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One School, One Family: Portland High School Climate in the Age of Trump

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One School, One Family: Portland High School Climate in the Age of Trump

Naomi Abrams Hawkes, University of Southern Maine. Mentor: Caroline Shanti, LCSW, Ph. D.

Abstract

The 2016 U.S. presidential election led to one of the most contentious seasons in American politics. Citing the inflammatory rhetoric of public figures, a growing body of literature documents a dramatic increase in bias-related bullying and feelings of anxiety in K-12 schools across the country since the 2016 election. Using student and faculty interviews/focus groups, secondary data analysis, and direct observations, this case study offers a comprehensive examination of the effects of the substance and tone of the current sociopolitical climate on students at Portland High School. Data was analyzed and suggestions made for administration to help create a more inclusive, welcoming environment at PHS and other local high schools.

Background

Throughout his campaign and since his inauguration, Donald Trump has expressed controversial positions that call into question the status or rights of vulnerable populations in the U.S. (Rogers et al., 2017). Nowhere have the impacts been more salient than the nation's K-12 educational institutions (SPLC, 2016). Educators report feeling at a loss for how to temper negative effects of the political environment or encourage productive discourse amidst a campaign that challenged respectful values at every corner. The data demands an exploration of how our nation's youth are experiencing the current political climate and raises questions about how to combat short and long-term effects and teach tolerance and civil engagement to the next generation of voters.

As one of the most diverse schools north of Boston, Portland High School has the opportunity to embrace its student body by celebrating differences and commonalities present in the population. While incidents of intolerance at schools continue to rise in a post-Trump era, it is imperative these issues be exposed if ever they are to be resolved. The present study uses PHS as a case study to examine student experiences and perspectives of school climate in the age of Trump. The findings of this study will contribute to a growing body of literature on student experience in a post-Trump era.

Research Questions

- What are students' experiences and perceptions of school climate at Portland High School?
- How did the 2016 presidential election, and the substance and tone of current political rhetoric, affect students' perceptions of safety and belonging at Portland High School?
- Do students believe the 2016 presidential election and the current political climate affects their relationships with classmates or staff at PHS? In what ways?

Methods

Case Study

This study uses a case study approach to cover contextual conditions of the Trump era, under the assumption it directly impacts student experience. This is a holistic, single-case design with Portland High School, from the perspective of students, as the bounded entity (Yin, 2011; Creswell, 2013).

Data Collection

Participants were selected through non-random purposive sampling and snowball sampling. Participation included interviews/focus groups with 8 PHS students, 5 PHS teachers, one school social worker, and the school principal. Secondary data analysis of 87 student responses to a student-conducted study on discrimination and field observations were also utilized. All data underwent categorical aggregation and thematic analysis.

"Diverse, but not diverse"

"Everything changed that day."

Community citizens

"Silos" to swirl

Silence

Preliminary Results

Theme one: "Diverse, but not diverse"

Academic opportunities, self-organization, and perceived preferential treatment

Theme two: "Everything changed that day"

November 9th as a catalyst event, unveiling issues long under the surface

Theme three: Community citizens

Life outside school hours vastly impacts school experience

Theme four: "Silos" to swirl

"Conversations happen in silos", but the incidents have viral impacts

Theme five: Silence

Discussing this election was difficult and often avoided; this left much to interpretation

Discussion

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