Unlocking Elementary Students' Perspectives of Leadership

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Abstract

This study examines whether and how principals take their lead from students, and use student voice, to create more responsive schools, and more responsible models of leadership. I consider issues of student agency and voice within four very different elementary school settings. Further, I consider the challenges 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 and students can use to create new dialogue and shared theories that are focused on improving both administrative function and the instructional programs of their schools.This approach has revealed a new shared theory which includes students in models of school leadership. Central to this theory is a call for principals to use more student-driven approaches, so that young students can be empowered as learners and leaders in their own right.

Keywords: Student Voice, Educational Leadership, Elementary Education, Student Agency, Cogenerative Dialogue

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). At 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 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

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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 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 elementary school students. In order to build on what is already known about how students perceive school, learning, and leadership, this study will attempt to answer the following questions:

- What, from the perspective of elementary school students, are the most significant challenges faced in schools?

- How do principals help these children cope with the challenges they face?

Overview

My study analyzes 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 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, 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's 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.

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. 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). 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 with the increase in job demands principals now collaborate more with others before making decisions (Wulff, 1996) 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.

Collins (2009) argues that organizational decline is largely self-inflicted and is often generated by neglecting the core business (in our case students). While some principals are having success navigating the bumpy instructional terrain outside of the classrooms using non-traditional and at times innovative methods, many principals, including those working in districts that have more resources, fail to acknowledge what students identify as high-influence instructional behaviors. Although research has recognized the impact of effective principal leadership on individual student learning and achievement, much of the research regarding the effects of leadership on student learning needs clarification (Walker, 2010). 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. 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. 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.

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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). 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

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 (Cusick, 1973; Ogbu, 1974; Wilson, 1993; Wilson, 1994; Wilson, 2011; Allen, 1983; Stubbs & Delamont, 1976). 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 (Gentillucci & 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 (Cook-Sather, 2010; 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 (Warner, 2010), yet rarely are student perspectives considered in educational research or applied work. 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. Do elementary school students even perceive principals to be instructional leaders? If not, what do students think and feel about their relationship, or lack thereof, with their principal? If students do believe that principals directly influence their learning we must then ask which instructional leadership behaviors do they perceive to influence their academic achievement in school.

We know from data provided by adults that principal behaviors, such as maintaining a visible presence on campus, are correlated with higher student achievement (Waters et al., 2004). However, we lack data explicating such findings from the perspective of students (Gentilucci & Muto, 2007). How can instructional leaders say they have done all they can when many have not even considered the undervalued perspectives students have about instructional leadership? If schools are not asking the students what works for them, then whose needs are they trying to address? Whose experiences of school are they really trying to structure? Who is being empowered? Schools are not measured by how well teachers, superintendents, or even principals perform; they are measured by the strengths and weaknesses of their students.

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)?

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. Research tells us 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 school-established parameters. 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 urban students, struggle to view students as collaborators that can potentially inform their practice. Despite this, there is evidence 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).

It's important to note that it's not only principals that have failed to meet and make decisions with students. Researchers too have largely ignored asking students about the work being done in schools. While students have been given some opportunities to talk about their experiences of school, we see fewer students included in research as we go down in age, and virtually nothing on the topic of leadership. While young students are less mature, and have had less experience relating to principals, their perspectives are also less affected by what others (parents, teachers, principals and even popular culture) have taught them about what leadership means, and how it impacts them directly.

Findings also show that when ethnographers have gone to kids and asked about how they learn, they often invoke their own agendas, identities and memories in relation to their informants (Biklen, 2004). Research indicates that educational researchers and leaders, in their effort to make sense of how students perceive schools, have imposed meaning in the development of their theses (Denzin, 1978). This has been problematic for researchers and practitioners who have used adult perspectives to structure their approaches to effecting change in schools.

Research Methods

This multi-site ethnography involves two groups of participants across four elementary schools. The first class of participants is four principals that I interviewed twice and observed a minimum of four times. The second class is made up of focus groups of elementary school students, which I interviewed twice and observed a minimum of four times. 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.
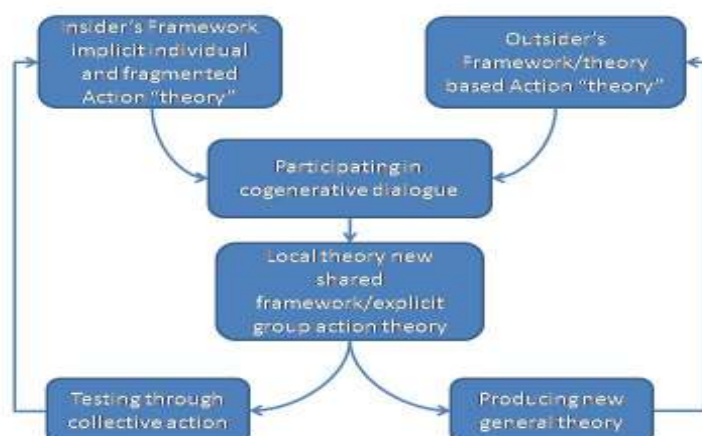
Figure 1. Elden & Levin's (1991) cogenerative model of participative action research

Elden & Levin's (1991) insider-outsider model of participative action research includes six dimensions: insider's framework, outsider's framework, participating in cogenerative dialogue, new shared framework, testing through collective action, and producing new general theory. This model was created by Elden & Levin to emphasize that the participants of the study (students), or insiders, are not subjects or data sources, but instead co-learners. This model does not promote prescriptive behaviors for researchers to impose on the students. Instead, its emphasis lies in the cogenerative dialogue that takes place between researcher and participant in developing a shared theory where meaning emerges as data is produced.

Elden & Levin (1991) define cogenerative dialogue as:

The empowering participation that occurs between insiders and outsiders—

insiders and outsiders operate out of their initial frames of reference but communicate at a level where frames are changed and new frames generated (p. 134).

This framework 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), a dialogue that I helped facilitate, and (d) discuss the value and significance of this collaboration. The bottom two dimensions of the framework will be the resulting theory I have developed through my literature review and field research[1], and the impact this study has had on the work of principals in the field[2]. 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 to develop new approaches to leadership.

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[1] See below Conclusions: *Toward a Theory of Engaging Students in School Leadership*
[2] See below Concluding: *Reflections*

Data Collection

The research goals of this study are to understand how adults use student perspectives to structure their approaches to leadership. I have used Elden & Levin's (1991) cogenerative learning model as the theoretical framework for investigating the youth studies, student perspective, and educational leadership literatures. 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 mixed-qualitative approach that principals and researchers can use to structure their approaches to leadership, empower students, and create more meaningful dialogue between children and adults.

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

Implications for conducting focus groups with vulnerable or marginalized populations, including young children, have been considered and weaknesses of this methodology have been meaningfully reviewed. 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, such as listening, taking turns speaking, and being comfortable sharing their experiences. 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 created 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 a school counselor from the site, and was audio-recorded and transcribed for analysis.

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, (e.g. during lunch, classroom walk-throughs, after school, etc.), 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 that coincided with my four interviews. After each observation, which lasted between one and two hours, I wrote a detailed set of field notes that were analyzed during the data collection process to inform my interviewing approaches with the principals and students, and after the data collection process was complete.

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. This theoretical framework 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.

My theoretical framework suggested that I first develop two sets of codes based on data collected from interviews (one for principals and one for students). These two sets of codes were then merged and assigned to field notes from my observations at the site, 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 whether and how each informed the work of the other. 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.[3] After these codes were organized into the four general categories listed above, I then developed a definition for

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[3] Illustrations in this appendix, in the form of quotes, observations and students' drawings, served as the basis for developing these more specific categories.

each code, identified some key characteristics, highlighted the specific conditions under which the code operates, formed a proposition, and connected several illustrations based on students' and principals' comments, behaviors, observations and students' drawings (see Appendix A).

Some of these codes were more easily identified based on the research questions. For example, codes such as students' perspectives of leadership (SPL), and challenges (Chall), were addressed repeatedly during interviews with both classes of participants and spoke directly to the research questions. As a result there was more than enough evidence that these codes served a purpose in developing a baseline understanding of the research topic. Other codes emerged only after careful and extensive review of the data. One such category was focused on assumptions made by principals (see Appendix A).

Using the analysis procedure described above I began to first define the code based on both my principal and student interview data. After analyzing all of the data it became clear to me that principals were saying things about their work that did not correspond with what the students had to say. For example, at Lodi the principal said the students were often unaware of his presence during his walk throughs. After speaking with the students, however, it became clear that they were not only aware of his presence, but that he made some of the students feel tense or uncomfortable during his classroom visits (see student illustration in Appendix B). The students also said they would like their principal to help teach them and not just observe. As a result I first developed the following definition for the code: "Principals often draw conclusions or make assumptions about their approaches to school leadership that don't correspond with what students are looking for in an instructional leader." Second, I attempted to characterize principals' remarks by identifying words or phrases that I thought best spoke to these assumptions. I found the principals' assumptions to be naïve, instinctual, spontaneous, impulsive, and hypothetical. Next, I identified a specific condition under which this code operated in the schools. After reviewing dozens of illustrations from the data, most of which came from the principals' in-depth interviews, I determined that these conditions existed when principals develop and demonstrate leadership behaviors that underestimate what students understand about, and/or are capable of contributing to school.

I then revisited my literature review to identify elements of the literature that might correspond with what I had so far established about this category. I found ample evidence from the student perspective literature that spoke to this category and so developed the following proposition: Some principals assume that (a) only older kids are worth talking to about the work that's being done in school, (b) kids aren't able to answer specific questions about teaching and learning, (c) student voice should be limited to school established parameters, and (d) certain leadership behaviors are valuable for kids (Johnson, 2010; Richardson, 2001). Confident that there was also research out there to support my claim, I moved forward and developed a proposition of my own: These assumptions often don't match what the students are looking for in a principal and highlight the value of using student perspectives to inform principals' approaches to school leadership. Finally I went on to list several quotes from principals that exemplified when they were making assumptions that contradicted findings from the field and/or the literature. I did this by cross-checking the data with other codes I had already established. Some of these pre-established codes that spoke to this category were: principals' perspectives of leadership, principals' perspectives of students, principals' perspectives of school, principals' perspectives of instruction, students' perspectives of leadership, students' perspectives of school, and students' perspectives of instruction.

One strength of this analysis procedure is that it gave me multiple opportunities and means by which to triangulate the data and check for accuracy in determining which codes were critical to developing my discussion and spoke directly to the research questions. A second strength of this procedure is that it allowed me to develop a strong foundation from which to proceed with my cross-case analysis. In my cross-case analysis I further triangulated the data from each of the research sites using these codes. This process was made less difficult because I already had a great deal of data organized and ready to support my claims about where certain beliefs and behaviors were taking place.

The goal of this study was to include students' perspectives in the dominant discourse on educational leadership by giving students an opportunity to shape the direction of this study. Both researchers and practitioners have substituted adults' perceptions of problems at school as solutions to issues that would be best understood by going directly to the students (Denzin, 1978). 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' thoughts and feelings matter and can provide schools and the research community with new evidence that can be used to inform the existing research on instructional leadership and administrative function in the field.

Results

In this section I will be presenting findings from my student and principal interviews, and observations, at four different elementary schools. I will start with Forrest Hills Elementary (FH)[4]. FH is the most affluent of our four schools and is located in a mid-sized suburban district. Next I will introduce our rural site, Lodi Elementary, which is located in a small town 30 miles from the closest urbanized center. In the final two sections of this chapter I will present our two urban schools. First 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. Finally, I will 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.

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 for many readers, the traditional American elementary school. 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

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[4] All names of people and places have been changed.

touching base with his support staff around the school to make sure everyone is on the same page and moving forward together.

The students at FH 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 that plays a significant role in the lives of many of these students. Mark, an experienced teacher and administrator at other rural districts in the region, has worked to combat that culture of poverty here at Lodi, and 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. Despite the challenges of poverty and competing responsibilities, Mark has created a school culture at Lodi that makes going to school a source of joy for the students and staff.

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 (which Leah refers 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 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 high-levels of academic and emotional support do not come naturally to many parents, and where 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 Margeret 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 instuctional program, and provide opportunities for meaningful student involvement.

Students' perspectives at Carter, reflected the seriousness and sense of urgency David brings to his work every day. 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 them 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 their principal and that instructional and social/emotional support that 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.

Summary

After looking at the constructed themes across 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 be using the 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 framework[5], and my theory, 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 relationships between these two groups have been discussed at length from the perspective of the adult. This model serves to demonstrate the importance of developing a line of inquiry that not only includes the students' perspectives, but also places it beside that of the principal. 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 in elementary (and secondary) schol settings.
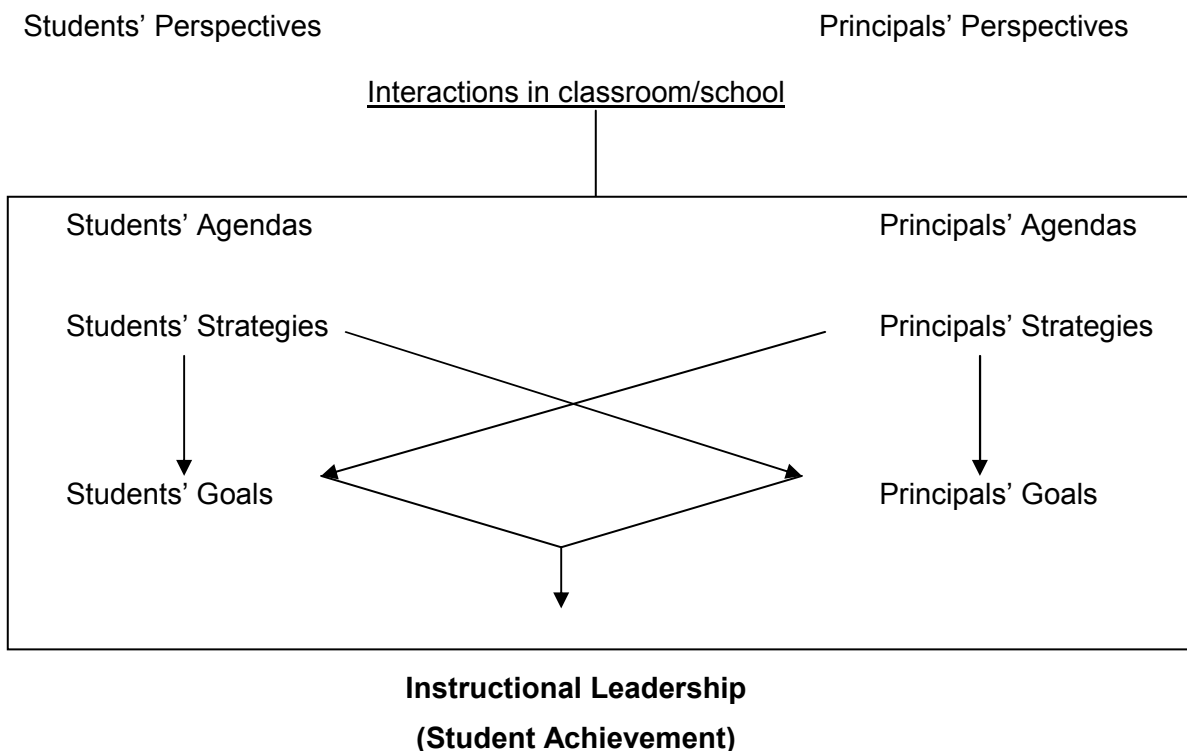

Instructional Leadership

(Student Achievement)

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

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[5] Adapted from a study on students' perspectives of teachers as classroom managers (Allen, 1983).

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. I did this by going directly to principals to ask them a wide range of questions focused on their approaches to leadership and their work with kids. I then spoke with their students and asked about their impressions of their principal, and about their thoughts and feelings about school. After in-depth interviewing and observation at four very different schools, with four different principals and groups of students, 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.

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. 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.

Business and industry leadership has long-recognized the value of involving line-workers in decisions about how their work is organized and conducted (Wilkinson, 1998). While effective leadership, strong teachers, and socioeconomic status have been cited as a few of the many determinants that make up a successful school, students are the ones that are actually doing the work of learning. Students are education's line-workers, and it is the quality of their work that inevitably determines the success of the entire organization. Despite this fact, students have not been treated as vital to the success of schools by most practitioners and scholars. While university students have been actively involved in evaluating their instructors and postsecondary programs for over a half century (Becker, 1961), and secondary students have been given opportunities to reflect on their experiences of school (Shultz & Cook-Sather, 2001), younger students perspectives are rarely if ever used to inform the work of researchers of practitioners.

Schools teach kids about how to deal with problems based on how adults like these 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, class meetings to address problems, and lessons designed for student-constructed processing), 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, 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 discussion; 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 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 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.

All of the principals spoke to the quality of leadership and strength of the teachers that were in the building before their arrival as a key factor for determining how, where, when, and why they spent their time the way they did. As a result, early analysis led me to believe that principals' leadership styles were in part influenced by the work of their predecessors and that school leaders inherit their approaches to leadership, and play more of a maintenance role in schools that are not in a situation of crisis. After more in-depth analysis, observation, and interview I have concluded that age, training, and personal background have also played a significant role in shaping the choices these principals make regarding school leadership.

It is plausible that older principals idealized their 'better days' when they had more time to be in the classrooms, or more energy, or when there were more resources and fewer students. Our youngest principal, however, made no excuses and said that the principal is the one who is responsible for the success of the students. He also pointed to his more recent training and experiences working with strong (and not so strong) principals in the recent past, as instrumental to his development as an urban school leader.

While there was some evidence that students felt like they could identify more with principals and teachers who shared a similar background, I do not believe that race or gender played a role in determining whether or not these principals choose to work closely with their students, or how students' perceived their principal's role as school leader. At our suburban and rural school, predominantly white students were able to identify with their white middle-class male principals despite the lack of meaningful interactions they held with them on a regular basis. At Carter, a predominantly black high-poverty community, students did say they were better able to identify with adults (including their black male principal) that were of the same race. Despite these findings, there was ample evidence that students at Everton, a predominantly black school with a white female principal, had no problems going to their principal for support of any kind.

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.

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.

Implications

The findings of my study hold several important implications for leadership practice and preparation. In the following section I present the value this research holds for principals interested in adapting their approaches to working with students. Next, I will present a new framework that can be adopted by university leadership programs interested in becoming more student-centered.

Practice

Principals can use students' thoughts and feelings about a whole range of school wide factors to inform their practice. They ought to do this because their assumptions about what works have largely been based on more traditional approaches to school leadership, which have in turn been informed by a body of adultcentric research and experience. There has also been evidence to suggest that leaders need their students' perspectives and cooperation to develop their administrative function. Neither tradition nor the extant research on school leadership can, in every case, match what students are actually looking for in their school leader.

After sitting down and speaking with students, I found that they are asking for more of that direct academic and social/emotional support. Students value opportunities to receive the principal's assistance in schools where students have had more frequent interactions with principals, as well as in schools where they have had less frequent interactions. Students like when principals ask them questions and provide them with support because it shows them someone important cares about what they are learning. These observations align with and build on existing student perspective research that says students are confused when principals enter the room and only interact with the teacher, do not interact at all, or limit their feedback to teacher performance (Gentilucci & Muto, 2007). When principals do not interact with students, or talk to them about what they are learning, students are left to wonder what the principal actually does, and whether the principal actually cares about their learning.

There is also evidence that principals are not setting up systems to help them focus their time on improving students' experiences of learning. For example, of the four principals included in this study, only one principal has a capable group of secretaries handling his more managerial responsibilities. As a result, he can routinely spend his time monitoring teaching and learning in his school's classrooms. This clear and consistent contact with students and teachers provides him with opportunities to provide students and teachers with more focused feedback and instructional support than colleagues who only observe for short periods of time during informal walk-throughs, or who limit their interactions with students to matters of discipline. Principals that are in the classrooms, hallways, and lunchroom throughout the day are better able to solve little problems before they become big problems, and develop proactive strategies that anticipate or respond to challenges students face in school.

While time constraints, accountability demands, and new initiatives from above are limiting the amount of free time principals have to devote to instruction, it was clear that principals who are not managing crises are able to choose how they spend significant parts of their day. Furthermore, our principal at Carter illustrated that the management of what some people think of as crises can be delegated to others. However, these choices rarely included interacting with students or supporting classroom instruction directly, or even indirectly in some cases. Principals need to set up systems that allow them to have more routine, structured, and meaningful interactions with the students and the instructional program during the day. Students' voices can be heard (quite literally) by principals who put themselves in the position of interacting with students, without having to develop any formal procedures for involving students in decision-making. Data indicates that principals who are in the classrooms should be providing feedback to teachers *and* students, and coaching them both if they want to develop a more cohesive and coherent approach to instructional leadership.

There is also evidence to suggest that after being given opportunities to develop a dialogue with students, school leaders became more interested in using student voice to inform their decision-making and empower students as learners. Principals in this

study were eager to see and hear about what the students thought of them. Students' comments and feedback challenged principals to think more deeply about their important role as learner, and prompted them to develop sets of questions for the students that held real value for how they approached a range of leadership decisions. Principals also thought that if students saw the changes they were discussing in their focus groups happen in their site, that it could be an empowering experience for kids, and a valuable new leadership tool.

Preparation

While leadership development programs are aiming to provide young and veteran principals with the tools they need to succeed in today's schools, many principals still find preparation programs to be out of touch with today's realities (Butler, 2008). One possible reason why principals have been reporting frustration after entering the high-stakes world of school leadership may be that they have not been taught how they can help students deal with the unique challenges many of them are facing in school. Principal preparation programs have largely failed to convey the significance of using student voice, instead focusing on professional development, models of shared leadership that include only adults, and on the administrator's function as a data driven decision maker or instructional coordinator (Hess, 2007).

While each of these functions is essential to the principal's success, particularly in schools that have been struggling academically, students are largely excluded from their principal's formula for success, and more responsive approaches that involve working with kids, or taking the students' lead, are all but ignored here in the United States. Programs that address this issue of principal's choice, and that recognize the value of using students' perspectives of leadership to develop both the administrative function and students' experiences of school, could provide principal candidates, many of which enter these programs as experienced or talented instructors, with a more seamless transition into leadership. They could also help focus the principal's work around a key variable (students and student learning) that actually hold real value for the overall success of the school.

Preparation programs are responsible for helping preservice administrators develop strategies that include students in models of shared decision-making. These programs can help show principals how to make the time for regular instructional contact with students and student learning in the classrooms. Programs that can help principals develop ways of eliciting student voice as it relates to students' experiences of learning, and help principals find ways of applying what they have learned, will empower students as learners and leaders in their own right. Preparation programs should also instill in their principal candidates an awareness that students are the ones actually doing the work of learning, and help principals model this understanding for other adults in the school so that all students may become more responsible learners.

Concluding Reflections

I felt the need to check in with my four school principals one month into the following semester to see if any changes had taken place over the summer. The local newspaper reported that Leah's site, Everton Elementary, was closed at the end of last school year so I was curious to see where she would end up. Mark's site was being consolidated with another school so I also felt compelled to see whether or not he would engage with his new batch of students in ways he said he might during our final interview. Based on this knowledge, I decided to ask just a few brief questions to see how things were going: (1) Do you find yourself in the same position you were last year? (2) How has the start of this new school year unfolded for you? And (3) have you made any changes to how you structure your interactions with kids?

As was typically the case during the previous school year, Joseph at FH replied within minutes of receiving my e-mail. Joseph's answers were succinct and to the point. He remarked that he was still the principal, that the school was off to an excellent beginning, and that his interactions with kids are similar to what he has done in the past. A few days later I heard from Mark who now finds himself using a co-principal model at a new PK-6 site that has nearly 500 more students than were at Lodi. This consolidation took place over the summer when two separate K-4 buildings merged with grades five and six from what was a middle school. Mark says that while the consolidation has gone wonderfully, he has not changed how he structures his interactions with kids and that it is now more difficult to get around to all the classrooms. He also said that one of the reasons why they adopted the co-principal model was so that administrators would be able to spend more time with kids in classrooms, but that "old habits die hard."

Leah now finds herself as the Director of Professional Development for the urban school district in which she has been employed. No longer the principal at Everton, she is now working on the Race To the Top reform agenda of common core instruction, supporting the district with their Annual Professional Performance Review, and working with teachers to develop their approaches to data driven instruction. Sadly, Leah, who was one of the principals most connected to students in this study, placed "N/A" as the response to the third question as she now has very few opportunities to interact with children in her current position.

Of the four principals David was the only principal who requested we have an actual conversation around these three questions. After setting an appointment with his secretary, we spoke at length over the phone about many of the changes he decided to make at Carter over the summer, and about his experiences as principal so far this year. While much of David's abbreviated first year was spent focusing on issues that needed to and could be resolved quickly, he has continued to tighten up his instructional program throughout the school in a few different ways.

Carter now has a school dress code, and students from all backgrounds are now attired in more formal khakis and shirts. One of the concerns expressed by students at Carter in the spring was that clothes were a source of contention, particularly among the older boys and girls who would often criticize their peers for wearing outdated apparel. The high number of refugee students were also being ostracized and ridiculed for dressing differently and this new regulation, coordinated with the cooperation of parents from the community, has reportedly alleviated a great deal of the conflict that took place, while giving students an increased sense of community and responsibility.

The school's academic and behavioral incentive plan has also taken shape this fall as parents and special education students are being involved in distributing a range of new and exciting awards to deserving students. The school has also partnered with community stakeholders to cultivate a green space just a block away from Carter where fruits and vegetables have been planted and are being attended to by students on a regular basis.

Finally, and perhaps most significantly, David has revamped the after school program to include enrichment activities that will be very unlike the ones done at Carter in the past once the program kicks off in October.[6] David said he intends to develop a student council made up of class representatives involved in the after school program. This student council will meet with David on a weekly basis to raise concerns they have

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[6] For example, instead of playing basketball students at Carter are now designing a green room, learning to golf, and becoming involved in a student government.

about how they are treated and how the school is run. He refers to this as a "leadership development opportunity," that is designed to infuse the conversations class representatives are having with David, with the day-to-day operations of the school. I am excited to say that I have been invited to participate in these weekly meetings between class representatives and the principal starting in just a few weeks.

Before entering the field I really did not know how students and principals would react to questions that many of them had never been asked. It is never easy, especially as a professional, to answer questions for which you have very little prior knowledge or experience. All four of the principals did their best to respond in ways that helped me understand how they thought about the research topic. During this brief study, some of the principals even began to develop an understanding and appreciation for the possibilities of this work themselves. Some highlights of this study include being able to witness Mark's paradigm shift first-hand. Another was finding out after the study that David would soon be meeting with students on a regular basis to talk about issues they are having in school. It was also hard to see Leah, who was so great at connecting with kids, be relocated to a position where she will have so little contact with the students, which clearly drove her practice. Even harder was the knowledge that all of her students lost their school, their beloved principal, and are now having to re-adjust to new sites and all the challenges that come with being uprooted.

The most rewarding part of this work was being able to sit down with students and have conversations uninterrupted by adults. As a long time elementary school teacher I always cherished the few moments when I was able to speak with kids about problems they face in school, or even just listen to them talk about their lives.[7] Still, before entering the schools I was not sure how students would react to an outsider asking them about their principal. As a result, I was hesitant to let the conversation flow during our first focus group. During our second interview however, conversations about leadership and challenges students were facing in school naturally opened up and students felt comfortable sharing their opinions about their principals, teachers, and school. It was in these spirited moments of focus group conversation that I saw the students, and the students saw themselves, as being capable of providing an honest and sometimes critical account of the work being done by their school leaders.

It was in these moments that I also saw students reflect on challenges that got in the way of their learning. Bullying, exclusion and unhealthy competition were just a few of the problems students cited—Problems that continue to plague each of our schools to varying degrees. Students also commented that they are still being confronted with problems outside of school, and that these problems "get them off-track," and in the way of their opportunities for growth.

After spending a significant amount of time reflecting on these challenges myself, and on how they relate to decisions principals make (or do not make), and about how talking about these challenges made the students feel empowered, I have realized the real significance of this work. While my work as an outside researcher gave students and principals opportunities to reflect and develop their thinking, the best way to conduct student perspective research may be as an insider of the school. K-12 practitioners that can actively elicit student voice and use it to shape the way they structure their students' unique experiences of learning, are in an excellent position to impact change within their classrooms, schools, and districts. If principals can structure regular interactions with their students, and focus conversation on the students'

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[7] These fleeting moments only took place before or after instruction-at recess, lunch, or on trips. As a teacher I used these moments to help me develop an understanding of each student's experiences, and this input helped me become a more responsible teacher.

experiences of school and learning, they will be better able to respond to student issues before they manifest as an oppositional behavior, another student failure, or reach the main office via an outsider like myself.

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APPENDIX A

Codebook: Elaboration of Code
(Assum) Assumptions made by principals

Definition: Principals often draw conclusions or make assumptions about their approaches to school leadership that don't correspond with what students are looking for in an instructional leader.

Characteristics: Naive, instinctual, spontaneous, impulsive, hypothetical, taking something for granted, theoretical.

Specific Conditions under which Code/Category operates: These conditions exist when principals develop and demonstrate leadership behaviors that underestimate what students understand about school and/or are capable of contributing to the school.

Proposition: Some principals assume that (a) only older kids are worth talking to about the work that's being done in school, (b) kids aren't able to answer specific questions about teaching and learning, (c) student voice should be limited to school established parameters, and (d) certain leadership behaviors are valuable for kids. These assumptions often don't match what the students are looking for in a principal and highlight the value of using student perspectives to inform principals' approaches to school leadership.

Illustration: "I guess initially I thought I could see that (using student voice) at the secondary level but what does that look like at the elementary level? How do kids know what's good for them? Isn't that our job?

"You want to listen to the children but you need to lead the children. You can't let them control what we do."

"I can walk in and in many cases they don't even know I'm there."

"I'll still approach that (talking about college) with young kids at the elementary level because for them to think too far beyond that is really difficult."

"From the structure of the day to the buses coming to school and going home, to the lunchroom, and recess. And to recognize that sometimes kids are going to say they need a lot more recess and to keep that in an 8-year-old context (referring to how the principal would like to use student voice)."

"So if I were in an elementary school it (student council) would probably be 3-5th graders working in an advisory capacity."

"I'm asking questions like 'I see you're doing that, what are you doing?' because I'm checking to see if they understand, checking on the quality of what they're being assigned in classrooms. It gets to the point with the older kids, in grades 3-5 and even 2nd graders 2 but a little bit less with the K-1 because they may not really understand what I'm asking—"

APPENDIX B
Student Illustration L4-5

L4-5

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