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## Unlocking Students' Perspectives of School Leadership: Toward a Theory of Engaging Students in School Leadership

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**Abstract:** The need to define principals as the ones who seek out the opinions and perspectives of those they serve, rather than making decisions for them, is a significant but necessary departure from more traditional approaches to leadership. This study examines whether and how principals take their lead from students, and use student voice, to create more responsive schools, and more responsive models of leadership. Using a mixed qualitative approach, and data collected from interviews and observations with students and principals in urban, suburban and rural schools, I explore what elementary school students perceive to be the biggest challenges they face in school, and whether and how their principals help them with their challenges. This article employs a bidirectional interaction framework in an effort to address roadblocks to responsive leadership in schools. This model, and data gathered using a cogenerative qualitative approach, has revealed a new shared theory focused on improving administrative function, providing students with a voice, and engaging students in school leadership.

**Keywords:** Student Voice, Student Agency, Educational Leadership

## Introduction

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 (Day et al., 2016) 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 (Hallinger, 2015). 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 how leaders of students 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 students. This study examines whether and how principals take their lead from students, and use student voice, to create more responsive schools, and a more responsible principalship. In order to describe and explain whether and 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), this article focuses on the instructional behaviors of principals as seen through the eyes of the students, the administrators themselves, and my own observations of the interactions between these two often disparate members of the school community. By capturing the work that is being done in schools where students, principals, and parents are interested in developing a meaningful dialogue about learning and leadership, I have begun to better understand how the relationships between students and principals may lead to more efficient instructional programs, increased communication, and student empowerment.

I will begin with an examination of the research on educational leadership, exploring how students' perspectives have been used in schools, and highlighting approaches researchers have taken when studying youth. I will then describe the theoretical framework that has helped me structure my understanding of the literature, how this study might inform the literature, and will describe the mixed qualitative approach I have used in an effort to answer the following research questions: (a) What, from the perspective of students, are the most significant challenges faced by students in schools? (b) How do principals help children cope with the challenges they face? In an effort to depict the lived realities of the students and principals that produced this article's data, I will next present some key data collected from each research site. A brief cross case analysis that summarizes

findings from the data will then be provided. Finally, I will present my emerging theory—One that includes students and student voice in models of school leadership.

## **Background**

In this section, I will review the extant research on educational leadership alongside research that has included students' perspectives on a range of factors affecting their experiences of learning and school. I will also review research that has been conducted using young and marginalized people(s). Finally, I will present Allen's (1983) bidirectional interaction model as a theoretical framework for this study.

## **Educational Leadership**

The principal's role historically has been that of manager. 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., 2010; Waters et al., 2003). Today, changes brought on by federal mandates 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. More current descriptions of the leadership role include: initiators of change, educational visionaries, curriculum and assessment experts, budget analysts, special

program administrators, school managers, personnel administrators, and community builders (Darling-Hammond, 2007). 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 (Klocko & Wells, 2015), and 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 (DiPaola & Tschannen-Moran, 2003). 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. While research tells us that principals have indirect effects on students and student learning (Marzano et al., 2005), it has ignored the possibility of principals having a direct and profound effect on students' experiences of school and learning (Walker, 2010). By exploring the topic of leadership through the eyes of the student, we can begin to see whether and how principals are directly impacting students in more concrete ways.

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 (Kraft et al., 2015). Differentiating support of teachers has improved the overall quality of teaching, and made principals into more responsive leaders (Brezicha et al., 2014). 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. 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; Louis et al., 2016). 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; Baroutsis et al., 2015). 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**

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 (Ogbu, 1974; Wilson, 1994; 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 (Cook-Sather, 2009). 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 elementary school student perspectives on this topic. Promoting student voice and agency has been heralded as one of the keys to successful schools (Cook-Sather, 2014; Beattie 2012), yet rarely is youth participation considered in educational research or applied work (Mitra et al., 2014). Many schools are struggling to create instructional programs that are suited to the members of the organization that will inevitably determine whether or not the school is successful. In order to understand what students are looking for in their educational experience, we must first ask the students what it is they think their principals do.

We know from data provided by adults that principals' behaviors, such as maintaining a visible presence on campus, are correlated with higher student achievement (Waters et al., 2003). However, we lack data explicating such findings from the perspective of students. Schools are not measured by how well teachers, superintendents, or even principals perform; they are measured by the strengths and weaknesses of their students.



## **Youth Studies**

Teachers today have become more adept at using student voice and collaborative approaches to learning in classrooms (Mitra, 2004), and administrators have involved teachers in inquiry-based approaches to leadership (Lambert, 2002). These collaborative models have long been shown to lead to improved teaching, and as a result increased student performance (Talbert, 1995). Yet administrators still rarely use student voice to structure their reform efforts or students' experiences of school. More modern definitions of student voice such as Mitra's (2008):

“The ways in which young people can work with teachers and administrators to co-create the path of reform. This process can enable youth to meet their own developmental needs and can strengthen student ownership of the educational reform process (p. 7)—”

highlight the power student voice holds for impacting schools on a much deeper level. They also draw our focus to new relationships between students and adults. This concept of adults learning from, or working alongside students to shape the climate of schools may sound to many practitioners and researchers like a radical departure from more traditional methods (Jones & Perkins, 2004). These relationships between students and adults have resulted in more collaborative learning environments, where students accept more responsibility and share authority (Panitz, 1996). These new and more meaningful models of shared leadership have begun to receive attention from researchers focused on

understanding how schools can best use student voice initiatives to drive reform efforts (Beattie, 2012; Simmons et al., 2015). Research has demonstrated that cooperative efforts between students and adults can develop schools in a way that students and adults acting alone cannot (Kirchner, 2005).

While schools and principals have for decades used student voice in relation to maintaining the status quo, or to manage and organize student activities and student behavior, student voice has been largely subjected to limiting schoolestablished parameters (Quinn & Owen, 2016). These parameters have rarely been designed to include students' perspectives of teaching and leadership, arguably the two most important aspects of student life. Many adults, who don't share the same backgrounds as their students, struggle to view students as collaborators that can potentially inform their practice (Biklen, 2004). Despite this we know from research that when adults listen to what students have to say about their learning, and meaningfully use student voice to shape their experiences of school, they can empower students as learners (Warner, 2010).

### **Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical model that best suits my research comes from a study on students' perspectives of teachers as classroom managers (Allen, 1983). Allen's (1983) model (see Fig. 1) of the relationship between student and adult perspectives is bidirectional (Hargreaves, 1972) and is based on symbolic interaction theory (Becker, 1968; Hargreaves, 1972). This theory assumes that in the interaction between two groups individuals act from a group perspective based on the norms of

their group. Therefore students' behaviors are based on the norms of youth culture (Morrill, 2000; Murdock, 1972) and teachers' (or principals') behaviors are based on the norms of adult culture.

Allen's (1983) study on students' perspectives proposed two essential research questions that relate to this study. The first was to establish that students use certain strategies to achieve goals, which form their classroom agenda. The second was to establish the degree to which these strategies influence teachers in establishing how the classroom is managed. While Allen's study was not able to determine which students' strategies influence teachers, and subsequent studies have failed to determine which strategies influence principals and their instructional leadership, it's important to note that ancillary data from Allen's research suggest that adults are influenced and school management effected by students' strategies. This highlights the bidirectional influence between how students' strategies and goals, can affect those of the principal. Just as students have an agenda that includes strategies to help them achieve their goals, these same strategies also help students adapt to, or circumvent, the goals of the adults in school.

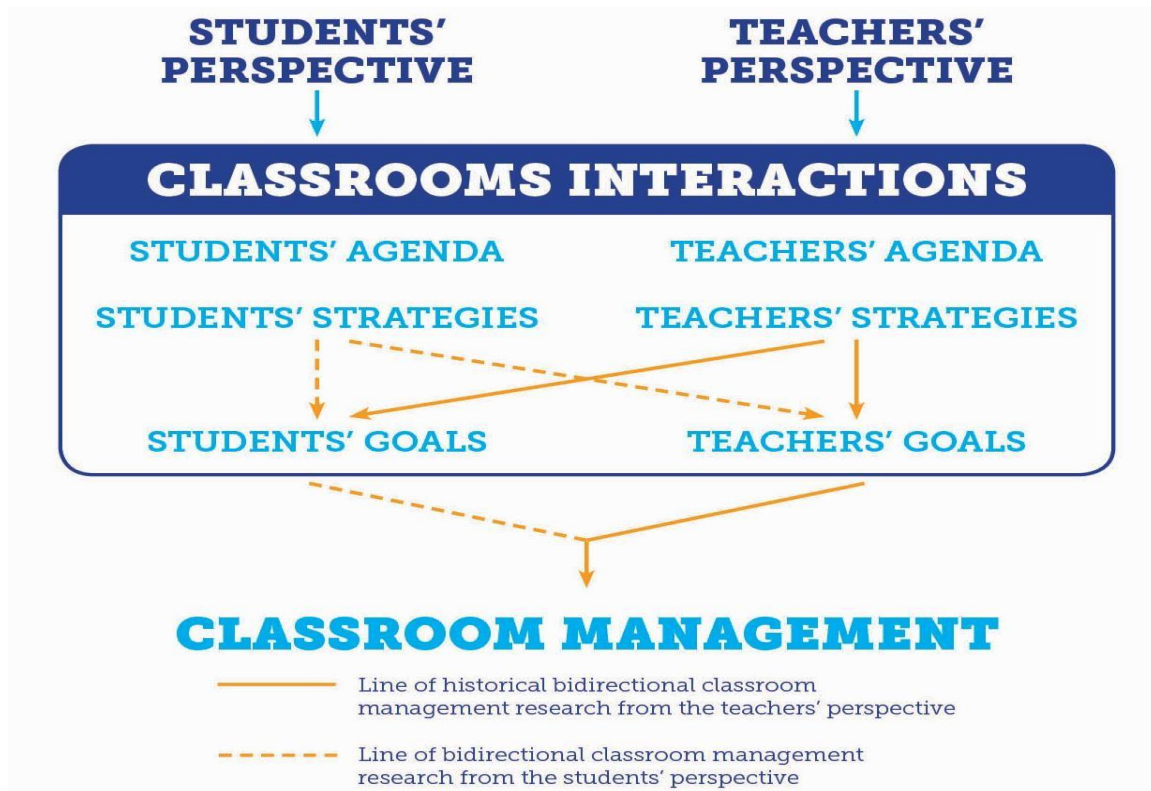


Figure 1: Bidirectional Classroom Interaction Model (Allen, 1983)

The framework places the two parties beside each other so as to highlight the bidirectional influence students and teachers both have on outcomes such as academic achievement and classroom management. This framework provides an alternative to more hierarchical and unidirectional approaches to understanding the connection that exists between adults' strategies for improving the instructional program, and students' strategies for succeeding in schools. While the relationship between these two groups has been discussed at length from the perspective of the adult, this model serves to demonstrate the importance of developing a new line of inquiry that not only includes the students' perspective but also places it beside that of the adult.

This model emphasizes the important role student voice plays in empowering students as learners, and will also guide my query into how student perspectives can be used to shape and guide new forms of leadership behavior in schools. While the theoretical framework does depict a relationship between students' strategies and goals and teachers' strategies and goals, it's important to note that principals' perspectives and agendas may also be connected or developed in response to those of the students.

### **Research Methods**

This study is designed as a multi-site ethnography of how elementary school principals empower students and use student voice to develop their principalship. With this study I describe and explain how principals have (or have not) used students' perspectives to structure their experiences of school and learning. Here I will describe the study settings, participants, and methods for data collection and analysis.

#### **Participating Principals and School Settings**

The participating principals included in this study have been recruited based on the following criteria: a) recommendations from colleagues at local universities and regional schools that have identified candidates based on my descriptions of principals that work directly with students to find meaningful ways of promoting student learning and shaping their principalship, b) face-to-face screening interviews I then held with possible candidates where I asked about specific strategies they had in place (or were developing) that incorporated student voice

and/or empowered students, and c) principals that expressed excitement about being included in a study that is designed to support the work they do with students, by involving students in the work they do as principals.

Principals were also purposefully selected from a variety of elementary school settings to inform this study. This study includes two urban, one suburban, and one rural school. Because few studies have investigated what students perceive principals do to influence their academic achievement (Gentilucci & Muto, 2007), and the majority of principals struggle to find the time to devote to working with kids (Walker, 2009), it is important to provide both researchers and practitioners with evidence of how these student-centered administrators lead in schools that represent a number of different populations.

### **Participating Students**

Another class of participants is elementary school students. Because I did not want to actively interfere in any of the students' instructional time in schools, I gave the principals opportunities to decide when I would be given access to small focus groups of students (4-6 students per focus group). Each focus group was randomly selected from classrooms at grade-levels determined by the principal, where parents were willing to complete and submit consent forms, and meant to be representative of the overall population of the school. At Forest Hills, Lodi and Everton I was granted access to two groups of students at each site. These groups consisted of students in grades 3-5. At Carter I was given access to one group of fifth grade students. All students fell between the ages of 8-11.

## **Data Collection**

The research goals of this study are to understand how adults use student perspectives to structure their approaches to leadership. Research has shown that using different kinds of data to understanding a single topic can produce results that are both confirming and powerful (Denzin, 1978). My research produced a mixedqualitative approach that researchers and practitioners can use to structure their approaches to leadership, empower students, and create more meaningful dialogue between children and adults. In the following section I will describe the different qualitative approaches that were taken during interviews with principals, students, and visits to the schools.

**In-depth interview.** My first formal interview with the principals lasted approximately 60 minutes and was conducted before I spoke with the students near the beginning of the spring semester. Questions in the first interview included: descriptions of a “typical” day, success stories, challenges and hurdles, ways student-based initiatives were presented at the schools, and interactions with the students. Data collected from this interview was used to inform my questioning during my subsequent focus group which was conducted with the students. A second interview, which lasted between 60-90 minutes, was then conducted with the principals after my first focus group with the students. The questioning from this interview was created in response to the analysis of my first focus group with students, was informed by my observations at the site, and gave the principals an opportunity to respond to any questions and/or concerns posed by the students.

**Focus groups.** There are a number of strategies that researchers have used when conducting focus groups with children (Liamputtong, 2011). In addition to conducting the two focus group interviews at each site, I have employed three of these strategies in an effort to conduct fun, age-appropriate activities focused on the research topic. The first strategy was the use of a warm-up activity with students from all groups. This involved 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.

Next, I asked each student to provide me with a drawing they create in response to an initial brainstorm about principals. In my attempt to provide the students with an opportunity to tell their story as transparently as possible. Students were provided with colored pencils, a standard (A4) size piece of paper, and asked to draw what they thought their principal does before my line of questioning began. A third activity I used to start my second focus group 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. Focus groups were conducted twice with each group of students at each site, 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.



**Observation.** I also used observation as a tool for understanding and interpreting the data I collected in my interviews with students and principals. At the schools I observed principals in their natural interactions with students. Because principals often schedule specific times for these interactions, principals invited me to join them in these interactions at various points throughout the semester. I arranged for a minimum of four days of observation at each research site.

### **Data Analysis**

Data analysis began during the process of data collection and was conducted by the students, principals, and myself. The initial interview with the school principal was used to inform my questioning during the subsequent focus group interview with students. Likewise, data collected from this focus group of students was used to inform my probing of the principal during our second in-depth interview. This approach is based on Elden & Levin's (1991) model of cogenerative dialogue and models of narrative inquiry (Polkinghorne, 1995; Riessman, 2008; Rolling, 2008). This model suggests that more participatory approaches taken by the researcher and subjects during the data collection process can help the participants, in our case students and principals, develop a shared framework that can be tested through collective action, or used to produce a new general theory that can be used to inform and improve their situation in the future.

Both during and after the data collection process was complete I used an analytically inductive method to develop codes for my data. This method allowed

important categories to emerge as the data were collected, produced, and analyzed by the students and principals throughout the study. My two classes of participants, and bidirectional framework both suggested that I first develop two sets of codes based on the data collected, one for principals and one for students.

The resulting two sets of codes were then merged and assigned to field notes from my observations at the site, interview transcripts, and any artifacts I collected from the students during the focus groups. More general categories for coding the interview data were based on what students and principals said, what they did, how they interacted, and how principals helped students learn. More specific codes included student responsibility, challenges faced by the students, assumptions, personal inclination, high/low influence leadership behaviors, direct/indirect leadership behaviors, dialogue, communication, structuring student experiences, student voice, shared decision making, student achievement, and non-traditional role of the principal. These codes were then organized into the four general categories described above, and each of these categories was then purposefully connected to one of the two research questions.

### **Case Studies**

This research study included case studies of different groups of students and their principals, across four elementary schools in New York State. In this section, I provide a brief summary of all four schools based on conversations I had with students, principals, staff, my own observations at the research sites, and any artifacts shared by the students or principals during my visits. The first part of each

school's case will focus on describing the school and data from observations and interviews with the principals. The second part of each school's case will focus on the students' perspectives of the challenges they face, factors that relate to their experiences of school, and where data from focus group interviews and observation will be shared.

I will start with Forrest Hills Elementary (FH)<sup>1</sup>. FH is the most affluent of the four schools and is located in a mid-sized suburban district. Next I will introduce the rural site, Lodi Elementary, which is located in a small town 30 miles from the closest urbanized center. Next, I will present Everton Elementary, a school that was shut down at the end of the school year due to a daunting budget deficit being faced in the city district. I will then introduce Carter Elementary, which is located in the center of the city, and has a principal that took over just months before this research was conducted. Finally, I will provide a brief cross-case analysis in order to summarize key findings.

### **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 lunch list. The students, staff, and principal here make up what may appear to represent the traditional American 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

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<sup>1</sup> All names of people and places have been changed.

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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.

FH is appropriate as the school to begin this analysis of how principals help students cope with the challenges they face for two reasons. First, the school appears to be running as well as any school possibly could. Students are actively engaged in learning throughout the day, and are being given opportunities to develop socially and emotionally in this very nurturing climate. Second, this principal's approaches to leadership represent what may appear to many readers as the most typical form of primary school leadership in the United States. Unlike Joseph's previous experiences at a district site where behavioral and academic issues were more of a concern, FH's kids are rarely insubordinate, and the majority of students are testing at or above grade-level. This leaves Joseph to focus on more traditional, managerial functions from the main office where he does an excellent job coordinating his ample supply of support personnel and resources around a range of student and staff concerns.

However, here too I found this age-old tension between the principal's need to have control, and the student's experiences of school as they relate to this control, a tension I did not anticipate before entering the field as a formal researcher. Neither my experiences working with student teachers at this site in the years before Joseph took over, or my screening interview with Joseph six months before the study began, prepared me for how this tension would eventually manifest itself. During my first interview with Joseph I asked him how students' opinions and attitudes about school or teaching influenced his agenda. He responded in the following way.

Joseph: Everybody needs to be led. Everybody needs to be able to look to somebody for guidance. But we also have to have expectations. As we work with kids, and as we work with adults, the expectation of where we're going needs to be out there. Because if the kids understand the adults understand. If the adults understand they can help lead students. So as kids work through it you want to listen to the children but you need to lead the children. You can't let them control what we do.

This passage allows me to articulate two sides of Joseph's approach to leadership simultaneously. There is the side that acknowledges the value student voice has for influencing the work of adults, and the side that chooses to ignore opportunities to do much more than listen in his role as school leader. Belief statements like these serve to highlight a critical disconnect in what Joseph, and principals like Joseph, say

about using students' perspectives to drive their leadership, and actually do to provide students with a sense of voice and agency in their own learning.

**Students' Perspectives.** Students' challenges at FH were with specific subjects, or with teachers. When asked how students dealt with the challenges they faced in class, they initially reported that they are likely go to a parent, peer, or sibling before speaking with an adult in school. For example, when I asked the students at FH to tell me about some ways they would deal with problems they were having with school I was able to group responses I received at this site into two categories. The first included students who said they would talk with a sibling, a parent, a classmate or their teacher about the issue. The second group said they would work to get the principal's attention, which was not surprising considering the context of many of my questions. What was surprising was the way this group of students would go about being heard. One example of focus group dialogue that occurred around this topic went like this:

Student One: You should act bad so that you can get the principal's attention.

Student Two: I would start meeting with kids and have a strike, or campaign, or write a letter.

Student Three: I don't really talk about my feelings but I express them with yelling and screaming.

Student Four: I'd go on strike or protest.

Student Three: Seriously though, I'd have my little brother go tell the principal for me. He's a crazy kid.

This exchange demonstrates how one group of students at FH said they would react to problems they were having with teachers, peers, classwork or at home. It also serves as our first example of how student voice could manifest itself when principals do not develop ways to honor student voice, and/or give students opportunities to actively share their thoughts and feelings about 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.

Many of Mark's comments demonstrate that Mark has developed into the kind of principal that understands what students need not only from their school, but from their principal as well. However, like Joseph at FH, it is unclear as to how this principal is reciprocating that understanding. One lengthy analogy of school leadership that Mark shared with me during our first conversation went like this.

Mark: This building is like a car or a vehicle. There are people that are the engine of that car, and they're the ones that really make the building go. (They) are the doers, and they step up to the plate. They're here early, stay late, get involved in everything, are all about kids, and when I say we need to do something about instruction they say (mimics eager teacher), 'What do I need to do?' And then we have the wheels. They're the people that make the building move. They may not be the heart of the building but without them we don't go anywhere. And then there's the chrome and the trim. They are the ones that are along for the ride that kind of make us look good but don't really do anything. And as a principal, I'm sitting in the driver's seat and



stepping on the gas, breaking, steering, signaling which direction to go, and together all of us somehow get the organization down the road and moving forward. Sometimes I try not to be that autocratic principal but there are other times when I'll say, 'This is what we need to do and we're going to do it.'

Notice, if you will, that students are omitted from this analogy altogether. Are they in the passenger seat? The back seat? Maybe the trunk? While it is unclear as to what their role is in making the car go, it is clear that this principal, like Joseph at FH, is in the driver's seat and making the decisions that effect all members of the school community, whether they are mentioned or not.

**Students' Perspectives.** 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. Even though I had begun to see how Mark was making a positive impact on kids in this community, I was still curious to see what the students had to say about their experiences of school and their principal.

During my first focus group with students I presented them with four images. The first image was of a police officer in uniform, the second of a firefighter, the third of President Barack Obama, and the fourth of their principal. I asked the group to tell me what job each of the four people did, and how they knew that. The students effortlessly identified each of the first three images as police officer, firefighter, and president accordingly. When I asked how they knew that Barack Obama was the

president, they pointed to the flag in the background, a pin on his lapel, and one student told me he knew because “He’s on TV. Plus, everybody knows he’s the president.” When I came to a picture of Mark however, they first guessed office worker, and then office man, before a third student guessed principal. While this may seem like a minor observation, I found it significant in that this was the only site where a percentage of the students struggled initially to identify their principal during this warm-up activity.

Students at Lodi also offered a range of responses when I asked them about what their principal did. One exchange between the students and I started like this.

Author: How is your principal different from a teacher?

Student One: He doesn’t teach much.

Student Two: The principal probably doesn’t get paid.

Author: Why do you think that?

Student Two: I think he gets paid a little bit but the teachers get paid a lot more because they teach all day and he doesn’t. He just walks around.

Student Three: I know, but he’s the boss of teachers.

Student Four: He (principal) keeps you on task. He doesn’t teach subjects like math and spelling. He’s more focused on keeping you safe, not hurting other people, not saying mean things, and just making sure he’s helpful.

These student perspectives serve as an example of how different students at this site hold different opinions about what the principalship entails. Some see him as a teacher leader, some as an observer, and others see him as the one setting the tone for the building.

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.

### **Everton Elementary**

Everton, the first of two urban sites included in this study, has a principal that spends a great deal of time managing crisis both inside and outside of the main office. Here I will present how this principal has managed to maintain a sense of calm, despite the many challenges faced by her school and the community. While students at FH and Lodi have had their share of academic and social/emotional challenges in school, students at Everton are dealing with a range of issues unique to urban education in addition to many of these same challenges. All of the students at Everton receive free and reduced lunch. This is also the only school that has an

onsite mental health clinic to help students with special needs or those with emotional issues.

Leah, Everton's principal, has 25 years of experience working as a teacher, a staff developer, and an administrator in this urban district, and 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, as well as 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 (which Leah repeatedly referred to as "triage"), 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.

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. When I introduced a hypothetical situation to Leah, and asked

what she would do differently if she did have the time and the resources she shared the following passage.

Leah: The first thing I would want to do is start a student cabinet and I would like to be directly involved with that. So if I were in an elementary school it would probably be third through fifth graders working in an advisory capacity. I would present them with problems that we're facing as a school. So maybe, bullying, or community service projects, or it might be around science and math, and I'd ask them how to get kids more excited about science and math. I'd like to create an advisory board and maybe have a tape recorder and have the school leadership team (teachers) listening to students talking about these issues. That's what I'd do if I could have my dream time.

I found this passage interesting for two reasons. First, it is clear that while Leah would involve students in dialogue about school wide factors like bullying, and community factors like service, she said she would focus on asking the kids specifically about learning as well. Second, she has thought through this hypothetical scenario far enough to have considered the value student's perspectives would also hold for other members of the building. While I presented a hypothetical scenario similar to this one to each principal in this study, Leah's response was the first that made me believe a scenario such as this one could become a reality.

**Students' Perspectives.** 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. When I went on to ask Leah what question she would like to ask the students she requested that I ask "Do they feel supported academically at Everton". I found it interesting when I posed Leah's question to the students that the topic again came back to issues of safety, and the important role that played in the students' experiences of learning.

Author: Do you feel supported academically here at Everton?

Student One: Yes.

Student Two: Yes.

Student Three: Yeah they try working with us. Like in each subject that you're struggling with, they can try to get you a tutor as quick as they can.

Student Four: Leah keeps us safe because sometimes she tells us, 'You should feel safe,' and when there's a bad person inside the school trying to get the child because what they did to the other child the teachers should lock the

doors and stuff. If she didn't do that the child would get harmed and that would mean she wouldn't care about that child.

Whether this final scenario is fact or fiction is irrelevant. Like a student at Lodi who drew a picture of his principal saving him from a wolf in the forest, this student perceives her principal to be someone that is there to protect the students in times of danger. It also points out the important role Leah plays in providing students with additional academic support and the message that learning is important. When it came time to ask the students if they feel there is a clear and consistent message being spread that they can go to college, all of the students interviewed replied in the affirmative.

### **Carter Elementary**

At Carter, our second urban school and the final school included in this study, is a new principal that has made a big impact on his site in a short period of time. 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. 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 and student responsibility. Below, David excitedly shared a statement that speaks to his work around student responsibility as principal at Carter.

David: I'm big on responsibility. If kids make a mistake, whether it's minor or major, I'm so elated if I can get that kid to take responsibility and communicate the choices that should have not been made or talk about what should have been done. That's the real work. That's priceless and is going to get you further in life than math, ELA, & science.

In a school like Carter, where there is clearly room for academic improvement, David's emphasis on responsibility and communication between students and principal is unique in that here, systems are set up for these key elements to move in both directions. Not only is David communicating school goals and working to maintain a school vision, he is also asking the students to own this vision and to share their own visions for what they think works (or does not work) in school.



Another example of a situation where David used student responsibility to focus his school reform efforts is evident in the following passage.

David: We want parents to communicate with teachers, and teachers to communicate with parents, but why don't the kids have agendas and planners like the adults have so they can take responsibility for their own learning?

David believes that students, and their own experiences of learning, have so often been excluded from the school reform agenda. Here at Carter is a principal who starts with the students and looks to see what pieces of their puzzle are missing in an effort to solve problems on a larger scale.

**Students' Perspectives.** Students' perspectives at Carter reflected the seriousness and sense of urgency David brings to his work everyday. Students identified their key challenges as being confrontataion 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.

At the start of my first focus group interview, I asked the group to draw me a picture of what they saw their principal doing, and then describe what they saw.

The very first student provided the following commentary when I asked him about what his principal does.

Student: So I wrote David walks to classes and sits in there. I think he tries to see what we are learning. He talks with students. He sometimes talk to students about they are learning. David is a good principal.

While many students across the three other sites drew pictures of their principals observing instruction, this is the first student at any school in this study that mentioned the principal observing and talking to students about what they are learning. In just a matter of months the students at Carter already see their principal as someone who is concerned about what they are learning, and who is in control.

A second student chose to draw a picture of their principal looking into the classroom from the outside, but she too writes about a principal that is “looking to see that students are learning and paying attention”. Like almost all of the other pictures this student also chose to depict a principal that is focused on student work and learning. When I went on to ask the group (each of which came from different classes) whether they saw the principal on the day of the interview they all replied in the affirmative. When I asked where they saw their principal that day, one student shared the following comment.

Student: I see him in my class today and we was doing a project and he came to see what type of project and then come in and says questions about our projects.

Another key aspect of my first conversation with students at Carter that caught my interest took place after all the students were finished sharing their illustrations and stories of their out-of-office principal. I asked the students if they ever went to talk to him and the following exchange ensued.

Author: It sounds like he comes to see you a lot. Do you ever go talk to him?

Student One: Sometimes, like if I have a problem or something I'll go talk to him.

Author: What do you talk about?

Student Two: Like if we're having problems with somebody, and we want the problem dealt with we go tell him and he'll probably call the person down and talk about the situation and how to fix the problem, how do we get along.

Student Three: Or sometimes he talks to you about something is going on at home.

Author: How does he know if you have a problem at home?

Student Three: You could tell him and he'll talk to you about it.

Notice that three of the students in the focus group identified that their principal as someone they or others felt comfortable going to with problems they were having. This student data is dramatically different from the data at other sites where students said they would not go to their principals for a variety of reasons. These comments also represent what many students at Carter identified as challenges they

face in school.

### **Cross Case Analysis**

After looking at all four of the cases some key findings have emerged. First, each principal's perspectives on leadership, school, instruction and students varied from school to school. These perspectives or beliefs are sometimes based on assumptions principals have about what works for their schools and students. These beliefs led to certain behaviors that broadcast to the students what the principals valued about school.

While the principals' districts or even the state prescribed some of these behaviors, it is clear that each principal was able to choose how they spent some of their time in school. These choices represent what each of these principals value about their role as school leader. After speaking with the students it became clear that these choices, and even the principals' beliefs in some cases, do not always match what the students are looking for in their principal. Students were able to clearly identify ways the principals could help them address challenges they were facing with school. Students were also able to identify which specific leadership behaviors had a high or low influence on their experiences of school.

Principals that had meaningful interactions with students, and who were effective communicators, were better at structuring students' experiences. They were also more willing to engage in dialogue with the students about what they value about school. While some principals claimed that they value student voice, student responsibility, and shared decision-making, it became clear that not all

principals understood what that looked like, or if they did, were able to put their claims into practice. In addition, principals struggled to provide me with specific examples of student-centered approaches to leadership. While each of these principals demonstrated a range of approaches to the administrative function, it is clear that each principal has adapted their approach to suit the unique needs of each of their schools, their leadership backgrounds, and even their own expectations.

### **Conclusions: Toward a Theory of Engaging Students in School Leadership**

In the following passage, I will present my new 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. I will begin by using an adapted version of Allen's (1983) theoretical framework to capture and explain how students can be more actively considered as partners in co-developing approaches to instructional leadership, and student achievement outcomes. This model also highlights the important role student voice plays in empowering students as learners, and serves as a guide for how students' perspectives can be used to shape and guide new forms of leadership.

Next, I will present the theory that has emerged from my research with students and principals, and in doing so describe what elementary school students perceive to be the biggest challenges they face in school, and whether and how principals help students with the challenges they face. Finally, I will present how student voice and agency manifested itself in schools as a result of this study.

## **A Shared Vision**

Even though more decisions are now being made with shared goals in mind, there is evidence to suggest that both students and principals act from a group perspective based on the norms of their group. Therefore students' behaviors are based on the norms of youth culture (Morrill, 2000; Murdock, 1972) and principals' behaviors are based on the norms of adult culture. Allen's (1983) model (Fig. 1) of the relationship between student and adult perspectives is bidirectional (Hargreaves, 1972), based on symbolic interaction theory (Becker, 1968), and provides this study with a useful way for exploring how students can be more actively considered as partners in co-developing approaches to instructional leadership, and student achievement outcomes.

I have chosen to adapt Allen's (1983) bidirectional model from a study on students' perspectives of teachers as classroom managers, to this study on students' perspectives of leadership. It not only highlights the important role student voice plays in empowering students as learners, it also guides my query into how student perspectives can be used to shape and guide new forms of leadership. This framework allows me to position the research on how students' perspectives have been used in schools alongside the literature on leadership. While the theoretical framework does depict a relationship between students' strategies and goals and principals' strategies and goals, it is important to note that principals' perspectives and agendas may also be connected or developed in response to those of the students.

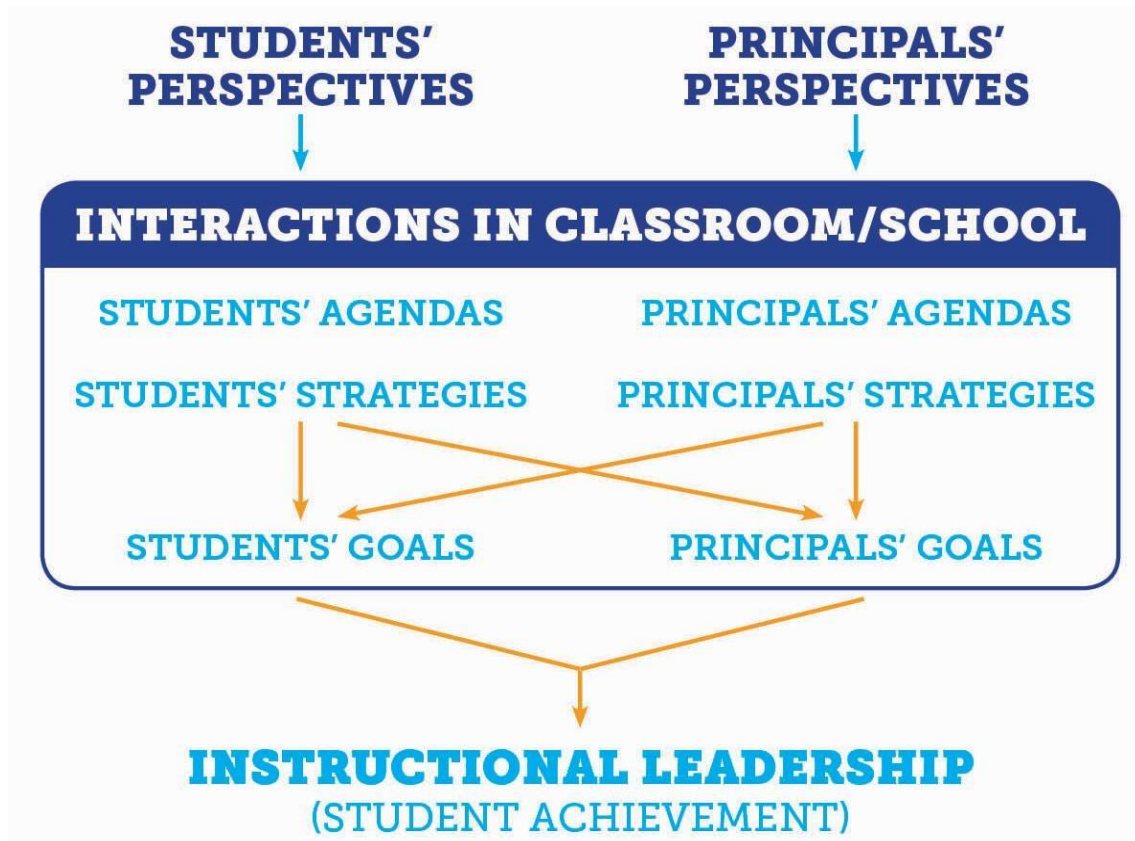


Figure 2: Bidirectional Instructional Leadership Model, adapted from Allen (1983).

The framework places these two often disparate members of the school community side-by-side so as to highlight the bidirectional influence students and principals both have on outcomes such as academic achievement and school climate. This framework provides an alternative to more unidirectional approaches to understanding the connection that exists between principals' strategies for improving the instructional program, and students' strategies for succeeding academically in schools. The relationship between these two groups has been discussed at length from the perspective of the adult; this model serves to demonstrate the importance of developing a new line of inquiry that not only includes the students' perspective but also places it beside that of the administrator.

Until now schools have given students few opportunities to help shape school culture, and even fewer chances to meaningfully structure their instructional program. Principals that fail to use student voice are missing out on opportunities to affect student outcomes vital to successful schools, social development and academic achievement. The role of the principal continues to change, and as it becomes more focused on improving instruction in schools, students' perspectives of the work that administrators are doing will need to be utilized in order to develop schools intent on addressing more diverse sets of learning needs.

While students are capable of articulating their thoughts and feelings on a number of topics, including teaching and leadership, these perspectives are rarely used to inform the practice of administrators. This gap in the literature presents evidence that there is room to situate a unique counter narrative beside those provided by researchers, teachers, and principals. The lack of research on principals' direct relationships with kids is surprising when one considers the significant roles that both principals and students play key roles in shaping school culture. Principals have been disinclined to solicit kids' opinions because so many principals (and even teachers) argue that direct instructional leadership behaviors are unrealistic for principals (Browne, 2003). Despite this, there is evidence from research outside the U.S. that demonstrates how principals have adopted strategies that bring them into the classroom for more direct instructional contact with students on a regular basis (Hargreaves & Shirley, 2012; Jenkins & Reitano, 2015; Murdoch & Schiller, 2002).



## **Engaging Students in School Leadership**

In this qualitative study, I explore what elementary school students perceive to be the biggest challenges they face in school, and how principals help students with the challenges they face. After conducting interviews and observations at four different schools I have developed a new theory that I will present here in an effort to inform educators and researchers who seek to strengthen the opportunities of students, and the leadership practices of school principals. Central to this is a call for principals to use more student-driven approaches to guiding their principalship, so that students can be empowered as learners and school leaders in their own right.

Schools teach kids about how to deal with problems based on how adults like these principals deal with their own challenges. 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. This concept of principals' responsiveness is a core value of this study. Our need to define principals as the ones who seek out the opinions and perspectives of those they serve, rather than making decisions for them, is a significant but necessary departure from more traditional approaches to leadership. Principals that only use adult perspectives to shape their leadership practices leave students to circumvent or adapt to goals that in many cases will not square with their own, and may impede their ability to develop socially and academically. 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.

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, and are able to talk about some ways they promote quality instruction for kids based on the instructional leadership vernacular, 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.

These observations reinforce the conclusions I drew from my findings— 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 this study was willing to engage in an indirect conversation with students about the challenges they face, few others actively look to see what students think about school, and even fewer use student voice to shape their approaches to leadership.

### **Student Voice & Agency**

At FH, 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 Lodi, 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 Everton, 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 Carter, students spoke openly about how they wanted more of the direct instructional and social/emotional support their new principal was already providing.

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.

In schools where students did not perceive their principal to be someone that they could go to for help with their challenges, student voice occasionally manifested itself as an oppositional behavior. While these schools had less problems with insubordination based on a variety of factors including socioeconomic status, school resources, teaching experience, and school climate, findings indicate that students would react to conditions in ways that did not fit their principal's preferences in order to get the principal's attention. As a result, principals would then have to deal with student voice in the form of resistance or by way of parents, instead of using that voice to structure their approaches to leadership early on.

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. Reform minded practitioners may find that developing this counter-narrative will help empower kids, structure their experiences of school, and impact their academic achievement.

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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