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Practicing a Professional Ethic: Leading for Students' Best Interests

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This research examined secondary administrators' perspectives about the expression "the best interests of the student." Principals' intimate reflections provided empirical insights into what they mean when they use the expression, "the best interests of the student" and whether such a common catch phrase could provide ethical guidance. A modified phenomenological research method suited for an educational research context was used to capture administrators' perspectives and experiences. Results challenge the theoretical notion that the expression, "serve the best interests of the student" is, or should be, used in some primary, rule-based first order manner by administrators to inform their ethical decision making. Ethical judgment was more complicated and contextually defined than following a fundamental professional injunction, but the expression resonated with administrators, typifying dispositions that promote moral practice. Results and interpretations bring conceptual clarification to the moral leadership construct "serve the best interests of the student."

Moral leadership and ethical administrative decision making require more than the mechanical application of existing rules, regulations, and various levels of school and school-related policy. The essential aspects of school leadership entail more than possessing certain technical skills and ensuring effective management of organizational operations. The preoccupation with bureaucratic scientism and management perspectives has given way to the importance of moral, value-informed, and ethical educational leadership decision making (Sergiovanni 1992). Increasingly, there is recognition that putatively value-free administrative decisions and actions are actually "value-laden, even value-saturated enterprises(s)" (Hodgkinson 1978, 122). This recognition is an "administrative logic" of a new order.

Research and the construction of theory about this "administrative logic" of school leadership is typically concerned with two broad categories: the enactment and understanding of various ethical stances and the more broadly

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conceived value orientations and valuation processes. What is known currently about the topics of values, ethics, and moral leadership in the field of educational leadership pertains to how practicing educational leaders approach, or should approach, decision making and their consequent actions along various ethical frameworks, that is, justice, care, critique, community, administrative virtue, and other moral vantage points (Schussler and Collins 2006; Starratt 1991).

Ethics then, embodies the “study of underlying beliefs, assumptions, principles, and values that support a moral way of life . . . [constituting] a logical dynamic” that characterizes and informs one’s relationship with others and the world (Starratt 2004, 5). For this inquiry, ethics represents formal systems and analysis of moral philosophy that can have practical implications for the professions. Morality “is the living, the acting out of ethical beliefs and commitments” (Starratt 2004, 5) and constitutes what persons, individually and collectively, take to be important in relation to one another and nature, the dispositions within each person, and the relationship between a person and his teleological beliefs about the universe (Lewis 1952). Ethics is the thinking and reasoning; morality is the doing of the thing.

Behaviors of school officials are likely to be influenced by personal values or motivational bases that affect valuation processes, particularly “value groundings” that are rationally derived and lead to decision making that is either consequence- or consensus-based (Begley 1988; Begley and Johansson 1998; Begley and Leithwood 1989). The two aforementioned lines of research and theory building have each assisted the other in coming to a clearer understanding of moral leadership practice in schools. Theory and research on values, ethical decision making, and moral leadership in educational administration have called for ontological and epistemological changes in research and theory building that focus less on positivistic perspectives and approaches and more on paradigms that are naturalistic, transactional, and constructive (Maxcy and Caldas 1991; Smith and Blase 1991; Willower 1994). Mitchell (2006, 211) has advocated for an “integrated framework for the study of educational policy, politics, and administration” that proposes an inquiry methodology of “sensationalism,” defined in terms of phenomenological epistemology. This investigative perspective provides the “schema needed to link moral and factual questions into a common inquiry methodology” (Mitchell 2006, 212).

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Significance and Purpose

This empirical investigation examined secondary school principals' perspectives regarding the expression "the best interests of the student" as a viable professional ethics for educational leadership. I was interested in how secondary school principals interpreted their experience of leadership decision making as a moral activity in relation to a specific ethical decision-making framework, the Ethic of the Profession and Its Model for Students' Best Interests (hereafter the "framework"; Shapiro and Stefkovich 2001, 2005, 2011; Stefkovich 2006). This study did not investigate decision making per se but, rather, focused on principals' post hoc reasoning about the decisions they made, or would have made, in a hypothetical situation. I was largely concerned with evidence of moral reasoning when participants were presented with a dilemma, prompted to remember decisions they had made in the past, and reflected on their professional opinions about the common expression, "the best interests of the student." My intent was to look at whether principals experienced ethical decision making in one of several ways depicted in the framework.

Theoretical Framework

The framework (Shapiro and Stefkovich 2001, 2005, 2011; Stefkovich 2006) recognizes moral aspects unique to the profession of educational leadership and grounds the moral dimension of the profession on the nomothetic injunction, "serve the best interests of the student" (Shapiro and Stefkovich 2001), thereby "promoting the success of all students" (ISLLC 1996, 2008) by focusing on the needs of children (Walker 1998). The framework is situated in a larger "multiple paradigm" ethical landscape of justice, care, and critique (Starratt 1991, 1994). A brief consideration of these theoretical standpoints serves as a backdrop for ethical and moral leadership.

Justice.—This perspective focuses on ethical concepts that constitute the foundational principles of liberal democracies. Taken as a whole, they can be described as a "civic ethic" upholding that all persons, irrespective of culture, race, or other defining categories, possess the capacity for a sense of fairness and the ability to conceptualize their own good. Central to this orientation are principles such as individual rights, due process, freedom, equality, and responsibility for the common good. In the West, fundamental human rights and their protection by means of justice are central concepts of postindustrial, liberally democratic, constitutional nation-states, but rights and justice do not tell us the whole story about the moral life (Rawls 1971; Strike et al. 1998).

Care.—Interpersonal in nature, this moral perspective focuses on the demands

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of relationships from a position of unconditional positive regard and asserts that we have the capacity to feel deep respect or love for others, especially those different from ourselves. Our attitudes toward others “are determined in part by an understanding of who and what they are: in this case, that they are human beings, persons, and that as persons they possess an inner integrity, a self-determination, a capacity for free and spiritual activity that we also sense in ourselves” (Gilkey 1993, 79). This level of empathy and self-understanding applied to others can become the foundation for treating persons as ends and not as means and can provide the inner basis of an outward social order through “motivational displacement toward the projects of the cared-for” (Noddings 1984, 176; see also Beck 1994).

Critique.—The critique perspective addresses issues beyond interpersonal relations and serves as a moral examination of social and institutional dimensions of life. Issues of competing interests, power, the nature and structure of bureaucracy, the influence and force of language, and redress for institutionalized injustice are the focus of critical concern as it relates to the legitimacy of social arrangements. The disproportionate benefit of some groups from political, economic, and judicial hegemony are moral concerns that transcend the naive perspective that societal structures and properties are simply the way things are. Reasoning and acting ethically entail the paradoxes of leading within an institutional position and being an activist against practices and procedures that do not support democratic processes, freedom, and social justice (Apple 1982; Foster 1986; Giroux 1988).

The framework incorporates established ethical viewpoints, which have apparent tensions within and between them. In educational leadership, professional ethics is commonly viewed “as an extension of another paradigm [justice] and not thought to stand alone” (Shapiro and Stefkovich 2001, 7). The framework indicates a frequent disparity between diverse ethical perspectives related to the education of children, professional codes meant to inform decision making and conduct, the personal moral values of administrators, and professional/community standards and expectations for professional practice. When reflective school leaders attempt to integrate these sources of guidance, the result is often moral dissonance, or a “clashing of codes.” In response to this discord, the framework is grounded in a reasoned consideration of the educational shibboleth “the best interests of the [student]” (Walker 1995, 3–4).

The framework consists of a robust focus on the essential nature of individual rights, the duty of responsibility to others for a common interest, and respect as mutual acknowledgment of the other as having personal worth, value, and dignity (Stefkovich 2006; Stefkovich and O’Brien 2004). It recognizes that adults possess a great deal of power in determining students’ best interests and that it is “incumbent upon school leaders to make ethical decisions that

truly reflect the needs of students and not their own self-interest” (Stefkovich 2006, 21). The framework provides a jurisprudentially and ethically defensible expression of what is in a student’s best interest and assists educational leaders with understanding that self-reflection, open-mindedness, and sensitivity are important aspects of moral choice. The phrase “the best interests of the student” is structured by three Rs: a robust adherence to the essential nature of a child’s individual *rights*; the child’s duty of mutual *responsibility* to others for a common interest and the school leader’s role in encouraging that responsibility; and mutual *respect* as reciprocal acknowledgment of the other as having worth, value, and dignity unto himself or herself.

The framework has been largely developed by its proponents based on their work with graduate students in university classroom and seminar settings. No clear empirical work has been done on how the injunction “serve the best interests of the student” is understood and practiced by school administrators outside specific university training programs. The framework is promoted as a “free-standing” paradigm with a pluralistic approach to ethical reasoning and moral action (Hinman 2008). As such, its conceptualizations may be an overreaching expectation for the practical ethics in the daily work of school principals.

The injunction “serve the best interests of the student” is situated under the deontic principles of justice and beneficence (Frankena 1973). According to Noddings (2002, 1), “history suggests that the prescriptive use of principles has not been effective. Moral people rarely consult abstract principles when they act morally . . . [rather,] moral motivation arises within the agent or within interactions.” The focus on “How shall we live?” and not just “What is my duty or obligation?” is central to educational leadership. Moral discourse is “paralyzed if not dead” because of the “interminability” in the utilitarian-deontological debate that almost exclusively emphasizes decision making and moral choice over virtue (MacIntyre 1984).

Virtue plays a role in following the injunction “serve the best interests of the student” (Begley 2005; Greenfield 2004; Starratt 2004). It ensures that motivation is not entirely external and provides for what J. S. Mill calls “internal sanctions” (as cited in Frankena 1973). The moral ideal for the profession stands as a “double-aspect conception of morality” (Frankena 1973, 65), where the principle and a personal way of being provide the motivation to serve students’ needs.

Research Questions

The intent of this research was to test theoretical explanations of professional moral leadership against what practicing secondary school leaders tell us. It

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focused on providing empirical insights into what principals mean when they use the expression, “the best interests of the student” and whether this common catchphrase could provide ethical guidance for school leaders. Central research questions included the following:

1. Is there a guiding principle(s) that assists school leaders in making value-laden decisions? Particularly, does the notion of “best interests of the student” emerge as a principle?
2. What do principals mean by “the best interests of the student”?
3. Do secondary administrators conceptualize “the best interests of the student” in a way that mirrors the Ethic of the Profession and Its Model for Students’ Best Interests?
4. Is the expression “best interests of the student” educational jargon, a “party line” that serves as a rhetorical ploy, or vacuous language so indeterminate that it contains no meaning at all?

Empirical Literature

The literature makes reference to “best interests” (or some approximation) as an expression but not specifically as a moral practice informed by an ethical system. In his ethnographic research, Wolcott (1973) focused on a suburban elementary school principal. Vigilance in maintaining the quality of institutional responsiveness to clients was noted by the principal and the teachers working with him: “He’s [the principal] always questioning himself and his motives and his philosophy. He’s always wondering, ‘Am I really doing the right thing or thinking the right thing?’ Almost always when we get into a discussion, Ed pulls us back to the fact, ‘Well, what’s best for the youngster?’ Not what’s best for the teacher, what’s best for the principal, or what’s best for the parents[?] What’s best for the youngster[?]” (Wolcott 1973, 290).

Ashbaugh and Kasten (1984, 1986) studied the role of values and ethics in educational administration. They focused on conflicts faced by school principals and how cognizant they were of the values they used in making decisions. With respect to “organizational values”: “A conviction voiced by so many of those interviewed and so central to the ethos of the principalship that it deserves a subcategory of its own is the belief that the interests of children should be preeminent in the organization. . . . The statement [‘what’s good for kids’] is genuine and appears both to justify and explain behavior, but it has little use as a guide to action unless it can be made operational and delimited. Few respondents had a conscious method for doing that” (Ashbaugh and Kasten 1984, 205).

A study of the micropolitical behavior of an urban elementary school prin-

principal identified what Greenfield (1991) called a “professional style” of leadership that solicited compliance and full participation of those vested in the work of the school at a moral level of shared norms, values, ideals, and beliefs. Those invested in the school were encouraged by the principal to think and act in an effort to serve “children’s best interests” (183). This kind of moral focus on shared values and beliefs helped those involved in the work of the school to believe that their actions were right.

In a study of administrators’ ethical dilemmas and the principles that guided them in making moral decisions, Marshall (1992) identified an obligation to exhibit loyalty to the system while exhibiting personal authority and commitments to colleagues. When asked “what guided them when faced with dilemmas in their work, they never referred to a professional code of ethics or professional training” (376). In fact, participants indicated that professional norms and organizational rules were often culprits in making a situation dilemma laden, because there was no clear guidance available from those sources. “The phrase ‘judgment call’ kept recurring in their talk as they described their management of ethical dilemmas while the strongest value that emerged from participant statements was a ‘concern for the individual student’” (381).

Walker and Shakotko (1999) conducted research on the ethical challenges and pressures faced by administrators. Challenges articulated by respondents revealed overlapping, ill-defined, and complex definitions of “ethical constraints.” School leaders managed multiple value claims while simultaneously providing value-based, strategic leadership. Superintendents in the study articulated the advice, principle, or perspective they found most helpful in making ethical decisions, and “the best interests of the student” emerged as a primary consideration.

Klinker and Hackmann investigated the ethical decision making of state secondary principals of the year. Principals discussed the importance of sensitivity to differing perspectives and rational fact finding, yet paradoxically relied on “gut feelings” or emotion. Surprisingly, they struggled to define their ethical beliefs, “the very thing they considered vital to their reputations, career, and selection for State Principal of the Year.” Confusion in the use of language and its meaning was also detected: “The difficulty in the language confusion is further illustrated by the phrase, ‘what’s right for kids,’ and variations of it that permeated the interviews. No one, however, defined the term ‘right.’ This statement, ‘do what’s right’ was always made with conviction, a sense of purpose, and with the tacit understanding that everyone would know what ‘right’ meant” (Klinker and Hackmann 2003, 25; emphasis added).

Storey and Beeman conducted structured interviews with high school administrators to investigate awareness of decision-making processes and influences. Interviewee statements indicated a “profound depth of reflection” using perspectives that were aligned to justice, care, critique, and profession frame-

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works. Their “strongest concern [was] for the individual student in the school and the school culture experienced by that student” (Storey and Beeman 2005, 22). A paradox was discovered between participants’ “strongest concern” and its origin: “All of our respondents specified that moral and ethical behavior was important in decision making and they traced back their primary influences to faith, family and early education, [that is, an] intrinsic code. Few [respondents] referred to the influence of their academic training or [a] professional code” (Storey and Beeman 2005, 23).

Marshall’s (2008) research on superintendents revealed frequent reference to “the best interests of the student” and the decisions resulting from its definition. The expression was referenced most often within the context of systemic dilemma areas rather than at the individual student level.

The foregoing literature relates to administrative moral decision making and value orientations that were not directly focused on discovering the meaning, function, and utility of the phrase “the best interests of the student” within professional practice. Nor did most intentionally employ the framework articulated by Stefkovich and Shapiro. What is evidenced is a commonly used expression that exists as a construction of practice rather than an injunction connected to a richly conceptualized ethical system. Although each study had different investigative ends, “best interests” and closely associated phrases appeared frequently in administrative conversations as a means of determining ethically right decisions and corresponding moral action. As such, the reviewed literature informs this study by considering the essentially nonethical uses of “best interests,” along with how and in what circumstances the expression is employed.

A Phenomenological-Like Research Method for the Educational Context

The central concern of this study was the description, or rendering an accurate account and interpretation, of the perspectives and experiences of educational leaders. The goal was to express empirically derived knowledge for theory building and to bring conceptual clarification to the meaning and utility of commonly employed educational language. This was accomplished by using a phenomenological-like perspective (Dukes 1984) to uncover the inherent logic of moral decision-making experiences. A phenomenological research perspective applied to an educational context is derived from a combination of methodological approaches. Moustakas (1994) emphasizes the transcendent nature of human experience and focuses on such deep subjective essence as prehensive, intuitive, and nonculturally bound. Giorgi (1985) acknowledges social and cultural stability or systemic influences that inform common, ev-

eryday human experience. Polkinghorne highlights the technicalities and uniqueness of phenomenology when compared to other descriptive and/or naturalistic research. “Phenomenology maintains a critical distinction between what presents itself as part of a person’s awareness and what might exist as a reality ‘outside’ of [his or her] experience” (1989, 44).

Participants

Since a principal’s daily activities are replete with decision-making activity, and student contact is likely, the administrative position provides an important point of investigation when considering moral judgments pertaining to students’ best interests. Eleven principals from school districts in central and southeast Pennsylvania were selected by a mixed sampling design to maximize variation along predetermined personal and demographic criteria through means of “well-situated” participant informants (see table 1; Patton 1990). Executive directors of the two major state-level professional associations for educational leaders provided initial contacts for thoughtful potential participants; initial contacts suggested leads for other “information rich cases” (Patton 1990, 169).

Data Collection Techniques and Interviews

The primary data collection strategy was participant interviews, interviewer observations of the interview process, and analytical notations of the meaning participants made of their experiences (Seidman 1998, 4). Two semistructured interviews were conducted, with each participant using a dilemma vignette and follow-up questions, along with a protocol to elicit descriptions of personal and professional experiences and the meanings ascribed to ethical decision making and moral practice. Open-ended and prefigured questioning techniques were used to guide the interviews; the average length of the first and second interviews was approximately 40 minutes and 55 minutes, respectively. A considerable amount of clarification, rephrasing, and participant response checks was part of the conversational nature of each interview (Guba and Lincoln 1981).

Interview Design Rationale

The use of both a vignette interview and a personal reflection interview made for a diverse methodological approach that allowed for constant comparative

TABLE 1

List of Participants and Corresponding Characteristics

Participant	Gender	Race and Age	Community School Type (Grades)	Enrollment	Years in Profession	Religious Affiliation
Principal 1	Male	White ~ 50	Suburban Senior (9-12)	900	Principal: 5 Career: 27	Catholic
Principal 2	Female	White ~ 45	Suburban Middle (6-8)	800	Principal: 4 Career: 13	None specified
Principal 3	Male	White ~ 45	Suburban Senior (9-12)	1,000	Principal: 4 Career: 25	None specified
Principal 4	Male	White ~ 35	Suburban/metropolitan Senior (9-12)	1,400	Principal: 5 Career: 15	Protestant
Principal 5	Female	White ~ 50	Suburban/metropolitan Senior (9-12)	1,400	Principal: 13 Career: 28	None specified
Principal 6	Female	Black ~ 45	Suburban/metropolitan Senior (9-12)	1,000	Principal: 6 Career: 11	None specified
Principal 7	Male	White ~ 55	Urban Senior (9-12)	2,200	Principal: 14 Career: 32	Catholic
Principal 8	Male	Black ~ 45	Urban Middle (6-8)	500	Principal: 6 Career: 20	Protestant
Principal 9	Male	White ~ 40	Urban Secondary alternative (7-12)	80	Principal: 2 Career: 12	Protestant
Principal 10	Male	White ~ 35	Rural Senior (7-12)	250	Principal: 7 Career: 13	Catholic
Principal 11	Male	White ~ 55	Rural Senior (9-12)	650	Principal: 19 Career: 29	Protestant

NOTE.— ~ = approximately.

analyses (Bogdan and Biklen 1998). Vignettes, which are fictionalized scenarios that invite reader response, have been used in comparable research (Begley and Johansson 1998; Goldring et al. 2009) and the social sciences more broadly (Artino and Brown 2009; Perri et al. 2009; Wilson and While 1998). In this study, the vignette served as a control stimulus presented to all participants (Lysonski and Gaidis 1991). Their responses served as baseline data to compare and contrast with the second interview.

The first part of the second interview explored participants' professional experiences through recollections of past actions and current perspectives about school leadership. The second part of the second interview involved formally introducing the framework developed by Shapiro and Stefkovich. Its introduction was reserved in order to detect variation in participants' responses from what they communicated earlier and to elicit feedback based upon the model's components of rights, responsibility, and respect through direct questioning. Specific details about each of the interviews and example questions are presented in chronological sequence as experienced by participants.

Interview 1: Vignette.—The vignette, entitled “Whose Best Interests? A Testing Dilemma” (Shapiro and Stefkovich 2005, 126–29), presents the story of a high school principal, Charlie, dealing with dictates from his superintendent and school board to radically change the curriculum to supposedly better prepare students to meet yearly state accountability measures through achievement testing. Charlie must deal with the tension between accountability pressures and what he believes to be in the best interests of the students. Ultimately, he must decide between his prescribed organizational duties and the collective professional viewpoint of his staff, who believe that the current curriculum best serves students' interests.

Administrators' responses to the vignette involved their reflective answering of four questions: (1) If you were Charlie, how would you go about making a decision to deal with this situation? (2) Why is accountability so important? (3) What is Charlie's ultimate responsibility? Is there a difference between strict accountability and broader responsibility for student outcomes? (4) What would the profession expect Charlie to do in this case? Can something be educationally right but morally wrong, or vice versa?

Interview 2: Professional experiences.—Seventeen refigured questions dealing with participants' professional experiences were presented, including (1) In what ways do you consider your work as a school leader to be moral and ethical in nature? (2) Has there been a time in your career when what you believed was right personally was in conflict with what you thought was expected, or the right thing to do, professionally? (3) If you were to give advice to a beginning administrator about the essential ingredients of right, good, praiseworthy practice, what would you say? (4) Have you ever heard of the expression “the best interests of the student?” or “do what's best for kids,” or

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some other variation of the phrase? What does that expression mean? (5) Is there a difference between the best interests of the student (one) and the best interests of students (all or most) in your mind?

Presenting the best interests model.—Toward the end of the second interview, participants were presented a brief verbal explanation of the Stefkovich (2006) Best Interests framework and asked questions including (1) How important is the consideration of student rights, mutual responsibility by the student and yourself, and mutual respect by the student and yourself, in making decisions that affect children and youth in relation to the school? (2) How do you define rights, responsibility, and respect? (3) Are any of the three Rs more important than the others? How would you rank them?

Analysis of Data

Formal analysis after data collection began with a careful reading of each of the cleansed interview transcripts, corresponding observations, and analytical memos. Recurrent patterns in participant records and cross-participant themes embedded within transcripts were identified with a primary focus on analyzing multiple perspectives on common experiences.

Recurrent patterns, or meaning units, were listed and clustered into common categories/themes that represented the words of participants. The central theme, “defining ‘best interests of the student,’” was further broken down into smaller subsets of words and ideas (Bogdan and Biklen 1998). After data were reduced, information was reconceptualized in thematic categories (LeCompte and Schensul 1999; Reissman 2002). Some data examined along major components of the theoretical model were found to be incongruent; a secondary analysis contrasted principals’ views with the theoretical explanation (Glaser and Strauss 1967), allowing for differences between participants and the theory to be drawn out as competing explanations.

Thematic categories that emerged from the data relating to the use, understanding, and utility of the expression “the best interests of the student” were identified. Examples include school/community expectations, school/community conflict, professional expectation of accountability, context relationship: personal investment, and context relationship: one versus many. To support the credibility of this research and counteract researcher bias, an independent peer examination was conducted with six researcher colleagues who are familiar with the theoretical orientation and methods (Merriam 2009; Wolcott 1990).

Limitations

First, chain sampling constitutes a threat to validity because participants providing leads for other potential participants could lead to the selection of like-minded associates; as such, a purposeful random sample design could have increased credibility. Second, the specific dilemma influenced responses and, as a consequence, findings. A dilemma involving a decision to suspend a student or to eliminate a different kind of school programming may have altered participants' definition of best interests. Third, participants may have said what they believed I wanted to hear in relation to the framework, which was introduced late in the interview process. Fourth, the procedure of asking participants to rank order the importance of rights, responsibility, and respect might not have conformed entirely to the spirit and intent of the Best Interests framework proposed by Stefkovich (2006) while inadvertently privileging a justice or hierarchical researcher orientation. Although this design component potentially created "noise" and validity problems, it was important to get a glimpse of what practitioners viewed as important and most relevant within the framework.

Findings

Participants expressed both a personal and professional obligation to work with children. This responsibility was described as "providing," "guiding," and "helping," along with "educating" on intellectual, social, and emotional levels. Principals often saw their relationships with children as having a fiduciary legal status that obliged them to build trusting relationships based on the belief that all students have "value" and "worth." Several participants depicted themselves as a parent responsible for making "decisions and creating opportunities for experiences that are in line with students' needs." Knowledge of students in a compulsory setting placed the principal on a higher legal plane as a substitute parent or trusting adult supervisor.

Despite the clear negotiated order (Strauss 1978) of modern schooling, participants' overwhelmingly articulated a professional orientation toward valuing what is good for children in their development as students. This professional aim was both a legal requirement of public office and a personal issue of integrity. Rather than simply framed as a morality that on the surface appears to be the lore of the profession, participants genuinely expressed their central commitments to children while recognizing the challenges associated with such a professional moral aim.

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Students' Best Interests and Vignette Responses

Principals' responses to the dilemma were surprisingly similar, especially with issues about uniform academic standards and accounting for students' standardized test scores. Most principals favored such practices and believed them to be in their students' best interests. They were not blindly uncritical of testing policy, but they generally embraced accountability practices and felt that setting high academic standards and expectations for students, and equally high performance standards for teachers, were serving the needs of students, their respective communities, and society at large. For every participant, except one, serving the best interests of the student entailed focusing on the central work of schooling, teaching and learning, and sustained academic rigor for all students. In addition, prior to any direct questioning about the meaning and utility of the expression "the best interests of the student," principals readily used the phrase when responding to questions about the dilemma vignette.

When participants were asked, "What is the protagonist, Charlie's, ultimate responsibility?" or "What would the profession expect Charlie to do in this case?" the overwhelming response was "do what's best for the students." This kind of response was articulated long before direct prompts and questioning about the phrase "the best interests of the students" occurred toward the end of the second interview. All but one principal framed the best interests of students as responding creatively, in some fashion, to the accountability dictates from a dissatisfied school board and superintendent as depicted in the vignette. In their views, serving the interests of children and meeting their needs was closely connected with a curriculum aligned to state academic standards that encourage rigorous, higher-order thinking about academic content and that prepare students for success on state accountability assessments. One suburban high school principal put it this way: "That's why you're here, for the kids, and you want the kids to be successful. And if they're not successful, that's an issue for them." Principals overwhelmingly believed that they were not helping kids or the community by neglecting the hard work of improving students' academic achievement and responding to stiff accountability requirements. "Making sure children are up to par" in order to "produce better performers, better thinkers" was a common sentiment.

Participant responses to the vignette indicated support for policies that encourage high academic achievement expectations for students, the curricular modifications necessary to reach those expectations, and the continuous instructional improvement required to serve all students as unique learners. Although standards and accountability policies at federal and state levels were viewed as a one-size-fits-all expectation for student performance, participants believed that rigorous academic demands and accounting for student performance by standardized testing were appropriate and even necessary ways to

serve students' best interests. All the participants, after reading the vignette, sympathized with the protagonist, Charlie, and his plight of immediately responding to curricular and instructional dictates from the central office. Participants were disturbed by the ultimate motivation of a superintendent to improve the school district's image with the community when it came to student performance on state tests. Principals were not naive about the political and public relations aspects of student performance, but their overwhelming concern was for the students' benefit in their immediate context. Practices such as teaching to state academic standards, expecting most students to meet or exceed those standards, and testing students to ensure that they are indeed academically proficient were entirely suitable and important aspects in serving the best interests of students.

Many principals talked about what was in a student's best interest as "being happy, being successful, and getting an education." Getting an education entailed a number of priorities, as succinctly expressed by one participant who said, "Ultimately the accountability rests with us. People who benefit are the kids. Ultimately, that's who it's going to benefit. We're working for the kid[s] to get them to a level that we perceive they're going to need no matter where they're going, whether it's a two year [college], four year [college], directly into the workforce, [or] skill-based trade. We need to get them to wherever they're going."

Principals believed that accountability for student achievement is important because "students are our clients and customers." Serving the best interests of students was viewed as providing a quality education so that future benefits of academic and intellectual skills, along with habits of productive citizenry, are developed in students before they graduate from high school. A high school principal indicated that although there are plenty of politics involved with federal and state accountability mandates, "the fact that we're holding our instructors accountable, that they're raising the standards for our kids to read, write and do math, and the fact that we're expecting the kids to meet higher standards—you can't argue with that, that's a good thing!"

The tension between accountability requirements and what administrators' notions of "best interests" might be for a student or students was resolved by generally being in favor of most accountability practices. Ironically, accountability expectations placed on secondary administrators were framed as student-as-client driven rather than meeting the policy and practice demands of federal and state agencies. Principals ascribed to the idea and purposes of high-level student learning and high-level teaching as universal goods for students (Burris et al. 2008), although the means by which these ideals were to be achieved (by national accountability through testing regimens) were questioned. Some participants clearly saw the accountability policy push at the federal and state levels as an equity and civil rights issue, while others

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firmly believed in setting a clear direction for their schools toward a belief in rigorous curriculum and expert teaching for all students.

Nuances of “Best Interests” beyond the Vignette—Responding with Personal Investment

Direct questioning about the meaning and utility of the expression “the best interests of the student” occurred toward the end of the second interview. Responses varied as to the meaning of the phrase, and each participant provided a nuanced perspective of her or his understanding of the expression. Principals indicated that the best interests of the student included “many facets.” One principal noted that, “We’re educating them socially, emotionally, how to interact appropriately with people, how to comply [with] rules, regulations and expectations.” This view was reiterated many times as “the bottom line is the students,” “the students are what we’re here for,” and “this profession is not about me, it’s not about teachers, it’s about the clientele that walks through our door everyday.” Although there was a clear power and conformity message in some participants’ reflections, it was apparent to them that their role, and that of their school staff, was of adult (parental) help, guidance, support, direction, and control. This fiduciary response was conceived as what was good for students and the necessary and appropriate response to ensure that students’ lives go well. The dispositions and actions of staff were to affirm the dignity and growth of students in relationship with themselves (Starratt 2004).

This interpretation of professional response to students was articulated differently by another participant: “The best interests of the student means looking at them as entire human beings—academic, career aspirations and future orientation, social and emotional needs, and especially now, achievement. . . . It means working with the whole child . . . to meet those needs.” When principals thought about the best interests of students, they thought holistically—“the complete person” comprising social, emotional, and intellectual needs, unique to the individual student, and the services provided to meet those needs, in addition to expert classroom instruction. For school leaders, “best interests” did not exclusively comprise the best educational interests of students.

Principals focused on the entire health, safety, welfare, and education package as constituting the best interests of students. They viewed this package as their responsibility in service to children, parents, and their communities. For many administrators, the best interests of students involved decision making and action that create opportunities and experiences “that are in line with where that student is” or “looking at what their needs are and what their

current level of ability is” and figuring out how to respond to and address those needs and ability levels. One school leader reiterated this perspective by explaining how a focus on high-quality teaching and learning, and setting high academic expectations for students, results in much more than just intellectual growth and achievement. He explained, “There’s definitely a part of . . . education that your intellect isn’t the sole purpose, it’s not just totally about intellectual ability, but it’s almost like acquiring a sensitivity to mankind. I think part of the academic rigor we provide actually brings about maturity and character—doing the right thing when nobody’s looking, persevering when there are difficulties, [and knowing] what do you do when you fail.”

Every participant expressed a moral viewpoint that reached far beyond formal professional obligation. By framing the best interests of the student as responding to “the complete person,” participants assumed for themselves a unique responsibility for either coordinating or encouraging close relationships between children and school staff and/or establishing relationships with students themselves. Personal investment was described primarily as being sensitive to students’ needs, expressing care in a way that demonstrated genuine concern for children’s well being, and assuming responsibility for relationships that emulated parental guidance and direction, or “erring on the side of the kid.” Participants believed that either the expression “the best interests of the student” or their descriptions of the special responsibilities they had to children involved possessing relational qualities and dispositions, characterological aspects of themselves, that afforded the recognition and response of what was in a student’s or the students’ best interests. Most principals used and described the expression “the best interests of (the) student(s)” as a principle or rule, much like the first of 12 statements of the American Association of School Administrators Statement of Ethics for Educational Leaders (2007), which states that “the educational leader makes the education and wellbeing of students the fundamental value of all decision making.” Although stated in principle form, the expression was not exclusively used this way. Every participant interpreted the best interests of students as a way of responding morally by being who they were as people. One male, suburban high school principal illustrated the disposition of personal investment:

I have a personal obligation to try to get every kid in this school, as a senior, a high school diploma—a professional obligation, but at the same time, I take it personally. Those kids, that’s my job. If there are 20 kids that aren’t meeting our graduation project requirement, I call every single kid in that’s not meeting that requirement and I meet with [them], personally. . . . It’s my obligation to get them through. If they don’t get through, I personally know that I did everything I could do to help them get to where they had to go. I’m not going do their course work

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for them. I'm not going to do their studying for them. But I can tell you I've met with every single kid since I've been here.

For most administrators, concern for children was expressed on a personal level, and being invested meant responding to the needs of one or many students irrespective of whether their decisions were counter to professional group consensus or personal consequence.

Recognizing and responding to individual students' uniqueness and worth was not always depicted by participants as following a principle or rule but rather by being considerate and having consideration. As one school leader noted, "Students need to know, as an administrator, that you value them." Leadership was described as a way of being in addition to citing the injunction "do what's best for kids" or using the expression "the best interests of (the) student(s)" as a formal rule. The virtues most frequently mentioned or illustrated included responsibility, care, patience, integrity (truthfulness, honesty, genuineness), fairness, and love. An urban high school administrator described an important way of being in order to achieve what was for him the best interests of the student: "I believe that someone who is an administrator needs to have a sound basis in integrity—operating under truth, with truth, for truth. I have a three-sentence statement that I say to almost every kid when I'm doing an intake interview. It's like this: 'I won't lie to you, I won't lie about you and I won't lie for you. So whatever we do, let's keep it truthful together.' You've got to have integrity, consistency. . . . Integrity will say a lot about you as a person."

For many administrators, possessing moral dispositions and qualities of character was just as important as reasoning and decision making about policy, procedures, and guidelines, or even trying to follow moral rules of thumb such as, "treat people the way you would expect to get treated" or "How would I want my kid to be treated in this situation?" In fact, most principals articulated a morality that was a blending of personal virtue, following right-making rules or principles, and reflective openness to the unique aspects of circumstance. A middle school principal expressed this perspective: "I think your heart has to be there, you have to be empathetic and feeling. . . . I think you have to have hands-on experience, and you've got to have the head—the knowledge, thinking through the whole situation. I don't think you can separate it. I think if you used any one approach you're doomed for failure. I think you need to be a true person and connect."

The disposition of personal investment was described as a dominant virtue for serving the best interests of students and was a prominent feature in my conversations with principals. Several principals noted the reciprocal nature of a responsible, responding relationship with students. One participant said that "kids today, if they get that perception that you're invested, they are going

to return that,” while another principal said, “we invest a lot in students . . . part of the investment, our relationship with them, enables us to hold them accountable.” A principal at an alternative secondary school explained what personal investment meant to him and how powerful the virtue of personal investment can be in ensuring the best interests of a student. He explained that “it’s very necessary that a kid feels that I’m willing to look at every single thing about him as an individual to try to make my decision.”

The personal virtue of being invested meant that sometimes administrators made decisions that ran counter to professional group consensus or personal consequence. Several administrators told stories of courage, determination, and administrative savvy in order to “present and represent” the best interests of students to those within the organizational hierarchy of the school district or to teachers, parents, and community members. These efforts involved “administrative discretion” in which principals manipulated, “massaged,” or outright violated school district policies or procedures, bought time by waiting out circumstances, took risks with the cost of organizational sanction, or lied in order to achieve what they believed to be in the best interests of a student. Some of the behaviors principals described in order to achieve a particular student’s best interests were less than virtuous, normatively speaking, but were viewed by participants as justified in order to preserve their invested relationships and serve the needs of particular students. According to participants, an accounting of their behaviors indicated that the best interests of a student or students—conceived as an aim in promoting their overall welfare—was indeed an important and dominant value for them and not a way to manipulate a system or other people for their own personal gain, power, or influence. The personal virtue of being invested, and all that the personal virtue entailed through attitude and action, served as a moral force in valuing students’ interests—whether those interests were immediate and long-term needs, promoting their success through academic curricula and related instructional practices, or responding to circumstances beyond narrow matters of learning and achievement.

“Best Interests” as a Principle or Maxim for Decision Making

In conversations with participants in both the first and second interviews, the expression “the best interests of the student” was expressed, although nuanced, as a rule or principle to assist in decision making and provided a rationale and justification for the decisions they made. A rural high school principal, after sharing many stories and illustrations about decision making, commented that, “you have to put those students needs first because that is an underlying principle that you have . . . it’s there, but it’s not something I verbalize on a

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daily basis.” Without being prompted, almost every participant readily used the phrase “best interests” to indicate a priority consideration when choosing courses of action and deciding on important school matters. Two principals did not use the expression or make reference to it until I directly questioned them about the maxim’s meaning and usefulness, although one principal did state early on in his first interview, “I think it’s his [Charlie’s] job to make sure that programs . . . and pedagogy are all in place so the kids have the best opportunity, and that you’re offering those things . . . so students can have what they need.” Clearly, the aim of the expression was employed without using the phrase as a decision rule.

Principals, when affirming the use of the phrase “the best interests of the student” as a rule in decision making, or as a high-priority consideration when making choices, made reference to the language as if it were the “bottom line” for them or as an achievable ideal when balanced with a variety of other considerations. One principal said: “Whatever decision I make, regardless of whether I think it’s the right one for me or for the teacher; it has to be the right decision that’s in the best interests for that student. What’s good for kids . . . may not always be what’s best for the teacher, or for me, or for the lunch lady, or the janitor. What’s good and right for kids is what really should drive us.”

When it comes to weighing other considerations in the decision-making process, one urban high school principal told a story about how the “best interests of the student” rule assisted him in defending his choices and actions when dealing with a student. For this principal, weighing out a variety of situational variables and coming to a place of decision and action was gauged against the moral criterion of what was best for a specific student within a unique social circumstance. The standard expression “the best interests of the student” was used as a criterion for moral judgment, but the meaning of “best interests,” according to this participant, changes in direct relation to serving the particular and unique needs of individual students. He explained:

A special education kid had been suspended for assault and extortion—fine. He comes back a day early. Now, could I have called his mother and had his mother come pick him up, take him home and finish his suspension? Sure, but . . . bringing him back a day early allowed him to be here. I met with him, talked with him, had his teacher talk with him, [and] I sent him back to his emotional support classroom because in that way several things happened. It’s better for the kid to get him back in the game because he’s missed some time. His temperament wasn’t horrible so we could get him back in the game that way. It is a situation where he needed to see that I could cut him some slack because we’ve had a rough couple weeks with him. So as a result, I have to weigh out what’s best for that kid. Now the staff might look at me and

say, “Hey you brought this thug back a day early. What were you thinking?” But in my mind, in doing what’s best for that kid, at that particular time, I can defend all of those things.

Using the maxim to defend an administrative decision and coloring it with moral hues can clearly serve as a rhetorical ploy or some form of linguistic accumulation of power over the viewpoints of colleagues or school policy—in other words, taking the moral high ground for self-interested purposes. Administrators were clearly not immune to this kind of political wrangling, although, in their view, political power plays in support of their interpretation of students’ best interests were noble pursuits that ultimately contributed to the students’ good. The possible use of ethics to be unethical (Begley 2000) appeared to be counterbalanced by personal virtue.

The situational nature of what is in a student’s best interest was a common theme throughout my conversations with school leaders. Their understanding of “best interests” as a rule was situation specific and based on manifold issues tied to circumstance, place, timing, and whether the topic under discussion related to one student or many students. Several principals talked about how a definition of what was in a student’s or students’ best interests in one school would not be the same thing in another school or how the characteristics and needs of one child, and consequently his or her best interests, can be so different from another student’s or that of an entire student body. According to every participant, timing, the manner of approach and interaction with students, and the people involved in any number of student-related issues or problems played a role in determining what was in a student’s or students’ best interests. This perspective was explained as “taking each thing individually, weighing it, and then you act upon it—you do what is right for this child at this given time. You take each one, in increments, and make a decision. . . . One decision you make one day might not be the same [one] you would make the next day. It’s very unique to each given [situation].” Counter to the institutional nature of public schooling that seems to force every student into the same mold, the virtuous response of personal investment required sensitivity and judgment in order to apply the “best interests” maxim and treat students differently based on what they need. One rural principal explained: “There are [a lot] of students, and each student is different. I think in public education we have assumed that one system is right for every kid. We have to look for what’s best for that particular student at that particular time. . . . You do what’s best for each student at the time, within the confines that you have, and as much as you can. If you err on doing the right thing for the student, as much as you can, you’ll be in good shape.”

Because of the situational nature of making decisions in a student’s best interest, two high school principals offered a counterperspective and indicated

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that the expression really had no meaning for them and could not serve as a principle or rule to assist them in decision making. One young principal and one veteran principal, both heading up high schools in rural settings, were doubtful of the maxim's meaning and utility. Either the phrase was empty of any relevant educational meaning or the phrase was used to justify personal preferences or relieve one of personal responsibility for a specific student or group of students in general. One principal said, "I think a lot of folks lasso that statement and kind of use it as their escape: 'Well, we're going to do it because this is best for kids.' You hear a lot of that, 'what's best for kids.' You know, we'll run against a wall because it's good for kids. I think we have to be careful with that, we don't over use that, use it as our crutch." The other perspective was similar:

It's a generic response, typically used when you don't have anything better to say, or any better explanation. If you're going to say that, you need to be able to back it up with a specific plan or idea—a rationale as to why it's the best interests of the student.

I think it could be a principle—using the term in that capacity; although I'm not sure what it means. It would need to be defined. To just say it's in the best interests of the student doesn't mean a whole lot to me, other than you haven't defined what it would be.

One Student versus the Student Body

In addition to situational factors that must be taken into consideration when weighing the particular best interests of individual students and determining their unique needs, each administrator was quick to convey frustration with the organizational constraints and managerial demands he or she confronted when trying to balance the best interests of all students, whether or not those interests were figured individually or corporately. One high school principal said, "There's lots of students, and what might be in the best interests of A, may not be in the best interests of B, C, D, and E, and my job is to run a school." The bounded rationality of institutional life was expressed as bounded morality when school leaders talked about policies and directives, resources, time, and the actions of other employees that were inhibitive to a student or students' best interests. Referencing the vignette in the first interview, one participant illustrated the inhibiting quality of bureaucracy in achieving both individual and corporate student interests by saying,

Professionally, you would like to hope that [Charlie] would . . . listen to the staff and try to go back and do what's best for the kids. But also, being in a hierarchy and a system where there are protocols, you un-

derstand that he's up against it. In his own position where he is, he has to do what he's told to do because if he's not going to, someone will be replacing him [who] will, which makes for a rather ugly career.

Achieving some level of moral satisfaction in meeting individual students' needs and serving their best interests was either courageously accomplished at the expense of formal organizational life or never fully realized because of frustrating school- or district-related factors that seemed, according to participants, to divert their time, energy, attention, and focused intention away from doing the moral thing on behalf of one or more students. Administrators were not overwhelmingly discouraged or overtly angry about some of the moral limitations imposed on them but, rather, viewed their role as a challenging opportunity to do right on behalf of a student or group of students, to the best of their ability, under unique and varying organizational circumstances.

Because of the focus and stamina required to lead a complex social service organization, every participant indicated in some fashion a difference between the best interests of one student and the best interests of students as a group. The distinction administrators made was different, along a continuum of responses, from the conceptual framework guiding this study, which focuses solely on the ethical ideal of attending to the "individual student" (Stefkovich 2006, 17), through which, if students are treated well (rightfully, respectfully, responsibly) as individuals, then a message is sent to an entire student body. Principals viewed the work of deciding and acting in the best interests of the student body as being qualitatively different than working with students on an individual basis (see table 2). Balancing the two priorities was difficult, but essential, within the confines of a bureaucratic institution.

In their daily work, most principals thought about the best interests of students in general, as a corporate body, and when issues came to their attention, they would alter their perspective and focus on unique, individual student needs. This pattern of thought was prevalent and consistent across participants. One urban administrator explained: "I think of the student body as a whole, and when I need to, I deal with students individually, or when it's appropriate or time to do that. [I] have to think that way because I'm one administrator. . . . It's kind of like a wheel, the core in the middle of the wheel, you want to keep that in mind, but you may have to deal with individual spokes." Another participant put it this way: "You look at each situation, and I think [about] making a decision [this way:] How many kids can I impact versus how many may I not impact, across the board?" A similar attitude was expressed by another administrator, but a little differently. He said: "I think there are times when you have to do things in the collective best interests. There is no question you have to do things sometimes that a student may have to have an issue sacrificed for the benefit of the entire student body, or

TABLE 2

Participants' Interpretation of the Expression "The Best Interests of the Student"

Participant	Perspective on a Student's Best Interests versus the Students' Best Interests	Perspective on the Theoretical "Expression" (3Rs) of Best Interests
Principal 1	"It can't be the same thing"	"Important" considerations; rank: respect, responsibility, and rights
Principal 2	"Times you look at the whole . . . times when you look at individuals"	"Very important" considerations; rank: no order, interconnected
Principal 3	"Yes [a difference]. You have to balance that. Absolutely, yes"	"Absolute" considerations; rank: rights, responsibility, and respect
Principal 4	"I think it depends on the situation . . . [sometimes] message to the entire student body based on what happens to the individual"	"Very important" considerations; rank: respect, responsibility, and rights
Principal 5	"Yes. What's best for all is not necessarily what's best for the individual"	"Very important" considerations; rank: no order, interconnected
Principal 6	"Think of the student body as a whole, and when I need to I deal with students individually"	"Very important" considerations; rank: respect, responsibility, and rights
Principal 7	"It's different . . . there are times when you have to do things in the collective best interests"	"Important" but not "overriding" considerations; rank: responsibility, respect, and rights

- Principal 8 “Circumstances which you’re going to have to think about the best interests of the individual, and then there are others that you think collectively as a group. It depends”
- Principal 9 “Sure . . . the needs of many outweigh the needs of one, yet I’m willing to meet [a student’s] need, but I can’t sacrifice everybody else’s [needs] because of it”
- Principal 10 “We’re always going to make [decisions for] the best interests of the whole”
- Principal 11 “It may have been in the best interests of [a] particular student, but it wasn’t in the best interests of students in general”
-
- “Relevant” and “fundamental” considerations; rank: responsibility, rights, and respect
- “Obvious” and “very important” considerations; rank: respect (rights, responsibility or responsibility, rights)
- “That’s what I talk to kids . . . [and] my parents . . . about”; rank: rights, responsibility, and respect
- “Foundational” considerations; rank: respect, responsibility, and rights.

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for the safety of the student body, or for a variety of reasons. We do work within a system where we have to handle the entire global group. [A student's] issue may be sacrificed for the benefit of all. That's a bureaucratic issue."

There was one principal who communicated the view of focusing primarily on individual student needs and best interests as specified in the Model for Students' Best Interests framework (Stefkovich 2006) when he explained that "given certain circumstances, you can send a message to the entire student body based on what happens to an individual." Although he believed focusing on a case-by-case treatment of individual students can have some affect on the best interests of the entire student body, this level of individual interaction was not sufficient for ensuring a complete consideration of the best interests of all students under his supervision.

Although principals' first order of business was considering, deciding, and acting in the best interests of students as a group, they were not ignorant of the potential danger of the distinction, especially when they frequently had to "just give people what they need[ed]" at an individual rather than a group level. Some believed that public schooling was becoming more individualized and student centered with planning and interventions designed to address the needs and talents of every student, whereas other principals expressed their frustration with public education and organizational life where "political correctness" and a "one-size-fits-all approach" dictated how to respond when addressing students' needs or seeking to serve their best interests.

The turbulent intersection of policy, professional ethics, and personal morality became evident as participants talked about working with students on an individual basis. Fairness figured prominently in our discussions. But fairness required responding with personal investment to each student based upon his or her unique needs, not being strapped to formulaic procedures or regulations that did not allow for reasonable distinctions between equality and equity. Principals did not want to be questioned about why they were not doling out the same treatment or responding and acting in the same, uniform manner toward every student. Considering students as unique individuals unto themselves required that each be treated differently based upon the individual's varying needs, abilities, and constitutions along with a host of circumstantial factors. Well-reasoned, equitable treatment was considered paramount.

The Meaning of "Best Interests" and the 3Rs—Theoretical Definition and Variations

The perspectives that principals revealed about the saying "the best interests of the student" were explored in greater depth toward the end of the second interview when I asked them specifically about how the Model for Students'

Best Interests definition fit with their own understanding and experiences. Viewpoints varied as principals reflected on a more theoretical explanation of a student's best interests.

When questioned about the theoretical definition, and more specifically the three Rs—rights, responsibility, and respect—components that are intended to define what is meant by “serve the best interests of the student,” principals gave a mix of responses, although many viewed the three defining components as “important” or “foundational” matters when fulfilling their roles and discharging their duties as building administrators. Each principal had a slightly different view of the three Rs and how they operate in order to ensure that the best interests of the student were met (see table 2). One school leader offered a coincidental response (immediately referencing the shorthand “three Rs” language in the model). She said: “The three Rs—maybe you should call it that. They should be underlining every situation, everything in the entire world, so they’re very important. It’s just unfortunate that it’s not part of everybody—not their groundwork . . . embedded in them—it’s not intuitive for them. That should be something for all people in our profession.”

Participants’ immediately identified the three Rs as fundamental and important considerations when I named them near the end of the second interview. All the principals affirmed the value of rights, responsibility, and respect when determining what is in the best interests of a student, and the definitions they gave for each mirrored, for the most part, the explanation offered in the framework. What was striking, though, was the lack of initial reference to rights. When talking with participants early in the interview process about their own understanding of what the phrase “the best interests of the student” meant for them in their own work, many referenced their own responsibility and respect as important aspects of serving the best interests of (the) student(s) and responding to their needs, but no one mentioned student rights.

For some participants, student rights and responsibilities were understood as being intermingled and even confounded with each other, while several other principals viewed respect as set apart—a special or first-order consideration. One principal said, “We talk about their [students’] rights, but at each individual level they have to understand the rights and the opportunities [others] possess as well, as individuals, if that makes sense. It has to be a conscious thing.” Initially, administrators did not explicitly frame the best interests of the student as consisting of, in part, student responsibility, as does the framework, but rather focused on themselves and their own responsibility to address student needs. This perspective carried over into the realm of respect as well.

When the three Rs of the framework were directly discussed, principals talked more readily about the students’ role in realizing their own best interests,

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but prior to introducing the framework components, a student's own rights, responsibility, and respect were not part of the "best interests" equation. After further rumination about the framework and its attempt to clarify not only what is meant by "serve the best interests of the student" but also herald the moral underpinning of the profession as being centered on the needs of children, principals were asked to rank the three "considerations" in order of importance. The responses of participants revealed a variety of perspectives on what was most salient when deciding and responding to students' needs. An administrator offered his perspective, which eloquently expressed the primacy of respect that was shared by the majority of secondary principals. He explained:

I think they're backward: respect, responsibility, and rights, simply because respect is a view of others, and if you view others as being equal, valuable, and important, then you will be socially and consciously responsible to do your best and possibly to realize that those responsibilities include protecting the rights of all individuals. . . . I think respect is [acknowledging] that everyone has value, and our value is equal. No one person has more value than anybody else. We all have value. It doesn't mean you like everybody equally, it doesn't mean everybody will be the same; it means that you look at the equality of that individual. It's not what they are, but who they are . . . because they're human beings.

There was a clear adjustment that administrators made when they were presented with the Best Interests framework. Prior to being exposed to a theory of what "serve the best interests of the student" might be, principals had a common view of supporting, deciding, and pursuing what they considered to be good for the student—a student's growth and flourishing as a person and the personal character he or she possessed as a fiduciary in achieving that end. Administrators operated from a moral theory of the good, and when exposed to a legal conceptualization of rights, responsibility, and respect (essentially a rights theory of morality), they appeared to readjust their thinking and come to grips with what they were previously trying to articulate as "best interests." Their readjustment centered on the closest concept connected with their notions of the good, which was respect.

Discussion

An Ethic of the Profession and Its Model for Students' Best Interests is proffered as a distinct and separate ethical system (paradigm) that can inform the moral practice of school administration (Shapiro and Stefkovich 2011, 19). An at-

tempt has been made in this research to closely examine one aspect of a professional ethics construct, namely, the use, understanding, and meanings that practicing secondary school principals attribute to the expression “the best interests of the student” as a central feature of an operating ethical framework that serves as an occupationally specific practical, rather than a formal, ethical system.

The Ethic of the Profession and Its Model for Students’ Best Interests posits the maxim “the best interests of the student” as a central ethical ideal for educational administration and attempts to define the expression in order to provide a clearer professional ethic for educational leadership. The framework indicates that “the best interests of the student” is best understood, promoted, learned, and adopted as a central, guiding, moral principle in decision making. The findings in this study both challenge and contribute to the framework by examining whether or not the expression is employed by practicing administrators as primarily an ethical injunction to guide behavior. It appears that other considerations and aspects of administrative morality are situated in confluence with the injunction when administrators decide ethically and act morally.

Returning to the central questions guiding this study, evidence does not exist that secondary school administrators regularly and/or consistently make reference to either a single injunction or set of guiding principles when making value-laden decisions, although the expression “the best interests of the student” was employed in common parlance. Using ethical rules of thumb in decision making (Frick 2009) appears to be a dominant practice, but the “best interests” expression is in nowise privileged. Sometimes the phrase was used as a formal maxim, while more often the saying was weighed with a variety of other concerns and considerations, obligations to organizational rules and policies, and situational and contextual variables, in order to determine what value, or set of values, takes precedence while seeking to meet both individual and collective student needs. The maxim was generally conceived by participants as a very important rule of thumb but not taken to be an absolute, as if the saying were a principle of duty of transcendent value.

What is meant by “the best interests of the student” varied, according to practitioners, with each participant providing a nuanced perspective of her or his understanding of the expression. Differences among the views of the principals along categorical selection criteria were not evident in any qualitatively significant way, with the exception of two rural school principals. Specific issues concerning student race, class, gender, or other equity categories (except for special education identification and placement) did not emerge in participants’ considerations. As stated earlier, the dilemma presented to principals concerning the focus on preparing students for the state exams could have had some influence on their responses in this regard. This finding can

be viewed as deeply troubling. Historically, students with disabilities have been miseducated in the name of “doing what’s best for the student,” as with students of color; the poor and working classes; and with gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered students. These issues, whether they are sensitive and effective bilingual education practices promoting an inclusive public school culture or addressing the intersection of race and class in schooling, were not raised by participants.

The expression “the best interests of the student” was employed by participants as both a professional injunction of special duty and as a way to express personal dispositions deemed necessary in order to recognize, respond, and address students’ needs. As principals told their own stories about working with students and faculty, they provided many illustrations of what it meant to serve the best interests of students, and with their responses to direct questioning, a depiction of the responsible, responding relationship emerged as one of personal investment. Participants expressed a moral viewpoint that reached beyond formal professional obligation to include parental-like guidance and direction. Herein, an echo of the ethic of care is most clearly apparent.

Every participant interpreted the best interests of students as a way of responding morally by being who they were as people—possessing virtuous qualities of character and the ability to reflectively judge the moral implications of decisions and corresponding action within unique and varied circumstances. The responsible, responding relationship was characterized as a personal investment that involved not only following a professional maxim but also required one to possess character qualities and personal dispositions conducive to genuinely wanting to do what was in a student’s or students’ best interests. Additionally, being morally attuned to a student’s best interests involved awareness and reflection about the unique personal qualities of individual students and the varying conditions and circumstances that play a role in formulating a moral judgment and carrying it out. Although subdued in the findings, a faint ring of an ethic of critique can be heard. Some of the participants’ commonsensical perceptions in resolving the tensions between accountability requirements and students’ interests, while well intentioned and bearing some merit, are not indicative of the politically critical moral finesse required to problematize wide, sweeping testing schemes, the marketization of schooling, or the disenfranchisement of those students who are subject to power structures beyond their consciousness and control (Rose 2009).

Evidence from the findings section reveals that most of the principals were not constructing “best interests” as a moral decision informed by an ethical system. Instead, participants’ constructed “best interests” more as “professional happy talk,” an expected bromide that “enlightened” principals were supposed to use. This was especially evident as a result of the study design. As the sequence of both interviews proceeded and more specific questions were posed

about what “best interests” means and its possible utility, more participants engaged in conversation about its validity for decision making and moral guidance. Few participants, if any, rationally or reasonably connected the expression “best interests” to a developed ethical conceptualization of practice and, as such, there is little evidence that the data acquired through this study aligned with the meaning of “best interests” as articulated through the Ethic of the Profession and Its Model for Students’ Best Interests (Shapiro and Stefkovich 2001, 2005, 2011; Stefkovich 2006).

Additionally, every participant expressed a difference between the best interests of one student and the best interests of students as a group. The distinction administrators made was markedly different from the conceptual framework guiding this study. Principals viewed the work of deciding and acting in the best interests of the student body as being qualitatively different than working with students on an individual basis. Balancing the two priorities was difficult, but essential, within the confines of a bureaucratic institution. These findings mark the clear intonation of an ethic of justice in egalitarian and utilitarian terms.

Even though administrators would like to consider the best interests of each and every student “in a perfect world,” they viewed their thinking, decisions, and actions in accordance with the best interest of all students as taking center stage in the daily operation of their schools. Serving the best interests of individual students and meeting their needs was vital for leading a school, but principals made a clear distinction between the best interests of one student and the student body, and those different interests, based on context and circumstance, may not be the same.

Principals were more inclined to focus on themselves—what rules they operated by or what kind of people they needed to be in order to serve the best interests of students—rather than bringing a student, qua student, or students collectively, into the equation for achieving their best interests. After further reflection, most likely as a result of the introduction of the framework and its model, it became more obvious to participants that students themselves do indeed play a role in meeting their own needs as specified in the Model for Students’ Best Interests, whether that role is simply principals recognizing the rights that students possess in the public schools or the lessons administrators teach, either explicitly or through their actions, about students being responsible for themselves and to others and likewise respecting themselves and others as persons who have needs, goals, and valued ends of their own.

Respect figured prominently in principals’ understanding of what “the best interests of the student” means as a professional ideal. Rights and responsibility were viewed as “important considerations” for clarifying the meaning of “best interests,” but respect—expressed in natural conversation as a responsible, responding relationship of personal investment in students, and additionally

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in administrators' ranking of the three Rs—was named, in a collective sense, as a foundational virtue from which a decision-making principle for the profession could emerge. Respect, conceived primarily as a characterological virtue, stands as an important finding in this study and spotlights the significance of virtue, and a theory of virtue, as a future theoretical direction in the formation and enactment of the principalship.

Conclusion

This study offers empirical insights that address both the strengths and weakness of one aspect (the central injunction) of a theorized ethic for the profession of school leadership and constitutes an attempt at providing empirically based theorizing about the Ethic of the Profession and Its Model for Students' Best Interests (Shapiro and Stefkovich 2001, 2005, 2011; Stefkovich 2006). As an ethical amalgam of justice, care, and critique contextualized in schools, along with an articulated framework of rights, responsibility, and respect that constitutes a student's best interests, forming a distinct professional ethic for school administration (and all school workers who lead), as evidenced or not within this study, is far from validated and settled.

The "best interests of the student" injunction appears to have some usefulness in providing ethical guidance for moral leadership practice, while at the same time being flexible enough to accommodate multiple vantages on the meaning of morality and valued ends. This is not surprising, since the ethical construct is purposefully pluralistic in makeup. In the profoundest sense, this study illustrates the importance of characterological virtue as preceding any and all meaning ascribed to a purported ethical "backbone" or "moral imperative" of the profession (Shapiro and Stefkovich 2011, 25) as ensconced in the ubiquitous and questionable expression "best interests" (Walker 1998). Quite possibly the virtuous quality of respect for persons (characterized by participants as a responsible, responding relationship of personal investment in children) must be a primary consideration for a professional ethic before other theorizing is pursued about what constitutes deciding ethically in order to achieve moral aims in schooling. How can respect, conceived primarily as a characterological virtue (such as respectfulness), figure so prominently in the findings of this study and yet participants were almost wholly silent about specific issues concerning student race, class, gender, sexual orientation, and other equity categories? How can respect as a virtue (conceived and embodied in a one-on-one relationship) square with a predominant justice orientation expressed in egalitarian and utilitarian terms?

The tensions between the managerial and leadership aspects of the principalship are evident in this study (Cuban 1988), and the means by which

they are resolved are problematic. The discrepancy between administrator views of what their job should be about and what the national discourse on testing is pushing their job to be is troubling and compounds the tensions that Cuban (1988) so clearly identifies. Policy pressures, at all levels, appear to force school administrators into a position of moral confusion that an often-used injunction fails to remedy. A continuing line of research about these specific tensions or “clashes” (Shapiro and Stefkovich 2011, 24), yet to be explored, is important for a fuller and more accurate conceptualization of a professional ethic for education.

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