Democratic possibilities for student voice within schools undergoing reform: A student counterpublic case study

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Abstract

Public schools failing to meet accountability standards have been shut down, taken over by charter organizations, or undergone reconstitution. This article challenges deficit views of students as passive and complacent in a schooling context dictated by accountability sanctions. Drawing from counterpublic theory, it describes a case study that illustrates the emergence of a student counterpublic at an urban high school under the threat of reconstitution. Interviews with four former students who were at the center of this emergence demonstrate how they and their peers acted within a realm of non-deliberative power and created their own spaces for deliberation and collective action. The results offer an example of how students can be partners in shaping reform through democratic action rather than simply being objects of reform.

Keywords: *student voice, counter-publics, reconstitution, school decision making, democratic action*

Introduction

> After we gave out our brochures [to students]…we had a sit-in. It was just supposed to be a sit-in where we felt that we weren't being listened to, so our idea was, "Okay, we're going to sit here. We're not going to listen to anybody. We're going to put a piece of tape over our mouths. We're just going to sit there and be disobedient." It was kind of childish, but things escalated very quickly. We ended up having a walkout…all the way to the [district] headquarters…and then when we finally got over there, we already had a student body inside the meeting room at the headquarters trying to explain our point of view and how we felt that we were being treated as experiments. We got dismissed as if we weren't there, so it was all for nothing, but we did get some people to see what it was that we wanted.
>
> (Pedro, recent high school graduate)

Pedro was a junior in high school when he and a group of his peers organized to oppose district efforts to remove the teaching staff at their school—known as "reconstitution"—in an attempt to address poor performance. These students gathered information about the proposed reform, provided the information to their peers, and planned collective action such as a sit-in on campus and a walk-out at a district board meeting. Their goal was to make school decision makers more attentive to student voice.

Across the country, parents, students, and community members have raised their voices in opposition to accountability structures that support reform efforts like reconstitution (Rogers, 2006; Scott & Fruchter, 2009). Recently, for example, a group of parents in Chicago staged a hunger strike. In a city that has witnessed the closing and privatization of its public schools, these parents demanded the opening of a community school (Hess, 2008; Lipman, 2013; Wong & Shen, 2005). It is less common, however, for students to be at the center of such resistance, and even more unusual for them to initiate activism. Other research has spoken of the ways youth come together and deliberate through organized structures such as grassroots organizations (Rogers, Mediratta & Shah, 2012) or youth participatory action research programs (Cammarota & Fine, 2008; Cammarota & Romero, 2011), but what happens when students organically coalesce to resist changes to their school? What structures or conditions allow or do not allow students to speak back in response to proposed reforms?

When students are able to analyze and question what is at stake for their school, their role as critical actors is centered. Moreover, this challenges the presumption that school staff members and district leaders are the only ones able to make key educational decisions (Hursh, 2005). Oftentimes, the student voice has been particularly marginalized by corrective sanctions faced by schools that have been designated as "low-performing" or that are under "program improvement." At such schools, decision makers prescribe what they see as best for students rather than recognizing them as conscious agents who can deliberate about their educational wants and needs (Baltodano, 2012; Hursh, 2005; Lipman, 2013; Rice & Croninger, 2005; Tienken & Zhao, 2013).

As decision-makers limit the deliberative power of students, I engage with the following research question: How and to what extent do students, due to exclusion from official decision-making spaces, engage with their own political spaces to critique and shape policies? I conceptualize these alternative spaces as a counterpublic—a space in which students deliberate about their educational wants and needs and begin to form counterdiscourses, separate from those created about them by decision-makers. In these spaces, students also plan to disseminate these discourses into wider arenas of decision making through collective action.

This paper investigates the process by which one group of students acted within a realm of non-deliberative power to seek engagement in the decisions shaping the fate of their school as it faced a significant reform. In doing so, I seek to provide a glimpse into the potential of empowering student voice and to think about how these students' histories can inform current engagement structures. To this end, I examine how students made sense of educational reform efforts and formed counterdiscourses about their needs. Further, I explore how they came together with other students to engage as a collective. I use their experiences as an example of how students can move beyond being objects of reform to become partners in shaping the reform through democratic action.

Background

Since the enactment of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), public schools, and the students within them, have faced standardization and accountability sanctions spelled out in the law (Hursh, 2005). More recently, the Race to the Top (RTTT) initiative has created competition among states for federal grants over who can develop the most innovative school reform plans. This has centralized responsibility for education at the state level and has also solidified a federally-driven vision of school reform (McGuinn, 2011). Furthermore, in an effort to improve student learning and close the achievement gap (Tienken & Zhao, 2013), schools have published test score data, implemented prescribed curricula, and placed an emphasis on high stakes testing. While NCLB, in particular, has sought to ensure a quality education for all students through such practices, it has also created a process by which schools are identified and labeled as "failing," creating a justification for turning schools over to the market (Lipman, 2013). Many schools—especially those in low-income communities—failing to meet accountability standards have been shut down or taken over by charter organizations, and/or have undergone reconstitution (Baltodano, 2012; Rice & Croninger, 2005).

Schools not meeting a set achievement performance marker known as Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) for more than two consecutive years are understood to need "school improvement" efforts. Reconstitution is one of several measures under NCLB that is intended to turn around these underperforming schools. It involves removing current staff, including administrators and teachers, and replacing them with educators perceived to be "more capable and committed to reform" (Rice & Croninger, 2005, p. 74). More specifically, the intent is to "[turn] around individual-student and collective-school outcomes—graduation rates, standardized achievement scores, core course performance, and other academic markers" (Maxcy, 2011, p. 189). Schools subject to reconstitution are often located in urban centers, are typically attended by poor and minority students, and have faced persistent reform efforts (Hursh, 2005; Rice & Croninger, 2005).

Unfortunately, as NCLB and other governmental policies such as RTTT have shaped the wants and needs of education, and of students in particular, students are left at the margins of decision making (Kirshner & Pozzoboni, 2011; Mitra, Serriere, & Kirshner, 2014; Oerlemans & Vidovich, 2005; Rubin & Silva, 2003). NCLB sanctions provide a broad stroke of standardization for what is best for all students while excluding the voices and particular needs of students themselves. To challenge deficit views of students as passive and complacent under a context of schooling dictated by accountability sanctions, this article sees students as stakeholders in both the process and outcomes of educational reform.

Theoretical Framework

Contemporary critiques of neoliberalism can shed light on what happens to students under reconstitution. In fact, Baltodano (2012) referred to NCLB as "one of the most important achievements of neoliberalism" (p. 495). When neoliberalism is applied to schools, education becomes a commodity, receptive to market forces. Within this framework, students are reconstructed as consumers—in this case, consumers of education. Such individualistic framing of students gives way to the significant erosion of collective power and the emergence of "docile subjects" (Davies & Bansel, 2007, p. 249) instead of "democratic individuals charged with challenging and changing the status quo" (Garrison, 2012, p. 371). Baltodano (2012), for example, asserted that neoliberal processes within education have resulted in an inarticulate public, unable to engage in public spheres that contest neoliberal reforms to education and society at large. This presents a limited view of students as marginalized civic actors. Moreover, neoliberal forces have moved us closer to conceptions of education that emphasize choice and competition, and away from democratic ideals aimed at supporting students as participatory citizens of a democracy (Westbrook, 2010). With this in mind, I present ways that students engage with their democratic capabilities to resist such forces.

Students may try to make sense of reforms, establish a set of goals, and be part of a collective at school (Rogers, Mediratta, & Shah, 2012). This complex process of interpretation and action can be understood in terms of publics and counterpublics. A public is a self-organized relation among people who come together to discuss matters that are of common interest (Warner, 2002). Through such participatory social inquiry, individuals engage in "information gathering, exchange, interpretation, and debate" (Rogers & Oakes, 2005, p. 2179) that can be used to address social problems and bring about change. A counterpublic takes on some of these same dimensions—such as grappling with the nature of a problem, thinking of alternatives, and taking action—but emerge because there is no political or discursive space within a dominant public for their concerns.

Fraser (1997) described counterpublics as "parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counterdiscourses, which in turn permit them to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs" (p. 67). Such counterpublics as "parallel" spaces of deliberation act outside of dominant publics. This is where oppositional interpretations—counterdiscourses—are developed and lay the groundwork for collective action. Marginalized social groups that have been identified as having the potential to form counterpublics include women, people of color, the queer community, and the working class (Fraser, 1990). I would add to this list, students, who are residents of politically marginalized communities and who attend schools that are constructed as "failing." Counterpublics understand their subordinate status in relation to the more powerful public (Beltran, 2009). As such, students' deliberation about their concerns and the fashioning of their collective power within a counterpublic shows their capacity to speak back to marginalizing structures that assume their educational needs.

In the present study, I show how one group of such students came together around a shared problem, developed counterdiscourses through deliberation about their concerns, and planned agitational activities directed at the wider public. Using the aforementioned frame, I later highlight examples that show students as actors within a counterpublic who can engage their collective voice in arenas of deliberation and decision making against reforms being proposed at their school. First, however, it is important to provide context for the study and to describe the research methods I employed.

Research Context and Method

In 2011, a major urban school district in the western United States announced its approval to reconstitute one of its schools, West High School (WHS) (all names are pseudonyms). WHS is located in a Latino/a working class community in a large city and most of its students are immigrants or children of immigrant parents. In a press release, the superintendent said the following about WHS:

> The status quo at [WHS] requires an immediate and aggressive reform. The restructuring process, allowed under the federal No Child Left Behind (NCLB) law, will require all staff to re-apply for positions with the goal of transforming a culture that has resulted, too often, in failure.

The press release highlighted certain facts about the school, including that one of every three incoming ninth graders would stop attending school over the subsequent four years, and that the school had been under “program improvement” for more than five years. Testing and the need to meet markers of academic performance became justification for having current teachers and staff reapply or find employment elsewhere. As the school underwent this restructuring process, students were faced with mass change and uncertainty. To explore this process and the students’ reaction to it, I employed a critical, qualitative research approach.

According to Merriam (2009), critical educational qualitative research questions the contexts of schools and the larger forces that shape education. Since the goal of this study was to give power to the student voice as it relates to school reforms dictated by neoliberal forces, I brought into question social structures that have marginalized students and aimed to “[help] those without power to acquire it” (Willis, 2007, p. 82). I was interested in providing students with the opportunity to recount their lived experiences and to make meaning out of their experience with their school’s reconstitution process.

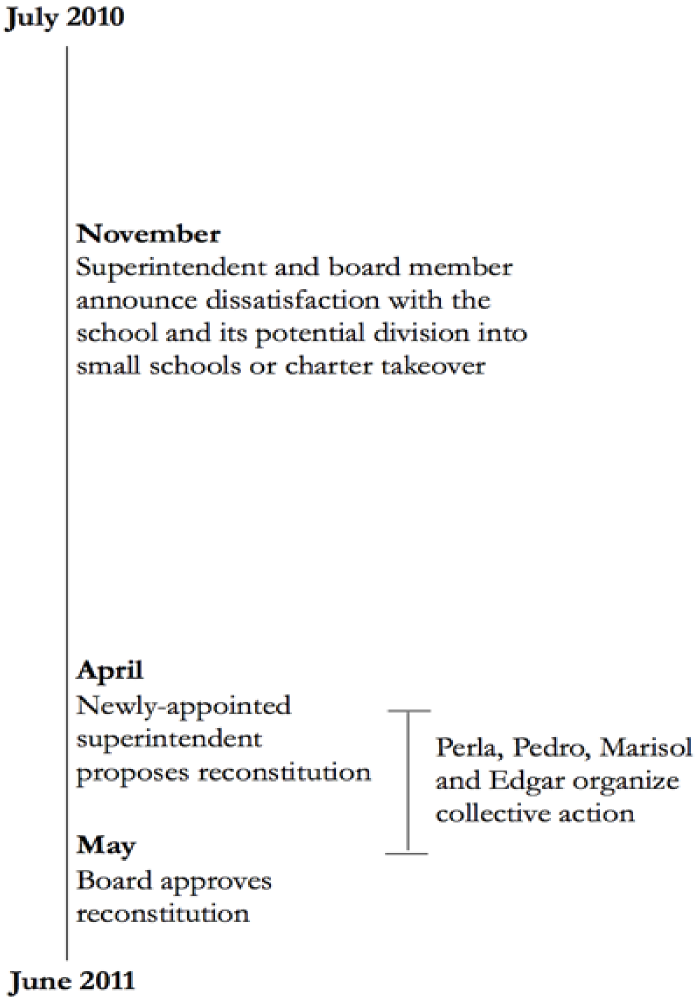
To achieve the goals of the study, I utilized the qualitative data collection method of in-depth, semi-structured interviewing, guided by a list of open-ended questions (Merriam, 2009). In-depth interviewing, as a method, centers the experiences of people and the meanings they make out of their experiences (Seidman, 1991). In the interviews, I drew from a list of questions that prompted students to describe their initial perceptions of reconstitution and their subsequent conclusions about it. They described the process by which they were informed about the reconstitution, as well as the actions they took once they had developed their own understanding of the reform process. My aim was to better understand students' engagement with decision-making structures. All responses were audio recorded, transcribed, and coded using the qualitative coding software Dedoose.

Through purposeful sampling, I recruited four former high school students who had served on the WHS student council to participate in the research. Student council members were required to participate in a leadership class, and in this context they had engaged with questions and critiques about the proposed reconstitution. Their participation in student council was also important because, at most high schools, student councils are typically used by adult school leaders as the sole medium through which to gauge student opinion and voice (Leren, 2006). As school leaders, these four students were some of the first and only students to know about the potential of school reconstitution.

I used three frames drawn from counterpublic theory as a theoretical overlay. Drawing from these frames in my analysis, I highlighted instances where students spoke about the process by which they came together around a shared problem, developed counterdiscourses through deliberation about their concerns, and planned agitational activities directed at the wider public (i.e., district decision makers). The students illuminated how a lack of incorporation into school decision making about reconstitution prompted them to create their own spaces of withdrawal to seek and plan access to spaces of power. While this small sample cannot be used to draw conclusions about all students who participated in the oppositional activities related to the proposed reconstitution of the school, their experiences do offer insight into the process by which students can speak back to their exclusion from official spaces of decision making by creating their own discursive space amongst themselves.

Findings

For WHS, an academic year began in July 2010 and ended in June 2011. In November 2010, the superintendent and a school board member expressed dissatisfaction with current test score results. Because of these results, they also expressed an interest in dividing the school into small schools or opening it up to charter organization takeover. In April 2011, a new superintendent was appointed. He came into the district with a reform-minded agenda, and was given the power to address underperforming schools. Subsequently, the superintendent proposed to the board that a swift and "aggressive" reform was needed at WHS. In May of the same year, the board approved the reconstitution of WHS. A timeline of events follows:


July 2010
November
Superintendent and board member announce dissatisfaction with the school and its potential division into small schools or charter takeover
April
Newly-appointed superintendent proposes reconstitution
Perla, Pedro, Marisol and Edgar organize collective action
May
Board approves reconstitution
June 2011

It was within this 2010–2011 school year that the students in this study—Perla, Pedro, Marisol, and Edgar—served as student-elected representatives on the student council. Particularly in April 2011, with the appointment of the new superintendent, these students came together to deliberate and partake in democratic action to address the fate of their school. In doing so, they began to emerge as “a public,” albeit a counterpublic, because of their subaltern status as students.

My findings show that exclusion from official spaces of decision making prompted these students to engage with their own political spaces where they (a) tried making sense of the problem, (b) developed counterdiscourses, and (c) organized agitational activities aimed at enacting their collective voice. I address each of these themes in turn.

Making sense of reconstitution: Finding a voice

> Typically, word didn't get around in such a big school. But it was just kind of rumors that our school was going to go through some change. But it was never administrators coming in and telling us. (Perla)

Despite the limited information they received about reconstitution, the four students in this study tried making sense of its implications on their school. As Perla described above, since there was no school-wide announcement or effort to inform the student body about the proposed reform, they relied on rumors and sought information on their own to make sense of reconstitution. As they engaged in discussions with one another about the meaning of reconstitution, they forged the beginnings of a counterpublic.

One rumor concerned the possibility that the school would be divided into smaller schools. Marisol recalled, "[the district] basically said they were going to split us up in different areas of the school and, to do that, that also meant…moving everybody around." Marisol recalled that she and her peers asked themselves questions about what these changes meant for the current structures of the school. For example, they asked, "Are we not going to have a leadership or a yearbook? Are there going to be a hundred different yearbooks because there's so many different schools?"

Pedro heard from peers that all teachers were getting fired. In response, and because of their fondness for the teaching staff, Pedro and his peers developed an antagonistic view towards reconstitution. He questioned what this meant for the large student population and the need for teachers at such an overpopulated school. In retrospect, he said he believes that words such as "relocating" or "reinterviewing" could have better explained what would actually happen under reconstitution.

Rumors crystalized as students were prompted by their student council advisor to engage in discussions about reconstitution. Perla explained that the advisor presented information with the disclaimer: "This is what's going on, but you form your own thoughts." Their advisor encouraged them to deconstruct the meaning of reconstitution and consider questions such as "Why do you think this is happening?" This led the students to begin meeting on their own and "talking about how [reconstitution] wasn't okay." This, Perla recalled, is "how some of us learned to form our voices for advocating for our school."

As students interacted discursively, they prepared their own conceptions of not only reconstitution, but also of their educational wants and needs. Counterpublic literature asserts that marginalized groups need such "arenas for deliberation among themselves about their needs, objectives, and strategies" where they can "undertake communicative processes" that are not "under the supervision of dominant groups" (Fraser, 1990, p. 66).

Forming counterdiscourses: Contesting reconstitution

> I felt like an experiment. I felt like I was being experimented on. We were like guinea pigs. (Pedro)

Students deliberated within a discursive space that was parallel to that of broader decision-making arenas. In doing so, they developed counterdiscourses that went against the need to enact reconstitution under a rushed timeline. They gathered information, drawing from data on other schools that had undergone reconstitution and from their own experiences with other rushed reform efforts, which they referred to as "experiments."

In the years preceding reconstitution, students had experienced changes resulting from efforts to improve school performance, including changes to the bell schedule and creation of small learning communities. With so much change, they viewed reconstitution as yet another attempt at "seeing what works." Like Pedro above, they articulated their experiences going through such changes and conceptualized themselves as "guinea pigs" within these reforms. Marisol particularly questioned why there had been so many changes and why the district was now proposing reconstitution:

> There was just all these things, and none of it was given the opportunity to see if this is going to work out or not going to work out. Like block [schedule] one semester and then they were like, "And now we're going to do [reconstitution] too." It was like "What? Didn't you just give us blocks like last year? Why are you doing such a big change again?"

Marisol's comment not only describes the changing learning environment of this school, but also sheds light on the frustration students felt when they heard of yet another educational change. For example, students had recently shifted from a six-period day, where each class was 60-minutes long, to a block schedule where each class was two hours long. Marisol further explained that she did not see the benefits of reconstitution as an effective reform strategy and felt like her school was being used as a testing ground. She was frustrated that earlier changes had not been given sufficient time to show whether they had improved the school for students.

The students also thought that reconstitution was being implemented too quickly, and they were most concerned about the hiring of new teachers under a rushed timeline—a matter of several weeks after board approval in May, but before the beginning of the new school year in July. While some students believed that change needed to happen at their school, they all agreed that reconstitution was not the means to do it. Perla explained:

> I came from the standpoint where I understood change was needed. I understood that as a high school we weren't performing well, but I wasn't okay with [the district] implementing change so quickly. I was asking for them to think about how they were going to implement this change for the better of our school … We were opposed to time. For them it seemed like it was just like, "Let's pretend that we care. Let's do this and then move on, and we can say we tried."

The students' opinions were not all negative. Edgar, for example, liked that reconstitution provided an opportunity to have the staff interview as a type of sorting process to rehire and hire the "best" teachers and get rid "of people that we didn't need there." To him, it seemed like "an ideal thing to do for my school at that time." Nevertheless, the students felt reconstitution had failed to accomplish this, largely because it was designed to happen suddenly and without much time to fill all open teaching positions with qualified teachers. At a school board meeting, Perla would later tell voting board members, "If you really want to change our school and better it, you need to form an outline, you need to have a structure." To these students, given the timeline and the efforts necessary to hire qualified teachers, it seemed impossible to hire qualified teachers.

While assessment data and other quantitative measures are typically used to determine the academic progress of a school, Edgar in particular was critical about the use of data to justify the need for reconstitution, especially under such hasty conditions. He pointed to the experiences of other schools in the district:

> [The district's] whole point was, "Oh, by looking at the data we can tell that you guys are not improving. You guys are not moving up." I said "Okay, like you said, by looking at the data I can see that reconstitution doesn't work…because Pioneer and Washington High school, this happened to them. And if I'm remembering correctly, they had six months to do it, and they were still not able to hire everyone. So now we have three weeks. Don't you think that's hypocritical for you to say that the data suggests something and you're going to follow it, and now that the data suggests something else, you're not going to follow it? So in which point is it okay to follow data and in which point is it not okay to follow data?"

Referring to the failure of reconstitution to bring about desired effects at other schools, Edgar expressed his belief that it would yield similar results at WHS. In addition, there was no plan to actually implement reconstitution under such a short timeframe. Taking these counterdiscourses to spaces of decision making became a main impetus for forging collective student voice and action.

By creating their own interpretations of reconstitution and their educational needs, students' formulations became oppositional to that of decision makers. Nevertheless, through their development of such counterdiscourses, they created contestations that would then have to be received and argued out with those decision makers. In essence, their mere existence "expand[ed] discursive space" (Fraser, 1990, p. 67) and laid the groundwork for taking collective action around critiques of reconstitution.

Coming together and taking collective action

> So this was [the district's] plan: "Yeah we're going to do it. [Students] don't care. They're a low-income community. They don't get involved, therefore we can do what we want." But they were not expecting the students to be educated people and say, "No, this is not going to happen to us."(Edgar)

As they made sense of and developed counterdiscourses, the students began to plan agitational activities in order to engage with decision makers through collective student action. Perla, Pedro, Marisol, and Edgar were part of a group of students who took an active role in planning ways to inform peers about reconstitution. The students circulated pamphlets and collected phone numbers to send messages about reconstitution. They also organized a sit-in on campus and a walk-out to district headquarter to collectively voice student discontent.

Despite the school council's deliberation about reconstitution, other members of the student body did not know much about the proposed changes to the school. Pedro explained what he and his peers did to inform them:

> We were trying to give out small brochures to students to let them know what exactly was going on. And I was going around during my free period, so I had no class. I was walking around with my brochures in hand and an administrator came up to me and they almost wanted to put me in handcuffs and take me to the principal's office. I almost felt like I was getting in trouble and did something extremely bad, when in reality I wasn't.

Pedro's experience provides a direct example of how students were not encouraged to engage with the decision-making process. To form a collective student voice around reconstitution, they understood that others had to know about it. They passed out brochures and hosted student-led meetings during lunch. In coming together in this way, they got more students involved in their deliberations about reconstitution. Their shared concern then became the basis for subsequent agitational activities directed at school decision makers.

One way students sought to enact their collective voice was by organizing a sit-in protest. This protest took place in May, on the day the board was set to vote on reconstituting the school. Perla, Pedro, Marisol, and Edgar all described passing around sign-in sheets prior to the protest to gather phone numbers so they could let other students know how they could take action. In all, about 500 phone numbers were gathered. Marisol remembered that days before the planned sit-in, they contacted students and instructed them on what to do to take part:

> We all got to someone's house and we were sitting on all these couches in a circle and we seemed like telemarketers. Everybody had their phone in their hand calling numbers like, "Hey, tomorrow, wear a white shirt; we're going to sit-in; don't go to class after nutrition…Tomorrow, this is happening. Do this and wear a white shirt. How are you going to participate? Would you like to participate?"

To bring attention to their actions, student organizers contacted the media prior to the sit-in. Edgar explained that they hoped that the media would enter their school and publicize their discontent:

> I remember the day before…we were calling a bunch of students saying "Hey, tomorrow at 10 am don't go into your classrooms." They were like "Why?" "Because the news are going to come. Univision is going to come and we want them to see that we're not happy with what's going on." They're like "Okay, cool." Then, out of nowhere, when we saw that no one was coming into the school, we were like, "Okay, now we need to walk out"…Everyone started walking out.

When the media did not show up during their sit-in, students walked out to seek media attention outside of the school's doors. They walked three miles to the district office, where the board was set to vote on reconstituting their school. By adapting their plans from a sit-in to a walk-out, they sought engagement on equal terms; those who took part in the walk-out saw it as a way to thrust themselves into the decision-making arena.

Discussion

These students' stories illuminate how a small group can coalesce organically in a project of democratic inquiry and action. Hundreds of their peers joined in taking action to resist reconstitution. As Perla, Pedro, Marisol, Edgar, and their peers engaged with reconstitution, a shared concern arose: What does reconstitution mean for the school? As the students formed their counterdiscourses, their succinct yet important critiques of policy emerged. A new public—a counterpublic—emerged as a broader group of students began to share similar concerns about reconstitution and their school. Collective action and student voice thus developed as they sought to expand the discursive space beyond the district and school decision makers.

My findings suggest that student counterpublics are critical democratic sites for student deliberation about school-related issues and for organizing to address these issues, even when larger structures of decision making act in non-democratic ways. Within this context of reconstitution, decision makers acted out their NCLB-given power to correct the low-performing track record of WHS. There was a lack of communication with students about this process, and the process itself did not include them in deliberations about the issues at hand. Decision makers did not conceive of the possibility that anyone but they themselves should come together to deliberate about reconstitution. Reconstitution, in a sense, was imposed on the school and its students; students were not treated as part of any democratic process of communication, social inquiry, or deliberation. They did, however, assert alternative ways of thinking about improvement.

While the movement to position students and their collective voice at the center of school reform initiatives dates back to the 1990s (Cook-Sather, 2006), my case study demonstrates this tool is still not well utilized to examine the educational changes students confront. Previous studies on student voice highlight case studies of adult-led programs (Cammarota & Fine, 2008; Quijada Cerecer, Cahill, & Bradley, 2011; Rogers, Mediratta, & Shah, 2012) where students informed debates and decisions being made at their schools. Others have highlighted how involvement in such organized structures is good for youth development (Cammarota& Romero, 2011; Mitra, 2004). Bragg (2007), for example, explained that students' participation in a student-as-researcher program designed to address the effectiveness of teaching and learning "normalize[d] young people as responsible decision makers with respect to their education and learning"(p. 354). It also, however, prompted students to ignore the structural forces shaping their education. In general, such studies lack a focus on what student voice initiatives can do for equitable school reform and decision-making processes. There are cases, though, when students engage in informal discursive spaces with the intent of using their collective voice to speak about their educational needs.

In keeping with other empirical research, students in the current study felt disengaged from the decision-making process (Kirshner & Pozzoboni, 2011; Oerlemans & Vidovich, 2005). Some studies have looked at top-down school reform initiatives through the lens of students experiencing such changes. Kirshner and Pozzoboni (2011), for example, examined how students interpreted and responded to the closing of their school. Most did not agree with the closure, as they felt excluded from the decision-making process and did not agree with the rationale for the decision. In a similar study, Oerlemans & Vidovich (2005) found that while students were usually silenced in change efforts, they were nevertheless "observant, insightful, thoughtful and very involved in the changes that took place in their school, they were in fact the expert witnesses. They wanted to be involved and they wanted to be asked"(p. 376). Both studies demonstrate that students must be empowered to play an active and expanded role in decision-making processes to make educational change successful.

From a philosophical standpoint, education philosopher John Dewey (1915) saw schools as sites where students develop social power and such power is taken through and by action. By ensuring free intercourse and engagement of all members on equal terms, the potential for social change is secured. In practice, students need to feel that they have a voice in the creation of policy and that they matter (Rudduck & Fielding, 2006). Individuals must trust and have faith in each other—their intelligence and their ability to communicate—and engage in social inquiry about social problems "in which both parties learn by giving the other a chance to express itself, instead of having one party conquer by forceful suppression of the other" (Dewey, 1939, p. 228). Furthermore, Robinson and Taylor (2007) explained that to create true democratic inclusivity, multiple student voices, regardless of race, class, gender and disability, need to be heard in school decision making. However, most of today's public schools do not engage the student voice in this way.

While other scholars have asserted that students should play an expanded role in decision-making processes and schools should practice democratic inclusivity in such practices (Kirshner & Pozzoboni, 2011; Oerlemans & Vidovich, 2005), these studies do not reveal the organic, self-organized process by which students can develop their voice. I have identified such processes taking place within student counterpublics—i.e., coming together around a shared problem, emergent counterdiscourses, and planning for agitational activities. In fact, Dewey spoke of publics composed of common citizens who take part in social inquiry where "experts" take a limited role (Rogers & Oakes, 2005). Decision making in Dewey's tradition, then, requires decision makers to join publics as consultants. There are instances however, when the creation of a public is neither encouraged nor expected. My findings suggest that while district members made the decision to reconstitute the school, they did not expect or encourage a student public to emerge. Student counterpublics are therefore critical sites for youth social inquiry. They provide students opportunities to take part in the democratic experience and undergo meaningful interactions with peers and adults.

Conclusion

As Solorzano and Delgado-Bernal (2001) noted, "we know more about the margin as a site of deprivation or domination and less as a site of resistance and empowerment"(p. 336). With this in mind, the current study has highlighted student counterpublic processes as a site of possibility for democratic practice and inclusivity in education reform. Urban educators who work within a system dictated by accountability measures and sanctions must cultivate in students a sense of legitimacy as they question practices that affect their day-to-day lives. But, are there ways that schools can do this without asserting authority? This is an important question to consider if students are to genuinely combat, inform, and critique the debates that surround reforms enacted at their schools. By looking at students as subjects that lack agency and voice, we undermine their role as agents of change and as partners in shaping equity-focused reform. Through their first-hand knowledge and perspectives, students have the capacity to reveal ways we can effectively enact change in schools. We must listen to them to leverage educational reform.

Although speaking specifically about the economic situation in the 1930s, Dewey (1932) believed that one of the functions of education was to provide students with skills to notice oppressive social conditions and take a role in changing those conditions. As today's neoliberal forces shape educational reform and student experiences in schools, it becomes difficult for students to develop the skills required to take part in deliberation processes—in large part because they are not seen as equals when voicing their concerns. Nevertheless, through deliberative practices within their respective counterpublics, such as inquiring about issues affecting their school, students can gain power in confronting these forces as well as larger structural inequalities (Rogers & Oakes, 2005).

It is important for students to exchange opinions in reasonable debate and to learn from and with one another as a precursor to their eventual participation in the public sphere. Through such practices, students may “forge new civic identities as agents of change who have a role to play in improving community”(Rogers, Mediratta, & Shah, 2012, p. 56). Given the context of neoliberalism and market-driven reform confronting students and influencing their experiences, we must ask: How can this become a more common practice within our schools?

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