Youth Involvement in School Decision-Making during the Pandemic

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Purpose: We explore youth participation in school decision-making during the COVID-19 pandemic, an area that is still underexamined. We use Mitra's pyramid of student voice to explore how students of color shaped decision-making processes during the pandemic shutdown at Sandoval School, a public school in the western United States. We respond to the following research questions: What types of youth voice opportunities arose at Sandoval School during the pandemic? How did the multiplicity of youth voice opportunities influence possibilities for change in online schooling approaches? What school-level constraints limited the influence of youth in school decision-making? **Research Methods:** We employed qualitative methods to conduct this research. Data collection, which began in October 2020 and ended in August 2022, involved semistructured interviews with students (grades 7–12) and school adults, as well as observations and artifact collection. Our data analysis was iterative in nature, involving a combination of inductive and deductive approaches. **Findings:** Our analysis led to the emergence of three main findings: (1) new initiatives provided youth with varying degrees of voice in school decision-making; (2) the quantity and diversity of youth voice opportunities appeared to amplify youth's influence in school decision-making; and (3) some adults' views and actions appeared to limit youth's influence. **Implications:** This study provides an understanding of youth voice as dynamic and fluid, ranging across levels of the pyramid of student voice. Our findings suggest that future research should further explore the interconnected nature of youth voice avenues, especially during times of crisis.

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During the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, many school leaders embraced collaborative forms of K–12 leadership to address aspects of the crisis, from technology access to student well-being (Brown et al. 2023; Grooms and Childs 2021; Thornton 2021). However, students were largely excluded from these shared leadership processes, as decision-making rarely extended beyond school staff (Thornton 2021). With some notable exceptions (Conner et al. 2023b; Ojeda 2022; Rocha et al. 2022), there is little documentation of students' contributions to school leadership during the pandemic. With this in mind, we address the area of youth voice during the pandemic, focusing on Sandoval School, a public school in a metropolitan area in the United States that serves students of color and emphasizes student involvement in school decision-making.[1]

In this qualitative study, we draw upon Mitra's (2006) pyramid of student voice to explore how students shaped school decision-making processes during the pandemic. We respond to the following research questions: What types of youth voice opportunities arose at Sandoval School during the pandemic? How did the multiplicity of youth voice opportunities influence possibilities for change in online schooling approaches? What school-level constraints limited the influence of youth in school decision-making? We show that, during the height of the pandemic, (1) new initiatives provided youth varying degrees of voice in school decision-making; (2) the quantity and diversity of youth voice opportunities appeared to amplify youth's influence; and (3) some adults' views

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and actions appeared to limit youth's influence. Ultimately, this study expands on Mitra's (2006) pyramid of student voice, contributing to a fluid understanding of the various levels of the pyramid. We also explore the relationship between pyramid levels and possibilities for the amplification of students' influence.

Literature Review

The terms "youth voice" or "student voice" encompass the many ways that youth contribute to change in and outside of schools by sharing their views, collaborating with adults, and taking the lead in decision-making (Conner et al. 2023b; Mitra 2009b). Youth voice initiatives are often promoted as avenues through which youth of color or other youth facing injustice can have a say in school and community decision-making (Bertrand and Lozenski 2023; Caraballo et al. 2017; Clay and Turner 2021; Domínguez and Cammarota 2021; González et al. 2017; Mansfield 2014). Such initiatives range from simply garnering students' opinions (Mansfield et al. 2012), such as via a survey, to participating in formal leadership groups, such as advisory boards or existing governance councils (Conner et al. 2023b; Garcia 2023; Prieto-Flores et al. 2018). An increasingly prominent type of youth voice initiative is youth participatory action research (YPAR), which, in its ideal form, entails youth-driven and action-oriented research alongside adult allies to address social justice issues that directly affect the youth (Bertrand and Lozenski 2023; Caraballo et al. 2017; Rodríguez and Brown 2009). In this multigenerational research collective, the adults are responsible for guiding and working alongside youth in ways that leverage the youth's knowledge as they move through the research and action processes (Cammarota and Fine 2008). In comparison, a youth advisory council, which is officially recognized but lacks true authority, acts in an advisory role to leaders of schools, districts, or cities (O'Connor 2013).

Research points to the ways that young people can and do contribute to social justice–oriented school change through meaningful participation in educational decision-making avenues such as YPAR, advisory councils, and other youth-adult partnerships (Bertrand and Lozenski 2023; Caraballo et al. 2017; Domínguez and Casanova 2023; Garcia 2023; Mitra 2009a). The issues that youth have tackled range from racism in school discipline (Welton and Harris 2021; Winn and Winn 2016), to discrimination against queer students (Hillier and Kroehle 2023), to the educational rights of undocumented students (Quijada Cerecer et al. 2011). Indeed, young people who face injustice, such as youth of color, have firsthand experience with the exclusionary practices of schooling and are well positioned to inform social justice efforts in schools (Fine 2008; Wright 2015). Research has pointed to the value of youth of color in particular participating in school

decision-making because they are well-situated to recognize everyday school injustices and generate innovative and equity-focused policies (Clay and Turner 2021; Fine 2008; Welton et al. 2015).

Barriers to Youth Participation in School Change Efforts

However, there are inherent tensions in youth voice initiatives that can hinder youth from contributing to school change. Brion-Meisels and Alter (2018) describe these tensions in relation to YPAR, but their points can be applied broadly. Adults often have conflicting goals for such initiatives: On one hand, there is the goal of disrupting power hierarchies so that youth have more influence in schools and beyond. On the other hand, there are the goals of youth development and learning, which entail the adult facilitators holding teacher/authority roles (Brion-Meisels and Alter 2018; Call-Cummings et al. 2019). Thus, the adult facilitators of a youth voice initiative may shape the direction of the youth's efforts and voice (Lac et al. 2022; Rodríguez and Brown 2009).

Additional barriers to youth voice initiatives also lie outside of an initiative, with unjust systems and adults in formal positions of power. Youth may be tokenized when they participate in youth advisory councils or when they have seats on a school board (Conner et al. 2023b; Mattheis et al. 2018). Similarly, researchers have argued that, despite its social justice–oriented potential, YPAR and similar initiatives do not always lead to changes, as youth's recommendations may go unheeded (Bertrand and Lozenski 2023; Brion-Meisels and Alter 2018; Call-Cummings et al. 2019; Domínguez and Bertrand 2023; Domínguez and Casanova 2023).

The disconnect between youth voice initiatives and youth influence in school decision-making beckons further exploration on the role of adultism. Adultism is a culprit regardless of the youth's positionalities outside of age and student status. This ideology of adult supremacy assumes that adults are inherently more developed and capable solely due to their age, giving them control over resources and decision-making in society (Dejong and Love 2015). Youth voice initiatives in schools face the additional hurdle of institutional student and teacher/school leader positions and adults' challenges to youth's credibility, further complicating possibilities for reciprocal relationships (Conner et al. 2023a; Domínguez and Casanova 2023). In addition, intersecting injustices of racism, heteropatriarchy, language, disability, wealth disparity, and more create interlocking webs of oppression for youth, in addition to adultism (Carter et al. 2016; González et al. 2015; Hillier and Kroehle 2023). Consider, for instance, studies on biases in school discipline and academic expectations, which indicate that teachers are more likely to view some groups of students of color as disobedient and academically struggling (Carter et al. 2016; Liou and Rojas 2018). Arguably, if

educators and administrators view students of color in this way, they are less likely to view them as capable fellow decision-makers.

Youth Voice and School Decision-Making during the COVID-19 Pandemic

Published studies on youth voice during the COVID-19 pandemic remain scant. However, there exists a growing body of research on pandemic crisis leadership at schools that suggests that students were largely excluded from formal educational decision-making. A perusal of articles discussed in a literature review on school leadership research in 2020 and 2021 in various countries (Brown et al. 2023), in addition to other publications, shows that an apparent increase in collaborative leadership during the pandemic did not often extend beyond staff (Grooms and Childs 2021; Thornton 2021). For instance, Stone-Johnson et al. (2023), in interviews with 26 principals in 14 US states, found that principals tended to rely on teacher groups for planning and leadership support. Relatedly, opportunities for students to participate in school governance apparently decreased in the Middle East, North Africa, and Europe during the pandemic (UNESCO and Council of Europe 2021). According to surveys of teachers in these regions, opportunities for students to participate in school governance decreased by 52%, with schools serving socioeconomically disadvantaged students more likely to have formal student governance structures suspended (UNESCO and Council of Europe 2021). However, some school administrators flouted the general trend and included students in their communication with stakeholders during the pandemic (Grooms and Childs 2021; Longmuir 2021; Thornton 2021). For instance, Thornton (2021), who interviewed 18 principals in New Zealand, reported that some administrators garnered feedback from students via surveys.

The scant research focused on youth involvement in decision-making during the pandemic showed that youth exerted varying levels of influence in schools and districts. One study examined a small city's youth advisory council, members of which launched a research project about the mental health challenges of youth in the city during the pandemic (Rocha et al. 2022). The youth's research in this case led to the city and associated school district hiring more social workers. Similarly, in another location, a school implemented teacher professional development activities and social-emotional learning strategies in response to the recommendations of a group of youth engaged in a school-based YPAR project during the pandemic (Ojeda 2022). However, at least one study pointed to the limitations of youth influence. During the COVID-19 pandemic, Conner et al. (2023b) conducted a study that closely aligned with our own, focusing on the roles of student members on school boards. Despite limitations such as speaking time restrictions and no voting rights, these students promoted important issues of equity and mental health and exercised both institutional and situational power, fluidly instantiating various

types of youth voice in ways that defied neat categorization into a typology. However, adults often countered these efforts with suppression tactics such as legal actions, emotional intimidation, tokenism, condescension, and exclusion to diminish student influence (Conner et al. 2023b).

Overall, the research on youth voice in the pandemic points to the importance of including youth during such a critical time. However, there is still a need for additional research on youth involvement in school decision-making in the pandemic. Our study aims to contribute to this area, specifically the inclusion of youth voice during a crisis.

Theoretical Framework

This study uses Mitra's (Mitra 2006; Mitra and Gross 2009) pyramid of student voice as its framework to examine the development of student voice opportunities throughout the pandemic at Sandoval School. The pyramid of student voice is a three-level typology of student voice activities, which encompasses listening, collaboration, and leadership. It describes the "youth development opportunities possible as student voice is increased in school" (Mitra and Gross 2009). This framework considers the order in which student participation tends to happen and how that relates to the opportunities available for youth development. In other words, as students move up the pyramid, the more possibilities exist for student leadership and the development of agency, which consequently benefits the youth. The pyramid's narrowing suggests that as students achieve greater agency, it becomes harder for the school to retain such a group because it goes against normative forces that define the traditional roles of school adults (Mitra 2006).

The largest section of the pyramid—"Being heard"—refers to adults listening to students' unique experiences at school; these differ greatly from the adults' experiences, as Mitra (2006) explained. In other words, students share their opinions, and adults listen and possibly act on them. The subsequent section—"Collaborating with adults"—entails the youth and school adults joining forces so that transformative changes are possible within the school setting. For instance, this could be the task of gathering data on school issues and implementing solutions (Mitra and Gross 2009). In optimal scenarios at this level, engaging students in identifying school problems and potential solutions serves as a reminder to school adults of the unique knowledge and perspectives that students possess (Mitra and Gross 2009).

The apex of the pyramid, labeled "Building capacity for leadership," represents the smallest and final tier. This level explicitly focuses on empowering youth to actively participate in leading the student voice initiative. It is the least common manifestation of youth voice, where students assume roles as critics and protesters within the school environment (Mitra and Gross 2009).

An expansion of Mitra's (2006) pyramid, proposed by Mansfield et al. (2012), included "students as data source," positioned beneath "being heard," with the incorporation of "students as co-researchers" alongside "collaborating with adults" in the same tier. The uppermost part of the continuum was labeled as the "undiscovered territory of student voice possibilities" Mansfield et al. (2012). Although both frameworks highlight the importance of youth voice, Mansfield et al.'s (2012) continuum introduces the idea of research collaboration and places a strong emphasis on unexplored possibilities. In contrast, Mitra's pyramid focuses on distinct levels of engagement and transformative actions within the community, without explicitly emphasizing research collaboration (Mitra 2006). Holquist et al. (2023), including Mitra as an author, also expand upon and problematize the foundational "pyramid" model, offering a more nuanced understanding that incorporates structures and relationships affecting student participation in schools. The framework consists of setting, focus, intent, access, representativeness, roles, and responsiveness, aiming to guide the development of student voice practices that extend beyond conventional feedback methods. This work challenges and broadens the current paradigms of student involvement in educational decision-making (Holquist et al. 2023).

Our study builds on and expands the existing scholarship on Mitra's (2006) student voice pyramid. It specifically examines youth voice during the pandemic, considering challenges faced by students in remote learning due to COVID-19. The study explores what types of youth voice opportunities emerged, their influence, and the constraints that arose. Our findings indicate that the pyramid is more dynamic than much previous scholarship has expressed.

Context

Sandoval School is a public school located in a metropolitan area in the United States. The school serves approximately 1,000 elementary, middle, and high school students. During the study period, approximately 75% of the school staff were Latine or other people of color.[2] The student body was approximately 85% Latine, 8% Asian American, 4% Filipino, and 2% Black. Sandoval School is located within a gentrifying, working-class, community of color that was especially hard hit in the height of the pandemic. Many students' parents worked outside the home, increasing the risk of COVID-19 infection and making online schooling challenging for some students, especially those entrusted with managing the schooling of younger siblings. The impacts of the pandemic among Sandoval School families corresponded to the nationwide trend of the triple pandemic of racism, economic injustice, and illness that especially affected Latine and Black communities, among other communities of color, while disproportionately

sparing white communities (Cornelissen and Hermann 2020; Lewis-Ragland 2021).

Sandoval School is within a large school district that operates with a top-down decision-making model. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, all schools in the district were conducted entirely online in the 2020–21 academic year, with the exception of just a few weeks at the end of the school year in which students had the option of returning in person. The physical school closure was in accordance with state law through March 2021 and then district policy through part of April 2021. The following school year was conducted entirely in person, with masking mandated at the county and district levels.

The school provided several avenues for student leadership and decision-making. Prior to the pandemic, the principal launched a YPAR group to examine the experiences of unaccompanied migrant youth. At the beginning of the 2020–21 school year, the school principal launched a student advisory board, open to any student who wanted to participate. The board conducted YPAR with the principal and two other adults about the effects of the pandemic and online learning for both students and teachers at the school. There were also student members on the state- and district-mandated governance council. Also, the school had a grade-level council for every high school grade. These were like student councils except that membership was completely open, with no maximum number of spots. And, finally, the school included many informal youth voice opportunities, such as within classes and through surveys that sought their reflections and input about the courses. We chose to study this school because of its unique approach to centering youth voice.

Methods

This qualitative study was informed by ethnographic methods (Anderson-Levitt 2006; Hammersley and Atkinson 1995). Several elements of ethnography were particularly central to our research design (conceived prepandemic), especially as related to participant observation, extended data collection, and local meaning-making. However, we encountered barriers to conducting in-depth participant observations due to pandemic-related challenges of student recruitment and the fact that there was little verbal interaction involving students in the online spaces (as described below). Data collection began in October 2020 and ended in August 2022. The most intensive data collection (involving interviews, observations, and artifact collection) unfolded in the 2020–21 school year, with continuing interviews and infrequent in-person school visits in the 2021–22 school year and the following summer. In the first academic year, all data were collected online via Zoom because school was conducted online. In the second year, data collection remained largely online.

Data Collection

A total of 39 participants were in the study. The participants included 23 students and 16 school adults. The students were in grades 7 through 12 and all were students of color, with Latine students comprising roughly 70% (see table 1). The adults included nine teachers; four certificated personnel, such as counselors, and three administrators. We conducted a total of 48 interviews, with 30 participants interviewed once and 9 interviewed twice. For those interviewed twice, there was one per school year. We used two semistructured interview protocols (Brenner 2006), one for youth and one for adults, each of which asked participants about their general views about youth participating in school leadership and decision-making, opportunities at Sandoval School for youth involvement in school-level decision-making, and whether all groups of youth were equally part of leadership and decision-making spaces. Most interviews were about 30 minutes, with some interviews lasting up to an hour. Each interview was transcribed using a transcription service.

In addition, we conducted 36 formal observations, most of which occurred in the 2020–21 school year, online via Zoom. Of these observations, 19 were in the student advisory board, 4 were in governance council meetings, and 2 were in grade-level council meetings. Oftentimes in these meetings, students had their cameras and audio off and "spoke" by writing in the Zoom chat. In contrast, adults usually turned on audio to speak and had their cameras on (with the exception of governance council meetings, in which many adults had their cameras and audio off as well). For these meetings, we took jottings that we later fleshed out (Emerson et al. 1995). And, finally, we collected 70 artifacts, mostly

TABLE 1

Student Participant Grade Levels, N = 23

Grade Level	Number of Student Participants
7th	1
8th	1 (also interviewed in 9th)
9th	4
10th	4 (3 also interviewed in 11th)
11th	7 (3 also interviewed in 12th)
12th	6

NOTE.—Participant numbers were counted in the year of the first interview if more than one interview occurred. No participant is counted twice if they participated in an interview in both years of the study.

in the first school year. These included student work, district documents, and meeting agendas.

Data Analysis

Our data analysis was iterative in nature, involving a combination of inductive and deductive approaches (Erickson 1986). Unfortunately, a longitudinal analysis was not feasible, despite the 2 years of data, because of the limited observations in the 2021–22 school year. We developed our coding scheme with our theory and the literature review in mind, but also stayed open to emerging codes. We had not set out to study youth voice during the pandemic. Indeed, the study had been conceived prior to it. However, approvals for the study were finalized in October 2020, at the height of the pandemic, in a school year that turned out to be almost entirely online in this district. Thus, some of our emerging codes were related to youth leadership and decision-making as related to this crisis and online learning. The final coding scheme included 6 parent codes and 49 child codes. For instance, some of our parent codes were *promoting youth voice*, *views/reactions to youth voice*, and *inhibiting youth voice*. Some child codes under *promoting youth voice* included *intentional diverse student recruitment* and *capacity building*.

After conducting several rounds of intercoder agreement (Miles et al. 2013) activities, we used MAXQDA qualitative software to code the interview transcripts and observation notes. We triangulated our findings by leveraging the three types of data from a range of participants.

Positionality

In this work, it has been important to consider our positionalities. Thainá identifies as a Brown Latinx cisgender woman who is a first-generation college student earning a PhD in educational leadership and policy. Melanie identifies as a white, cisgender woman who seeks to reflect on the fact that the oppression of people of color is the source of her privilege. Ashley identifies as a mixed race (Puerto Rican/white) cisgender woman, researcher, social justice educator, and community arts practitioner. Leyda identifies as a Latinx, cisgender Brown woman. She is Guatemalan-American and a first-generation college graduate whose experience in public schools spans more than 2 decades, as a teacher, principal, and researcher. In this research, two of the authors worked with youth at Sandoval School via the student advisory board, with one of these authors especially connected to the school. The insights of the authors of color and the ties to the school provided us a nuanced understanding of the data. Adding to the trustworthiness of our analysis, an author who did not participate in the student

advisory board and did not have ties to the school played a major role in the coding and overall analysis.

Limitations

One of the main limitations of this research is that it does not directly consider racism or other forms of oppression beyond adultism. In a separate article (Bertrand et al. 2024), we consider the ways that intersections of race, disability, and language influenced which youth at Sandoval School held more or less influence during the data collection period, finding that Black students, emergent bi/multilingual students, students with disabilities, and academically struggling students appeared to be less likely to hold formal leadership roles than other students in the school. In this article, we focus on the youth-adult/student-educator dynamics but understand that youth involvement in school decision-making is much more complex than this binary.

In addition, the study did not (1) follow Sandoval School longitudinally to determine the degree to which new youth voice practices persisted over time; (2) include video or audio recordings of meetings, because some individuals in these spaces were not study participants; (3) include rich interactional data between youth and adults, because these two groups used Zoom in different ways (with students usually communicating in the chat and adults communicating by speaking); or (4) include many participants in middle school grades.

Findings

Our analysis led to the emergence of three main findings that highlight the complex dynamics of youth voice: (1) youth voice initiatives increased leadership opportunities and collaboration, which spanned the levels of the pyramid of student voice (Mitra 2006; Mitra and Gross 2009); (2) diverse opportunities for youth input enhanced the influence of youth voice; and (3) some adults' views and actions constituted school-level challenges and limitations that impeded youth participation in school decision-making. Below we explore these three findings in depth, drawing connections to Mitra's (2006) pyramid of student voice.

New Avenues for Youth Voice Spanning the Pyramid

During the pandemic, Sandoval School witnessed a surge in youth voice opportunities, manifested via various initiatives. We found that these initiatives and aspects of them were situated at various levels of Mitra's (2006; Mitra and

Gross 2009) pyramid of student voice. In addition, the youth voice opportunities at these various levels functioned in a nonlinear, dynamic, and interactive manner.

Reflecting the base level of the pyramid (Mitra 2006; Mitra and Gross 2009), "being heard," surveying was a prominent avenue of youth voice in the pandemic, mentioned by 13 youth and 10 school adults in interviews. Though surveying students was not new at the school, its use greatly increased. Surveying provided students across the school a platform to share their thoughts on various aspects of their school experiences during the pandemic. Teachers and administrators often used surveying to gather youth input during the pandemic. Five students also mentioned teachers' practice of surveying, including Tara, a twelfth-grader. They commented: "Usually, they [teachers] make us do a Google form and it would ask us at the end, 'Oh, what's something that we can make this class even better or how we can help you.' We could write our ideas and usually they do take it into consideration."

As Tara asserted, teachers' surveys of students appeared to be a common practice. Also common were surveys generated by school administrators seeking input about the budget, the class schedule, and other school-wide concerns. These surveys provided opportunities for students to share feedback about varying levels of school practices, from the classroom to the school.

A youth-taught class and clubs provided opportunities for "collaborating with adults"—the middle level of the pyramid—and "building capacity for leadership"—the top level of the pyramid (Mitra 2006; Mitra and Gross 2009). The class, new during the pandemic, was an elective that was taught by a group of students with the guidance of a teacher. Each week, a subgroup of the student leaders would research a topic, meet with the teacher prior to class to discuss the content and pedagogy, and then teach/facilitate the class. As with this class, clubs also offered opportunities for youth-adult collaboration and youth leadership. One of these was the student advisory board, mentioned in the Context section, which will be discussed further below. Another was a new club called the Muslim Student Alliance. In the 2020–21 school year, two students cofounded this group, which had 10 to 15 members by spring 2021. As one of the founders, Tabari, explained, he and a friend launched the group to debunk negative depictions of Muslims in the media. This club certainly represented the top level of the pyramid, "building capacity for leadership," but the data are not sufficient to determine whether it also exemplified the middle level. A club that represented both levels was Students Speak Out, a chapter of a district-wide club in which students advocated for justice related to the overdisciplining of Black students and other students of color, gentrification, and immigration. During the pandemic, the group's leadership changed the focus of the club, as described by several youth club members, including Ofelia. She commented, "There was also a shift in what Students Speak Out wanted, so, basically, we were demanding a lot of resources

for students during this pandemic, like Wi-Fi, pass or fail grades, grab and go, which is basically like free meals for families. There was a lot of constant demanding in social media."

In this quote, Ofelia used the pronoun "we" to describe what the members of the club "were demanding," showing her and her peers' leadership and ownership of the decisions made in the group, reflecting "building capacity for leadership" (and possibly the middle level of the pyramid, depending on the interpretation of "we"). In addition, Students Speak Out appeared to provide a space for "collaborating with adults." Youth described this club, which existed prior to the pandemic, as a comfortable and collaborative space in which students did more speaking than the two adult facilitators. This collaboration is also illustrated through the words of one of the teacher sponsors of the club, who said, "That really was such an uplifting vehicle of hope, to be working with young people and to be working with other adults." Though we have no observational data from this space, the teacher's comment suggests youth-adult collective decision-making.

However, a given type of youth voice initiative was not necessarily confined to a certain level in the pyramid of student voice (Mitra 2006; Mitra and Gross 2009). Instead, the opportunities were dynamic and nonlinear. This was the case as related to clubs. For instance, the Students Speak Out club developed a survey for fellow students about returning to in-person schooling. As mentioned earlier, students who take a survey are "being heard." However, students who lead the development of a survey for their peers are "building [their] capacity for leadership." A member of Students Speak Out, Chloe, a twelfth-grader in the 2021–22 school year, explained the group's motivation for creating a survey: "We realized that no, like, students were, like, being involved in that decision, like, coming back to school. And so our club decided to create a survey where we surveyed the students from middle school to high school."

Students Speak Out members found that many students did not feel safe returning to school, a finding that the group presented to the school faculty. Thanks to Chloe and her peers' efforts, all students in grades 7 through 12 in the school gained new opportunities to share their views about schools reopening. In this way, the Students Speak Out survey provided some students with an opportunity to build their leadership capacity (the top of the pyramid) and provided a large number of students the opportunity to be heard (the bottom of the pyramid). This instance of youth voice/leadership exemplifies the nonlinear nature of how youth voice is manifested in educational spaces, including those spaces that provide intentional opportunities for students to leverage their leadership in meaningful ways.

Another group that created a survey was the student advisory board. Olivia, an eleventh-grader in the 2020–21 school year, described how the idea came about in a fall 2020 meeting of youth members and two adults, including one of the authors: "I think we all started talking about what we needed. . . . I think we all kind

of just got the idea like a group, and it just slowly started turning into, 'Well, we can make a survey.'" The result was a collaboratively created bilingual Spanish-English survey of middle and high school students about their experiences with online schooling and the challenges they faced. After the survey was administered, adults worked with youth advisory board members as coresearchers (Welton et al. 2021) to analyze the data and create a slide presentation of the findings to present at a school faculty meeting. In the meeting prior to a presentation to faculty, adults did most of the talking and questioning—using audio and video—and youth responded via the chat or with audio and no video. Thus, most of the interactions in this particular meeting could be categorized as "being heard." However, the group's presentation to the faculty could be charted in the middle and upper portions of the pyramid of youth voice (Mitra 2006; Mitra and Gross 2009). To small groups of teachers within a faculty meeting, the youth provided an overview of their findings, which showed peers' views about the online schedule; duties beyond school, including managing younger siblings' schooling; and recommendations for improvements. The youth focused on topics that could be beneficial for their peers' online schooling success, such as Wi-Fi hotspots, computers, school supplies, headphones, late work policies, class breaks, real-time feedback, music in class, meditation, yoga, college preparatory programs, and student clubs. The youth then talked with teachers around some questions, including "What can we do to make the job of teachers and students easier?" and "What are some ways we can make sure students are learning without overwhelming them?" This presentation, then, illustrated building capacity for leadership and hinted at possibilities for youth-adult collaboration. The dynamic intermixing of levels of the pyramid in the advisory board activities, ranging from being heard to building leadership capacity, was also evident later in the school year when the members decided to conduct focus groups of students.

Across the youth voice initiatives described above, there were varying avenues—spanning the levels of the pyramid of student voice (Mitra 2006; Mitra and Gross 2009)—for youth to influence the school's approaches to online schooling. As shown especially with the example of the student advisory board, types of youth voice across levels of the pyramid appeared to work in conjunction, in a nonlinear and dynamic manner.

The Influence of Youth Voice Opportunities

The multiplicity of youth voice opportunities—entailing types of youth voice spanning the pyramid—enhanced possibilities for youth to influence changes in the school's approaches to online schooling.

We found evidence of these enhanced possibilities for youth influence in the ways in which both youth and adult participants spoke of youth input and participation in generalities, rather than as associated with a given group or initiative. This suggests that both youth and school adults viewed youth input as ubiquitous. For instance, Belinda, an eleventh-grader and a member of the advisory board, noticed an overall increase in youth influence during the 2020–21 school year: "I think that this year has been one of the most important years for our school because the students' voices have been heard this year out of all the years I've been here." Distinguishing between the 2020–21 school year and the previous 2 school years, Belinda spoke of "students' voices" overall, unrelated to a specific initiative or group. Similarly, several school adults mentioned youth input in generalities. For instance, Tamara, a school adult, commented that gathering students' feedback about Zoom classes was "essential." She continued, "You really need frequent check-ins with the students. Because if they're not engaging, we won't see them. They're at home." In this way, Tamara acknowledged the importance of staying connected to students due to the inherent distance created by the pandemic. Similarly, another teacher commented that teachers overall were increasingly drawing upon student survey data to inform their practices. These comments from adults suggest that youth input was viewed as commonplace.

In addition, our analysis suggests that the multiplicity of youth voice opportunities across levels of the pyramid corresponded to youth exerting some influence on school decision-making during the data collection period. The student advisory board provides an example of this. As explained above, the students on the board engaged in research activities that could be charted at varying levels of the pyramid. The culmination of this research was a presentation to faculty, which two students viewed as spurring changes in teaching practices. One of the students was Olivia, who highlighted a specific change to late work policies. She recounted from her presentation to the faculty: "And the teachers were like, 'I told my kids that they weren't allowed to do that, but I can see that it's [a] really high [percentage of students in favor of teachers accepting late homework]. So, I feel like I should enter that more. Because most of my kids, they have a lot of late assignments.'" In other words, Olivia believed that teachers changed their minds about late work due to the presentation. If such changes did, in fact, occur as a result of the presentation, they were a result of youth voice stemming from all levels of the pyramid.

School adult participants did not directly connect the actions of the advisory board to changes in online teaching and schooling practices. However, several commented that youth in general influenced changes, such as related to the online schedule. For instance, Zaidy, a member of the leadership team, commented: "Recently we made a change to our instructional schedule and the teachers at the operations team wanted to know what students thought. So, we sent out a poll

and I think based on the poll results, it did help inform the decision-making process, that eventually the teachers made the decision, but they really considered student voice." In this quote, Zaidy referred to the student survey that was created by the leadership team, results of which influenced the schedule.

The advisory council students and Zaidy's comments point to their perceptions that youth input and participation influenced school decision-making. Relatedly, 13 school adult participants (out of 16) expressed support for youth input and participation in decision-making. And 19 youth participants (out of 23) described some level of participation in school decision-making, either their own or others'. Interestingly, in examples discussed in this subsection, and in many others, survey results—"being heard" on the pyramid—were involved. However, as described above, youth were also engaged in youth voice at the middle and upper tiers of the pyramid. Indeed, some of the surveys were generated, analyzed, and presented to faculty by youth. It is possible that including youth in faculty meetings and the governance council augmented the authority of student survey results in general. These examples, in the context of our data as a whole, suggest that the multiplicity of youth voice opportunities across levels of the pyramid served to strengthen the influence of youth input and participation in general.

Limiting Youth Influence on Decision-Making

Though there were multiple youth voice opportunities across levels of the pyramid, there were also school-level limits to youth influence on online schooling and other areas. These constraints arose at various levels of the pyramid.

One limitation was tokenism, which was mentioned or expressed by a few participants. For instance, two youth members of the governance council made comments that pointed to tokenism of youth. Fernando, an eleventh-grader, recalled that the administrators in the governance council "talk about the budget, bring up lots of data," but the student members "just sit there and say yes to everything." Ofelia, a twelfth-grader who was also part of the governance council, said, "We give them help in making decisions, but I feel like sometimes our votes aren't enough. Sometimes it's even hard to understand the language. We sometimes need it to be broken down. I think sometimes we're not given that space to vote as much as we should."

Ofelia's comment suggests that she believed youth on the council struggled to contribute to school decisions. In general, budget conversations were difficult given the layered and multifunded, multisourced nature of school budgets. Overall, there was an overwhelming amount of data not broken down or explained to students. Thus, students such as Ofelia and Fernando pointed out possible tokenism of youth participation in the governance council. In this example,

tokenism appeared to have arisen as related to collaborations with adults and possibly efforts at building youth leadership capacity, the middle and upper tiers of the pyramid.

There was also some evidence of co-optation. For instance, an administrator, Rosemary, explained that some school adults used students' viewpoints to justify their own agendas, noting: "I do think certain groups of people will take students' voice that maybe fits their own. Not in a selfish way, but just say, 'Well, I heard students say this.'" This example of co-optation within the middle tier of the pyramid reveals a potential pitfall of "student-adult collaboration": the misuse of student perspectives to further adult agendas, highlighting a misalignment between the intention of collaboration and its execution.

And, finally, there was evidence of some pushback from adults on youth involvement in decision-making. For instance, a few school adults voiced doubts about youth's credibility, mirroring prior research (Domínguez and Bertrand 2023; Domínguez and Casanova 2023). For instance, an administrator commented, "I always get challenged by this because I know in my heart, I think [listening to students' feedback] is right. But in practice, it's really tough. And as an adult and as someone older, I'm always thinking, 'Do they know what they're saying? Or do they know what to do?'"

Other school adults noted this stance from some colleagues, such as Karla, a teacher. She commented, "That's on the adults, of really being able to not dismiss the things that students say. . . . [Students] know what they're doing, and they know what they're asking for. They know what their experience is." In addition to doubts about youth's credibility, some school adults expressed fatigue with the amount of youth input during the pandemic. For instance, one teacher, Teresa, shared, "All these surveys right now, I feel like teachers kind of know kids are struggling. They [students] don't like the online thing. That's not new information." Thus she suggested that there was a glut of student survey data. Another teacher, Melissa, recalled hearing similar comments from teachers in response to student survey data, such as: "We already know these stories because we talked to the kids; we didn't have to do a survey to get these stories." Her wording indicated that several teachers had views like those of Teresa. These quotes suggest that some school adults questioned the amount of youth feedback via surveys. Furthermore, these statements invite further exploration into what teachers are learning from students during a crisis and how this knowledge is being communicated to the larger system to effect changes. The fact that teachers believed they knew this information but were not readily identifying what they were doing differently to address these student needs points to a break in the communication system and decision-making.

Overall, we found some evidence of incidences of tokenism and co-optation of youth input and participation, in addition to school adult pushback about youth input. These issues tended to occur within the middle and upper tiers of

the pyramid, where heightened youth influence is expected. Such constraints likely undermined youth's full participation in decision-making.

Discussion and Conclusion

Our analysis uncovered three main findings that show the intricate dynamics of youth voice at Sandoval School during the challenging times of the COVID-19 pandemic. The first was the rise of youth voice opportunities and collaborations that spanned the pyramid and appeared to work in conjunction with one another. The second was the augmented influence of youth voice when opportunities were diverse. The third was the presence of school-level challenges and limitations that arose with some adults' beliefs and behaviors. These findings provide insights into the multifaceted nature of youth participation during the pandemic and build upon the pyramid of student voice (Mitra 2006), which we further discuss below.

Our findings, in summary, showed how Sandoval School increased youth voice spaces in the pandemic, showcasing an increase in opportunities for student collaboration and engagement. Noteworthy initiatives, such as the student advisory board, appeared to span all three levels of Mitra's (2006) pyramid of student voice, demonstrating a concerted effort to incorporate students' diverse perspectives in the school's decision-making processes. The advisory board demonstrated how students collaborated with adults, built leadership capacity, and were heard through surveys. Similarly, the Students Speak Out club underscored the significance of collaboration between students and adults across multiple levels of the pyramid. These initiatives illustrated the school's commitment to providing structured avenues for youth input about online schooling, aligning with Mitra's (2006) framework. The holistic approach of such clubs, involving various levels of the pyramid, showed the interconnectedness and fluidity of youth voice types.

The multiplicity of youth voice opportunities at Sandoval School emerged as a factor in enhancing the influence of youth on decision-making processes related to online schooling during the pandemic. The inclusive approach, where youth input was considered ubiquitous rather than associated with specific groups, points to a recognition of the importance of youth input during the crisis of the pandemic. The involvement of students in decision-making, as well as the endorsement of youth input by school adults, further strengthened the influence of youth voice. Therefore, the increase in youth voice opportunities across various levels of the pyramid, driven by the pandemic, was beneficial in amplifying youth perspectives.

Although there was a surge in youth voice opportunities, our findings also shed light on school-level limitations and challenges. Tokenism, co-optation,

and pushback from some adults indicated potential obstacles, particularly at the middle and upper tiers of the pyramid. Instances where students felt their votes were insufficient or when their input was co-opted for adult agendas highlighted challenges associated with collaboration and building leadership capacity. Doubts about youth credibility echo previous research (Domínguez and Casanova 2023) on how adult response to youth voice can help or hinder school initiatives, particularly those that are driven by race and social justice. In addition, adults expressed student voice fatigue due to the abundance of youth input during the pandemic. We describe this phenomenon adults experienced as a consequence of diverse and increased levels of student voice, layered with other personal, professional, and social commitments, especially in times of crisis. These challenges suggest a need for continued efforts to bridge the gap between youth and adults in decision-making processes. Of note, our findings as related to these challenges examined school-level constraints only. As with most schools, the adults at Sandoval answered to district, state, and federal policies and leadership.

Our findings hold important theoretical and conceptual implications. Mitra (2006) proposed a hierarchical structure in the pyramid of student voice, assigning more power to youth as they ascend (Mitra and Gross 2009). Our study provides nuance to this concept in that, in our data, it was unclear whether the upper tiers indeed conferred more power on students. The youth voice opportunities at Sandoval shifted dynamically across the different levels of the pyramid, yet all seemed to contribute to broader school decision-making processes. Our data suggest that the higher levels of the pyramid did not necessarily correlate with increased influence for students. This is because, in our study, youth voice resembled more of a dynamic circle rather than a pyramid, in which the three levels were interconnected and frequently intermixed. We offer this circle, shown in figure 1, as a conceptual tool to analyze youth voice. In this Dynamic Circle of Youth Voice, we have included the headings from Mitra's (2006) pyramid but updated one of them: "Collaborating with adults" has become "youth-adult collaboration" to better reflect the potential of authentic reciprocity among and between youth and adults. This change also emphasizes the shared responsibility and partnership between both groups, rather than suggesting adults as the primary leaders of these collaborations. This figure also pays tribute to more recent iterations and critiques of the pyramid, as seen in Mansfield et al. (2012) and Holquist et al. (2023). Indeed, the circular nature of the figure points to the potential for increased responsiveness (as mentioned in Holquist et al. 2023) and new, currently unknown, iterations of youth voice (as mentioned in Mansfield et al. 2012). In our study, students in clubs exemplified the fluidity of the Dynamic Circle of Youth Voice by conducting surveys, associated with "being heard," and simultaneously collaborating with adults and building their capacity for leadership. Although Mitra's (2006) pyramid presents opportunities for student voice, it does not address the challenges of authentic shared decision-making. This circle addresses this issue, showing the dynamic

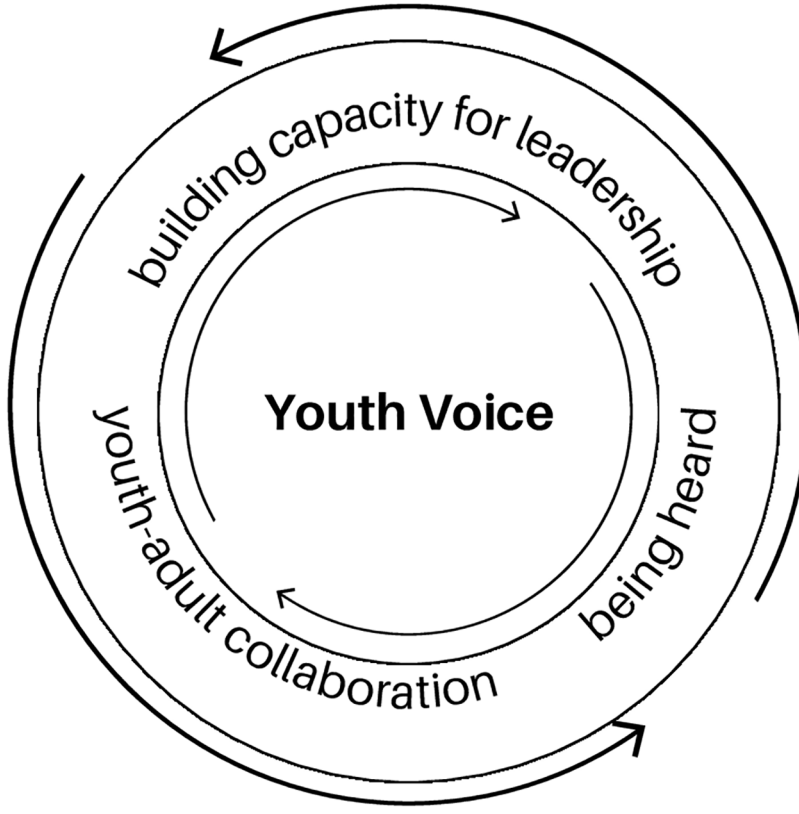

FIG. 1.—Dynamic Circle of Youth Voice.

nature of the potential for reciprocal collaborations, in which partnerships reflect both student and adult contributions fairly.

The theoretical and conceptual implications of our findings point to areas of potential future research. We recommend that future scholarship explore whether providing youth voice opportunities at various levels of the pyramid—or across areas of the circle—enhances the influence of youth. Investigating the impact of a dispersed approach to youth voice opportunities could offer insights into reshaping the dynamics of student involvement and influence. We are also interested in further exploring challenges adults encounter when engaging in shared decision-making with youth, such as student voice fatigue. In addition, future research could draw upon Indigenous, community-based scholarship with

intergenerational approaches to learning and change (Bang et al. 2016, 2020; Hausknecht et al. 2021). This shift adds further dynamism and avoids youth-adult dichotomies. And, finally, we suggest studies that examine the relationship between crisis conditions and the dynamism of youth voice opportunities.

In conclusion, the exploration of youth voice at Sandoval School during the COVID-19 pandemic revealed a complex interplay of opportunities, collaboration, and challenges. Mitra's (2006) pyramid of student voice provided a valuable framework to understand the nuanced dynamics at play. However, our analysis indicates that the hierarchical and static nature of a pyramid may not adequately illustrate the dynamic fluidity of youth voice. A circle may better capture the interconnected nature of youth voice opportunities observed in our findings, which painted a picture of a dynamic arena where collaboration, influence, and decision-making frequently made a transition across planes. Overall, this research points to an understanding of youth voice as fluid and adaptable.

Notes

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1. All proper names are pseudonyms.
2. Latine is a gender-neutral term, like Latinx.

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