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Incorporating the voices and insights of students with disabilities: Let's consider our approach

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Abstract:

For this qualitative case study, I centered voice to discover the points of view of 33 students with an identified disability attending two different Texas high schools. The purpose of the study was to capture the personal meanings these students attributed to their learning experiences and bring their perspectives to the fore. Drawing from my personal and professional experiences as a special education teacher, high school administrator, and inclusive researcher, I expound upon how listening to the stories of the students with disabilities whom I served motivated me to utilize their voices and the voices of their friends in order to interrogate my own practice and stay true to a

commitment I made to my students nearly 30 years ago to tell their story. To set the stage and the importance of honoring the voices and perspectives of students with disabilities, I provide a brief account of the international legislative priorities related to student voice and various arguments that have been advanced to recognize and honor the voices of every student. Next, I present the international legislation and suggestions that support the participation rights of persons with disabilities in making decisions that directly affect their lives as well as the research literature related to inclusion, student voice, and students with disabilities. An explanation of the research design and approach that includes an explanation of the level at which students who participated in this study were involved is followed by a presentation and discussion of the findings. A call for the adoption of a differentiated approach to student voice research and practice that incorporates the voices of students with disabilities serves as the conclusion.

Introduction

The overall culture, norms, beliefs, and collective behaviors of individuals within a school “makes a difference” for the students who attend our schools (Carroll-Lind, 2018, p. 21). So, how many times have we, as educators and leaders gone straight to our students as a primary source to discover how we can keep our teens healthy, safe, engaged, supported, and challenged? Over 25 years ago, Harold Howe (1993) declared, "It is high time for those of us who want to improve education to stop paying more attention to schools than to kids" (p. 199). This imperative holds true for today as much as it did back then. Yet, despite continued calls for educators to embrace a learner-centered approach to teaching and learning, the voices, experiences, and perspectives of the student when constructing such a learner-centered proposition are

rarely consulted (Lundy & Cook-Sather, 2016). In most instances, traditional student government initiatives, also known as student government associations or student councils, function as the primary voice and representation of students within our schools to "articulate and advocate for their own interests" (Charteris & Smardon, 2019a, p. 1). Although a multiplicity of student voices with multiple identities clamor to be heard, certain students tend to be excluded from the arena of student voice initiatives due to adults' deficit views and beliefs about whether they have the ability or maturity to effect change (Brasof & Mansfield, 2018b).

Background

During my time spent as a high school special education teacher in two different states in the U.S., I provided academic as well as social and emotional supports for students with mild to moderate disabilities (i.e., specific learning disability, emotional-behavioral disturbance, intellectual disability, autism spectrum disorder, other health impairment such as attention deficit hyperactivity disorder among others) for one class period per day. Students spoke frankly with one another about each of their content-area classes and talked openly about some of the difficulties they faced due to the lecture-oriented, whole-class, one-best-way approach to instruction that many of their teachers provided in the majority of their general education classes. They swapped horror stories about being called out by their teachers for giving the wrong answer, asking clarification questions, or refusing to read aloud or answer certain questions due to internal fears associated with "looking stupid" or "being found out" in front of their peers. They recounted such incidents and the various reasons for their actions in detail while their classmates commiserated with them about how they must have felt during

and after the event and the impact that similar experiences that they, too, had previously encountered in some of their classes had on them and their identity.

During these discussions, different students recounted every detail of the verbal and nonverbal insinuations and/or accusatory remarks that teachers, administrators, peers, and others leveled against them. Such incidents included allegations of ineptness, laziness, lack of self-control, intentional behaviors to do harm to the adult in charge or others. In many cases, their collective accounts concluded with an emotional diatribe of the impact such micro-aggressive words or actions had on their personal identity and belief in themselves. Granted, most of their teachers and administrators responded positively to them as individuals. Others, however, reverted to shaming behaviors (Brown, 2007) or, as stated by numerous students, threatened to “out them” in front of their peers, in conversations with other teachers and staff, or in private. Rather than giving them the benefit of the doubt in regard to a student’s intent or state of mind at the time, they attributed certain behaviors and/or actions displayed by students, whether real or perceived, as confirming the accuracy of their disability classification. Every day, they struggled to overcome, in their own minds, the negative attributions associated with the label with which they were assigned (Danforth & Gabel, 2008; Dunn, 2019; Nario-Redmond, 2020; Sperling, 2020).

As professional educators, we are tasked with getting to know our students, listening to them talk about their various experiences, and investigating how they are impacted by what happens in their classrooms and schools (Liou & Rotheram-Fuller, 2019; Thiessen, 2007). My classroom served as a *Cheers* type of atmosphere—a safe space where “everybody knows your name” (Schmoop, 2019, para. 1) and students

could express their views freely without reprisal. For every student who entered my classroom, regardless of any of the various markers with which they identified, the one identity they shared in common was that of disability. As a community of learners, we listened to what different students had to say about each of their experiences or dilemmas, and then we brainstormed solutions and helped them develop potential strategies so they could strengthen their identity and self-confidence. As their classroom teacher and adult advocate, I supported them in their efforts to correct or remedy the situation on their own whenever possible. Based on students' conversations with one another of who they aspired to be and their unanimous insistence of how they wished to be treated by others, notions of ability, voice, recognition, and respect seemed to matter more to them than their differences in terms of race, class, or gender. When a student achieved victory through sheer persistence and a refusal to accept the characterizations imposed on them by their defined disability and others' perceptions, we all celebrated. When I left the classroom to pursue my doctoral degree in educational leadership in Texas, my students tasked me with a simple request: "Don't forget to tell our story."

The memory of their stories and accounts as well as their cry to be heard continued to resonate. Four years later, I fulfilled the commitment I made to my former students via an ethnographic dissertation study (Pazey, 1996), chronicling the lived experiences of six students, grades 9 through 12, with an identified disability at Central High School (CHS, pseudonym), an urban Texas high school. During the 1995-1996 school year, CHS served as a neighborhood school to students who lived in one of the poorest areas in the district; however, the school also housed a liberal arts magnet school, offering advanced courses to students across the district. While CHS students

interacted with students who attended the magnet school during lunch and some of their extracurricular classes or activities, most of the time, the students with disabilities who attended CHS were assigned to a separate “resource class” for their content-related courses or, in rare cases, attended a general education class, distinct from the magnet school.

The opportunity to spend time in these students’ lives and hear their stories altered my career plans and I became a high school administrator at two similar high schools over the next nine years. The charge my students gave me five years earlier became my primary goal; however, as a school leader, the need to *listen* to students’ stories and involve them in various aspects of school governance took precedence over *telling* their story. Little did I know that the General Assembly of the League of Nations, consisting of an international league of national leaders, crafted an argument for adults to honor the rights of children across all nations nearly 70 years earlier, named the *Geneva Declaration of the Rights of the Child*.

Context and Purpose of the Study

Fifteen years later, I returned to the same geographical area where I completed my dissertation study (Pazey, 1996). In 2008, two years prior to my return, CHS was closed in accordance with the legislative mandates of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB, 2002), a U.S. federal law. NCLB required schools like CHS, a school with a high percentage of students from low-income families that received federal funds to provide additional resources and supports for such schools (i.e., Title I schools), to meet challenging State academic standards (U.S. Department of Education [USDOE], 2020).

Title I schools such as CHS that failed to make adequate yearly progress (AYP) via incremental percentages of academic growth on state accountability measures in reading and mathematics for five consecutive years were given the option to initiate a change in leadership and staff, close and reopen the school under a new name, and develop specific strategies designed to reverse the direction and trajectory of the school's negative pattern of academic performance; hence the term, *turnaround* school (Pazey, 2019). In 2009, CHS reopened under a new name, Heritage High School (HHS, pseudonym), with a new roster of school leaders, faculty, and staff.

Between 2010 and 2013, I visited two high schools, located within two different school districts: HHS, an urban high school (formerly known as CHS), and Technology High School (THS, a pseudonym), a rural-suburban high school. At both high schools, I interviewed students in grades 9 through 12 with an identified disability. My intent was to discover what high school students with an identified disability had to say about their learning experiences and their overall perceptions of school. I also asked students to describe the types of school and/or classroom contexts, environments, and/or experiences that contributed to or were detrimental to their ability to learn.

To set the stage for this study and the importance of honoring the voices and perspectives of students with disabilities, I provide a brief account of the international legislative priorities related to student voice and various arguments that have been advanced to recognize and honor the voices of every student, including the voices of students with disabilities who, until recently, have been typically marginalized from such conversations (Pazey et al., 2015; Pazey et al., 2017; Pazey, 2019; Byrnes & Rickards, 2011). Next, I present the international legislation and suggestions that support the

participation rights of persons with disabilities, including students, in making decisions that directly affect their lives as well as the research literature related to inclusion, student voice, and students with disabilities. An explanation of the research design and approach that includes an explanation of the level at which students who participated in this study were involved is followed by a presentation and discussion of the findings. A call for the adoption of a differentiated approach to student voice research and practice that incorporates the voices of students with disabilities serves as the conclusion.

International Legislative Priorities Related to Student Voice

Declaration of the Rights of the Child

In 1924, the General Assembly of the League of Nations formally adopted the *Geneva Declaration of the Rights of the Child*. The Declaration called forth the obligation of “men and women of all nations” by acknowledging “that mankind owes to the Child the best that it has to give” (para. 1). The Declaration was the “first document dedicated to the active and distinct promotion of children worldwide” (Stornig, 2015, para. 1). Its adoption represented the first time an international audience of influential individuals in politics recognized children as “innocent and valuable human beings” worthy of being provided “special assistance, protection and guidance” by “men and women of all nations” (para. 2). The Declaration referred to “children as symbols of the future and stressed the importance of their positive development for humanity at large” (para. 2). The signatories endeavored to incorporate the document’s principles into their national laws; however, the agreement was not legally binding (Humanium, 2019).

Twenty-five years later, the United Nations (UN, 1959) authored an expanded version of the 1924 Declaration, consisting of 10 general principles, to represent its own view on the rights on children entitled *The Universal Declaration of the Rights of the Child.* The overarching message of the document placed special attention on the *best interests of the child* in terms of equal opportunity and the development of one's abilities.

The Convention on the Rights of the Child

The updated and expanded version of the *Universal Declaration on the Rights of the Child* (UN, 1959) served as the foundation for the *Convention on the Rights of the Child* (CRC) (UN, 1989), drafted and adopted 30 years later. The text recognized students as being capable of formulating their own views about matters that directly affect their lives and acknowledged they should be granted the *right* to express their views. Furthermore, the CRC acknowledged students' views should be *respected* and afforded "due weight" in proportion to the student's "age and maturity" (Article 12(1)).

Velez (2016) problematized how "the child" is constructed within the CRC documents, however, noting that the text homogenizes the definition of the child as a "universal category" and causes the child to emerge "as a limited and definable category that develops linearly toward a maximization of potential" (p. 96). Such a conceptualization ignores the individual and internal characteristics of each child and the variable ways in which each child develops over time; interacts with their social contexts, networks, and environments; and/or depends on the external support of others. According to Velez (2016), the text of the CRC positioned a stance that every

child progresses through an ideal and specific trajectory of discrete stages within predetermined timeframes, moving toward “participation, integration, and achievement of ‘their fullest potential’” (p. 103) contradicts the realization that children’s experiences and development, including students with disabilities, are diverse rather than uniform.

The Imperative for Student Voice

Since the codification of the rights of children in the CRC (United Nations, 1989), student voice researchers have advanced the imperative for us to expand our understanding of the various ways in which students elect to express themselves (Cook-Sather, 2002; Lundy, 2007), consider what students have to say about how they learn (Charteris & Smardon, 2019b; Nind, 2014) and what facilitates and impedes their ability to learn (Rose & Shevlin, 2017; Ruddick & Flutter, 2004), and decipher from their testimonies and stories how they want to be viewed and treated by others (Bergmark, 2008; Dean et al., 2018; Margrain & Farrugia, 2018; McKay, 2014). Some have focused on student voice and participation rights (Cook-Sather, 2014; Hart, 1992, 2008; Lundy, 2007; Fletcher, n.d.; Graham et al., 2018; Kellett, 2011; Thiessen, 2007; Ontario Ministry of Education, 2016) while others have connected the benefits of honoring students’ voices to inform school leadership and education reform (Brasof & Mansfield, 2018a, 2018b; Lundy & Cook-Sather, 2016; Mansfield et al., 2018; Mayes et al, 2017; Mitra, 2006, 2009, 2018; Mitra & Gross, 2009; Rudduck & Flutter, 2004; Silva, 2003; Smyth, 2006, 2007).

Recognizing student voice remains “central to the daily schooling experience because this is where the students are” (Leiding, 2004, p. 24). When applied to today’s

schools, students generally possess a strong sense of what is “fair and just” regarding how they are treated (Smyth, 2007, p. 641). They can easily pinpoint and articulate the details of events or situations that propelled or constrained their ability to advance or succeed (Caruthers & Friend, 2016; Daniels & Arapostathis, 2005; Lewis & Porter, 2007) and provide “complex and needed equity narratives” to facilitate “transformative school change opportunities” (Gonzalez & Love, et al., 2017, p. 2). When adults consult with students and afford them the space and opportunity to share their perspectives and insights in terms of how they learn and wish to be regarded and supported by others (Cook-Sather, 2014), students gain the sense their voices matter.

In terms of how adults attempt to develop a relationship with students, however, Fielding (2018) described two uniquely different value orientations and dispositional attitudes of adults and how they interact with and listen to students: the instrumental dimension and the fellowship dimension. Each dimension operates in distinctly different ways from one another, both of which can enable or prohibit individuals from either side of the partnership from participating with one another and influence “the potential synergy of the joint work” (p. 75). How well the adult and student are “able to listen to and learn with and from each other” (p. 75) depends on the value orientation and dispositional attitude of the adults involved.

The instrumental dimension embodies a focus on “high performance schooling through market accountability” (Fielding, 2018, p. 75) to which many countries currently ascribe. The instrumental dimension prioritizes the requirement to reach or exceed specific and measurable targets due to an “external framework of performativity” (Fielding, 2001, p. 103). The primary rationale for encouraging student voice derives

from an intent to acquire students' insights into what they believe promotes effective teaching and learning so those in charge can document their school or district's success in meeting or exceeding expectations in terms of accountability reform mandates or achieve "high-performance status" (Fielding, 2006, p. 306).

The other dimension, the fellowship dimension, epitomizes a "person-centered education for democratic fellowship" approach which, in turn, opens up "possibilities for intergenerational learning" (Fielding, 2018, p. 75). Teachers, students, and staff begin to rethink and redraw the parameters of possibilities, working together to extend the boundaries of what might be in terms of working together.

For students to advance in their educational careers, schools must include a consideration of the hopes and aspirations of the students themselves (Smyth, 2006). Too often, however, the pressures felt by school and teacher leaders to document increases in student achievement tend to preclude any willingness on their part to fully indulge in obtaining the input and different opinions that students wish to offer (Conner et al., 2015; Mitra, 2009). Friend and Caruthers (2015) extended these arguments accordingly: "If educators are to support the academic and affective development of all learners within a positive school culture, listening to students share their stories must be as important as analyzing quantitative measures such as standardized assessment results" (p. 14).

Student Voice on a Continuum

At various points in time, student voice researchers and advocates developed various frameworks and models related to student voice, calling for a continuum of

student participation and involvement. While each of the proposed frameworks and models promoted a hierarchical order characterized by increasingly higher levels of student participation and involvement, the involvement and inclusion of students with disabilities in student voice initiatives were not mentioned or highlighted.

Mitra (2006) categorized input received from students through student voice opportunities on a continuum from limited to substantial, represented as a pyramid. The "most common and basic form of student voice" was "being heard", followed by "collaborating with adults" and "building capacity for leadership" (p. 7). At the basic level, students share their opinions about specific problems. When students move to the second or third level of the student voice continuum, which diminishes in frequency from level to level, students offer potential solutions to collaboration efforts with adults, or lead the charge to devise and/or enact initiatives for school improvement or reform.

Ladder of Participation

In 1992, Hart wrote an Essay related to children's participation, referencing participation as "the process of sharing decisions which affect one's life and the life of the community in which one lives" (p. 5). Rather than depicting the various levels of student participation and voice on a continuum, he conceptualized a *Ladder of Participation* represented by eight progressive rungs.

Models of non-participation. The first three rungs of the ladder serve as "models of non-participation" (p. 9). The lowest rung of participation on the ladder is *manipulation* where adults convince students to participate to fulfill their own purposes without providing children with any understanding of the issue or the consequence of

their actions. When adults invoke the participation of children in indirect ways without giving them any say in how the event is organized in order to promote their own cause, children are participating at the second rung, *decoration.* Hart describes *tokenism*, the third rung, as giving students a voice without providing them any "choice about the subject or the style of communicating it, and little or no opportunity to formulate their own opinions" (p. 9).

Models of genuine participation. Hart (1992) correlated the five remaining rungs to various "models of genuine participation" (p. 11). Rung four, *assigned but informed,* is characterized by four important requirements:

1. The children understand the intentions of the project;
2. They know who made the decisions concerning their involvement and why;
3. They have a meaningful (rather than 'decorative') role;
4. They volunteer for the project after the project was made clear to them. (p. 11)

At the fifth rung, *consulted and informed,* adults remain in charge; however, students understand the project or process, serve as consultants, and their input is valued and "treated seriously" (p. 12). Hart refers to the sixth rung, *adult initiated, shared decisions with children,* as "true participation" (p. 12) because young people are invited to engage and participate in the decision-making process. The seventh and eighth rungs, *child initiated and directed* and *child initiated, shared decisions with adults*, occur but rarely because, according to Hart, "adults are not good at responding to young peoples' own initiatives" and find it difficult "not to play a directing role" (p. 14).

Ladder of Student Involvement

In 2001, Fletcher adapted Hart's *Ladder of Participation* and renamed the framework, the *Ladder of Student Involvement*. In 2011, he reinterpreted and adapted the *Ladder* again to "reflect the practical structure of schools today" (Fletcher, n.d., para. 4) and represent the "gradient ways students are involved throughout schools" (para. 5). Fletcher maintained Hart's (1992) names for the first three rungs; however, he renamed and characterized the five final rungs categorized by Hart as examples of true participation in terms of "meaningful involvement" (para. 10).

Information. Students may understand what is happening in school and share their perspectives, serving as key informants; however, adults remain in control and may not let students know about the outcome of their decision or why a decision was reached.

Consultation. Students may be recognized by adults as experts, capable of providing advice and opinions about a program or giving input about a specific process. Yet, the amount of authority granted is determined by the adults in charge, restricting their level of involvement.

Student/adult equality. Student involvement with adults represents a "50/50 split of authority, obligation and commitment" (para. 12). The extent of continued student involvement and engagement depends on the extent to which students "experience full power and authority in relationship to each other and with adults" (para. 12).

Student-led action. At this level, students drive the action and adults offer support. In situations where adults may appear to be “indifferent, apathetic, or disregarding toward students, or students are not seen with regard to their contributions” (para. 13), students may decide to take their own action.

Student/adult equity. Students and adults are recognized as integral to the activity in terms of impact and level of expertise. Everyone makes a conscious effort and commitment to work through any barriers that may exist and establish “healthy, whole relationships with each other while moving forward through action and learning” (para. 14), leading to “equitable involvement” (para. 14).

It should be noted that the frameworks and models proposed and advanced by Mitra (2006), Hart (1992) and Fletcher (2001, 2011) excluded any discussion on behalf of students with disabilities. In similar fashion, international discussions leading up to the need to recognize and honor students’ voices, initial and follow-up calls to embrace an inclusive model of student voice that included students with disabilities students with disabilities were rare (Farrell, 2000).

Linking student voice to the underlying agenda of the CRC (U.N., 1989), Lundy & Cook-Sather (2016) suggested that those in authority “not exercise power in a way that undermines a person's right to be treated with dignity and equality” (para. 9). Such a “rights-respecting pedagogy” urges us to (a) respond to the diverse makeup of students within our schools and classrooms, (b) seek their input on “what helps them learn” (para. 37), and (c) afford them the opportunity to “contribute to and actively participate in their own and others’ learning and the realization of their potential” (para. 38). Yet, the

life experiences of students with disabilities can be much different than the experiences of those without disabilities (Biklen, 2000).

International Legislative Priorities Related to Inclusion, Disability, and Student Voice

Twenty years after the CRC (UN, 1989) was ratified (albeit not by the U.S.), Byrnes and Rickards (2011) posed a question that did not appear to be discussed back then: “Are the views of students, regardless of their ability or disabilities, worthy of inclusion in the educational arena?” (p. 25). Drawing from the work of Beresford (1997) and Middleton (1999), Byrnes and Rickards (2011) conjectured that the lack of student voice applied to students with disabilities could have been due to prejudicial and discriminatory judgments made by adults, suggesting that some may have perceived students with disabilities as “ineffective informants” or lacking in their ability to “make worthwhile comment” (p. 26). Fortunately, conversations concerning the need to develop an international framework specifying an imperative to incorporate and honor the input of youth with disabilities in the determination and design of their quality of life and the type of education they received began to emerge (United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization [UNESCO], 1994).

Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Needs Education

Five years after the CRC (UN, 1989) was ratified, over 300 individuals who represented 92 governments and 25 international organizations met in Salamanca, Spain, with the objective to promote the principle of “inclusive education” and enable “schools to serve all children” especially students with “special educational needs”

(UNESCO, 1994, p. 1). In the *Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Needs Education,* the delegation reaffirmed their commitment to the principle of "Education for All" and recognized "the necessity and urgency of providing education for children, youth and adults with special educational needs within the regular education system" (p. 2). They encouraged governments to include these individuals when planning and making decisions "concerning provisions for special educational needs" (p. 3).

United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities

Following in the footsteps of the Salamanca Statement (1994) 12 years later, a different delegation of individuals gathered to draft the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities* (UNCRPD, 2006) which was put into force by the UN on May 3, 2008. Many of the current U.S. federal and state laws and policies corresponded with the Convention including the Americans with Disabilities Act and subsequent Amendments Act (ADAA, 2008), Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act, and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 2004) and were viewed by some as meeting or exceeding the requirements and stipulations of the Convention (Blanchfield & Brown, 2015).

Due to its international influence and wide-ranging impact, the World Health Organization (WHO, 2019) welcomed the UNCRPD, calling it a "historic human rights treaty which provides a moral compass for action at national and international levels" (para. 1) because it aligned with their mission to "promote the human rights of people with disabilities" (para. 2). As the first human rights Convention of the 21st century, on

the first day the UN opened the UNCRPD for signatures, over 82 States signed, representing the largest number of signatories on the opening day of any Convention (Hacker, 2017).

The Preamble to the UNCRPD (2006) consists of 25 statements that reaffirmed, recognized, recalled, emphasized, considered, highlighted, realized, and/or expressed a concern and conviction relevant to the rights of persons with disabilities. The following statements apply to a philosophy of inclusion for all in terms of student voice, particularly individuals with disabilities:

- *Recognizing* the valued existing and potential contributions made by persons with disabilities to the overall well-being and diversity of their communities and that the promotion of the full enjoyment by persons with disabilities of their human rights and fundamental freedoms and of full participation by person with disabilities will result in their enhanced sense of belonging…(p. 2);
- *Recognizing* the importance of persons with disabilities of their individual autonomy and independence, including the freedom to make their own choices (p. 2);
- *Considering* that persons with disabilities should have the opportunity to be actively involved in decision-making processes about policies and programmes, including those directly concerning them (p. 2); and
- *Recognizing* that children with disabilities should have full enjoyment of all human rights and fundamental freedoms on an equal basis with other children… (p. 2).

The intent of any international policy or initiative that, on paper, elevates the visibility and voices of students with disabilities should represent more than a political maneuver to quell the outcry of individuals who advocate on behalf of vulnerable or marginalized populations. The gap between a rights-based policy and its implementation must be addressed so that students with disabilities are included more prominently in practice (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2016). Yet, despite the human rights agenda and claims expounded within the CRC (UN, 1989) as well as the Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994) and the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UN, 2006), few educational professionals have taken the time to listen to what students are trying to tell them, particularly students with disabilities (Pazey et al., 2015; Pazey & DeMatthews, 2019; Pazey et al., 2017; Keefe et al., 2006; Ludlow, 2011; MacArthur et al.,, 2018; Margrain & Farrigia, 2018). International researchers, primarily outside the U.S., have conducted studies utilizing student voice in various contexts of inclusive education (Ajodhia-Andrews, 2016; Carroll-Lind, 2018; Dimitrellou & Male, 2019; Gonzalez & Hernandez-Saca, et al., 2017; Herz & Haertel, 2016; Messiou, 2018; Rose & Shevlin, 2017; Veck, 2009). Still others have written extensively about students with disabilities and participation rights applied to school improvement and reform (Callus & Farrugia, 2016; Cefai & Cooper, 2010; Cooper, 1996; Gillet-Swan & Sargeant, 2018; Hajdukova et al.,, 2016; Nind, 2014). Considering the legislative imperative advanced by each of these international declarations to listen to students including students with disabilities, Byrnes & Rickards (2011) challenge us, as student-voice researchers, with the following question: “[W]hy,

then are the voices of students with disabilities given less attention than the voices of their peers?" (p. 26).

Rationale for Incorporating the Voices and Insights of Students with Disabilities

To authenticate the significance of various student experiences, student voice efforts must strive to garner input from a broad array of students, representative of multiple student backgrounds and abilities (Defur & Korinek, 2010; Kozleski & Smith, 2009; Silva, 2003), not just students of wealth and privilege (Silva, 2003). Until recently, however, certain marginalized student populations such as students with disabilities have rarely been consulted and their lived experiences and perceptions of school and learning have rarely been given voice (Pazey et al., 2015; Pazey & DeMatthews, 2019; Pazey et al., 2017; Gonzalez & Love et al., 2016; O'Hair et al., 2000).

Pearce and Wood (2019) spoke to the divisions that can occur when certain students are denied "the opportunity to empower themselves" (p. 121) and are silenced because "they don't fit the dominant discourse and academic aspirations of their schools" (as cited in McIntyre et al., 2005, p. 155). Hence, student voice initiatives tend to be carried out with students who "fit within particular ideals of a good student" (Pearce & Wood, 2019, p. 121), rendering silent the voices of students with disabilities who may be "difficult to hear" (p. 121) due to discriminatory, coercive or hegemonic forces. When schools do not offer spaces for every student to express themselves, however, they may choose to resist any attempts to assist them in their learning, alienate themselves from school authorities, or disconnect from school altogether (Brown, 2017; Emdin, 2016; Jeffers, 2017; Taines, 2012). Yet, the same students who

tend to be “excluded or disempowered by the school system” (Pearce & Wood, p. 121) possess the same desire to be heard, honored, and respected as those students who are selected to speak.

The practice of “including the excluded” requires individuals to ask different questions, challenge old assumptions, think outside their comfort zone, and move beyond the “privileged perspectives” of those who tend to hold positions of power (Cerecer et al., 2013, p. 220). Keefe et al. (2006) agree, advancing students with disabilities as the *real* experts on learning. Listening to students’ voices, including students with disabilities, has been justified by several researchers for several reasons:

- students provide an alternative source of knowledge and expertise due to their unique insider perspective of school culture and climate (Bland, 2011; Cooper, 1996);
- investigations into issues concerning students need to represent the experiences and viewpoints of every student (Walmsley & Johnson, 2003) since students who may not “be succeeding under current conditions are often the most important voices that need to be heard” (Mitra, 2009, p. 821);
- the determination of whether a policy or practice is effective can only be achieved by communicating with the students who are most directly affected (Keefe et al., 2006); and
- after students voice their concerns and suggestions, they should be allowed to engage in future conversations so their views can be incorporated and transformed into the school’s policies and practices (Cefai & Cooper, 2010).

To authenticate the significance of various student experiences, input must be garnered from students with multiple backgrounds and abilities, not just students from privileged backgrounds (Carroll-Lind, 2018; Defur & Korinek, 2010; Kozleski & Smith, 2009; Silva, 2003). Yet, students' differential experiences should not be attributed to them, as individuals, as much as to a society that promotes certain beliefs about what is acceptable and establishes certain conditions for living out one's life that contribute to the creation of those differences in the first place (Callus & Farrugia, 2016). Applied more narrowly to the educational arena, such research should not be premised on the view that students with disabilities have "needs that are 'special'" (Barnes & Sheldon, p. 237); rather, one should focus on an alternative model of disability that recognizes their needs are similar to any child but are not being met by the current educational system.

Do students with disabilities agree with our current models of schooling? Can their input assist us in understanding the challenges they face and the social supports they seek most from us, as educators, so they can thrive, both in and out of school and beyond? Bourke et al. (2018) address the importance of including a diverse profile of youth in research to determine what works best for them, both as individuals and a collective whole. Taking such a collective and inclusive approach can contribute to our efforts toward creating a "positive school and classroom environment (p.183).

Method

To gain an understanding of the types of school experiences and/or contexts that high school special education students might identify as beneficial versus detrimental to their ability to learn in school, a qualitative case study research design and approach for

each school site was utilized (Yin, 2014). My approach drew from phenomenological methods, centering on student voice, to discover each participant's point of view, capture the personal meanings they attributed to their learning experiences in school and the classroom, and bring the perspectives they derived from their own experiences to the fore (Smith et al., 2009).

School Sites

In 2010 and 2012, I revisited the same urban high school where I conducted my dissertation study (Pazey, 1996) and interviewed 12 students with an identified disability. In 2013, I visited a suburban-rural high school in the same geographical area and interviewed 21with an identified disability. Across both high schools, I interviewed a total of 33 students. Both high schools followed the New Technology High School model of project-based learning and adhered to a science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) curriculum focus.

Selection and Description of the Student Participants

Criteria used to select the 12 students (six in 2010 and six in 2012) at HHS were identical to the criteria used for the previous study conducted at CHS, the same high school, in 1995 (Pazey, 1996). The principal asked the school counselor and lead special education teacher to collaboratively create a list of potential student participants who then spoke with each of the students about the purpose of the study to determine their initial interest. They provided a list of students who agreed to participate in the study. At THS, the rural-suburban high school, 22 students with an identified disability were told about the study by the high school principal and all but one student agreed to

participate. Of the 33 students, the male to female student breakdown was 24 and 9. According to race, 12 students were Black, 11 were White, 9 were Hispanic, and 1 student was Hispanic-Black. Most of the students were classified with a learning disability in reading or mathematics (26) followed by attention-deficit, hyperactivity disorder (4), emotional-behavioral disorder (2), and autism spectrum disorder (1).

Table 1

Student Participants drawn from Heritage High School and Technology High School

Students	Grades	Gender	Ethnicity	Identified Disability
Students with an identified disability	9th through 12th grade	Male (24) Female (9)	Black (12) White (11) Hispanic (9) Hispanic-Black (1)	Learning disability (26) Attention-deficit, hyperactivity disorder (4) Emotional-behavioral disorder (2) Autism spectrum disorder (1)

Approval to conduct the studies at both high schools was obtained from the University's Institutional Review Board and the principal of each high school. Both parents and students were assured that all responses would be held in strictest confidence and their identity would remain anonymous. Approval for each student to be involved in the study was also obtained from the students' parents. Students were given the opportunity to make their own decision about whether they wished to participate and signed a student assent form to indicate their agreement. Students were informed of

their right to withdraw at any time from the study and refrain from answering any question if they elected to do so; however, none of the students withdrew nor did they voice any concerns with the interview questions or process.

Data Collection

Six focus-group interviews and 15 one-on-one, semi-structured interviews were conducted across both schools. The interview questions were derived from the same interview protocol that was used in the 1995 dissertation study. At both high schools and for both the individual and focus-group interviews, students were asked the same interview questions:

1. Tell me about what you like about school or some of your classes. Why?
2. Tell me about what you don't like about school or some of your classes. Why?
3. What kinds of teachers and/or learning environments do you like best? Can you give me a description?
4. What kind of teachers and/or learning environments do you like least? Can you give me a description?

All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. To validate the data, I returned to both schools to meet with each student so they could review their transcripts and offer any additional insights they wished to share. None of the students with whom I was able to meet provided any additional insights nor did they make any changes, additions, or deletions to the transcripts. During my second visit, the principal and lead counselor at both schools assured each student that their input would be used

to inform them and the school faculty in terms of future topics for professional development related to classroom instruction and the overall school culture and classroom climate.

Data Analysis

An inductive coding process was used to allow the data to emerge from each of the interview transcripts (Hesse-Biber, 2017). During the first round of the coding process, I searched for short-word phrases and initial categories (Saldaña, 2016) related to the different types of learning experiences within the classroom or the school; the overall perceptions they described of those experiences, either positive or negative; and any other factors or constructs they believed to be instrumental or detrimental to their ability to learn. Significant statements were highlighted and listed separately and were then combined into themes. Specific incidents, individuals, conditions, situations, and contexts in which each experience occurred were also noted. Themes and subthemes that emerged from students' responses at both school sites were nearly identical; therefore, the following narrative merges the descriptions and insights shared by students at both high schools.

Social and Emotional Supports

When asked to identify what they liked about school, nearly every students' immediate response was "spending time with my friends." Situated within the arena of accountability mandates and neoliberal reform policies mandated by NCLB (2002) and the Texas Education Agency (TEA), the state education agency responsible for interpreting and enforcing the regulations contained within NCLB, administrators and

teachers attended to the daily academic rigors of school (Pazey et al., 2017; Pazey, 2019; Pazey & DeMatthews, 2019). Each of the students whom I interviewed, however, valued their school and classroom experiences more in terms of the types of social and emotional supports they received to help them learn. To underscore the importance of this prerogative, nearly every student talked about their teachers and administrators as well as the school culture, classroom configurations, and the conditions for learning that most supported their social and emotional needs.

Get to Know Us and Help Us Believe in Ourselves and Our Ability to Learn

For most of the students, the attitudes of their teachers and administrators and the way they made them feel about themselves took precedence over any other aspect of their school lives. Teachers who took the time to get to know them, expected them to perform beyond what they believed represented their own capabilities, and "cared about them being successful" stood out in their minds.

A senior male student who admitted to "being highly dyslexic" recounted how his math teacher forced him to think and not allow him to use his disability as a crutch. She helped him discover his strengths and encouraged him to draw upon them. In the process of assisting him in understanding mathematics, she also helped him overcome what he "may not be as good at" and taught him "how to advocate for myself." In his words, "By the middle of my sophomore year, I finally threw my disability crutch out the window and I started walking on my own two feet and using my mouth to speak up for myself and using my mouth to tell people like, 'I don't understand this, can you help me?'"

Several students conceded that they needed to be more independent despite their desire to lean on their teachers and others for assistance instead of learning how to think for themselves.

- "Teachers aren't always going to help you and so, you're going to have to go discover things on your own time. Just getting that sense of being independent allowed me to think for myself and not have others think for me."
- "She makes you think about stuff and explain what you are thinking. She takes time to understand where you are coming from instead of discounting what you have to say. She cares enough about what you need and what you think is important—what you want to know—both in school and in life and is willing to help you think things through and prepare for it."

Others talked about teachers who connected with them and, based on their own stories and efforts to locate where they were in terms of their understanding, enabled them to engage with what they were learning:

- "He's the coolest teacher because he can connect with the students and when he teaches, like, everything he says, it's so simple. He helps you out like, just right there, where you're at and makes a connection so we want to learn."
- "Teachers that are telling us more about themselves and how they might have struggled. You know, like showing that they can be closer to you more than a teacher."
- "Teachers who tell stories, so we can relate to what they are talking about."

A male student who also served as the schools' Student Body President referred to his high school principal in terms of his willingness to get to know each student individually and treat them with respect. At the same time, he expected them to take responsibility for their own behavior:

> He helps everybody. He understands their problems. He knows most of all students, so he knows how they will act when they get in trouble. So, that's what I like. He still gives you a consequence. But the fact is, he knows most every student, how their reactions are, and never quits believing you can be the best.

School Culture as "Family"

Students at both high schools touted the importance of a family-like school atmosphere, a culture that adopted a "non-judgmental" approach toward each student and a place where "if you need to talk to someone, they are there." One of the high schools embedded a "circle time" where the entire student body and school assembled in the school's gymnasium and the principal facilitated a weekly meeting to "talk about events and issues and whatever's going down in the school." Rather than following a top-down approach to making decisions, the principal and teachers involved them and the overall student body, giving them an open invitation to voice their opinions and give input into critical decisions. If students preferred to remain anonymous, they could speak in confidence with their teachers or peers, or express their thoughts in writing.

A sophomore student described the culture of the school accordingly: "This school has the expectation that every student will be supported. No disrespect. Everyone feels safe to learn and be themselves." In contrast to his middle school

experience where he encountered frequent incidences of bullying, he added, “You don’t really have that at this school and that’s what I really like about it. You have a much more student-friendly environment amongst the students, and I feel safer here than I did in middle school.”

A different student likened the school to the overall parameters that his parents established for him and his siblings at home, characterizing the overall culture of the school as both “strict and lenient” but in different ways:

> Like, we have the freedom to do kind of what we want to do, but we have those base guidelines that keep us on track. But overall, in my opinion, it’s more efficient, smoother, and creates a better atmosphere to learn.

Classroom Configurations

Nearly every student emphasized the importance of the social nature inherent in their ability to learn, expecting the teacher to first “explain what they needed to know and allow the class to learn together.” They also stressed the belief that they should be allowed to choose whether they wanted to work independently or with their peers “depending on the work.” For mini-assignments and projects, they preferred to work alone or one-on-one with the teacher. In such instances, they highlighted the need for smaller class sizes, ranging from 15 to 20 students. With less students, they could “talk to teachers and one another and get to know one another” and the teacher would be able to “come around to individual students and have more one-on-one time” and “break thinks down” to make sure they understood what they were learning. When assigned to larger class sizes, they lost their ability “to focus” due to students “playing around” and

“other distractions” that kept them from getting their work done. In such cases, they “got blamed for not finishing your work” which created additional stress for them.

For larger projects and assignments, however, they underscored the advantages of working in a group. Students at both high schools referenced collaboration, communication, teamwork, and networking opportunities as strengths and critical aspects to their ability to capitalize on their strengths, make improvements, and be successful—in terms of school as well the future:

- “Projects are more like hands on, how we work in groups. You get to know more people and stuff and it helps you figure out—like, you can do more and better work, like teamwork like in the real world.”
- “When you work with others, it gives you more of a chance to get to know, like, what you are working on because they might know something you don’t know. So, you can help each other out.”
- “For projects, I like working with others because there are multiple parts that we need done. We take one part we are good at and one we know least so we can improve on it. We assign each other homework so we don’t lose our focus. We set guidelines and make sure everyone does their part.”

Conditions for Learning that Support Students’ Social and Emotional Needs

When asked to describe what they liked most and least about their school and classes and to explain why, every student proffered either a list of do’s and don’ts or expounded on specific events that contributed to or deprived them from their ability to learn. They repeatedly spoke about their previous lived reality that no one had ever

taken the time to hear what they had to say about school. Nevertheless, their willingness to openly discuss the social and emotional aspects and priorities they deemed to be instrumental to their ability to achieve success in school in terms of how we should treat one another, in general, warrants our attention, both as educational professionals and leaders and student voice advocates and researchers:

- "Don't look at a student and then, just make an assumption about that student. Take time to really get to know the student even if the student is rough around the edges."
- "If a student asks a question, respond in a respectful tone, not in a sarcastic way where the student feels dumb for asking the question."
- "If we are expected to work in a group with others, please don't require me to work with a person who is bossy or who does not do their work."
- "Because I have reading problems, please don't make me read aloud in front of my peers. I would prefer to discuss ideas."
- "Provide the opportunity for the student to turn in work and then, after it is graded, if more work needs to be done, give the student a chance to work with the teacher one-on-one and redo or revise the work for a 2nd chance."
- "Be clear & consistent in what you expect of students. Don't let students get away with not doing their work & then give them extra credit at the end and get off scot-free from not doing their work all along. In the real world, you don't get extra credit. You can't say, 'Oh, I forgot to submit this, so I'll submit it now. Just forget that it was late.'"

- “Allow for late work if you understand that a student might have a bad internet connection or does not have internet at home. If the only time we can work on our work is at school, be willing to work with us and help us.”
- “Don’t show us how to do it but help us figure it out on our own or be there to answer questions. Help us establish our comfort zone.”
- “Whoever is in charge should always make sure that the students come first, that the students have a place to work, the students are encouraged to work, that teachers do not give up.”
- “It shouldn’t matter what others think about your school or the students in the school. It should matter more about what students can do in the classroom; what teachers and administrators do in their jobs; and how much that counts and affects each student’s future.”

Discussion

Like all other students, students with disabilities possess “knowledge and unique insights into the educational system” (Hajdukova et al., 2016, p. 207). The need to explore the schooling experiences of students with disabilities as told from their perspective cannot be ignored. Yet, their voices “are not necessarily recognized by educationists, practitioners, or policymakers” (p. 207).

Clearly, each of the students in this study had stories to tell about their experiences in school and how they wished to be treated by adults. How others viewed them in terms of ability and whether they honored them by listening to what they had to say stood out as a major contributor to whether they connected with the academic

aspects of both the classroom and school. Individuals who took the time to get to know them, treated them with respect, helped them learn how to advocate for themselves, and taught them to think for themselves stood out in their minds. Those who recognized them for their capabilities, regardless of the topic or content, also made a difference in their lives.

Making connections with adults who truly cared about their success overrode the specifics of what typically takes precedence in the minds of those who place a higher premium on student achievement and academic outcomes. Descriptors such as “safe to learn”, “no disrespect”, “nonjudgmental”, “working with others” seemed to underscore the learning conditions they preferred the most. From a student voice perspective, the following comments should give us, as student voice advocates and researchers, pause:

> “…using my mouth to speak up for myself…”
>
> “… capitalize on their strengths…”
>
> “… takes time to understand where you are coming from instead of discounting what you have to say…”
>
> “… help you think things through and prepare…”
>
> “… respond in a respectful tone, not in a sarcastic way…”

When conducting a focus-group interview with four students, one student confessed, “No one has ever taken the time to ask us about what we thought about school.” Reflecting back on my experiences as a former special education teacher and

high school administrator who determined to interrogate my own practice based largely on what I learned from students, his confession forced me to question whether I was staying true to the commitment I made to my students nearly 20 years ago. Am I incorporating the voices of marginalized student populations such as students with disabilities into my research agenda and practice?

One student's statement, "Don't look at a student and then, just make an assumption about that student. Take time to really get to know the student even if the student is rough around the edges" provides a perfect segue for me to challenge all of us, as student voice researchers, advocates, and practitioners, to ask ourselves: Can we, as a community of student voice advocates, lay claim to a "rights-respecting pedagogy" (Lundy & Cook-Sather, 2016, para. 37) if we fail to recognize or involve the voices of students with disabilities who represent one of our most vulnerable student populations? Can students with disabilities who serve as "data sources" or "active respondents" contribute to adults' efforts to "listen to and learn with students in schools" (Fielding 2018, p. 74), or should our calls for student voice and advocacy focus more on progressing toward the highest level on the student voice continuum by acquiring "substantial" (Mitra, 2006, p. 7) input from students? Is reaching the highest rungs on the ladder of participation (Hart, 1992) and involvement (Fletcher, n.d.) worthy of our efforts when we may be in danger of excluding the voices and insights of students with disabilities?

Participation can occur at various levels, ranging from "asking the disabled child for their views about specific aspects of their lives to their being actively involved in making major decisions" (Callus & Farrugia, 2016, p. vi), an assertion which is

enshrined in both the CRC (UN, 1989) and the UNCRPD (2006). In the spirit of the Disability Rights Movement, “Nothing about Us without Us” (Charlton, 2000, p. 3), Callus and Farrugia (2016) threw a spotlight on the significance of the UNCRPD, highlighting the reality that the creation of the CRPD’s creation stemmed from the rights that students should be able to “air views about their education” (p. 20). Therefore, they suggest, students with disabilities should be given the opportunity to express their views about education “through research that involves them as participants” (p. 64). The argument that the individual child as well as groups of children have the right to be heard is also stated in Article 12 of the CRC. The Committee on the Rights of the Child (2009) clarified that the determination of whether a child is “capable of forming his or her own views” (p. 9) should not be translated as a limitation. Instead, they note, parties should (a) avoid imposing any age limits on the rights of children to express their views, (b) presume they have the capacity to form their own views, (c) acknowledge their ability and right to “express them” rather than expect them to “prove” their “capacity” to do so; (d) obligate ourselves to ensuring children who may encounter difficulties in “making their views heard”; and (e) be sensitive to any “negative consequences of an inconsiderate practice of this right” (p. 9).

Lundy (2007) underscored four aspects of Article 12, emphasizing the imperative that adults should

- provide children the space and opportunity to express their views,
- facilitate their ability to express their views,
- listen to what children have to say, and
- as appropriate, act upon their views.

When asked to provide an explanation of my approach in terms of where the students involved in this study fell on the continuum of student voice, Lundy's model caught my attention. The realization that many of the students with whom I spoke admitted they had never been asked to talk about their school experiences took me back to my experiences as a special education teacher 20 years earlier. Why did my students elect to vent their frustrations and celebrate their successes in my classroom? What was different in terms of each of these four elements? My classroom provided a non-threatening space where students could freely express their views without fear of reprisal or judgment from their audience about what they had to say and how they chose to express their views. We all served as a captive audience, a congregation of listeners with choral responses of agreement and encouragement to *tell it like it is*. The power of my experiences as a special education classroom teacher and administrator as well as those of the students at both high schools existed in the knowledge and assurance that their views would be given due weight and acted upon whenever possible.

In 2008, Hart admitted that the ladder metaphor he advanced in 1992 to represent various levels of student participation was "unfortunate" because it implied "a necessary sequence to children's developing competencies" (p. 23) and suggested that the "higher rungs of the ladder" were "superior to the ones beneath" (p. 24). He called for new models to emerge. In the case of student participation, Lundy (2018) revisited and reevaluated her position on tokenism, Hart's third form of nonparticipation, particularly when the views of children in terms of a collective group were being sought. She referred to individuals who avoid including students with disabilities in student voice

initiatives, influenced by “generally accepted assumptions” about their “lack of capacity” (p. 342) and the perceived inherent challenges involved. To counteract such hesitancies, she argued that much can be accomplished by incorporating these students into the conversation: “Children’s capacity to exercise and influence can occur even when children are allowed in at ‘low entry points’” (p. 346).

Let’s Reconsider Our Approach

Messiou (2019) contended that “inclusion and student voice are interconnected ideas, inclusion referring to the presence, participation and achievement of all learners” (p. 769). As a community of student voice researchers, my position of how we might move forward mirrors the argument advanced by Parry et al., (2010) who called for communities to ponder the following:

> “[H]ow do we change so that more people can participate?” Inclusion does not mean joining in on other people’s terms but it does mean that every new challenge to our idea of inclusivity is met with a positive response; it means the process of change has to be valued by everyone and is seen to enrich the value of everyone involved. (p. 2)

If our intentions are to truly be inclusive, the voices and views of those who tend to be excluded need to be pursued by mainstream student voice researchers and advocates, given legitimacy, and placed in the center of the student voice narrative that currently exists. Within the current climate and culture in which we live, nothing less will suffice.

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