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Bridging the Gap: Enhancing Student Access and Communication with the Principal in Nursing Education

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Abstract

In nursing education, the Principal plays a pivotal role in shaping academic excellence, professional discipline, and holistic student development. However, students often hesitate to approach the Principal directly, opting instead to communicate through intermediaries or remain silent. This paper explores hierarchical, cultural, and psychological factors contributing to this hesitation and offers strategies to enhance students' confidence and sense of agency while increasing the Principal's accessibility. Drawing on educational leadership theories, student psychology, and personal experience, this paper emphasizes the importance of fostering an open, supportive, and trusting institutional climate.

Keyword: Leadership Theories, Student Psychology, Personal Experience

Introduction

A healthy student-leader relationship is central to professional education. The Principal, as both academic and administrative head, is expected to serve as a mentor, guide, and advocate for student welfare. Despite this, nursing students often prefer to communicate concerns via faculty, mentors, or peers rather than approaching the Principal directly. Our own experience reflects this: students often perceive us as objects of authority and fear, influenced by assumptions, anecdotes from peers, and the traditional association of discipline with punishment. Even in informal interactions, such as when we attempt humor or casual dialogue, students often remain silent, seemingly unsure how to respond. These observations suggest that hierarchical

distance, cultural norms, and psychological factors strongly shape communication patterns.

Understanding these dynamics is crucial for promoting open communication, encouraging independent thinking, and ensuring leadership remains responsive to student needs.

Reasons for Students' Hesitation

- **Hierarchical Distance:** Students perceive the Principal as occupying the "top" of the institutional hierarchy, creating psychological barriers that make personal concerns feel inappropriate to share.
- **Fear of Judgment or Repercussions:** In nursing education, which emphasizes discipline and compliance, students often fear being misunderstood, judged, or penalized. My personal observations confirm this:

students carry assumptions about discipline and authority even before meeting the Principal, and often hesitate to share honest feedback.

- **Cultural Norms of Respect:** In many societies, approaching senior leaders directly may be seen as disrespectful; silence is often equated with proper conduct.
- **Comfort with Intermediaries:** Frequent interactions with faculty, mentors, and coordinators make them preferred channels for communication. Students may rely on second-hand accounts rather than direct dialogue, limiting clarity and trust.
- **Student Personality Factors:** Adolescents and young adults may lack assertiveness, confidence, or communication skills. Introverted students are particularly hesitant to engage one-on-one. Even when I ask for their opinions, many students appear dumbfounded, highlighting the gap between willingness and confidence.
- **Principal's Limited Informal Visibility:** Students encountering the Principal mainly during formal ceremonies, inspections, or evaluations rarely perceive her as approachable in casual contexts.
- **Perception of Busyness:** Out of respect, students often assume that the Principal's time should be reserved for "serious matters" and avoid discussing personal or academic concerns.

Implications

1. **Student Welfare:** Unvoiced concerns about stress, learning difficulties, or personal issues may remain unaddressed.
2. **Leadership Effectiveness:** Without direct student input, decision-making risks being detached from actual student experiences.
3. **Institutional Climate:** Hierarchical distance and lack of approachability may reduce trust, belonging, and overall student engagement.

Strategies to Enhance Students' Free Will And Principal Accessibility

1. Promote Student Free Will

- **Student Voice Platforms:** Establish councils, feedback forums, or anonymous suggestion boxes for open expression.
- **Encourage Independent Thinking:** Reflective exercises, debates, and peer-led discussions cultivate confidence in voicing opinions. I personally discourage over-reliance on "spoon-feeding," encouraging students to think critically and independently.
- **Mentorship Training:** Faculty mentors can coach students in assertive communication and confidence-building.
- **Psychological Safety:** Reassure students regularly that expressing concerns will lead to constructive dialogue rather than punishment.

2. Increase Principal's Accessibility

- **Open-Door Hours:** Fixed weekly slots for student interactions enhance approachability.
- **Walk-Through Leadership:** Informal visits to classrooms, clinical areas, or hostels encourage casual engagement.
- **Interactive Student Meets:** Small-group sessions such as "Tea with the Principal" break hierarchical barriers.

- **Digital Accessibility:** Email, online portals, or anonymous submission channels allow students to voice concerns without fear.
- **Celebrate Student Initiatives:** Public acknowledgment of suggestions fosters trust and demonstrates responsiveness.

Innovative Strategies to Encourage Students to Approach The Principal Directly

While hierarchical, cultural, and psychological barriers exist, creating a combination of trust-building, visibility, and empowerment initiatives can significantly increase direct communication. Below are several innovative approaches:

1. Structured and Creative Open-Door Opportunities

- **Rotating Open-Hour Themes:** Instead of generic open-door hours, dedicate each week to a theme—e.g., academics, career guidance, personal development, or well-being. Students may feel more comfortable approaching with specific topics.
- **"Walk-in Wednesdays":** No prior appointment required; casual, short interactions in a lounge or cafeteria setting.

2. Peer-Led Confidence Boosters

- **Student Ambassadors:** Train a small group of approachable senior students to mentor juniors on how to communicate directly with leadership.
- **Role-Play Workshops:** Practice "speaking to the Principal" in safe peer groups to reduce anxiety and normalize the interaction.

3. Digital Engagement with Human Touch

- **Anonymous Suggestion + Direct Response System:** Students submit concerns online, and the Principal responds personally via scheduled one-on-one sessions, bridging the gap from digital to in-person.
- **Video Messages & Mini-Updates:** Short, approachable videos from the Principal on student concerns, achievements, and reminders that your door is open—humanizes your presence.

4. Informal & Relational Approaches

- **"Tea with the Principal" or Lunch Circles:** Small groups of students invited informally to discuss any topic, breaking hierarchy in a relaxed setting.
- **Random Walkabouts:** Unexpected visits to hostels, classrooms, or labs to greet and casually interact with students.

5. Gamified & Incentivized Sharing

- **Feedback Challenges:** Students earn recognition or certificates for submitting ideas or concerns directly to the Principal—can be tied to creativity, problem-solving, or campus improvement.
- **Student Voice Wall:** A physical or digital "Wall of Ideas" where students can post concerns or suggestions; highlight how these were addressed by the Principal.

6. Psychological & Cultural Strategies

- **Normalize Mistakes & Concerns:** Regularly share personal stories of challenges you faced, emphasizing that seeking help is a sign of strength, not weakness.
- **Confidentiality Assurance:** Explicitly reinforce that any concern shared will remain confidential and treated respectfully.

- **Rotate Meeting Settings:** Conduct informal chats in non-office environments—garden, auditorium, or lounge—to make the interaction less intimidating.

7. Feedback Loops and Recognition

- **Follow-Up Communication:** After addressing a concern, communicate back the outcome publicly (without naming the student) to show that student voices are valued.
- **Student Spotlight:** Recognize students who proactively share ideas or concerns in newsletters, notice boards, or digital platforms.

8. Integrate into Curriculum & Campus Culture

- **Reflection Journals / Guided Diaries:** Encourage students to write weekly reflections that can be optionally shared with the Principal.
- **Regular Town-Hall Meetings:** Open forums where students share experiences; start with informal stories to reduce formality.

Effective Communication to Students

1. **Model Approachability:** Greet students warmly and listen actively.
2. **Use Encouraging Language:** Emphasize that all concerns are welcome and valued.
3. **Demonstrate Transparency:** Share updates or outcomes from student suggestions to build trust.
4. **Normalize Interaction:** Regularly remind students of open-door hours, digital channels, and informal meeting opportunities.
5. **Empathize:** Acknowledge emotions and challenges before providing guidance.

Personal Reflection

Through our experience, we have observed that students often view authority figures as intimidating. They may carry assumptions formed from peers or prior experiences, leading them to avoid direct engagement. Even in situations where we attempt humor or casual dialogue, students often remain silent, highlighting a lack of confidence or fear of judgment. We actively encourage independent thinking, reflective practice, and conscientious use of self, promoting the idea that students should formulate and express their own ideas rather than relying on excessive guidance. Despite these efforts, the initial hesitation is persistent, underscoring the need for deliberate strategies to bridge the gap between students and leadership.

Conclusion

Nursing students' reluctance to approach the Principal stems primarily from hierarchical, cultural, and psychological factors rather than lack of respect. By strengthening student free will, cultivating safe communication platforms, and enhancing Principal accessibility through relational, digital, and innovative approaches, institutions can foster trust, empowerment, and engagement. When students feel confident to share and leaders remain approachable, nursing education transforms into a professional and nurturing environment, promoting holistic growth, critical thinking, and meaningful student-leader collaboration.

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