

Engaging students in school leadership: Creative approaches to empowerment

(scientific paper)

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Abstract: *This study examines how principals take their lead from students, and use student voice, to create more inclusive and responsive schools, and more responsible models of leadership. I consider issues of student agency and voice within four different public school settings. Further, I consider the challenges all students face, and the ways principals are preparing to address these challenges. In this study I address roadblocks to responsive leadership in urban, suburban, and rural schools using a cogenerative qualitative approach that principals, students, and researchers can use to create new dialogue and shared theories focused on improving both administrative function and the instructional programs of their schools. This approach has revealed a new shared theory which includes young students of various abilities in models of school leadership. Central to this theory is a call for principals and researchers to use more student-driven approaches, so that students can be empowered as learners and leaders in their own right.*

Key words: *Educational Leadership, Student Voice, Inclusive Elementary Education*

1 Introduction

The need for principals to have the time and tools to focus on instruction and student learning has continued to intensify with the introduction of federal accountability mandates such as No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and Race to The Top (RTT)¹. At

¹ Federal mandates like these affect virtually every person employed in schools. As a result of these mandates, all schools that accept federal funds must make detailed annual reports on the progress of all children. Each school must also report the progress of four subgroups: minority children, children diagnosed with special needs, children with limited English proficiency, and children from low-income families (Powell et al., 2009). Superintendents will use this information to determine which principals are running successful schools and which are not.

the same time, the incongruence between what principals want to do instructionally and have time to do, create dire consequences for school leaders and their work in making a difference in inclusive schools regarding staff and student improvement.

Principals today are spending more time focusing on teaching and learning than ever before. This shift away from the office implies that more direct relationships between principals and the instructional program are necessary if new models of leadership are going to replace earlier models that limited contact with students to matters of discipline, and classroom visits to teacher feedback, supervision, and modeling (Waters et al., 2003). Research into issues of administration has emphasized reflective and inquiry-oriented approaches to working with teachers (Blase & Blase, 1999). As a result, principals now collaborate more with others before making decisions and many employ models of distributive leadership in which adults share in responsibilities that were typically overseen by the administrator (Spillane et al., 2001). Despite these efforts towards reorganization, schools have neglected to include students in more responsive models of leadership, and research has largely ignored the inherent possibilities.

The purpose of this study is to discover whether and how principals have performed in their role as instructional leaders, and to determine by what means their thinking or behaviors associated with this role have been shaped in part by the students they lead. In order to build on what is already known about how students perceive school, learning, and leadership, this study attempts to answer the following questions:

- What, from the perspective of students, are the most significant challenges faced in inclusive schools?
- How do school principals help children cope with challenges they face?

2 Overview

My study's intent is to analyze how principals take their lead from students, and use student voice, to create more inclusive and responsive schools, and a more responsible principalship. In order to describe and explain how principals have used students' perspectives to meaningfully structure their experiences of schools and learning, further investigation into how students can naturally inform the work being done by principals may help to bring students' attitudes and feelings about principals into the dominant discourse on effective leadership practice.

Rather than focus on one aspect of educational leadership (e.g., visibility of the principal), I am focusing on the instructional behaviors of principals as seen through the eyes of the students they lead, the administrators themselves, and my own observations of the interactions between these two often disparate members of the inclusive

elementary school community. By capturing the work that's being done in schools where students, principals, and parents are interested in developing a meaningful dialogue about learning and leadership, I have started to better understand how the relationships between students and principals may lead to more efficient instructional programs, increased communication, and student empowerment.

3 Background

Educational Leadership

The principal's role has historically been that of manager. Typical administrative responsibilities in schools have been defined by Portin et al., (1998) as: (a) maintaining safe schools, (b) overseeing the budget, (c) completing and submitting reports, (d) complying with regulations and mandates, (e) coping with teacher and student behavior issues, and (f) dealing with parents. In the 1980s, research into effective schools gave birth to the connection between school leader and school success (Teddlie & Reynolds, 2000). For the first time principals began to pay more attention to student learning in an effort to make schools more effective. More recently the expanding job, and its increasing focus on accountability, standardization, and resource allocation, has necessitated the emergence of an instructional leader (Cooley & Shen, 2003; Walker, 2010), capable of impacting student achievement (Leithwood et al., 2004; Waters et al., 2003).

The changes brought on by No Child Left Behind and Race to The Top have forced principals into the spotlight at a time when many schools are coping with significant changes in the socioeconomic composition of their student body, adjusting to a steady influx of English Language Learners (ELL), and pushing towards inclusion of students with special needs in regular education classrooms.² More current descriptions of the leadership role include: initiators of change, educational visionaries, curriculum and assessment experts, special program administrators, and community builders (Darling-Hammond, 2007). School leadership is now widely regarded as second only to classroom instruction as an influence on student learning (Leithwood et al., 2006).

Just as the relationships between principals and schools have changed, so too have the relationships principals are having with teachers and students. Principals are spending more time observing teaching and learning than ever before. The old model of formal, one-person leadership is no longer realistic (Lambert, 1998), and

² Add in the fact that in the past ten years the number of U.S. students enrolled in special education has risen 30 percent, and that three out of every four students with disabilities spend part or all of their day in inclusive classrooms (NCES, 2010), and the balancing act that takes place between the principal and students' agendas becomes even more complicated.

with the increase in job demands principals now collaborate more with others before making decisions and employ models of distributive leadership (Spillane et al., 2001) in which adults share in responsibilities that were typically overseen by the administrator. These models of leadership have, until now, included teacher-leaders, principal-teachers, assistant or associate principals, co-principals, and management service coordinators (DiPaola & Tschannen-Moran, 2003), and provide principals with opportunities to focus more on their capacity as instructional leader (Walker, 2010). Despite these efforts towards reorganization, schools have neglected to include students in more responsive models of leadership, and research has largely ignored the inherent possibilities.

A few arguments have traditionally been advanced in support of school leaders considering student participation and involvement when making decisions.

1. *Teachers and school based support teams have been involved in helping principals make decisions for years. These same arguments apply, at least in theory, to students as well.* While most principals would argue that it is their job to make the decisions that affect their school, many actively involve teachers in conversations about the school's instructional program on a regular basis. This has improved the overall quality of teaching, and made principals into more responsive leaders (Portin et al., 2003). If principals were to involve students in similar conversations about their experiences of teaching, learning, and even leadership, students might also become more empowered as learners, and principals would become even more effective leaders.
2. *All students have a moral right to be involved.* When principals do not involve students, and ignore students' basic needs, such as the need for social/emotional support, autonomy, and respect, students are left to wonder if their principal actually cares (Gentilucci & Muto, 2007). Students have a right to a voice in decisions that affect their experiences of school and learning, and will become more responsible learners if they have a higher morale.
3. *Student involvement enhances cooperation and reduces conflict between all members of the school.* There is evidence that when students' personal needs of accomplishment and meaningfulness are met by adults in schools, students' agendas, goals, and perspectives, will align with those of adults (Allen, 1983). When these goals and perspectives align, students and adults are more likely to work together toward improving student learning outcomes. Active involvement in the school's instructional program will also provide students with opportunities for their voice (as it relates to problems and dissatisfaction) to be heard by those that matter, and who can address their needs before they manifest themselves in a negative way.

The rationale for giving students a voice, and involving them in decisions about the work of learning and leadership is clear. Just as teachers have valuable information

about the instructional program, students also have information that leaders need to make good decisions. Students also have a need and a basic undeniable right to feel committed and connected to their experiences of learning. When principals do not actively consider students as being valuable to the overall success of the school, and involve students in decisions that effect the work of learning, students in turn get the message that their participation and involvement is not valued by all members of the organization.

Students' Perspectives of Leadership

What is clear is that almost all of the data correlating school leadership with student learning has been collected from administrators, school board members, parents, and classroom teachers (Cook-Sather, 2009). Few studies have examined what students perceive schools do to impact their learning, and of these few studies, the emphasis has largely been on issues such as student satisfaction with school, perceptions of school climate and culture, issues of motivation, classroom management, and expectations of teachers (Wilson, 2011). As useful as these lines of inquiry were, none reveal much about what students think and feel about principal leadership and its effect on academic achievement, arguably the most central aspect of student life (Gentilucci & Muto, 2007).

While the departure from a more traditional, managerial role has been critical for principals that want to appear more accessible to both the students and teachers in their schools (Fullan, 2008), there is evidence to suggest that these new roles only in part fulfill what the students were looking for in a strong instructional leader (Gentilucci & Muto, 2007). Teacher and student engagement data related to these instructional behaviors has been recorded (Quinn, 2002), and secondary students have been able to talk about how they perceive these behaviors (Shultz & Cook-Sather, 2001), but no study to date has considered inclusive elementary school students' perspectives on this topic.

If leadership wants to address issues of instruction more thoroughly they have to begin to find ways to understand what the students think and feel about their experiences of school. Some critics of student perspective research argue that learning, not understanding students' thoughts and feelings, is the primary goal of schooling. While this may be true, it begs the following question; Who is better qualified than the students to tell us what most effectively influences or hinders their learning and academic achievement (Gentilucci & Muto, 2007)?

4 Methods

My multi-site ethnography involves two groups of participants across four inclusive elementary schools. The first class of participants is four principals that I interviewed twice and observed a minimum of four times throughout the spring semester. The second class is made up of focus groups of elementary school students, which I interviewed twice throughout the semester and observe a minimum of four times.

In an effort to draw a representative sample of students I requested that each principal grant me access to groups of students at each grade-level (in kindergarten-fourth grade schools this would mean meeting with five groups of students, in kindergarten-fifth grade schools, six groups, etc.). While some principals were comfortable providing me with the requested number of students, others preferred that I meet with grade levels that they thought will be better able to articulate their feelings and attitudes based on their age. Because age does not appear to be a discriminating factor in this setting, I accepted their offer. Each focus group consisted of between 4–6 students was randomly selected from classrooms at each grade-level and meant to be representative of the overall population of the school (across diversity areas such as race, special education, ELL, etc.).

Implications for conducting focus groups with vulnerable or marginalized populations, including children, have been considered and weaknesses of this methodology have been meaningfully reviewed. Focus groups are not immune to researcher bias, and they come with their own unique set of challenges. Recruitment and data analysis emerge as the two most significant hurdles researchers face when using this approach across a variety of disciplines. My inclusion of the contemporary qualitative research methods literature helped me to focus on more specific issues of reflexivity, narrative inquiry, and ethnographic approaches to using this method in educational contexts and with children. More current approaches to using focus groups across all disciplines, and with marginalized populations, point to incorporating the focus group as a way to summarize a series of observations.

There are a number of strategies that researchers have used when conducting focus groups with children. I have employed several of these strategies in an effort to conduct fun, age-appropriate activities focused on the research topic. One such strategy was the use of a warm-up activity with students from all grades. This involved breaking the ice with the group, and practicing some of the basic skills necessary for participating in a focus group. I introduced the subject at the beginning of the first interview by using a free association activity where students were asked to identify images of various adults and take turns describing the same images. The photographs I showed the students were of a firefighter, a policeman, the president, and finally their principal. A second activity I used to start my second student interview was to introduce the topic in a read-aloud of an age-appropriate children's book about

principals (Creech & Bliss, 2001). After the story I asked the students to talk about the story as it related to our first discussion, and as a prompt for our more focused second discussion.

Immediately after introducing the topic using the free association activity I also asked students to provide me with drawings or words they create in response to an initial brainstorm about principals. Words are only one form of communication, and visual representations of experiences can enable others to see as the participant sees and feels (Riessman, 2008). In my attempt to provide the students with an opportunity to tell their story as transparently as possible, visual data was used to capture the perspectives of all students including those that a) struggle to express their thoughts verbally, b) are English Language Learners, and/or are c) more comfortable using imagery to depict their understanding of the research topic. Students were provided with colored pencils, a standard size (8.5" X 11") piece of paper, and were asked to draw what they thought their principal does before my line of questioning began.

Focus groups were conducted twice with each group of students, once at the beginning of the semester after my initial interview with the principal, and once at the end of the semester after my second interview with the principal. The first focus group was focused on giving students opportunities to describe their experiences, relationships with adults, challenges they face in school, support they receive from principals, and the voice they are given in shaping school culture. The second focus group was focused on deeper probing and asked students to talk about data collected from the principals' second interview. Each focus group interview lasted between 30–45 minutes, was conducted by myself, included another adult presence from the site, and was audio-recorded and transcribed for analysis.

I have developed a mixed-qualitative approach based on Elden & Levin's (1991) model of cogenerative learning (see figure 1 below), in order to create a dialogue between principals and students, and develop a shared theory that is action-relevant and can be used to inform and improve their situations in the future. This framework has allowed me to explore: (a) the value of including students (insider's framework) in research, (b) approaches that researchers (outsider's framework) have taken in previous youth studies, (c) approaches that have been taken between students and researchers (cogenerative dialogue), and (d) discuss the value and significance of this collaboration. The bottom two dimensions of the framework will be the resulting theory I develop through my literature review, and the approach I decide to take when conducting my research in the field.³

³ While this model has been adapted to serve my own exploration of qualitative research methods, it is important to note that this framework could also be used to support the applied work of principals interested in using their students' perspectives of leadership to develop new approaches to leadership.

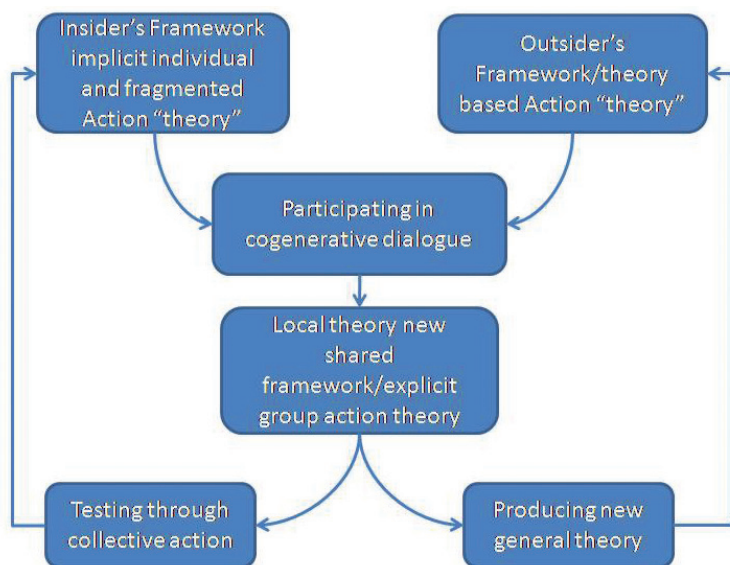


Figure 1: Elden & Levin's (1991) cogenerative model of participative action research

5 Findings

This research study included case studies of four different groups of students and their principals, across four schools in New York State. I addressed two key research questions: (1) What, from the perspective of students, are the most significant challenges faced by students in inclusive schools? (2) How do principals help children cope with the challenges they face? In this section, I will be analyzing themes across all four schools in an effort to find similarities as well as differences. Before I provide the theory that emerged from my conversations and observations with the participants, I will provide first a brief description of each of the schools.

Forest Hills Elementary

Forest Hills Elementary (FH) is our lone suburban site and has the smallest number and percentage of students on the free and reduced lunch⁴ list. The students, staff, and principal here make up what may appear to represent the traditional American

⁴ This program provides cash subsidies for free and reduced-price lunches to students based on family income and size. Eligibility is determined via an application process which parents complete and submit each year. Children from families at or below 130 percent of the poverty level are eligible for free meals. Children from families between 130 and 185 percent of the poverty level are eligible for reduced-priced meals. In 2010, more than 31.7 million American students qualified for these services (Isaacs, et al. 2012).

elementary school for many readers. Joseph, an experienced teacher and principal in this district, is also a prominent figure in the community. Joseph took over the FH principalship just eighteen months before this study began, and brought with him 170 new students and nearly a third of the current staff.

One of Joseph's key strengths at FH has been his ability to coordinate the curriculum and help the teachers navigate the school's instructional program. Joseph has also developed a positive school culture where teachers are able to focus primarily on instruction and students enjoy learning. Joseph appears to do an effective job managing his resources, support staff, and a talented group of teachers to meet students' academic and social/emotional needs; as a result, he spends the majority of his time in between the buses and bells managing the ebb and flow of managerial responsibilities that come his way during the course of an average day. These responsibilities include coordinating with other administrators in the district, handling parents' concerns, training teachers around the common core learning standards, and touching base with his support staff around the school to make sure everyone is on the same page and moving forward together.

My extensive observations of students at FH, and my conversations with FH's principal and students, have revealed that these children are happy to be in school, are rarely insubordinate, and are doing well academically. Students' challenges at FH were with specific subjects, or with teachers. When asked how students dealt with the challenges they faced in class, they report that they are likely go to a parent, peer, or sibling before speaking with an adult in school. It was only after mid-way through our final interview that they began to consider their principal as someone they might be able to approach about problems they were having during or outside of school.

Despite (or perhaps, because of) the high level of student achievement at FH, students have had few meaningful opportunities to interact with their principal. Joseph is a strong leader of adults, and spends his time helping them with the challenges they face at his new site, and as a result, students perceive him as someone that is there to spread a clear and consistent message, help the school run smoothly, and occasionally act as a disciplinarian. While Joseph acknowledges the role students play in making the school function, he is not inclined to take their lead or use their voice to support their experiences of school or learning.

Lodi Elementary

Lodi elementary is the smallest site in the study. It is located the furthest from a city center, and has a free and reduced lunch rate of 55 %. There is significant poverty in this rural community and it plays a role in the lives of many of these students. Mark, an experienced teacher and administrator at other rural districts in the region, is passionate about boosting the aspiration rate for students in this area. Mark

sees his primary role as making sure he has the best teachers working in each of his classrooms, and that they have the resources they need to help the students achieve. When asked to describe his day Mark talked a lot about state and district initiatives, meetings, observation, and providing teachers with feedback. When I asked Mark to describe the interactions he was having with kids he chose to talk about how he worked to manage behavioral problems at the site. Due to the small size of this rural district, Mark has responsibilities that take him outside of the school more than he would like.

Because Mark's walk-throughs are largely focused on observing the adults in the building and providing them with feedback on their practice, many of the students perceived Mark to be more of an office principal, who works behind the scenes to make sure they are supported academically and to make sure they are safe and cared for in school. When I asked students about their challenges at Lodi, they spoke about tests, and classes where they had trouble with content, and when I asked how Mark helped them with their challenges they naturally responded that Lodi's teachers were the ones they would go to for help with these problems. Students here were very responsive to questions Mark posed during our first interview, and a meaningful dialogue developed between the two that was focused on direct leadership behaviors such as Mark's approaches to speechmaking, and his passive role as observer during walk-throughs, as well as indirect leadership behaviors such as the program schedule, open house, and the classroom makeup.

Mark, who admitted he had not thought about using student voice before this study, began to see real value in how students' perspectives could be used to inform his work, and empower students as learners. While Mark has given students opportunities to make decisions that reflect those traditionally made by student governments in the past, he remarked that he could now see the value student voice had for impacting his approaches to leadership, and mentioned that he considered the students' comments as useful to his work.

Everton Elementary

All of the students at Everton Elementary receive free and reduced lunch, and of the four schools in this study it has the highest percentage of students diagnosed with special needs. Students and staff at Everton are dealing with a range of challenges unique to urban education, in a community where crime rates are high, and parental involvement in their children's education is low.

Leah, who has 25 years of experience working as a teacher, a staff developer, and an administrator in this urban district, was brought to Everton two years ago to manage the school through a situation of crisis. At Everton the challenges students' face outside the school often manifest themselves inside the classrooms. As a result

she is as responsible for keeping the building functioning, as she is for providing the instructional support her students so desperately need. Leah's key responsibilities included her role as a resource allocator for students, someone who listens to students and looks at what they need, an instructional leader of teachers, and someone who is actively involved in shaping the school culture. During my visits to the site it became clear that Leah has little choice as to how her days are spent. While systems have been set up to deal with academic and behavioral supports for kids, Leah spends most of her time at Everton putting out fires. Despite the frenetic pace of her work, she has managed to maintain her poise and serves as an excellent role-model to students who value her patience and passion for working with kids.

Students at Everton listed distractions in the classroom, physical challenges of the building, and misbehavior as their biggest challenges in school. Leah helps these students cope with these challenges by being actively involved in working with students in classrooms, and students seem to thrive on the extra support she provides. Leah's focus is on making sure the students first feel safe and supported in communities where she says "high-levels of academic and emotional support do not come naturally to many parents, and student efficacy often begins to diminish as early as the second grade." While some of the students were distracted and even aggressive during focus groups, others saw their principal as a teacher, a counselor, and even a caregiver. The students also remarked that she tries to keep their expectations high, and focused on going to college.

While Leah has spent most of her time at Everton reacting to problems associated with urban schools, she manages to keep a positive outlook on the work that she is doing. Near the end of the study Leah mentioned that she would like to develop a student cabinet whereby she could ask students about problems they were facing academically, in an effort to get students more excited about learning, and adults prepared to develop more responsive approaches to working with kids.

Carter Elementary

Carter is another urban site where nearly every student qualifies for free and reduced lunch, and where there is a low-rate of students succeeding academically. The largest school in this study, Carter also serves as a beacon for this community and provides a range of services to help students and their families experience some degree of stability and success in their lives. Despite the challenges faced by students outside of the school, the new principal here appears to have everything under control.

David arrived at Carter midway through the school year and has already had a significant impact on the school culture. David is the youngest of our four principals, and the only African-American principal in this study. David delegates most of his managerial responsibilities to his support staff, which frees him up for more

instructional contact with students. The majority of David's time is spent in Carter's classrooms where he is able to monitor student progress, have direct instructional contact with students, and observe teachers. David has created a school climate where teachers are valued as professionals, and has taken responsibility for developing the work of his teachers and students. This principal's work with students, has allowed him to develop specific student-driven approaches to reform, in an effort to streamline the instructional program, and provide opportunities for meaningful student involvement.

Students' perspectives at Carter reflected the seriousness and sense of urgency David brings to his work everyday. Students identified their key challenges as being confrontational in the classroom, bullying, and factors outside the school that get them off track. All of the students interviewed at Carter cited their principal as someone they could go to for help in dealing with a range of obstacles to learning. All of the students at Carter also saw their principal as someone who helps them learn, and who is out-of-the-office and available to students when they need him. Still, these students wanted more of the instructional and social/emotional support he provides them. They were also able to respond to very grown up questions posed by their principal that even adults rarely feel confident enough to address when talking about schools.

David has not been afraid to defy tradition and go against the grain in an effort to provide his students with academic and behavioral supports they were not receiving before his arrival at Carter. The appearance and feel of the school, the nature of the instruction taking place in the classrooms, and students' comments all reflect what this new principal is about. David also chose to talk about his approaches to leadership and the role kids play in making schools work from the vantage point of a servant or guide.

6 Conclusions: Toward a Theory of Engaging Students in School Leadership

In the following passage I will present a new shared theory on how principals can create more responsive approaches to school leadership by including students' perspectives on school and school leadership in their own agendas, strategies, and goals. By better understanding principals' perspectives of leadership (and their agendas, strategies, and goals) researchers and practitioners can see how they are connected or developed in response to those of the students. Findings indicate that when principals look inside of their school for help with solving problems faced by their students, instead of looking outside of school, more authentic and transformational approaches can be developed to create schools that are more responsive to students' needs.

Schools teach kids about how to deal with problems based on how principals deal with their own challenges. Research demonstrates that when teachers develop strategies designed to meet students' academic and psychological needs, they can promote their students' sense of responsibility and voice in the classroom (Schneider, 1996). When teachers set up systems to actively engage students in their own learning (such as cooperative learning, self-assessment, student-teacher contracts, etc.), students become more responsible and are able to self-direct more of their behavior over time (Gossen, 1992). Many teachers however are reluctant to give students opportunities like these and can get caught up in (and even contribute to) the same self-defeating mindset of their students (Schneider, 1996). Teachers and even principals have for years attributed causes for failure to any number of causes out of their direct control (e. g., lack of resources, poor parenting, etc.).

While principals have long been regarded as the school managers, they are also in a unique position to show a larger population of students that they can or cannot have a voice based on the work that they do. This has far-reaching effects on the students and their future role in society. It also has a direct impact on how teachers choose to run their classrooms and structure their interactions with kids. While most principals in this study agreed that a big part of their job was making sure they had the best teachers possible, and that teachers were the ones capable of impacting change, principals invariably shape the work of the teachers, and enact policies and practice that affects the way teachers teach, and students learn.

Even though principals today are supposed to spend more time focusing on teaching and learning than ever before, there is evidence that students and student learning often take a back seat to the work of adults in school. Conversations and observation at these schools also indicated that there is a discrepancy between what some principals say, and what they actually do. While some principals acknowledge the value student driven approaches to school leadership have for empowering kids, I found limited evidence that principals actively use student voice or interact with students directly in an effort to address problems in their schools.

Findings from the field indicate that this is not because principals can not or do not have the time to use more student-driven approaches to guide their instructional program. Instead, this research has found that principals choose to use these approaches based on whether or not they value receiving direct input from kids. Principals choose to let students' perspectives affect their agenda, strategies, and goals based on whether or not they believe this is important. While some principals may be unaware that such a choice even exists, and instead take more traditional and managerial approaches to their work, there is evidence that some principals are aware that there is a choice, and still make an active decision to not give students opportunities to share how they think and feel about school.

Principals who are not using student-driven approaches to guide their principalship are left with personal inclination or externally derived models in their quest to provide structure to the school's instructional program. Many of these choices were based on assumptions principals have about what students are capable of contributing to a discussion on what does or does not work in schools. These assumptions were largely based on (1) whether or not it had occurred to principals that using student voice was a possibility, (2) perceived competence as it relates to a student's age, and (3) preconceived notions about whether or not students should have a say in their experiences of school. These assumptions existed when principals develop and demonstrate leadership behaviors that underestimate what students are capable of contributing to the school. While every principal in the study was willing to engage in an indirect conversation with students about the challenges they face, few principals actively look to see what students think about school, and even fewer use student voice to shape their approaches to leadership.

At our suburban site, students shared stories about teachers that made them feel uncomfortable, and by the end of the study, began to realize that the principal was someone that could help them with their problems. At our rural school, students wanted their principal to develop some new approaches to his interactions with students, and also provided some ideas for restructuring school events like open house and assembly. At one urban site, students' behavior during focus groups alone demonstrated that they were having trouble engaging with the instructional program. They also cited a range of physical factors around the school (such as the condition of the classrooms and hallways), and factors inside the classroom (such as disruptive students and overwhelmed teachers) as hindrances to their learning. At another urban school students spoke openly about how they wanted more of the direct instructional and social/emotional support the principal was already providing.

At the root of many of the assumptions made by principals was a reluctance to concede or modify their current position of authority and adopt a more shared approach to making decisions in schools. This autonomy, which gives principals their sense of professionalism and a feeling of control over their school can also get in the way of collaboration with staff and students, and communication structures which might allow for alternative forms of interaction. Opportunities to make adjustments to the instructional program and to impact student learning outcomes are lost when leaders take more autocratic approaches to making important decisions in schools.

Both my review of the literature and research data from the field indicate that principals who increase student responsibility and use student voice to drive their instructional leadership have empowered students as learners. This empowerment has resulted in better behavior, increased engagement in the instructional program, and the development of a more shared set of goals between students and staff. Principals have done this by playing a more visible and accessible role school-wide and

in classrooms, and by having more direct instructional contact with the students. Outside of the classrooms these principals have also been able to speak with students about problems that affect their learning inside and outside of school. The data suggest that instructional leaders can develop more specific goals using a vision which is shared by the students, reflects student concerns, and in which students had a voice in creating, if they want to create, a school climate that is more inclusive, conducive to learning, and better equipped to respond to change.

Research that seeks to understand principals' perceptions of how schools best operate, and then places adult perspectives alongside those students have about school, can develop a better understanding of how students and principals can work together to create more equitable and excellent schools. Principals' direct and indirect approaches to promoting the instruction that takes place in their schools has a significant impact on students' experiences of education. By better understanding how principals think about the approaches they take, students' learning outcomes and teacher efficacy can be enhanced. Principals and students play key roles in shaping school culture, and enter school with similar goals. These shared goals include an intention to succeed as participants in the academic program, as well as a strong desire to be supported socially and emotionally. Principals willing to explore their perceptions of students and student learning in depth are better able to understand their relationships with students, and the role they play in determining the success of both the school and the principalship.

Students' thoughts and feelings matter and can provide schools and the research community with new evidence that be used to inform the existing research on instructional leadership and administrative function in the field. This study has shown that principals are interested in what younger students have to say about their work. It has also helped principals realize the value these perspectives have for shaping their work as school leader.

Students have also been affected by this study. Students felt empowered when adults took the time to ask them about their challenges. When asked about what they would like to see done differently, some students were quick to ask for more instructional support from their principals. Others remarked that they would like to see their principals develop new ways of approaching their administrative function. Still others spoke openly about their teachers and peers, or about how their principal could help support them socially and emotionally.

In each school students had different sets of challenges and adults helping them with these challenges. In all of the schools however, students were clear about what they could use to help them learn better, and in each of these cases, principals were in a position to adapt their agendas, goals, and strategies to those of their students. Principals that underestimate student agency, have trouble addressing diversity, and

fail to make themselves accessible to their students limit their own opportunities for reform.

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