 years: "They *were* all nice and now I'm *scared* of them." I asked the group, "Does anyone else have issues with your old friends? As far as them changing or anything?" The seven students in this particular focus group answered with a loud "yes" in unison. I asked, "Anybody wanna say anything about that?" Hannah Beth recalled,

I was best friends with this one girl pre-K to like 5th grade. And then . . . she wouldn't speak to me at all and I thought she was my friend. She would make fun of our uniforms. And they would say I'm like, "White Girl." They go, "Hey, white girl, come here."

I asked Hannah Beth if being called White was intended as an insult. She answered, "Yeah. The kids at [that school] aren't nice to us. They aren't anywhere nice to us. They throw rocks and pencils at us." I asked, "So, since they're calling you, "White" does that mean that most of the kids that go to [your neighborhood campus] are not White?" Again, the group answers together with a resounding "yes" in a tone that conveys, "Of course, silly girl!" Hannah Beth added that at that particular school, "There is only one White girl and she's ghetto! She's *ghetto*! I mean, Ghe-TTO!"

In addition to dealing with accusations of "acting White," the girls spoke of negotiating their perceived sexual identities.

STUDENT: At my home school, they ask me if we're lesbians.

OTHERS: Yeah! Me too!

MANSFIELD: Who asks you if you're lesbians?

ALL: [loudly] Everyone!

STUDENT: I would have old friends call me like after the first day of school and they were like, "So, what happened today?" And I was like, "Um, it was just like a regular school day. You know, like just talking to people and trying to make new friends." And they were like, "Did anyone try to hit on you?" And I would be like, "I don't know!" And then they made me really uncomfortable 'cause they were asking me all these questions like—not to be labeling anyone or anything, but—they'd ask if I saw anyone that looked like a "dyke" or has tried to feel up on another girl in her areas or anything. And I just started to feel uncomfortable. I don't talk to them anymore because of it.

We then discussed how unfortunate it is that people are making assumptions about their sexuality before they even know the girls. We also talked about how even if one were a lesbian; it is not necessarily anyone else's business. And besides, as Amyranni said, "I think it is very rude and discriminating" to be making such a big deal out of the possibility that someone might be a lesbian. The other girls and I agreed.

Sam said that she was approached by a former schoolmate on "My Space" and asked if she was a lesbian since she went to an all-girls' school. When Sam shared with her friend that she is not a lesbian, her friend did not believe her: "And everywhere I go, people find out I go to [YWLS] and they say, 'So, who's your girlfriend? What's your girlfriend's name?' And I have to answer like, 'I don't like girls like that.'"

Discussion and Implications

While making meaning of the findings, I revisited the literature on student voice and social justice leadership; and in doing so, I intrinsically conducted a meta-analysis of my methods for data collection. For example, the time-consuming nature of conducting ethnography elicited reflection on whether it may have been easier to collect quantitative testing data and test how some combination of student and school variables were interacting to facilitate the high test scores that were celebrated at the end of the school year. While there is nothing inherently "wrong" with that type of study, I have come to appreciate that using students as "data sources" alone does not adequately probe issues of social justice when it comes to leadership practice or research methodology (Fielding, 2001; Mitra & Gross, 2009). Conducting ethnography enabled a "being there" quality that cannot be achieved via test scores alone (Wolcott, 2008). However, I also learned that the lynchpin of ethnographic field work, participant observation, was not enough to fully probe student experiences or leadership practices. The phases of my field work closely aligned with the "student voice continuum" (Mansfield et al., 2012; Fielding, 2001; Mitra & Gross, 2009) by first using my Self as data collection instrument (observation, photography), then moving to a student survey and interviews with adult stakeholders, followed by speaking with students directly about their lived experiences.

Observations enabled me to get a "feel" for the school environment and communicate my impressions about a variety of spaces to the principal. As a result, the principal, in consultation with other stakeholders, was able to make some changes. For example, the cafeteria and library were void of color, student-centered work, and academic symbols. Thus, as part of my service to the community, I framed and hung student artwork in the library while custodians hung college banners in the cafeteria. In addition, I was able to view how the teachers challenged the students not only in terms of learning mathematics, but also in deconstructing contextual complexities such as sexism in the STEM fields and racism in society at large. The principal used the information I shared as a data source to gauge progress on just one aspect of the developing school culture and used examples from my research in her professional development activities.

By going beyond participant observation to administering a student survey, the principal and I were able to glean more detailed information. For example, the principal was unaware of the broken locks or lack of soap in the restrooms. This was one area she was able to address immediately with the custodians, much to the pleasure of the students. The survey also gave the

principal information she could share with her teachers during their faculty meetings; specifically, the need to “be on the same page” as far as homework as well as project expectations and allocation among core classes. Since students were able to express that they were sometimes feeling overwhelmed by the higher expectations, the faculty were able to work together to create time and space to offer much-needed tutoring and study hall experiences to help the students achieve balance in their lives. However, these changes could not be implemented until the following year, and it was not until a few years later that the much-needed technology was supplemented by community partnerships.

While observations, photography, and the student survey were helpful, information gleaned via focus groups was even more revealing. The girls were quick to point out the struggles they were experiencing and even how they disliked being pushed despite the fact that they knew it was good for them. They may not have had the terms *deficit thinking* in their repertoire of vocabulary, but their stories of how their prior teachers “just didn’t care” about them and how at their prior schools, they “never did anything” shows their understanding that they desired and needed a more challenging and enriching curriculum delivered by teachers who truly cared for them and believed that they could achieve. The students were clear that one of the major reasons their schooling experiences were so different in their new school was because the principal and teachers were “opposite” from their prior experiences; even comparing them to angelic beings descended from heaven. These intricacies of students’ lived experiences could not have been discovered via student surveys or participant observations alone. Rather, speaking directly with students opened up the necessary space for students to truly communicate.

Observations and survey data also illuminated some of the specific ways the teachers and principal met the emotional and material needs of students, such as providing nutritious snacks and being available to help with challenging homework. Not surprisingly, focus group interviews enabled us to learn more. There, students spoke in relational terms. The students shared that the relationships they were building with the teachers and principal were major reasons they felt this school was better than their prior experiences. They compared their relationships with Ms. Santiago and their teachers as akin to a “mother–daughter situation” and described their relationships with each other as “more like relatives or sisters.”

However, there are some missing gaps between theory and practice that must be acknowledged and remedied. Recall that Dantley and Tillman (2009) argued that leaders must fully deconstruct the realities of students’ lives while English (2008) emphasized the need for transformative leaders to look beyond “schooling interiorities” (p. 116) and learn to work within and against societal assumptions and practices (or schooling exteriorities). Unfortunately, acknowledgment of student realities and attention to exteriorities and societal assumptions did not include giving adequate attention to the difficulties the girls were facing concerning their sexual and cultural identities. This is not to say that school leadership knew about the difficulties students were facing and chose to ignore what was going on. Rather, school administration was not aware of the harassment that was taking place, and thus, not in a position to intervene. It may be that during the day-to-day operations of schooling, students were afforded adequate time and space to air their grievances concerning interiorities at the expense of working through their difficulties concerning exteriorities. For example, surveying students enabled faculty and leadership to learn about not only the positive aspects of the school, but also how they could further improve this

innovative space. And students' voices were heard and acted upon in varying degrees. For example, following the survey, the bathroom locks were repaired and the faculty met several times to discuss and recalibrate the amount of homework required for each class per evening. The survey also gave students an opportunity to disparage school uniforms. However, it was not until given space to speak openly, did students express the difficulties they were having outside of school with neighborhood peers.

Recall that scholars have called for school leaders to actively critique their own leadership style and practices as well as those of the rest of their organization for behaviors and attitudes that may marginalize students. Recollect also that the students revealed that they were struggling with the "burden of acting White." Like the students in the Fordham and Ogbu (2011) study, students reported neighborhood peers viewed their academic attitudes and behaviors disapprovingly. In addition to rock throwing and name-calling that included derogatory terms such as "Oreo," students were also accused of being "dykes" or "lesbians." The girls expressed hurt and anger that their sexuality and cultural identities were called into question because of their choice to attend an all-girls' college preparatory public magnet school. School folk did not appear to notice that the prep-school uniforms the girls were required to wear acted as a type of reproductive hegemony that symbolically indicated to neighborhood peers that the girls had rejected their cultural heritage and were now "White." Indeed, school personnel were neither aware of those taunts or the accusations of being lesbian because of the girls' decision to attend an all-girls' school.

On the surface, it may not seem that the decision to wear school uniforms is an actual leadership practice, per se, but if one digs deeper, it becomes clearer that requiring the girls to "look White" as well as advertise their attendance at an all-girls' school, placed the girls at risk. The students faced a sexist culture outside their school walls and were not adequately prepared to handle the taunts and rock throwing. The conversations within the school concerning privilege, power, and prejudice did not include some of the realities the girls were facing outside school walls.

When I shared the results of the focus groups with the adults in the study, they were surprised to learn of the experiences of the girls at their home campuses. Since school administration had not been aware of the maltreatment, they had not been in a position to intervene.

This has serious implications for leading schools for social justice and for preparation programs that train future leaders. If educational leaders are not asking students about their lived experiences, how will they ever know what is truly happening in their lives? We learned from the literature on the importance of seeking student voice that although conducting a school survey can be helpful, and is certainly a step in the right direction, surveys fall short of opening up the necessary space for students to truly give voice to their most heartfelt concerns. Principal preparation programs as well as school district professional development opportunities can and should include training on student voice endeavors from their simplest to most complex forms, from using students as data sources to including students as active respondents, to including students as co-researchers (Mansfield et al., 2012; Fielding, 2001; Mitra & Gross, 2009). For example, principal internships can include student voice initiatives using student surveys and conducting focus groups. Leaders-in-training can learn firsthand how opening up spaces for

students to express their concerns gives leaders additional information concerning contextual complexities to enable a more responsive approach to leadership practice.

This leads us to the next point: leadership practice is not static or linear. Rather, it is a fluid process that is dialectical. This necessary dialectic cannot take place unless school leaders are cognizant of students' lived experiences. Rather, soliciting student voice is a type of conversation that must take place between adult and student stakeholders and this can only be done if students are included in school reform efforts. Additionally, leaders must engage in a dialectic between schooling interiorities and exteriorities. For example, we learned from the literature on transformative and social justice leadership that school leaders must be exceptionally conscientious of the contextual complexities of their students, including how their school is situated in the larger community and political realities. Thus, becoming aware of not only the internal school culture but also what students' lived experiences are outside of school is essential. This enables leaders to constantly adapt practice based on new knowledge and interaction with people and with systems. True transformative and social justice leadership looks inward and outward and evolves depending on context and students' lived experiences. This iterative process needs to be discussed in depth in leadership preparation programs as well as professional development after taking on a leadership position in the field. This interactive nature of leadership performance needs to be understood and practiced by all leaders at every level of the educational system.

Future Research and Conclusion

As a result of this study and our continued collaboration, the adult stakeholder participants have been exploring and developing new ways to better address students' needs. These programs will include new counseling sessions to facilitate the development of what Prudence L. Carter termed *cultural straddlers* (Carter, 2011) and *cultural flexibility* (Carter, 2010). The students expressed needing help learning how to talk with their former friends and neighborhood peers as well as additional resources adapting to a more robust learning environment. While the girls expressed their thanks for the many ways the principal and faculty were supportive, they also shared their worries that they were just not going to be able to make it through the next several years without additional support systems. Future research includes returning to the site to document these new practices as well as conducting additional interviews with adults and focus groups with students to gauge the effectiveness of these adaptations.

This research aimed to fill an important gap. By including the voices of historically marginalized students while researching social justice and transformative leadership practices, a fuller picture is realized. Rarely, has research struggled with the complexities of achieving excellence and equity in terms of what students are actually experiencing in transformative learning spaces and what we might learn from them concerning how we might improve our leadership practice. It is one thing to expound the benefits to students and the moral obligation of school leaders to transform their school cultures and open up opportunities for excellence and equity for all students. However, it is another thing entirely to use student voices as a means for self-reflection to improve practice. The hope is that by sharing a case that illumines where adult and student discourses coalesce and where divergence points to the ways leadership practices can evolve,

others will be inspired to do likewise to provide an even more powerful, transformative learning space that better meets students' needs.

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