

You Matter: Empowering Youth Voices in Schools

Madeline Keo¹

¹ UC Berkeley

High School

Shortly after I turned 17, I was elected to my school board as the student representative for the district. Before joining the board, I steered clear of schoolwide leadership positions, viewing them as nothing more than popularity contests for who could plan the best dance. I was highly involved in other clubs, like our school's genders and sexualities association and environmental club, but only wanted to participate in positions that would enact change. Then, I discovered that students could join the school board as student representatives. Unlike other school leadership opportunities, the student representative position offered me what I perceived as the opportunity to work directly with school and district leaders to make a true difference in my school and the community that supported it. I was wrong.

However, at the end of every board meeting, I was expected to discuss school spirit days and school morale for a few minutes. It seemed to me that my youth meant I was not to be taken as seriously as the other board members, and I felt as though I was more of a figurehead for their spirited, happy students, rather than someone who wanted to improve situations at school. I joined the board to promote change for student wellbeing. While I was doing what was expected of me as a figurehead, I was also privately emailing our school board's financial chair asking for the fiscal report of the district, listening closely to the board's discussions regarding board member's per diem for meals during conferences, and noticing that our school's mental health budget was outrageously low. I became especially interested in the discussion of average daily attendance and its role in determining school funding. I learned about Special Education Local Plan Areas (SELPA) and their impact on funding for the district. I discovered that our average daily attendance in part influenced how much money our schools received. It felt as though we were viewing students as commodities. I was appalled that we were pushing chronically absent students to attend school, but were not thinking seriously about why they weren't coming to school.

As a result of these discoveries, I took the initiative to survey half my student body on mental health and attendance. In the survey, I asked about students' stress levels, attendance, and school satisfaction and gathered information on the demographics of the students responding. I found that there was a direct correlation between school-induced stress and absences and that minority students were more likely to have a negative view of school and therefore avoid attending. Given these findings, I recommended flexibility,

¹ Correspondence concerning this article should be sent to: Madeline Keo. Email: madelinekeo@berkeley.edu.

inclusivity, and trust in students from teachers and support from administrators. I wanted our school to develop democratic classrooms, where students' voices were included in the design of the classroom, where we made up the classroom rules and expectations together, and where teachers trusted their students and were flexible with missed classes and past due assignments. I asked administrators to start conversations between teachers of each grade, so they could more easily identify which students needed more help or flexibility within that grade level. Most importantly, I asked that teachers verbalize that they cared for the students as individuals. I wanted students to know that their teachers did not view them as receptacles for knowledge but as full human beings with lives and experiences outside of the classroom.

Though I didn't know how to present research, I wrote a research brief based on my findings, and presented it at multiple teachers' meetings and one of the school board meetings. I was met with awe by a few teachers who had supported me endlessly, but those who ran our high school and classrooms were primarily unaffected. My research made little to no impact. I instead felt that my recommendations, which made sense to high school students, were disregarded. A few teachers went on to reassure their students that they cared about their mental health, but others came up to me to tell me that my suggestions for change were unreasonable. Perhaps they were unreasonable. After all, I was only 17. Still, my hours of work were mostly ignored, and I was filled with anger at the lack of change. Did they not see that primarily minority students were reported as absent most often and that they were also responding to my survey with honest responses about how the school environment made them feel like outsiders? Our school made students feel stressed and uncomfortable. One student even commented on how a teacher disregarded their plea for kindness and an extension on an assignment after they discovered their parent had cancer. If this was how classrooms were to be run, how could my school expect students to *want to* attend? I felt that my recommendations, which made sense to high school students, were disregarded by most of the staff and district leadership.

I was angry at my school personnel because of their inability and unwillingness to respond to students' needs. Sometimes, I am still angry when I reflect on those years. But I have instead channeled that energy into something positive.

College

At UC Berkeley, I am involved in the Community-Partnered Research Collaborative (CPRC) and Institutional Change for Community Engagement teams, where we discuss a wide variety of educational topics, from social-emotional learning to chronic absenteeism, the issue that sent me on my educational research journey. I have been honored with the opportunity to write research briefs on schools creating psychosocial health infrastructures to support students and work alongside UC Berkeley faculty who are studying the causes of chronic absenteeism. In August of my sophomore year, I was looking to continue my research journey through the Undergraduate Research Apprentice Program at Berkeley. CPRC stood out to me, as it works directly with practitioners to improve educational outcomes. The CPRC worked with local school boards, and this reminded me of why I chose to study education. I was excited to build on the research I had completed in high school. Now, I am a part of a group that disseminates information in a meaningful way, something I have been craving for years. I have the opportunity to rewrite research articles

into summaries that use accessible language so all can understand them. I also get to support a team pushing for greater support of community engagement and youth voice, allowing people like my 17-year-old self to be heard in research. Through the CPRC, we work directly with schools to address the issues they want to focus on, not just focusing on professors' academic interests.

The CPRC and the team for community engagement have given me a way to channel all of my existing frustrations into research opportunities that are focused on increasing equitable educational outcomes for all students. We care about how the research is conducted and communicated, look to schools for the questions researchers need to ask, and ensure that everyone's voices are heard. As we design our website and write research briefs, we include input from representatives from the school districts we work with, as well as professors and program administrators. I carefully choose the words I use as I write, thinking about the way I want to be represented as a student who cares and is concerned with our approach to chronic absenteeism. I am currently working on a brief in collaboration with SFUSD and the UC Berkeley School of Social Welfare. As I've written this, I've thought carefully about how ideas are conveyed, how I describe participants in research, and how research implications can be communicated equitably.

When I was 17, I generated research that produced conclusions and recommendations about practice. My favorite thing about the CPRC is that we are generating research that can be used in practice. This is not new knowledge for the sake of new knowledge, this is new knowledge that can be used for the improvement of equity in schools.

Recently, I have begun volunteering at an independent middle school near the UC Berkeley campus. This school effectively incorporates social-emotional learning and social justice into its curriculum. Three days a week, I have the privilege to work with these children as we collectively learn about issues of race, gender, and politics in the English classroom. We respect one another and create space to discuss our ideas and feelings without judgment. When uncomfortable topics arise, instead of ignoring them, we sit with our feelings. One day, in a discussion about how we must wear masks and why the masks did not fit the faces of all of the students comfortably, the teacher asked the students why masks might not fit everyone. A student had an idea but was scared to share it in case he offended anyone by being wrong. The teacher assured him that if he said something offensive or hurtful, the class would learn and no one would be mad at him, but there would be the expectation that he wouldn't say it again. After this, the student shared that he thought face masks might have been designed for white or male faces, which launched us into a conversation about how privilege and health care are intertwined. When talking about gendered language, we discussed the idea of a binary, which again launched us into a conversation about black and white. "But black and white don't really mean anything," one student shared. The teacher used this opportunity to shift the conversation about the cultural implications of black and white as colors that carry meaning, and we connected this to the books we are reading.

I have loved my time at this school and my ability to engage in topics that would otherwise be avoided in a traditional public school. I hope to attend a teacher education program after graduating that specializes in social justice so I can implement strategies like the ones used at this independent school in the public-school classroom. All children

should be able to discuss such topics, regardless of their parent's ability to pay for an independent school. I hope to cultivate a classroom that is free of judgment, explores the nuances of the cultural and political aspects of our society, and allows students to discuss their qualms with the school. The school I work with hopes to uplift and empower youth voices. As I think back to my schooling experiences, it was the support that I received from a few of my middle and high school teachers that made me feel like my voice mattered and allowed me to engage in educational research. The students at this independent school are treated like the experts they are. They witness and understand racism, gender bias, and privilege, and we give them the knowledge and context to make sense of their place in the world while educating them to become the leaders and thinkers they are. In a world where youth voices, including my own, are often ignored, I look to teachers like the ones at this school and myself to be the future of education where we value the opinions and ideas of our students.

The Future

I envision a world where teachers, administrators, and students can work together to identify persistent problems and needs in schools, a world where voices that are normally ignored can be heard. I dream of partnerships between schools and research institutions. I imagine a world where school members can come to a research institution with the questions they need to be answered and both parties can work together to share their expertise and find solutions. I hope for a partnership between universities and K–12 schools to conduct research that will improve equity. I am interested in schools developing teams that consist of school staff from different parts of the school that meet to identify needs and assist students in holistic and thorough ways, identifying students who are struggling and figure out ways to support these students. My perfect school is a place where every student's voice matters, and learning is the center of every class. In 8th grade, my English teacher said, "It's not about the grade. It's about learning." I hope to see classrooms where students do not feel pressured to perform but are excited to learn and do well because of their eagerness and the support from their teachers. I dream of schools where being absent is noticed, where chronic absenteeism does not exist because the school supports the students, and the students want to be there.

How do I think we can get there? Through the encouragement of undergraduate students involved in youth equity projects and the continual support from institutions to improve education. I have been exceptionally fortunate to participate in a research project based out of the School of Education that allows me to help researchers improve educational outcomes for students.

My personal ideas about improving education are not new. They've been happening here at Berkeley for decades. I now get to join others to be a part of it. I know 17-year-old me would be excited and proud of what I and my community are doing now. I aspire to join other teachers to be an educator who listens to and learns from their students. I hope to join other researchers to never fail to acknowledge, respect, and incorporate youth voices. I want to be a part of a movement to create a world where youth researchers add their input on youth equity issues. I don't know exactly how to do that yet, but I know that for the past three years, I have been learning from reflecting on my own experiences and joining those around me. Together, we must never stop learning.