

Reimagining Student Leadership Development in Urban Schools

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Summary

Urban Teen Summit (UTS) is a program that gives high school students the opportunity to amplify the voices of young leaders in search of viable solutions for their school and community progression. These student leaders illustrate efficacy and agency by identifying areas of improvement for their community and proactively develop and implement a community-wide, student-led conversation with stakeholders. Since the advent of UTS in 2016, more than 300 student leaders of color have been trained, and more than 2,000 students, parents, and community leaders have participated. The focus of UTS is to recruit students aged 15–18 years from high-poverty and underserved communities and give them the opportunity to acquire leadership skills that will benefit their communities in real time.

Keywords: leadership, urban leadership programs, leaders in schools, African American leaders, Latinx leaders

Subjects: Education, Change, and Development, Education, Cultures, and Ethnicities, Educational Administration and Leadership

Introduction

In an attempt to adequately address the leadership capacity and development of secondary students from urban, high-need schools, the school and community relationship is the catalyst for all stakeholders involved (Epstein, 2018). When schools engage their students, families, and communities, students develop a sense of urgency and agency to become the purveyors of community progression (Govan et al., 2015; Khalifa, 2012; Winchester, 2018). In a broader sense, educational leadership is nestled between policy and practice (Modeste et al., 2020).

Rudimentarily, the practice of community progression should involve student leadership development, with the intent to find viable solutions for the community's needs. When students take ownership of their community's development, they move beyond simply conversing about the problem toward advocacy and activism. On a continuum, students can move from self-serving or needs-based leadership to community-focused and compassionate leadership (Martinek et al., 2006).

Student leadership is critical to the success of the school and its surround community. Students, when given the opportunity, will not only engage their community but also discuss, negotiate, and implement viable solutions to the community's issues. Unfortunately, there is a sparse amount of research that addresses the effectiveness of leadership development for students of color in urban settings. In many cases, particularly in high-need schools, administrators,

teachers, and counselors spend much of their time on discipline prevention. Not enough attention is given to student leadership development, especially for African American and Latinx students. Furthermore, many educational leadership preparatory programs and associated research may discuss school and community relations or focus on the leadership relationship between the principal and teachers but do not address the nuanced leadership development of students in urban districts (Eckert, 2019; Lárusdóttir & O'Connor, 2017; Lavery & Hine, 2013).

In one such oral history project for urban students, Griffen and Greene (2019) illustrate how students can be purveyors of their own leadership development when given the opportunity to lead—in this case, conducting action research and making policy recommendations based on their findings. In Griffen and Greene's (2019) research, there is an adjustment from specific leadership roles and responsibilities to distributed leadership—that is, the practice of leadership. Although we examine distributed leadership further in this article, we highlight an initiative called P.A.M. Outreach Urban Teen Summit (UTS), which places students in the position of campus and community leaders by engaging stakeholders and creating a community call to action (Figure 1). It is this *collective agency* that amplifies students' voices to create lasting change that goes beyond simple rhetoric (Kirshner, 2009; Walsh et al., 2019; Weiner, 2003; Winchester, 2018).



Figure 1. Student leadership by design training session. Urban Teen Summit founder, Paula Monroe, poses with student leaders and school administrators, LBJ High School, Austin, Texas.

Source: Paula Monroe <<https://pammediaoutreach.org>>.

Most important, with the advent of UTS, we can examine the role that democratization of school leadership plays. Principals can distribute and delegate their authority (distributed leadership) to not just the faculty and staff but also students on campus. In turn, students learn through active participation (participatory learning).

For the purpose of this article, we closely examine modes of school leadership democratization through distributed leadership, the importance of participatory learning through UTS leadership training, and how the school and community can collaborate to create sustainable initiatives such as UTS, where all stakeholders can be active contributors to the community's development. We explore the background and the process of implementation of UTS in schools. We also discuss the types of democratized leadership styles employed by many principals, including distributed and participatory leadership, which are aligned with the methods of UTS. Last, we discuss considerations for secondary administrators regarding the potential utility of this model in helping develop student leaders of color in urban settings.

Implementation of the Urban Teen Summit

The UTS was created by Paula A. Monroe Media Outreach in 2016 to help students engage community stakeholders by creating a summit rooted in the community (P.A.M. Media Outreach, 2020). Since its inception, UTS has served more than 1,000 students and has trained more than 120 student leaders to lead their respective communities. UTS leaders range in age from 15 to 18 years and are typically high school juniors and seniors. Currently, there are five high schools participating in south Texas. They are in discussion to incorporate some of the middle schools in the feeder patterns to build a pipeline of success throughout the community. The goal of UTS is to empower high school youth in developing a strong local community. Teachers, counselors, and administrators are critical in the recruitment of students for UTS. As Kotter (2002) has noted, principals and campus leaders must create a sense of urgency, build buy-in, and develop a coalition that will champion this initiative.

It is highly suggested that student participation and recruitment are not simply relegated to students who are traditionally engaged (i.e., student government members, athletes, band members, advanced placement students, gifted/talented students, etc.) (Figure 2). What makes UTS work is that schools recruit from a cross-section of the student demographics and are intentional about attracting and retaining students who are traditionally disengaged. Due to the nature of the conversations during training and the UTS event, students who participate build a bond and rapport that supersede their high school positions or titles.



Figure 2. Planning and preparation session. Urban Teen Summit founder, Paula Monroe, poses with student leaders and school administrators, Memorial High School, San Antonio, Texas.

Source: Paula Monroe <<https://pammediaoutreach.org>>.

Students first participate in a 9-week training with staff members of P.A.M. Outreach Urban Teen Summit during the school day (Figure 3). Throughout the training, students discuss important issues in their community and how they will continue the dialogue on the day of the summit with community leaders. After they have discussed their perspectives on the issues, they develop questions for the expert panelist for the teen summit event. Student leaders are then assigned to subcommittees to plan the UTS. Some of the subcommittees (or roles) include media and promotions, and event operations. Students are now charged with the responsibility to promote the UTS event. Students create flyers, do a social media blitz, mention the UTS in the morning announcements, solicit friends from other organizations, and even join their school leaders in an interview on the local news station to promote the event to the general public (Figure 4).



Figure 3. Trainings by the founder—the beginning stages of the program. Urban Teen Summit students participate in a 9-week leadership training to prepare for the Urban Teen Summit event.

Source: Paula Monroe <<https://pammediaoutreach.org>>.



Figure 4. Media promotion of the Urban Teen Summit. Urban Teen Summit student leaders join County Sheriff Javier Salazar and local business owner Eddie Chapman at the local news station to promote the upcoming summit.

Source: Paula Monroe <<https://pammediaoutreach.org>>.

Day of the Event

On the day of the event, student leaders oversee the sign-in process, usher all participants throughout sessions, and lead and guide the discussions within the breakout sessions. During these breakout sessions, students act as moderators and mediators between the students and parents, school, and community experts. Community leaders who are conversant with the issues are invited as experts to continue the dialogue that started in the 9-week training sessions. Some of these participating stakeholders include the local chief of police, the district attorney, the county sheriff, members of the city council, local business owners, educators (high school and college), ministers, community organizers, activists, parents, and peers (Figure 5). Some of the topics discussed include police relations, youth activism in school and the community, entrepreneurship, relationships with churches and civic organizations, and peer-to-peer mentoring.



Figure 5. Community and police engagement and collaboration. San Antonio, Texas, Police Department Chief of Police, William McManus, engages in discussion of community policing at the Urban Teen Summit.

Source: Paula Monroe <<https://pammediaoutreach.org>>.

The outcome of the summit is a “call to action” that helps build a platform for the students to interact with the community by bringing stakeholders together to find feasible solutions for issues faced in the community. Subsequently, students start other grassroots initiatives such as community forums, follow-up meetings, and peer-mentoring groups with an aim to continue the empowerment and engagement of youth in discussions and relationship building with community stakeholders (Figure 6).



Figure 6. Student-led discussion and solution-building with community leaders. Urban Teen Summit student leaders present a call to action for community stakeholders after discussion.

Source: Paula Monroe <<https://pammediaoutreach.org>>.

Sense of Urgency for Students in Urban Communities

Recent education research regarding urban school leadership suggests some urban youth have difficulty in a myriad of areas, including entering the workforce, learning technical (hard) skills, socialization into the workplace, conversational norms, and participation in public dialogues (Alexander & Hirsch, 2012). Furthermore, research has shown that urban students are involved in a limited number of school organizations, and few receive the opportunity to practice leadership skills (Anderson & Kim, 2009).

The UTS program is a formalized process that provides students the opportunity to perform in leadership positions within the school and the community. The 9-week commitment of discussion, planning, and positive adult interactions provides tangible skills for urban youth. Formalized programs such as UTS are beneficial for all communities but especially urban communities. Parkhill et al. (2018) posited that students develop their well-being, personal leadership style, and individual identity through the empowerment of leadership development. Further research on a national sample of students who participated in leadership programs determined that it is necessary for students to learn the soft skills in the areas of communication, leadership, and team management as prerequisites for a quality education (Rosch et al., 2017). According to Omoth (2020), employers seek individuals who possess specific soft skills, including (a) the ability to use creativity in solving problems or dealing with adversity, (b) the ability to communicate with others, (c) the capability to reach higher levels of achievement by learning new skills, (d) having the emotional intelligence to perceive and evaluate one's own emotions as well as those of others, (e) the ability to collaborate with others, and (f) possession of leadership

skills that make the team better. The National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE, 2019) calls these soft skills competencies. According to NACE (2019), students should have the following eight competencies prior to engaging in work and/or attending college: critical thinking/problem-solving, oral/written communication, teamwork/collaboration, digital technology, leadership (including interpersonal skills), professionalism/work ethic, career management, and global/intercultural fluency. Global and intercultural fluency entails the ability to work with ethnically diverse individuals of all ages, races, and genders. Students who possess these soft skills are considered better prepared for the workforce and better prepared for leadership opportunities and positions inside and outside of school.

Conversely, Kunreuther and Thomas-Breitfeld (2017) argued that there are biases that “hobble” people of color and may create obstruction through the leadership pipeline. This is certainly a point of contention in the history of education in America. Anyon (1997) and Lee and Burkam (1992) proposed societal biases have created inequities of opportunities for students of color. Darling-Hammond (2010) proposed that historically, the marginalization of students of color has been well documented, and it continues today. Students of color are often maligned based on a plethora of factors. According to Ford (2011), students have been treated inequitably based on race, ethnicity, age, social class, and language. Algava (2016) states that students have also been marginalized by racism and poverty. Thus, students in urban settings often do not have the opportunities to learn and practice leadership skills in real-world applications (Anderson & Kim, 2009) such as provided by UTS.

Donna Ford’s (2011, 2013) voluminous research on gifted education examines the continued disparities of students of color in gifted and talented classrooms across the educational landscape. Moreover, Ford (2011) opines that even when students are in the gifted and talented courses, they are often ignored, which leads to persistent underachievement and underrepresentation in advanced academic programs. The low socioeconomic status (SES) in schooling aligns with school success as well as the cognitive functions of students. Foster and Tillman (2009) note that “low SES contributes to educational resource limitations (e.g., poor schools, lack of educational materials, and lack of support resources for school persistence, etc.)” (p. 173). Chambers (2009) calls the lack of education for all students a *receivment gap*, suggesting the problem is with structures and inputs rather than students and outputs. These differences show up in the achievement gap for students of color. Too many students in urban schools wear the “scarlet letter” of being poor, African American, Latinx, or ESL. Thus, they are often left trying to find a way through or out of the educational maze as they navigate and negotiate high school while attempting to avoid the bigotry of low or no expectations (Scott et al., 2021).

Building a Culture of Empowerment

Even with the dire forecasts, Foster and Tillman (2009), along with Griffen and Greene (2019), propose that it is possible to build a culture of empowerment via leadership in schools. Anderson and Kim’s (2009) research on urban students determined students want to have leadership experiences that are organized, fun, interactive, and provide real-world application.

Furthermore, students in Anderson and Kim (2009) study preferred the leadership activities to occur within the school and to connect to leadership skills they will utilize in the future. Students in UTS are in the liminal space between childhood and adulthood. In particular, these students of color in the urban community are presented with opportunities to be involved in making decisions for the good of their communities. The program requires participation in community services as a way to engage students in leadership roles (Figure 7). Thus, it is of utmost importance to build leadership capacity in students.

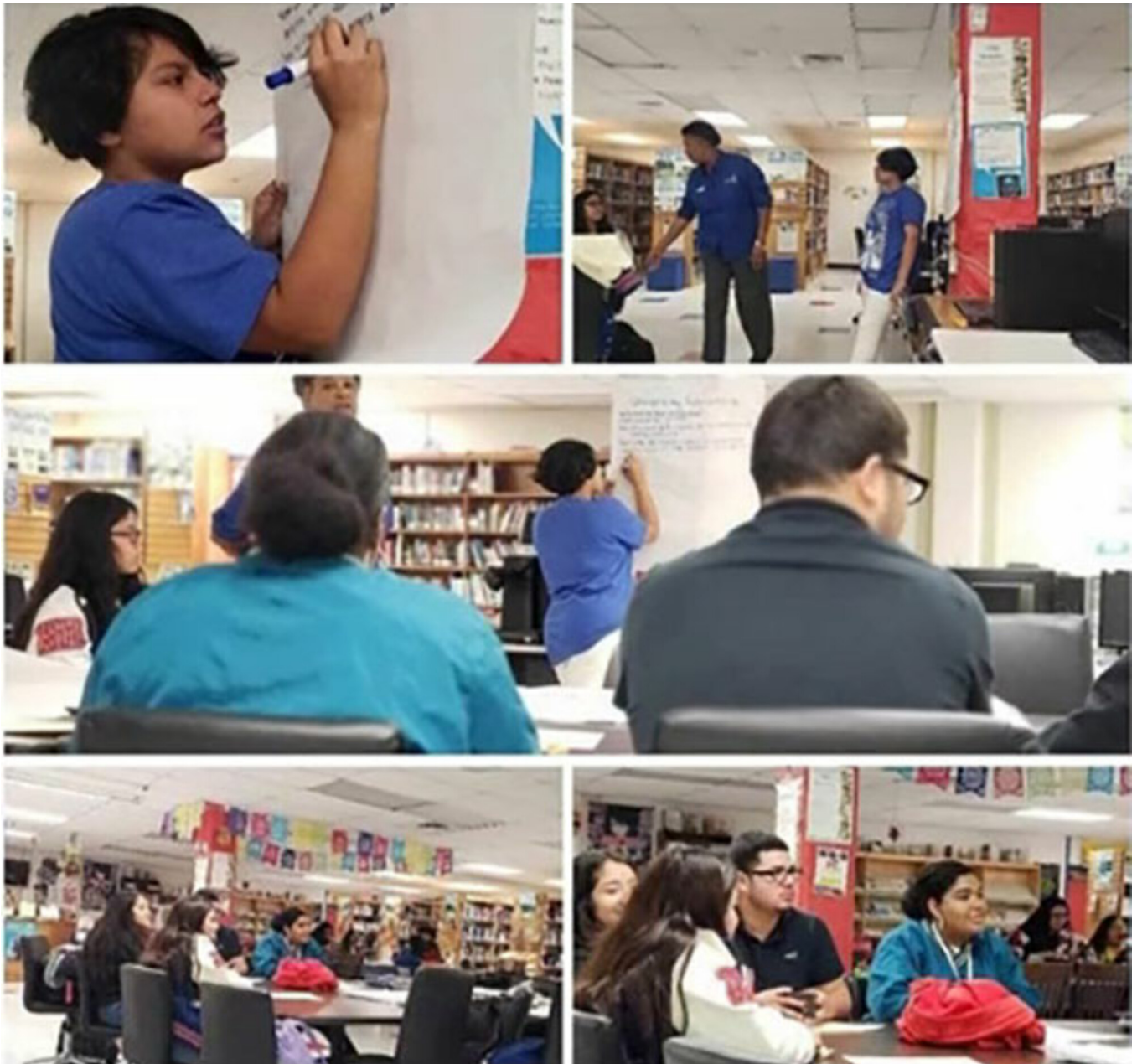


Figure 7. Final training week prior to Urban Teen Summit. Urban Teen Summit students participate in a 9-week leadership training to prepare for the Urban Teen Summit event.

Source: Paula Monroe <<https://pammediaoutreach.org>>.

Students develop their well-being, personal leadership style, and group and individual identities through the empowerment of leadership development (Parkhill et al., 2018). Providing opportunities for leadership for students of color is imperative. However, having students participate in authentic social research, rather than be the “object” of the story, can give students power over situations and circumstances (Grover, 2004). Grover (2004) suggested students do not listen to us as adults because we do not give them “power and voice” to be heard (p. 81). However, students should be active participants, with opportunities to lead, rather than be passive gatherers of knowledge. Griffen and Greene (2019) argued for collaboration of urban schoolteachers to empower students as a way to promote social consciousness and student advocacy. Furthermore, Griffen and Greene (2019) determined that

when students are in school and authentically engaged in practices that promote social justice and student advocacy, they are less likely to engage in activities that lead to suspension or expulsion. Engaging students in social consciousness and grassroots student advocacy connects students to their school and community. Although these programs were not designed specifically to address student behaviors, the faculty and staff found that such programs mitigate academic, social, and behavioral factors that lead to negative student outcomes. (p. 9)

The most important factor to consider is that today’s youth are tomorrow’s leaders in every aspect of society. How do we, as citizens, want and need to prepare our future leaders? Even more important, if we do not prepare future leaders for imminent endeavors, such as work, college, careers, and family, what type of individuals will inhabit our communities? It is imperative that we consider the implications and ramifications of lack of training opportunities for all students.

Every stakeholder and school constituent has a role to play in the leadership development of students, if they so choose, beginning with school administrators and teachers. Lavery (2012) contends school principals have the most important position of authority by ensuring students have the opportunity for leadership positions:

By virtue of their status, school principals are in a preeminent position to influence the vision of student leadership and leadership development exercised in their schools. They ultimately decide what human and financial resources will be allocated to student leadership. They—through their words and actions—model leadership behavior for students (and staff). Moreover, they—by their level of involvement—indicate to the school community the degree to which student leadership is valuable and worthwhile. In such ways, school principals—perhaps more than anyone else—affect the culture of student leadership in the school. (p. 42)

School administrators are often the main gatekeepers to school programs, plans, and policies, particularly regarding obtaining resources for allocation to students. However, administrators cannot lead by themselves. Thus, it would provide better traction if there were a team of individuals to shoulder the responsibilities for inclusion of students of color. Foster and Tillman

(2009) suggest school leaders consider the perspectives of students of color that contribute to the students' academic engagement and achievement. School principals should also develop, nurture, advance, and empower other leaders on campus, including teachers.

Democratization of Leadership

Regarding shared governance in schools, there is considerable information on the decentralized model for teacher empowerment. In order to encourage teacher buy-in and ensure that decisions regarding what happens in classrooms are made by those closest to the classrooms, many principals are turning to a master teacher or instructional facilitator model in order to democratize leadership on their campuses. Innately, leadership is associated with power and dominance, which are inextricably linked to our nation's history of patriarchy and authoritarianism: Leaders can affect the entire culture of those they manage, decreasing democracy and fruitful dissent (Kostas & Bogdan, 2020). While employing teacher teams and master teachers that contribute to the development of the campus as a whole, it is that this does not relieve leadership, namely the principal, from their managerial duties. Master teachers should be empowered to develop the learning and instruction of the school, but tensions rise if they are forced into managerial roles (Liljenberg, 2015). Democratizing leadership on the school campus by employing master teachers to facilitate planning, coach instruction, and serve as teacher leaders lessens some of these associations, improving campus culture and allowing excellent teachers to do what they do best: share their knowledge. Master teachers are tasked with developing and motivating other teachers, which contributes to retention and ultimately student achievement (Moore, 2015).

Qualification for a master teacher ranges from an award or accolade to a definitive number of years in the classroom (Trimmer et al., 2017). Instructional facilitators are in a coaching role and sometimes have a reduced class load so that they have more time to observe instruction and provide feedback. Receiving instructional feedback from a master teacher or instructional facilitator allows teachers to improve their practice without the feedback becoming a part of their evaluation. Non-evaluative feedback can sometimes prove more meaningful because teachers are able to be completely honest about their struggles or misgivings without fearing negative consequences. For the same reason, master teachers are often in charge of facilitating professional learning communities. Teacher leadership can be formal, as in the case of master teachers who are identified and recognized by administration, or informal as interaction between teachers lends itself to the emergence of leadership (Lin et al., 2018). Their leadership provides expertise and creates an environment in which teachers believe they can speak freely, ultimately encouraging collaboration. On the contrary, this delegation of tasks from administrators to teachers may cause a loss of specificity in translation. This is a double-edged sword in that a master teacher's classroom perspective contributes to their view of initiatives and expectations, which can enhance the school's goals by providing insight to administration. At the same time, the master teacher may serve as an intermediary whose interpretation of leadership's message may differ as it is passed to other teachers.

Democratizing leadership roles by delegating certain responsibilities to master teachers has many benefits, but they come at a price. As teacher-leaders, master teachers require additional time to perform their duties. If not released from enough teaching duties, this task can seem daunting. In addition, because master teachers are sometimes paid a stipend or have some other financial incentive, they are held to a higher standard regarding assessment and accountability. Maintaining their role may depend on their evaluation or the test scores of their students.

Distributed Leadership

Distributed leadership is often used in organizations that value collaboration and understand the importance of capitalizing on the strengths of individuals. This model allows for multiple stakeholders to use their unique areas of expertise to contribute to a common goal, sharing accountability and responsibility with the organization as a whole (Pak & Desimone, 2019). By decentralizing power, distributed leadership increases staff ownership of organizational values; the increased involvement of all stakeholders, including students, promotes buy-in and a feeling of empowerment. This also develops students' leadership capacity by amplifying their voices and making them active contributors to the progression of the school's culture and climate (Fielding, 2004; Mansfield, 2014). Although this is a way to provide students with exposure to professional conversations and a team mindset, it also provides the school with feedback. Other stakeholders may believe that a particular initiative is improving student morale, but receiving feedback directly from students is a way to ensure the support is being received, not just perceived. An important distinction is that this distributed leadership requires leaders and staff to form an interdependent work environment, not simply delegate tasks (Spillane, 2005). Randomly reassigning tasks is ineffective if a team is distributing tasks perfunctorily without the intention to delegate authority. In addition, not distributing responsibility with purpose may cause teachers to believe that they are not being treated fairly or that there is a centralization of power (Pak & Desimone, 2019). Principals must set titles aside and emphasize the strength in collaboration; it is the interaction between stakeholders that produces quality work.

Releasing control and promoting democratization of power can make some leaders uneasy. Distributed leadership, particularly if lacking a clear common goal, risks inconsistency. To eliminate variability, the principal must err on the side of being democratic, not authoritarian, and lead through communicating the goals and values of the organization. In this way, multiple stakeholders can contribute in their areas of strength because leadership is less directive and more people-focused (Pak & Desimone, 2019). There has been a shift in the roles of school leaders, leaving behind the managerial role for that of transformational leadership. Although administrators do serve as managers within the organization, transformational leadership builds on the culture of the school, which is the unifying factor that brings a campus together around the mission and vision of the organization (Boncana, 2014).

Distributing leadership to teachers increases their academic optimism, which is the combination of teachers' abilities to be self-sufficient, trust their community and stakeholders, and hold students to high standards. Teachers with increased academic optimism are able to positively affect student achievement. This shows a linear relationship between distributed leadership and

student achievement. Making teachers an integral part of the decision-making process through distributed leadership promotes unity and collaboration within the organization. Teachers share in the accountability of the organization, increasing their buy-in and supporting professional growth. Distributed leadership increases a sense of commitment and belonging, which positively affects student achievement in a number of ways: reduced turnover, positive classroom culture, and quality plans built by teams instead of individuals. The availability of leadership opportunities is one of the strongest predictors of academic optimism and teacher job satisfaction (Alenezi, 2019; Torres, 2019).

Participatory Learning

Participatory learning (PL) invites participants to actively engage in the learning process. PL is a collaborative activity that fosters mutual learning and cooperation. PL is constructed by and with the learner, rather than something done to the learner. Providing relevant skills during the impressionable teenage years gives students the opportunity to develop the requisite skills necessary to be successful in life, work, college, and the community (NACE, 2019). Similar to Griffen and Greene's (2019) oral history course, Grover (2004) suggests that students in the 16- to 18-year-old age range be provided authentic opportunities that allow them to

(1) formulate or suggest research problems or discuss their ethical implications; (2) do social research on questions of concern to them with or without the assistance of adult experts on research process; (3) contribute to the shape of data interpretations formulated by adults about children; (4) provide data regarding their personal reflections on the topic studied or their experience as a research participant; or (5) provide input on what should be the policy implications, if any, of the work. (p. 81)

It is necessary to ensure PL includes activities that pique the students' interests but that are also realistic and relevant to community issues and needs. Cahill (2006) suggested these activities can build skill sets to include critical thinking skills and skills development. Activities include role playing, small group discussions, intergroup dialogues, and specific games designed with problem-solving exercises that can be applied to community situations (Cahill et al., 2014). Having a student-centered approach can assist in building self-confidence, along with ethical and moral skills, for young adults.

Kirshner (2009) used the term collective agency to describe the social and relational dividends of individuals, students, schools, and stakeholders working together toward common goals. Kirshner (2009) continued to examine "the ways in which a social action campaign became a venue for participants to articulate and enact different ideas about the individuals' relationship to civil society" (p. 417). Students are rising to the challenge of working together to discuss and take action to solve problems in their communities, when provided the leadership, opportunity, and chance (Griffen & Greene, 2019; Kirshner, 2009; Kysa et al., 2006). Just as students did in UTS, it was determined that the best place to start was with the students and what the students considered the most pressing problems they were facing.

School and Community Relations

Partnerships between neighborhood communities and the campuses that serve them are essential to both community and school success. The relationship between a community and its public schools supports student learning, improves the school environment and culture, and strengthens the surrounding neighborhoods and families. The school community comprises many stakeholders within the community, and as Griffen and Greene (2019) purport, urban-defined schools are at a distinct disadvantage due to areas of high poverty, crime, and unemployment. It is important to note that the idea of “school and community relations” can vary dramatically depending on the specific needs of the community (Stefanski et al., 2016). For example, in more affluent neighborhoods, school and community relations typically refer to the volunteer efforts of the parents. The relationship requires elements of privilege, such as typical work hours or the ability to take time off work. Participation in extracurricular activities and other traditional activities, such as parent–teacher meetings, parent–teacher association membership, and fundraisers, is also viewed as a part of the community’s relationship with the school (Watson & Bogotch, 2015).

In some communities, but certainly not all that experience poverty, the school provides health and human services. This holistic, wraparound service approach has illustrated the positive impact of school and community collaboration on students’ mental health, self-efficacy, academic achievement, and socioemotional outcomes (Eber et al., 2002; Hill, 2020; Rosch et al., 2017). To be most effective, Hill (2020) purports all stakeholders involved in the wraparound services for students must build and foster strong relationships; share resources, results, accountability, and high expectations; identify and utilize the community’s strength; and embrace diversity. These relations can prove to be mutual partnerships, with parents maintaining high academic expectations, open lines of communication, and structured home lives for their children.

Family environment, not necessarily poverty, is an important determining factor of student success. This nontraditional contribution is often overlooked by the school, creating a “culture of power” that also overlooks Black and poor students. Researchers such as Stefanski et al. (2016) and Watson and Bogotch (2015) suggest that schools will perpetuate the culture of power in society if they do not make an effort to value the lived experiences and cultures of the students they serve. Involving students in developing civic leadership within urban communities can be useful with regard to future scholarship opportunities, preparing them for adulthood, and empowering students of color in becoming community-minded leaders (Griffen & Greene, 2019; Liles et al., 2017; Sorkin, 2018).

Implications for Students of Color

As educational and community leaders, it is incumbent upon us to make sure we exercise this distributed leadership and give our students opportunities to lead while ensuring career and college readiness. When seeking employment, it is often the soft skills (interpersonal

communication, connection with thoughts and people, empathy, motivation, and team-building ability) that give applicants the edge (Gruzdev et al., 2018; Weiss, 2019). Although not the primary focus of UTS, student participants learn leadership skills that will be indispensable to any organization. Employers are looking for degree professionals with degrees who have the ability to resolve conflict and problem-solve. When schools fail to prepare their graduates with the skills employers seek, they are contributing to pay disparities (Fogg & Harrington, 2011). According to Black et al. (2006), men of color are already disproportionately paid compared to their White counterparts. Leadership initiatives such as UTS may help combat these institutionalized discriminating factors from compounding in that the findings of this study suggest an increase in confidence, soft skills, leadership skills, and personal voice.

Equipping students with these skills and attributes prior to entering the private or public sector presents the possibility of them having an advantage over others who lack such skills, even in lieu of having post-secondary education. UTS allows students to learn how to plan, coordinate, collaborate, maintain civility during discussions, problem-solve, present, and lead. This article focuses on students who possess leadership potential that is recognized by the professionals surrounding them. Because of this, the skills that they obtain during their participation in UTS will not only affect their success directly but also indirectly affect the peers they currently influence, as well as those they will influence in the future.

UTS gave many students a purpose and leadership skills that go beyond the confines of a classroom; now they seek to preemptively solve problems within their respective communities (Scott et al., 2021). As some students discussed, they were able to mentor others and help usher them to their educational goals. Other students discovered their voice and subsequently decided to expand their leadership opportunities. Student leadership self-efficacy improved. They believed they could now lead in other areas.

Discussion

The possible effects of a leadership initiative such as UTS are exponential. This program enables students to grow their soft skills; increase their social-emotional awareness; and receive the support they need to grow into active, well-rounded citizens (Scott et al., 2021). Although it is evident that students of color disproportionately receive a higher number of discipline referrals compared to their peers, programs such as UTS can help change this narrative (Okonofua & Eberhardt, 2015; Skiba et al., 2011). By providing leadership initiatives such as UTS, a campus can increase the social-emotional awareness of its students through first educating students about their voice and then supplying them the information and resources they need to be a larger, more influential part of their community. This can have career readiness implications as well. Many employers seek prospective employees who possess the soft skills (interpersonal communication, connection with thoughts and people, empathy, motivation, and team-building ability) that give applicants the edge (Gruzdev et al., 2018; Weiss, 2019). Furthermore, there are some noncognitive, emotional intelligence-related factors that can predict college success, such as empathy, social responsibility, flexibility, and impulse control (Roderick et al., 2009; Sparkman et al., 2012).

The feeling of being an integral part of the community creates a sense of responsibility to something larger than oneself (Scott & Sharp, 2019). UTS is an excellent example of a program that helps students come to better know and understand themselves and, in turn, those around them (Mansfield, 2014). This awareness presupposes students will also understand their need to contribute beyond their respective communities. Through the UTS initiative, students develop emotional intelligence, personal voice, and a sense of responsibility to community progression (Scott et al., 2021).

Conclusion

It is our hope that this article helps school leaders (i.e., superintendents, principals, counselors, and teachers) as well as community partners exercise distributed leadership by examining ways they can develop student leaders of color. Because local elected officials, law enforcement leaders, as well as business owners participate in this program, school officials can see the impact of community-based partnerships on the development of urban youth. This can also help inform educational preparatory programs on the importance of community and school relations and the critical roles teachers and administrators play in the development of student leadership as they interface with the community (Epstein, 2018; Epstein & Sanders, 2006; Fiore, 2016). In addition, this initiative will also help school board members and other policymakers prioritize resources for solutions that are student-centered.

Finally, Schoorman (2016) underscores the need for universities to go beyond *researching* schools in the community and to *partner* with community-based organizations in an effort to provide a holistic pipeline for all students. UTS has incorporated an educational component that involves college and university professors, state school board members, policymakers, leaders in law enforcement, and other church and organizational leaders in the community. This is where our academicians can collaborate and consolidate the resources of the university (grants, service/experiential learning opportunities, and research findings) to operationalize substantive change in the community.

That change can materialize into more grant monies, after-school programming, student mentorship, or the establishment of a recruitment component for prospective teachers of color. Because many of the students are high school juniors and seniors, this collaboration with the local universities can also create a seamless pipeline of engagement that demystifies the role of the professoriate, especially for students in urban school districts. These high school students can see that higher education is attainable because they are being mentored and coached by university students and faculty. Furthermore, these student leaders of color will not only hear about and discuss the changes needed within their communities but also can be the purveyors of the change they seek, starting with their leadership role in their school's UTS.

Further Reading

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