

**BEYOND LEGALITIES:
AN INQUIRY INTO THE ETHICAL DIMENSION OF PRINCIPALS' DECISION-
MAKING FOR SPECIAL EDUCATION**

A Dissertation by

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DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to my family. First, to my parents, whose hard work, generosity, faith, and example has consistently inspired and motivated me to be a better daughter, wife, mother, friend, and educator than I was yesterday. To my two beautiful daughters, Emily and Grace, whose encouragement, strength, and own perseverance served as a source of inspiration. It is truly an honor to be your mother. Finally, to my remarkable husband, Greg, thank you not only for your many sacrifices along this journey, but for your patience, encouragement, and support with my numerous personal and professional pursuits. Thank you for always supporting my dreams. While I have achieved many things, by far, our children and the life we have built together remain the greatest of those achievements.

“Risk more than others think is safe. Care more than others think is wise. Dream more than others think is practical. Expect more than others think is possible” - Claude Thomas Bissell

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ABSTRACT

Given the evolution of the principal's role and the current accountability system, principals are expected act in primary oversight of programming for student with disabilities. However, such expectations assume principals possess the core skills, knowledge, and dispositions necessary when navigating complex decision-making for students with disabilities. To meet the demands of a complex leadership role, principals must not only attend to the legal context, but are responsible to act as moral agents, providing the ethical leadership necessary to support the formation of an ethical school setting for all students.

This qualitative study, conducted in two member districts of a special education Interlocal located in Kansas, sought to explore how seven principals navigated the ethical dilemmas associated with special education that exist beyond the legal context. Through the perspectives of consequentialism, deontology, virtue ethics (Northouse, 2015), and care ethics (Held, 2006; Noddings, 2013), principals' moral and political stories with regard to their leadership for special education were examined. With particular attention to participants' description of their aims, actions, and motivation in association with their leadership for special education, a primary perspective with heavy emphasis on respect, care, nurturing, and relationship emerged. Highlighted were participants' primary process of cultivating a climate where all people matter, a focus on people first, a moral commitment to look beyond the rules, rigor, and regulation, and a primary motivation to cultivate support and promote unity through shared leadership. A final, yet important conclusion highlighted principals' acute awareness of the rhetoric and the realities, and their concerns regarding diminished opportunity to fully advance their leadership for all from a care perspective.

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Chapter 1

The civil rights of people with disabilities were first acknowledged as a result of special interest groups' advocacy and pending legislation during the civil rights movements of the 1950's and 1960's (Aron & Loprest, 2012). In 1975, Congress approved the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EAHCA). Also known as PL 94-142, this legislation brought forth sweeping reform with regard to the education of students with disabilities (Martin, Martin, & Terman, 1996). During these early years of special education, school leaders were typically prepared to work in one of two separate systems of education: one for general education students and another for special education students. With reauthorization of PL 94-142 in 1990, the law was renamed the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). This reauthorization, paired with subsequent reauthorizations in 1997 and the 2004 Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA), served to broaden access and education for students with disabilities (Yell, 2015). In addition, in 2001 the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) was reauthorized as part of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) and held important implications for students with disabilities (DiPaola, Tschannen-Moran, & Walther-Thomas, 2004).

Placing particular emphasis not only on school improvement but on the academic performance of all students, the passage of NCLB meant increased responsibility on the principal to ensure students with disabilities were afforded the same access to curriculum as their nondisabled peers (Rotatori, Obiakor, & Bakken, 2011). IDEA's subsequent alignment to NCLB and the focus of each on what to teach (curriculum) and where to teach it (instructional environment) put additional emphasis on this expectation. The result was the principal being accountable for far more than simply ensuring access to students with disabilities (Hasazi &

Shepherd, 2009). Rather, principals found themselves largely responsible for a unified model of program delivery, and thus, an ever-expanding number of roles and responsibilities associated with the primary management of all special education matters (Council of Chief State School Officers, 2016; Frick, Faircloth, & Little, 2013).

In the current policy context, principals regularly find themselves challenged by the complexity of their roles and responsibilities. Not only are they accountable for the academic performance of students who have disabilities, but they are responsible for ensuring the provision of procedural safeguards special education law has long required (Darling-Hammond, LaPointe, Meyerson, Orr, & Cohen, 2007). The accountability provisions of NCLB required principals to improve their knowledge and skills as they related to improving student performance and administering discipline (Bays & Crockett, 2007). Furthermore, under IDEA, schools are required to provide complaint and hearing procedures that focus principals' practices on the learning needs of individual students, protecting student's legal rights, and fostering relationships with their parents (Rotatori et al., 2011). However, principals frequently report they are poorly equipped with the knowledge and skills to fully attend to such responsibilities. Furthermore, research also contends many may simply lack the necessary dispositions to fully meet such professional demands (Bays & Crockett, 2007; Lashley & Boscardin, 2003; Lasky & Karge, 2006).

Research Problem

Principals report they frequently grapple with the implications of being accountable for a unified model of program delivery for general education and special education (Darling-Hammond et al., 2007; DiPaola et al., 2004; Lynch, 2012). Forty plus years of educational reform and the level of accountability magnified by ongoing reforms associated with IDEA,

NCLB, and the most recent passage of Everyone Succeeds Act (ESSA) in 2015 has markedly increased the demands shouldered by the principal. Often called to act as the final arbitrator on special education matters, principals routinely make decisions on behalf of students in compliance with the law (Lashley, 2007). Plagued by the complexity of addressing legal compliance, administrative directives, and the modern day call to provide instructional leadership for all, principals regularly find themselves thrust into complex ethical dilemmas involving competing interests and pressures (Bays & Crockett, 2007; Frick et al., 2013; Paul, French, & Cranston-Gingras, 2002). Yet, the laws' inherent focus remains on legal and technical action, leaving many to presume compliance with the law is sufficient.

Suggesting the complexities of leadership go well beyond simply complying with legal and regulatory mandates, Lashley (2007) asserted, "The best interests of all students will be served when school leaders come to terms with the ethical demands of their new responsibilities" (p. 186). While providing an acceptable level of service and protection for students with disabilities, compliance related responses only ensure a minimum standard that is essential but not necessarily commensurate with the ethical foundation of special education or the spirit of the law (Bon, 2012; Frick et al., 2013; Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2010). Therefore, both legal and ethical principles serve to inform the oversight, decision-making, and provision of special education services (Bon & Bigbee, 2011).

However, the laws' inherent focus on legal and technical actions in isolation of other factors may not suffice to influence the ethical disposition of building principals (Bon, 2012). While good law should be ethical and the obligations established with legal mandates are enforceable, the law cannot control for integrity, professionalism, or collegiality. Nor can the law respond to individual context (Bon & Bigbee, 2011; Paul et al., 2002; Vogel, 2012). High-

stakes pressures associated with regulatory mandates, increasing litigation, student interests, and community members may create an imbalance of demands resulting in disparity between the ideal and the realities of leadership. While the ethical dimension of leadership is less concrete, it is nonetheless instrumental to shaping the informal standards intended to encourage the ideal dispositions of professionals working with students with disabilities (Horner, 2003).

In their daily work with students with disabilities, principals regularly confront a particularly unique set of ethical demands. As their personal, professional, and ethical values are tested, Greenfield (1991) has suggested principals must be deliberately moral, that is, particularly mindful when attending to policies, procedures, and structures that may have hidden ethical consequences. This further necessitates principals remain sensitive to the ethical implications of problems and situations (Marshall & Oliva, 2010). While the knowledge and skills necessary to supervise and act in accordance with the law may be of primary emphasis, the ethical complexity of providing leadership for all students calls upon the principal to cultivate and attend to the disposition necessary to embrace the needs and enhance the performance of all children (DiPaola & Walther-Thomas, 2003; Frick et al., 2013; Vogel, 2012). Thus, the use of an ethical lens may further assist in understanding how principals navigate complex ethical dilemmas in association with improving educational performance and opportunity for all children.

Conceptual Framework

In an effort to better understand the approaches principals employ when making decisions for students with disabilities, it would serve little purpose to simply generate broad descriptions or observations of what school principals do. To gain a better sense of how personal and professional ethics may influence a principal's decision-making, I observed and investigated from within a conceptual framework (Lapan, Quartaroli, & Riemer, 2011). Ethical decision-

making, particularly in the pluralistic cultural environments found in school settings, is often complex (Howe & Miramontes, 1991; Marshall & Oliva, 2010). As a result, there is more than one ethical perspective from which leaders make ethical judgments (Lashley, 2007). Based upon traditional, normative ethical theories, I used the ethical perspectives of consequentialism, deontology, virtue ethics (Northouse, 2015) as well as the contrasting perspective of care ethics (Held, 2006; Noddings, 2013) and examined how principals conceptualize and deploy leadership in relation to their decision-making for students with disabilities. For some, ethics may closely intertwine with other approaches associated with choice making, such as religion, law, or morality (Bon & Bigbee, 2011; Ciulla, 2004). While the law can promote ethical decision-making in schools, the law in isolation of schooling's inherent social and cultural dimensions is unable to address the full range of ethical choices principals face (Lashley, 2007; Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2010). Probing into principals' practice from an ethical perspective offered an opportunity to closely examine the ethical considerations involved in leadership as it relates to decision-making for special education.

Ethical Theories

When studying ethics and leadership, theories tend to fall within two primary domains: theories associated with leaders' conduct and theories associated with leaders' character. Theories focused on the conduct of leaders are further divided into two categories: theories that emphasize the *consequences* of leaders' action and theories that stress the *duty or rules* governing a leaders' actions (Ciulla, 2014; Northouse, 2015). Classified as teleological theories, coming from the Greek word *telos*, meaning "purpose" or "end" (Webster, 2016) the primary aim of such theory is to frame questions of right and wrong. In such instance, particular emphasis is on whether an individual's conduct will result in desirable consequences. From the

teleological perspective, “What is right?” is verified by looking at the result or outcomes and the outcome determines the value of the principal’s behavior (Ciulla, 2004).

In contrast to the focus of actions tied to outcomes, deontological theory originates from the Greek work *deos*, meaning “duty” (Webster, 2016). The deontological perspective centers primarily on the actions of the principal and the moral obligation to do the right thing (Bonde & Firenze, 2013). From this perspective, actions are deemed moral if the principal has a moral right to do them, if such actions do not infringe on the rights of others, and if the actions advance the moral rights of others (Schumann, 2001).

While teleological and deontological theories focus on the behavior or conduct of the principal, the second domain examines ethics based upon the principal’s character. With heavy emphasis on leaders as people, the literature refers to them as virtue-based theories (Ciulla, 2014). This approach adheres closely to the belief that while virtues and morals are not necessarily innate, they are present in an individual’s disposition and can be taught, learned, and mastered with time and experience (Northouse, 2015). The Greek term *aretaic*, means “excellence,” or “virtue” (Webster, 2016). Virtue based ethics emphasizes becoming a good, worthy person suggesting practicing good values over time becomes habitual, and consequently virtues are derived from our actions and our actions manifest our virtues (Frankena, 1973; Pojman, 1995).

Consequentialist framework. The consequentialist framework focuses on the impact of a potential course of action, specifically with regard to the individuals anticipated to be directly or indirectly affected. Principals who use this framework focus on what outcomes are preferred, and the ethical conduct that will likely achieve the best outcomes (Bonde & Firenze, 2013; Howe & Miramontes, 1991; Schumann, 2001). Practical in nature, this approach desires to produce the

most good. Often viewed as helpful in circumstances involving numerous people, certain individuals may benefit from the action, while others may not (Northouse, 2015). However, predicting the consequences of an action is not necessarily easy. As a result, actions initially anticipated to produce positive outcomes might ultimately end up harming people.

Consequentialist considerations may drive many of the legal decisions a principal makes (Frick et al., 2013; Howe & Miramontes, 1991). Justifying such decisions is contingent on showing that the anticipated consequences remain preferable to any alternatives. While the goal is to produce the best result possible, principals are in a particularly difficult position, since such decisions potentially have long-term and unintended consequences (Paul et al., 2002). Moving forward with assurance in such situations may prove extremely difficult. As a result, such decisions prove daunting and principals may express serious doubts regarding carrying out their professional obligations (Dempster & Berry, 2003).

Deontological framework. The deontological framework is primarily relevant in consideration of the duties and rights of principals and the individuals with whom they work (Ciulla, 2014; Northouse, 2015). Often, such considerations are in legislation and interwoven within professional codes of practice. A characteristic of deontological considerations, and one crucial to the decision-making process, is deontological constraints often manage to override other ethical considerations, especially when crystallized in legislation (Dempster & Berry, 2003; Paul et al., 2002). Consequently, understanding the deontological framework and the manner in which principals apply the framework can expand understanding of how principals prioritize competing demands associated with complex ethical situations.

Principals who use this approach consider not only what ethical obligations they have, but also what actions they would never consider. Within this framework, carrying out one's

duties and doing the right thing with particular emphasis on carrying out the right action is key. Of benefit to this approach is the establishment of a system of rules with consistent expectations of all people (Bonde & Firenze, 2013). From this viewpoint, if an action were ethically appropriate or required by duty, it would apply to each individual in a given situation. In turn, this approach encourages treating every person with equal amounts of dignity and respect. Particular emphasis is placed on following one's moral duty irrespective of the outcome, allowing for the possibility one still acted ethically, even if the results were undesirable (Dempster & Berry, 2003). This framework lends itself best in situations where there is a sense of obligation or where duty or obligation dictates or forbids certain actions (Northouse, 2015).

Drawbacks of a deontological approach may include that under certain circumstances, it requires actions producing harm, yet remain within the confines of keeping with a particular moral rule. It offers little direction regarding which duty to follow should the principal find himself or herself presented with a situation where two or more duties clash. Furthermore, it remains rigid in application of the idea of duty to everyone despite personal situation (Ciulla, 2004).

The virtue framework. The ethical complexity of the dilemmas school principals routinely face may not align well with the rigid approaches of consequentialism and deontological theory. Highlighting the character traits and ideals principals bring to decisions, rather than the features and limits of decisions, virtue ethics is faithful to the intuition directing the principal's professional practice or the belief that conscientious principals make good decisions (Howe & Miramontes, 1991). This provides an explicit place to gain familiarity with as well as practice professional virtues and instincts often denied them by less flexible perspectives (Dempster & Berry, 2003).

From a virtue perspective, primary emphasis is identification of positive or negative character traits that motivate the principal in a context or situation (Bonde & Firenze, 2013). Principals who use this perspective consider what type of person they wish to be, as well as how the actions taken will reflect on their personal character (Northouse, 2015). It is useful in situations that ask what sort of person one should be, and is one approach to make sense of the world. The virtue perspective allows for a wide range of behaviors to be called ethical, asserting there are varying types of good character and numerous avenues through which one may develop such character. Thus, it takes into consideration the human experience as a whole suggesting one's experiences, emotions, and thoughts are highly influential on character development (Bonde & Firenze, 2013).

The care framework. A fourth ethical theory and a feminist philosophical perspective often attributed to the mid 1980's works of psychologist Carol Gilligan and education philosopher Nel Noddings, is the ethic of care. Veering from consequentialist and deontological emphasis on a particular line of reasoning and impartiality, the ethics of care places human relationships at the forefront. With the other frameworks imbedded primarily in western, white male perspective and actions, caring advances an alternative to such male dominated worldviews. (Gilligan, 1982; Noddings, 2013). In addition, this contemporary approach supports the notion that leadership and decision-making remains a human, fallible enterprise. Not only does this approach expect values will come into play, but empathy and emotion are valued over rules and rights. Based on a philosophy of nurturance, particular emphasis is on the relationships and the interdependency between human beings. Thus, primary focus remains on consideration of the vulnerability of individuals and the need for additional reflection and consideration of any unintended consequences associated with their level of vulnerability and decision-making (Held,

2006). Thus, individuals seeking to employ this framework fully attend to the contextual details ensuring safeguard and promotion of the individual interests and needs before coming to an ethical decision.

Putting the Frameworks Together

Through analysis of the participants’ responses to interview questions and vignettes, I gained specific insights into participants’ ethical conduct and motivation. The study focused on key areas, including the participants’ deliberative process, focus, definition of ethical conduct, and descriptors of motivation (Bonde & Firenze, 2013; Ciulla, 2004; Northouse, 2015). Such an approach was intended to cull forth a particular perspective or perspectives participants’ favored when faced with making ethical leadership decisions (See Figure 1).

	Consequentialist	Duty	Virtue	Care
Deliberative process	What outcomes should I produce?	What obligations do I have in this situation? What should I never do?	What kind of person should I be? What will my actions reveal about my character?	In what ethically significant ways do we all matter to one another?
Focus	Primary attention is given to the future effects of an action, for all individuals predicted affected by the action.	Primary attention is given to duties that exist prior to the situation and determines obligations.	Seeks to discern character traits that are, or could be, motivating the people involved in the situation.	Primary attention is give to human relationships.
Definition of Ethical Conduct	The action(s) that will achieve the best consequences.	Involves doing the right thing: do one's duty.	Doing what a fully virtuous person would do given the same situation.	Involves valuing empathy and emotion over rules and/or rights.
Motivation	End goal is to produce the most good.	End goal is to carry out the right action.	End goal is to advance one’s character.	End goal is to cultivate and support others through unity.

Figure 1. Chart to highlight the main contrast between the four frameworks. Adapted from “Making Choices: A Framework for Making Educational Decisions” by S. Bonde and P. Firenze, 2013.

Purpose of the Study

This study explored principals' navigation of ethical dilemmas arising from their efforts to comply with laws while keeping the best interest of students in mind. Research has progressively focused on ethical standards, ethical competencies (Jacob, Decker, & Hartshorne, 2010; Paul et al., 2002; Vogel, 2012), and models of ethical decision-making associated with school leadership (Frick et al., 2013; Lashley, 2007; Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2010). Through the in depth study of principals' moral and political stories, the study aimed to gain understanding of the ethical framework(s) principals' employ and principals' perceptions of the complex ethical issues associated with decision-making for special education programming.

Research Questions

This qualitative study explored how principals navigate the ethical dilemmas associated with special education that exist beyond the legal context. The participants were principals in positions regularly requiring them to confront complex legal and ethical special education issues often involving competing interests and pressures.

The following research questions guided the study:

1. How do principals describe their leadership role/responsibility for special education?
2. What ethical dilemmas do principals identify in association with making decisions regarding special education students?
3. How do principals navigate dilemmas associated with making decisions for special education students?

Chapter 2

Literature Review

In this chapter, I address the theory and research associated with principals' navigation of complex ethical issues related to decision-making for special education programming. Included is literature regarding the evolution of the principal's role, ethics and ethical dilemmas, ethical leadership, review of recent empirical research regarding ethical leadership, the legal context of special education, law and ethics, and special education as an ethical imperative.

Evolution of the Role of the Principal

The principal's role first originated in the 1920's, and was an outgrowth of the scientific management movement when scholars and practitioners believed teachers should only focus on teaching. In turn, management positions were created to provide the necessary supervision and relieve the superintendent of select responsibilities (Grogan & Andrews, 2002; Murphy, 1998). Yet, from the role's very inception, the expectation of the school principal was unlike that of other school personnel. Initially, the early 20th century position yielded the expectation of a strong connection to the values and norms of the community. Consequently, there was an expectation the principal's actions would closely mirror such values and norms. While carrying out the primary charge of supervising the curriculum, much like religious leaders, principals were to use this supervisory role to discover "relevant truths" (Murphy, 1998). However, with the onset of the 1930's came increasing numbers of students as more students remained in school. Along with an expanding population, came dramatic focus to the need to increase efficiencies. As a result, the strongest emphasis was primarily on the administrative facets of the job (Beck & Murphy, 1993; Grogan & Andrews, 2002; Hallinger, 1992). During this era, the public viewed the principal's role as passive and reactive (Richardson, Lane, & Flanigan, 1996).

Thus, often principals were typified as technical managers concerned only with efficiencies (Murphy, 1998).

The onset of the 1940's and 1950's brought further demands with prominence on education in a democratic society paired with an increased interest in principals' leadership traits and styles (Murphy, 1998). However, this brief resurgence in interest regarding leadership styles and traits was short lived as the United States sought to gain the competitive edge in the Space Race with the Soviet Union. As a result, during the 1950's and 1960's primary attention surrounded assurances of academic excellence (Hallinger, 1992). In addition, focus on school consolidation, the profession's emulation of corporate management, and the political nature of public educational institutions served to solidify even further the predominant role of the principal from the 1920's to the 1960's as one of administrative manager (Hallinger, 1992; Murphy, 1998).

However, slowly during the 1960's to 1970's, a new role began to emerge. Principals found themselves chiefly responsible for implementing and managing federally sponsored and funded programs designed to support special student populations. In addition, the infusion of federal money into math and science education resulted in two decades full of curricular innovations (Beck & Murphy, 1993; Hallinger, 1992). Newly challenged by federal intervention into local policy, principals were not only charged with being compliance monitors, but with assisting with staff development and providing direct support to classroom teachers. Varying widely in their preparedness and response to such professional demands, disparity in principal practices often created wide variances in the quality and outcomes of schooling (Hallinger, 1992). While the intent of such federal intervention was to improve outcomes, the nature of the policy inadvertently promoted the principal's role as one of manager (Goodwin, Cunningham, &

Eagle, 2005; Hallinger, 1992). Thus, many principals continued to place the heaviest emphasis on compliance criteria rather than on student outcomes.

The publication of the landmark report *A Nation at Risk* (United States National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983) brought about another pivotal point in the role and responsibility of the school principal. Paired with research on effective schools, an upsurge in public scrutiny of student achievement resulted in a standards based reform movement with strong emphasis on a comprehensive set of roles and responsibilities (Peterson & Deal, 1998). In addition, higher expectations regarding student achievement and the supervision of accompanying programs created a considerable expansion of the principal's role. Sharply contrasting the historical managerial role, Lynch (2012) submitted the modern principal should be an instructional leader in relationship to "personnel, students, government, public relations, finance, instruction, academic performance, culture and strategic planning" (p. 40).

Instructional Leadership

While the principal's role was viewed as key in the past, it has proven increasingly so with heightened expectations and mounting pressures associated with school improvement and reform efforts (Leithwood, Seashore Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004). At this critical point, principal and instructional leader became synonymous and student learning began to receive top priority (Jenkins, 2009). Such increased emphasis on student achievement meant the principal was critical to the development, implementation, and ongoing oversight of reform and re-culturing efforts to improve academic performance of all students (Provost, Boscardin, & Wells, 2010). Thus, the principal has experienced a significant increase in charge associated with the demands of instructional leadership. However, with the 1990's came an evolution in thinking accompanied by a general dissatisfaction with instructional leadership's focus on the

principal as the sole expert. In response, researchers such as Bass and Avolio (1994) and Leithwood and his colleagues (1990; 1994) developed the transformational leadership model for education. Out of such work, the terms and qualities now most readily associated with the modern day principalship first began to emerge.

Transformational Leadership

Initially presenting the concept of transformational leadership in the context of his descriptive research on political leaders, Burns (1978) submitted transformational leadership takes place when leaders work alongside followers, fostering creativity and motivation in association with the work of the organization. As a result, transformational leaders are rarely at ease with the status quo. Instead, they act to manage, motivate, and inspire followers to achieve more than intended. Yet, even in its earliest forms, transformational leadership was swift to de-emphasize the historically prominent managerial tasks readily associated with leadership positions (Bass & Avolio, 1994).

Burns (1978) asserted transforming leadership is a process in which leaders and followers work side by side to assist one another with the advancement of morale and motivation. Acknowledging the complexity in distinguishing between management and leadership, Burns (1978) suggested the variances are particular to the leader's characteristics and behaviors. In turn, he established two concepts: "transforming leadership" and "transactional leadership." Burns submits the transforming approach redesigns perceptions and values, and changes expectations and ambitions of employees (Northouse, 2015). Unlike the transactional approach highly dependent on a "give and take" relationship, the transformational approach is highly dependent on the leader's personality, traits, and ability to make a change through example, articulation of an invigorating vision, and establish challenging goals. Serving as a moral model

and working toward the benefit of the community as a whole, transformational leaders often serve as a role model for ethical behavior, instilling pride in others, and their ability to gain trust and respect of others (Marks & Printy, 2003).

Many of the earliest conceptions of leadership focused on the technical aspects of the work. However, within the context of transformational leadership and given the expectations of today's principal, the identity of the principal is not solely that of a person or a position, nor can the role be narrowed to a specific set of managerial tasks (Hallinger, 2003; Marks & Printy, 2003). Rather, such leadership largely involves a complex moral relationship between people. Such leadership calls for a culture of trust, responsibility, commitment, acknowledgment of emotion, and a common vision of good (Northouse, 2015). Ethics assists us in differentiating between right and wrong, good and evil in relation to actions, decisions, and the character of human beings. Ethics lie at the heart of relationships and therefore, remain at the center of the relationship between leaders and followers. Embedded within the definition of transformational leadership as well as the modern day role of the principal is a call for effective leaders to be ethical in their leadership (Ciulla, 2004).

The Principal's Responsibility for Special Education

Under an ever-expanding accountability system, principals regularly find themselves challenged with managing special education under an enormous set of regulations, mandates, and policies all while maintaining a leadership role for general education programming (Darling-Hammond et al., 2007; DiPaola et al., 2004; Frick et al., 2013). While the significant role of the courts in establishing the legal imperatives may lead principals to believe so, educational leadership for special education is not solely a legal enterprise. Rather the protection of educational opportunities and decision-making for students with disabilities remains deeply

rooted in ethical principles, values, beliefs, and moral obligations (Bon, 2012; Cranston, Ehrich, & Kimber, 2006; Paul et al., 2002).

Ethics

Decisions regarding right and wrong present themselves regularly in individuals' personal and professional lives. In turn, ethics concerns all aspects of life: acting appropriately as individuals, producing responsible governments and organizations, and creating a more ethical society (Bonde & Firenze, 2013; Ciulla, 2004). The definition of ethics and the development of ethical theory dates back to Plato (427-347 B.C) and Aristotle (384-322 B.C) (Vogel, 2012). Ethics comes from the Greek word *ethos* meaning "character," "conduct," and/or "customs" (Webster, 2016). Ethics refers to the morals and values deemed appropriate by a society or individuals themselves and the attempt to provide a basic system of principles to assist individuals with what is deemed right and good or wrong and bad in a given situation (Ciulla, 2014; Northouse, 2015). Because ethics are a moral code or a set of principles to guide behavior, they are different from laws. Rather, ethics serve as a framework or a set of guiding principles bringing order and purpose into what would otherwise be a void between laws (Bon, 2012). Such frameworks not only help individuals make choices, but also provide the support behind why they should make these choices (Frick et al., 2013; Howe & Miramontes, 1992; Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2010).

Given such fundamental issues of practical decision-making, the principle concerns of ethics include the value and the standards by which an individual's actions can be identified as either right or wrong (Ciulla, 2014). While the terms ethics and morality remain closely related, it is increasingly common to see reference to ethical judgments or principles where historically reference was likely made to moral judgments or moral principles (Northouse, 2015; Singer,

2011). In earlier usage, the term referenced not only morality itself, but also the field of study, or branch of inquiry, with morality as its subject matter. Consequently, ethics may be viewed as a counterpart to moral philosophy. Viewed as a branch of philosophy, ethics practical nature links it closely to other areas of study such as anthropology, biology, sociology, history, politics, and theology (Singer, 2011). Yet, the study of ethics remains fundamentally distinct from other disciplines since, unlike the other branches of inquiry, it is not a matter of factual knowledge. Rather, as Singer (2011) asserted, ethics has to do with determining the nature of normative theories and applying these sets of principles to practical moral problems.

Thus, given its distinct nature, the study of ethics remains a somewhat controversial terrain (Silverman, 2016). While some approach ethics in negative terms, stressing what it is not, others opt for a more positive spin citing its potential and referencing integrity, honesty, and care (Preston, Sampford, & Connors, 2002). However, one seemingly common theme emerging from the literature is the idea that ethics is about relationships (Ciulla, 2014; Noddings, 2013; Starratt, 2004). It “is about what we ought to do” (Freakley & Burgh, 2000, p. 97) and in turn, requires a judgment regarding a particular circumstance or situation (Duignan, 2007; Northouse, 2015). As Duignan (2007) asserts, when regard to ethics, the primary concern is with the manner in which people ought to act in response to value conflict and dilemmas. Thus, particular emphasis often is often on normative decision-making, and in turn, on what is seemingly the ethically correct thing to do when ethical dilemmas present themselves.

Ethical Dilemmas

Ethical dilemmas emerge when individuals are confronted with choosing among a variety of principles, values, beliefs or ideals. Badaracco (1992) referred to such competing interests as “spheres of responsibility” with the capability to “pull leaders in different directions” resulting in

ethical dilemmas for them (p. 66). From yet another perspective, Kidder (1995) asserted many such dilemmas facing professionals and leaders “don’t center upon right versus wrong, but can involve right versus right” (p. 16). Yet, given complex contexts and circumstances, discerning what is “right” and “wrong” may not necessarily be simple. In fact, Day, Harris, and Hadfield (2000) contended part of being a leader was not only dealing with tensions, but likewise, making tough decisions.

Within the increasingly expanding body of research on ethical decision-making processes, many have placed specific emphasis on the identification of ethical dilemmas and the recognition of the moral issues embedded in them (Jones, 1991). In conjunction, a number of recent empirical studies have endeavored to identify the types of moral dilemmas readily experienced by school administrators as well as principals’ preparedness to manage such dilemmas (Begley & Johansson, 1998; Cranston, Ehrich, & Kimber, 2003; Dempster & Berry, 2003; Kirby, Paradise, & Protti, 1992; Patterson, Marshall, & Bowling, 2000). In general, such studies aimed to describe the ethical dilemmas faced by school administrators and probe into the decision-making processes used in resolving them. In their study of 552 principals, Dempster and Berry (2003) reported 81% of the respondents suggested the frequency of situations which require making complex ethical decisions has significantly increased. Correspondingly, a study involving a small cohort of principals described ethical dilemmas as the bread and butter of their lives, reporting them as something they have come to expect to encounter on a daily basis (Cranston et al., 2006). Further highlighted in the research is the contention that ethical dilemmas are growing in complexity (Norberg & Johansson, 2007). Studying school leader’s ethical dilemmas, Norberg and Johansson (2007) found in the efforts to deal with such increasing demands and complexity, principals focused on the dilemmas reflecting students as their primary

consideration. Participants mentioned care, equity, and providing fair developmental opportunities to all children, along with professional considerations when called upon to reflect upon their deliberations in association with such dilemmas.

Ethical Leadership

As school leaders, principals face moral dilemmas and tough decisions on a daily basis. Often such dilemmas require leaders to make difficult choices between competing ethical demands and values (Bon, 2012). In addition, often such decisions must be made amid pressure to offer solutions tailored to each individual student and community, all while simultaneously embracing government regulations and adhering to uniform standards (Frick et al., 2013; Watson & Supovitz, 2001). Forced to respond to conflicting demands of numerous stakeholders, yet maintain professional integrity, the principal may find many of the demands adding to the complexity of the work are a result of societal or interpersonal interests. Yet, other dilemmas may take on political or professional undertones; mirroring conflicts present in the organization or between the school and the bureaucracy of the educational system (Cranston et al., 2006). Achieving consensus regarding the most appropriate solutions may prove difficult. In such instances, the principal's values readily influence the decision-making process and its consequences by filtering information and identifying possible alternatives for resolving the dilemmas (Begley, 1999). Such value-based decisions are not purely rational but remain based upon an ethical component (Ciulla, 2004).

Along with strong emphasis on leaders' character, action, and behavior, ethics in the context of leadership is about human relationships. Not only is it about how one should act and the characteristics one should possess as individuals, members of a group or society, but also about the different roles individuals play (Johannesen, Valde, & Whedbee, 2008). Leadership

constitutes one type of human relationship. Characteristics of this relationship include power, influence, vision, obligation, and responsibility (Ciulla, 2004). Understanding the ethics of this relationship can assist principals in gaining a better understanding of leadership, since many of the issues central to ethics are also primary to issues of leadership (Ciulla, 2004).

As a direct result of the relationship between the principal and his/her followers, ethics remains inherently linked to leadership. Yet, leadership is far from a solitary activity as one cannot lead without followers (Northouse, 2015). The ethical framework guiding a principal's decisions and actions readily influence and affect followers either negatively or positively (Yukl, 2006). It was further suggested by Foster (1986), "Each administrative decision carries with it a restructuring of human life: that is why administration at its heart is a resolution of moral dilemmas" (p.33). Therefore, leaders have more power, both interpersonal and/or formal hierarchical power. Along with such power comes greater responsibility with respect to their impact on their followers and the students within their charge. Given the potential for the long-term impact of their decision-making on others, principals' decisions for special education students hold great consequence.

Empirical Study of Ethical Leadership

While much of the literature reveals a long history of philosophers and theologians delving into the topic of ethics, only within the last few decades have social scientists begun to empirically examine the ethical facets of leadership (Mayer, Kuenzi, Greenbaum, Bardes, & Salvador, 2009). Research regarding principals and ethical leadership suggests much of the pre-service training as well as many contemporary leadership models may understate the importance of social justice and ethics in decision-making (Bon & Bigbee, 2011; Ciulla, Price, & Murphy, 2005; Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2010). Studying the impact of value and ethics on principals' daily

activities, Moorhead and Nediger (1991) examined the influence of values on the behaviors and decisions of secondary school principals. The study suggested principals' values, principles, and traits were "major personal motivating influences which indicated what activities and initiatives would be undertaken and with what degree of enthusiasm" (p.14). While the emphasis for each principal was frequently different, each leader's focus clearly aligned with and remained dependent upon the individual's value system.

Yet another study conducted by Cranston et al. (2003) found an understanding of ethics and ethical dilemmas remains critical for principals as a result of the value laden nature of their work. Interviewing principals concerning the ethical dilemmas they face as school leaders, their research suggested dealing with ethical dilemmas constituted a major portion of their jobs. In addition, the significance the principal's and other school personnel's values and beliefs played in decision-making reflected another important finding. Furthermore, Cranston et al. (2003) went on to assert the principal's professional ethics, established by the strong sense of duty of care of students, was a particularly key contributor in the decision-making process. The study by Cranston et al. (2003) stated, "ultimately it is the school leaders, and them alone 'guided' by their own values, their professional ethics, and their institution's values, who must resolve such dilemmas" (p.14) and in turn, emphasized the key role ethical considerations play in principals' daily decision-making.

In a more recent study, Gardiner and Tenuto (2015) sought to gain additional insight into principals' practices and understandings of leadership dilemmas, professional ethics, and decision-making. This study too evoked a strong narrative from principals, suggesting the ethical dimensions of leadership were more crucial than ever. Principals underscored a general sense of bombardment. Specifically they referenced complex ethical situations associated with

cultural and linguistic differences, discrimination, bias, communication challenges, diverse perspectives, legal, and accountability pressures. Examples principals cited as particularly challenging issues included unsupervised special needs students and the equity and adequacy of equal protection for students' rights to a quality education (Gardiner & Tenuto, 2015).

Affirming prior research, the study affirmed to administrators (a) the importance of ethical relationship, including trust and integrity, (b) that emotion in leadership is often underutilized one's own perspective and that of others (Culham, 2013; Yamamoto, Gardiner, & Tenuto, 2014), and (c) that reflection and contemplative learning is essential for growth as a leader (Burnell & Schnackenberg, 2015). In addition, while historically a somewhat taboo topic in the leadership arena (Ginsberg & Davies, 2007), the study specifically highlighted the importance of the acknowledgment and acceptance of the role of emotion in leadership. Yamamoto et al. (2014) attested it is only through such knowledge and acceptance, can administrators thoroughly be prepared to engage in reflection and fully prepared to seek justice through understanding the conflict in values proposed by competing arguments.

Legal Context of Special Education

The current approach to educating students with disabilities is the result of dramatic shift in policy and law over four decades. Prior to the 1970's there was no federal law in place to protect the rights of students with disabilities (Martin et al., 1996). However, with the civil rights movement came a shift and focus on the rights of all people, including those with disabilities (Longmore & Umansky, 2001). *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) determined segregation based upon race violated the 14th Amendment (Aron & Loprest, 2012). While the first case of significance to address the inequity of segregating individuals, this case ultimately offered protection based upon race, not disability. While prompting some increases in training

and funding for special education programs, throughout the mid 1960's, much of the public education system persisted with the legal exclusion of children with disabilities (Smith, 2004). The result was nominal services to children with disabilities, as only one in five children with disabilities attended school, while 1 million children were excluded entirely from public school. Another 3.5 million were afforded little or no effective instruction while housed in separate facilities (Aron & Loprest, 2012).

However, inclusion of the statement, "Separate educational facilities are inherently unequal" in the *Brown* ("Brown v. Board of Education," 1954) opinion laid a firm foundation of influence and quickly became the impetus for further civil rights action seeking to afford people with disabilities access to a free and appropriate public education. As noted by Martin et al. (1996) for first time in history, with the passage of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (ESEA) (P.L. 89-10), schools received federal funding and less than a year later, an amendment to the act earmarked a specific portion of funding for students with disabilities . Less than 10 years later, the passage of Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act in 1973 prohibited the exclusion of people with disabilities from public or private federally funded programs (Aron & Loprest, 2012). Thus, the passage of *Brown* (1954) and the subsequent federal policy slowly eased the door open for students with disabilities.

With the climate ripe for litigation, parents of children with disabilities turned to the courts to seek reparation. Two U.S. District Court cases established the underpinnings for the state and local obligation to educate children with disabilities. *Pennsylvania Association for Retarded Children (PARC) v. Commonwealth of Pennsylvania* (1971) and *Mills v. Board of Education* (1972) each proved pivotal in ensuring students with disabilities have a right to a Free and Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) as well as the right to due process (Martin et al.,

1996). Amidst a flood of litigation following the *PARC and Mills* cases, passage of PL 94-142, The Education for All Handicapped Children Act in 1975 formally required schools to ensure students with disabilities receive a FAPE, and formally threw open the doors of education to children with disabilities (Aron & Loprest, 2012).

While PL 94-142 afforded access to students with disabilities, it failed to account for the degree of educational opportunity afforded to students with disabilities. Thus, the courts found themselves in the position to define what constituted an appropriate public education in the least restrictive environment (Martin et al., 1996). Altered with amendments in 1983 and in 1990, PL 94-142 became the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA). Heavily focused on access and compliance, the initial amendments in 1990 failed to address low expectations for students with disabilities. However, the 1997 amendment to the IDEA aimed to make a fundamental shift from access and compliance to ensuring special education programs served to confer benefit (Rotatori et al., 2011). These changes, aimed directly at ensuring meaningful and measurable outcomes for students with disabilities included the development of measurable annual goals, the assessment and measure of progress, increased parent involvement in developing the Individualized Education Plan (IEP) and the reporting of progress to parents and the requirement to revise plans for those failing to make progress (Hardman & Nagle, 2004). Additionally, an emphasis on inclusion further influenced teams of professionals, requiring them to justify reason for removal of students from the general education setting.

Heavily influenced by the standards-based reform movement, the subsequent passage of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) in 2001 and the 2004 reauthorization of IDEA as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA) further solidified the federal government's role in education (Rotatori et al., 2011). Each reform effort distinctly held schools

increasingly accountable for the progress of students with disabilities and implemented specific policy regarding accountability for all students (Allbritten, Mainzer, & Ziegler, 2004). In turn, such regulation wielded tremendous influence on state and local and school districts' decision-making regarding the delivery of services for students with disabilities (Bon & Bigbee, 2011).

Law and Ethics

As previously described, the federal and state courts have had significant influence on the reform of the public education system and students' educational rights. Therefore, preparing principals to examine and address legal issues associated with educating students with disabilities often takes a place of prominence in the pre-service preparation programs and professional development for principals (Bon, 2012). Yet, ethical dilemmas associated with decision-making for special education are well documented (Fiedler & Van Haren, 2009). Given such prominence in preparatory programs combined with the knowledge that Congress, the courts, and State Education Agencies (SEA) regularly insert themselves into special education, comes an inherent danger that ethical considerations may be overshadowed in favor of an overemphasis on the technical and legal aspects. As the population of special education students continues to grow (United States Department of Education, 2013), principals' find their decision-making best informed mutually by legal and ethical principles (Bon, 2012; Frick et al., 2013).

While ethical questions often relate to legal questions, law and ethics do not necessarily perfectly coincide. The laws associated with special education serve primarily to delineate the rights and responsibilities of key individuals as well as establish obligations for funding, monitoring, and compliance (Bon & Bigbee, 2011). However, the law is unable to account for the same complexities and context that characterize the ethical judgment necessary to fully inform decision-making for special education. While most of the time the legal thing to do

would also be ethical, from an ethical point of view, some regulations may have shortcomings (Bon, 2012; Paul et al., 2002). Since laws are often broad and general in nature and focus primarily on concrete actions, certain situations require ethical deliberation to fully inform decision-making (Howe & Miramontes, 1991). In turn, principals are charged not only with possessing a preparedness for navigating legislated policies and regulations, but to navigate the ethical (extra-legal) dimension of leadership that acts to influence the school culture and the provision of services for students with disabilities (Frick et al., 2013).

Special Education as an Ethical Imperative

The ethical imperative to ensure students receive an education is perhaps one of the greatest responsibilities of US society. This is especially so given Dewey's (1909, 1975) contention the opportunity to learn is synonymous with the ability to benefit from and enjoy a democratic society. In turn, principals' ability to carry out their professional practice in a manner honoring such ideals remains central to ensuring students with disabilities are afforded the opportunity to derive educational benefit from the general education system (Bon, 2012). This additional layer of accountability implores the principal to call upon a primary set of ethical principles to guide and inform decision-making. Such action remains of particular importance when considering complex decisions involving choices among competing goods or the pitting of values (Fullan, 2001). By attending to both the legal and ethical dimensions of leadership when faced with such dilemmas, principals are more likely to fulfill the critical role of providing educational opportunities for students with disabilities (Bon, 2012). Absent such guiding principles, Furman (2004) suggests principals may lack sufficient guidance to make sound decisions in an increasingly complex educational environment.

While many professionals encounter ethical dilemmas and face the inherent complexities

associated with balancing competing interests or conflicting values in the workplace, ethical problems tend to be of particular prevalence in the field of education. Often, special education further magnifies such dilemmas (Fiedler & Van Haren, 2009). One reason for this is special education's direct link to the ethical requirement to afford all individuals the opportunity for an appropriate education regardless of the significance of disability. A second reason is because special education is indeed "special," and thus, readily challenges the traditional organization, structure, and resources of schools as well as the knowledge and skills of principals and teachers (Howe & Miramontes, 1991, 1992).

In addition, the principal's oversight of services, instructional practices, and the implementation of the policy and regulations all influence the opportunities students with disabilities have to access meaningful educational opportunities (Bon & Bigbee, 2011). Given the competing demands principals face, Kouzes and Posner (2007) support the contention it is imperative principals have a sense of their own voice or a personal set of guiding values. Only in the presence of such voice and values can they be expected to successfully manage the demands, navigate complex dilemmas, and provide the leadership necessary to ensure a quality education for all children. Given the vulnerability and minority status of this population, paired with the moral and political complexity of decision-making for special education, the literature suggests principals must remain purposeful in attendance to the navigation of such ethical dilemmas (Berkeley & Ludlow, 2007). Overseeing the provision of special education programs and services may appear to depend almost exclusively on the legal mandates established by state and federal disability rights laws. Yet, the decisions made by educational leaders about special education eligibility, programming, and student services significantly impact students'

educational and life opportunities. Consequently, such decisions are characteristically saturated with values and meaning (Paul et al., 2002).

The overemphasis and administrative concerns surrounding legal compliance and threats of lawsuits continually threaten to obscure the principal's view of special education as an ethical enterprise and the spirit of the law's intent on the interests of the child (Howe & Miramontes, 1992). Strict adherence to the legal mandates without an ethical foundation or understanding of the moral agency necessary to serve student with disabilities places students with disabilities at continued risk for disadvantage in the school setting. In turn, as some of the most vulnerable members of the school community, students with disabilities remain highly reliant on the principal to remain vigilant in their deliberations. This calls upon the principal to be judicious in approach, attending not only to the legal context, but also the ethical imperative of education to ensure the safeguard of the educational interests of all students (Bon & Bigbee, 2011; Frick et al., 2013; Paul et al., 2002).

Chapter 3

Research Design

For the purposes of this study, qualitative methods of inquiry were used to capture principals' perspectives involving moral practice and ethical decision-making as it relates to students with disabilities (Creswell, 2015). The focus was not to examine a specific outcome or result in quantifiable terms, rather sought to document and describe participants' deliberative process, focus, and motivation when faced with complex ethical dilemmas. According to Merriam (2009), qualitative study allows for such in depth investigation of complex social units consisting of multiple variables of potential importance in understanding a particular phenomenon. Directly tied to real-life situations, qualitative studies yield a rich, holistic account of the phenomenon (Lapan et al., 2011). Thus, the study's focus paired with the literature review supported the use of a basic qualitative study. Such approach offered opportunity to reflect upon the unique perspectives of participants within naturally occurring contexts, and provided descriptive information regarding the phenomenon under study (Brantlinger, Jimenez, Klingner, Pugach, & Richardson, 2005). Additionally, qualitative design was particularly appealing for a study in education since examination of the processes, problems, and programs may bring about further understanding and as a result, offer opportunity to improve practice and inform policy (Merriam, 2009).

Research Context

Several school districts across the state of Kansas opt for membership in a special education Interlocal or a cooperative to fulfill the federally and state mandated provision of specially designed instruction to those students deemed eligible for special education. According to Kansas State Statute 72-8230 (1972),

Any two or more school districts may enter into a school district interlocal cooperation agreement for the purpose of jointly and cooperatively performing any of the services, duties, functions, activities, obligations, or responsibilities which are authorized or required by law to be performed by school district of this state. (Para.1)

Kansas State Department of Education (KSDE) records reflected 18 such collaborative partnerships associated with the provision of special education existed in the state of Kansas during the 2016-2017 school year (Kansas State Department of Education, 2016). Some were comprised of as few as two member districts, while others were comprised of as many as seventeen member school districts. One of those eighteen entities was located in South Central Kansas, and was comprised of nine member districts, ranging from small rural districts to larger suburban districts. The Interlocal's website indicated with an annual budget comprised of district, state, and federal funds, the member districts came together as one and provided special education services for over 2,400 disabled and/or gifted students out of a combined student population exceeding 15,000 across the member districts spanning a total geographical area of approximately 1,600 miles. Governed by a Board of Directors comprised of one school board member from each member district, the Interlocal fulfilled the duties of its member school district with regard to ensuring the provision of special education services. The statistics offered in the descriptions below represent averages calculated based upon the 2015-2016 data provided to the Kansas State Department of Education for the one large district, four mid-size districts, and the four small districts comprising the Interlocal.

Large District

Situated approximately 15 miles from a major, urban city center, the largest member district within the Interlocal covered 45 miles of suburban and rural areas. Spread across two

Kansas counties, the district had an average enrollment of 5,800 students K-12 with approximately 11% of the student population eligible for free/reduce lunch services. Represented through district and state publications as focused on helping students succeed and holding high expectations for students and staff, the student population was served through a total of 10 attendance centers across the elementary, middle, and high school levels and a virtual school program. The district maintains a closed enrollment policy, therefore students must reside within an established set of boundaries in order to enroll and attend.

However, due to the district's membership in an Interlocal, for students with disabilities, there is an exception to the district's attendance policy. For a small percentage of student population, the specially designed instruction, services, and resources found within a neighborhood school may not suffice to meet their individual needs. Instead, this district along with the other member districts work collectively to support the development, use, and location of a few highly specialized programs within particular member districts and buildings to ensure the continuum of services and supports necessary to meet diverse student need. One such program, the Functional Applied Academics Program was located in the largest member district. This program offers a specialized classroom setting designed for students whom require instruction focused on authentic tasks in a real-world setting, and thus, require significant modifications to extract meaning from the general curriculum. The size of the largest district, its multiple attendance centers, and its close proximity to other member districts combined made this district a particularly convenient location to host this specialized program at both the elementary and secondary levels. Accordingly, along with those residing in the largest district, some non-resident students recommended initially by the IEP team and subsequently approved administratively by the Interlocal were assigned to attend a Functional Applied Academics

Program housed within the district to receive their special education services. Hosting such specialized programs not only supported resident student needs, but the member districts' collective efforts to meet the diverse educational needs of all students residing within the Interlocal.

Mid-Size Districts

The four mid-size districts in the Interlocal had an average student enrollment that ranged from approximately 1700 to 2,100 students, and on average, 40% of the population was eligible for free/reduced lunch. Each district had attendance sites comprised of one middle school and one high school, while at the elementary level, the number of attendance centers ranged from two to four. The geographical area the mid-size districts' boundaries encompassed ranged from roughly 55 to 175 square miles. With the majority of the districts located less than 30 minutes from a nearby urban city, most were geographically comprised of a combination of suburban and rural areas. Review of the district websites supported several of the mid-size districts' board policies allowed nonresident students to apply to enroll and attend in the district subsequent to administrative approval.

In addition to open enrollment policies allowing for the attendance of non-resident students, many of the mid-size districts held a partial suburban status. This resulted in convenient, centralized locations for other member districts to transport and support students with highly specialized service needs. Thus, like the largest district, some of the mid-size districts too acted as host locations for the specialized programs not available in every neighborhood school and/or district. One such program, with the elementary and secondary programs split between two of the mid-size districts, was a Severe Multiple Disabilities program. This program's primary aim was focus on extensive communication and/or physical and mobility

supports in order for students to meaningfully participate in the academic setting. In addition, with only an elementary level program housed in one mid-size district, was a Structured Learning program. This program served those students requiring intensive supports as well as predictable, consistent routines and structure in order to engage in learning and acquire skills affiliated with communication, social interactions, academic tasks, and/or behavior management. Finally, located just on the outskirts of one mid-size district were a Special Education Day School and an Academy program, which housed only special education populations. Each of these highly specialized programs served to support students' social emotional needs with the goal of reinforcing students' engagement in academic tasks and increased compliance with conduct requirements in an educational setting.

Small Districts

The four smallest member districts' student enrollment counts ranged from 500 to 700 students, and on average, 43% of the population was eligible for free/reduced lunch. Each district had one elementary school, one middle school, and one high school attendance center. The geographical boundaries of the small districts ranged from 125 to 340 square miles, resulting in a primarily rural status. While all member districts housed programs designed to meet the needs of students with mild to moderate disabilities, programs in attendance centers within smaller districts remained for the most part singular in nature. Unlike the largest and some mid-size districts, those programs specially designed to meet the needs of students with the most significant needs, were not typical to these smaller, often rural attendance centers. The only exception was one district hosting a secondary Structured Learning program. Thus, the majority of those students residing in these districts, yet requiring services and support beyond those

offered locally, were assigned to and transported to the mid-size or largest district where their educational needs could be properly met.

The largest district and one mid size district were selected for participation in the study for several reasons. First, the largest district and the medium size district selected both were locations that house the majority of programs used in the collective effort to meet the needs of a widely diverse student population. Furthermore, I anticipated principals providing oversight of programs in these districts would likely have a wider array and frequency of experience to draw from. In addition, each district remained within a reasonable driving distance from my work and home. Such reasonable proximity ensured I placed emphasis on collecting the rich, thick data necessary to fully inform the study, rather than committing valuable time to traveling long distances. Finally, while the districts shared characteristics similar to other Kansas school districts, they were set apart from many based upon the manner they elected to ensure students are afforded the special education provisions required under federal and state law. As member districts of an Interlocal, the two districts were representative of one of only 18 Special Education Interlocals spread across the state of Kansas. Affiliation with an Interlocal benefited participating districts in several ways. Most notably with managing special education material and fiscal demands, and ensuring those duties required by law were properly fulfilled by each member district.

However, along with the benefits associated with membership in an Interlocal, participants described an inherent set of complexities associated with collaborating with another agency to ensure the provision of special education services. Thus, of interest was the framework(s) principals drew upon not only when faced with dilemmas arising from ongoing efforts to comply with federal, state and local demands, but any layers of political and moral

complexities principals experienced as members in an Interlocal. Empirical research associated with principals and ethical decision-making is plentiful. However, a review of the literature suggested research conducted within the context of districts participating in an Interlocal service model to ensure the provision of special education services remains scarce.

Participant Selection

In qualitative research, purposeful sampling allows selection of participants who meet a defined criteria allowing for rich insight regarding the issue under investigation (Creswell, 2015; Patton, 2002). For this study, I invited the principal at the elementary, middle school, and high school level the Superintendent identified as the primary administrator assigned to the supervision of special education programming to participate. It was anticipated those assigned this role would be in a unique position not only to share how they ensure legal compliance with special education laws and regulation, but could offer description of conflicting role expectations and competing interests leading to ethical dilemmas when providing oversight of programs and services for students with disabilities.

Given the relative size of the participating districts, it was reasonable to interview participants from both the elementary and secondary levels. I interviewed a total of 7 principals, 4 at the elementary level, and 3 at the secondary level. However, I remained open to the idea of adding other participants should the data warrant doing so (Marshall & Rossman, 2011). Qualitative research typically involves a relatively small number of participants. Seeking out only principals charged with the primary oversight for special education, naturally limited the number of individuals closest to the phenomenon under study. Such an approach further supported an in depth of analysis of commonalities among participants and in turn, resulted in a

thick, rich description of the phenomenon associated with the purpose of the study (Merriam, 2009; Patton, 2002).

Data Collection

Qualitative data collection methods for this study consisted of the use of individual interviews and vignettes (Barter & Renold, 1999; Finch, 1987; Marshall & Rossman, 2011). Such data collection methods explored principals' experiences, perceptions, beliefs, and meanings associated with navigating complex ethical issues associated with decision-making for special education programming. After I contacted the Superintendent and confirmed those assigned the primary responsibility for supervision of special education for each building, I emailed potential participants and solicited their participation in the study. After confirmation of their willingness to participate, I contacted and arranged for initial sessions to conduct an individual interview. Shortly after each initial interview, I scheduled a subsequent session and gathered participants' responses to a series of vignettes. Each session was scheduled at a mutually agreeable location and time.

Interviews. Participants were asked to participate in a face-to-face, in-depth interview to gain insight regarding their navigation of the complex ethical issues associated with decision-making for special education programming. With an interview structure semi-structured in nature, sessions allowed for a mix of varying degree of structured questions, yet remained well developed and grounded in previous research (Merriam, 2009). The use of questions linked directly to the core literature yielded meaningful data. Furthermore, making use of an interview guide containing probing, open-ended questions served to facilitate a similar line of questioning across participants as well as served as a tool to aid in the effective and efficient use of time (Patton, 2002). The protocol and questions are included in Appendix A.

Vignettes. During a the subsequent session following the initial interview, participants were asked to respond to a particular situation by stating what they would do, or how they would respond to certain situations or occurrences, entailing some form of moral dilemma associated with decision-making for special education (Barter & Renold, 1999; Finch, 1987; Marshall & Rossman, 2011). Specifically, the use of vignettes was employed in an effort to facilitate recall and encouraged participants' discussion of experiences regarding the political and moral stories associated with their leadership experiences with special education. Along with developing rapport and ensuring participants felt somewhat at ease, the use of vignettes seemed to aid in the discussion of topics participants might otherwise have found difficult to discuss. Offering their perspective on how they might respond to a hypothetical situation was intended to be less personal and threatening than being asked to speak regarding direct experience (Barter & Renold, 1999). Such an approach offered participants a sense of control over the interaction. Furthermore, it allowed them to determine at what stage they wished to introduce their own experiences to further illuminate their perspectives. The use of vignettes acted as a complementary technique alongside the individual interviews and served to further enhance the data collected through individual interview or in some instances, generated data not necessarily detailed through individual interviews (Finch, 1987; Marshall & Rossman, 2011; Wilks, 2004). Vignettes can be found in Appendix B.

The time necessary to complete the individual interviews and response to vignettes was on average two hours. While the interview guide structure played an important part of subsequent data analysis and identification of themes, the use of digitally recorded interviews ensured the ability to maintain eye contact and fully attend to the conversation and preserved the interviews in entirety for verbatim transcription and analysis (Turner III, 2010). Remaining

purposeful in attending to both verbal and non-verbal interactions, immediately following each interview, handwritten observation notes were made regarding any specifics regarding any non-verbals, surprises, or particular highlights noted for further reflection and subsequent data analysis.

Data Analysis

According to Suter (2011), the biggest hurdle in a qualitative study is to manage the data, identify categories, make connections, identify themes, and in turn, use the information to offer well-supported, reflective conclusions. With hundreds of pages of transcripts for analysis, the analysis of the data concurrently with the data collection remained essential. Absent ongoing analysis, the data would have been unfocused, repetitious, and overwhelming in the sheer volume of material that needed to be processed (Merriam, 2009). Thus, I utilized a constant comparative, emergent method of data analysis and note taking and coding to discover emergent themes and categories.

The first step in data analysis was coding the transcribed interviews in an attempt to condense the information into manageable but meaningful chunks to search for initial relationships among the data (Creswell, 2015). Initially hundreds of codes and patterns of similarity emerged. Thus, initial coding remained focused on identifying, labeling, and classifying, and in turn, resulted in the identification of initial concepts. As a secondary step, I grouped the codes so categories and properties related to each other in some analytical way, in turn, created a network of themes. During this secondary step, Corbin and Strauss (2014) place particular emphasis on the importance of asking guiding questions. Questions asked included: What, words, phases, and concepts are seemingly related? In what manner are they interrelated? Do they in some manner illustrate or suggest a broader context? Such questioning during

analysis of the data further assisted in the identification of categories and themes, as well as allowed for an emergence of interdependence, potentially yielding tentative answers to the posed research questions. During the third and final step, the emergence of themes, categories and classifications and their relationship to one another emerged, and in turn, developed a central category. As the analysis of the data began to yield the same reoccurring codes and category, this served as an indication of saturation (Merriam, 2009). Finally, by clearly mapping the relationship among the constructs, such central category resulted as the emerging theory (Creswell, 2015).

Research Quality

Unlike the more definitive quantitative research, quality in qualitative research is defined by if the data are plausible, credible, and reliable and in turn, can be readily defended (Lapan et al., 2011). Certain caution was necessary in order to ensure the quality of the data. According to Merriam (2009) concerns associated with research quality are best approached with careful attention to the study's conceptualization and the manner in which the data are collected, analyzed, interpreted, and presented. Furthermore, Lincoln and Guba (1985) asserted quality research must have trustworthiness, which includes credibility, dependability, transferability, and confirmability.

Credibility

Credibility involves ensuring "the data speak to the findings" and are believable from the participants perspective (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In turn, the credibility of a study is not necessarily based upon the amount of data gathered, rather the richness of the data gathered. For the purposes of this study, I employed triangulation, member checking, and peer review to achieve and sustain research quality.

Since a single method was likely insufficient to shed light on the phenomenon under study, I used triangulation to produce understanding and assurances the account of the phenomenon under study is rich, thorough and well developed. Specifically, I relied on methodology triangulation (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994; Patton, 2002). By combining two types of interviews, vignette based inquiry as well as semi-structured interviews to collect my data, the complementary data sets supported my tentative findings and in turn, served to further validate the data. Any inconsistencies presented between the two methods employed, simply offered additional opportunity to uncover deeper meaning within the data sets (Patton, 2002).

The second strategy to ensure credibility was the use of member checks. By taking the data initial interpretations back to the original sources, it further substantiated the plausibility of the results (Creswell, 2015). Checks for accuracy of the data occurred during the course of interviews, as well as at the end of dialogues with participants. Likewise, this further verified any emerging theories and inferences formed with participants, as well as allowed me to inquire with participants regarding particular patterns identified (Brewer & Hunter, 1989). Furthermore, member checking allowed for the collection of additional data and supported or refuted the findings well in advance of a formal summary and publication of the findings.

The third and final strategy to address credibility was the use of peer review. Much like member checking, sharing the progress of the study with others, specifically emerging findings and interpretations provided an additional level of assurances of the credibility and dependability with the emerging themes in the data, as well as the subsequent interpretation of those themes (Creswell, 2015).

Dependability

Dependability is an evaluation of the quality of the integrated processes of data collection, data analysis, and theory generation (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In order to address dependability, the report offered is abundant in detail. This ensured not only the methods used remain transparent, but also offers insight into the research conducted, and why the approach was selected. Such in depth coverage allows the reader to evaluate the extent of adherence to proper research practices. To provide assurance readers can easily develop a thorough understanding of the methods and their effectiveness, included is a description of the research design and its implementation, details regarding data gathering, and an evaluation of the process of inquiry utilized for the study (Shenton, 2004).

Transferability

Transferability is how applicable the study may be in other contexts or situations (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Adequate time was set aside to gather and analyze the data and ensured saturation, and thus, an accurate picture of the phenomenon. This thick, rich description paired with information regarding the context of the study, the participants, data collection methods, and details regarding the number and length of the data collection sessions intended to assist others in assessing if the phenomenon described in compares with those that have emerged in their own situations.

Confirmability

With regard to confirmability, steps were taken to help ensure the study's findings represented the experiences and ideas of the participants, rather than the characteristics or preferences of the researcher (Shenton, 2004). It is the researcher's creativity, sensitivity, flexibility, and skills in using verification strategies that determines quality of a study (Morse,

Barret, Mayan, Olson, & Spiers, 2002, p. 10). Thus, any lack of responsiveness posed the greatest hidden threat to trustworthiness of the study. In turn, I placed strong emphasis on verification strategies in efforts to provide assurances of reduced personal bias. Furthermore, special attention was given to methodological coherence (Morse et al., 2002). Any incoherence between the aims of the study, the philosophical perspective, my role in the study, as well as the methods employed potentially result in reduced rigor and credibility of the study. Accordingly, great caution was exercised and as necessary, based upon what the data dictated, amendments to the process or methods were made.

Ethical Practice

Before commencing with the study, submission to the Wichita State University Institutional Review Board (IRB) for review and approval occurred. As outlined in the Belmont Report (1978), the requirement to acknowledge the right to autonomy and protect those with diminished autonomy was adhered to. For the protection of respondents, I substituted pseudonyms for personal identifiers (participant names, school district names, buildings). Furthermore, I maintained the confidentiality identifiable data on secure, data password protected storage, and per guidelines, the data will be stored for 5 years. Following the final analysis of data, to further safeguard the anonymity of participants, I destroyed all identifiable information. Participation in the study remained strictly voluntary and I maintained strict adherence to proper measures to ensure the confidentiality of participants. All potential participants were provided with a clear description of the purpose of the study and maintained the right to withdraw from the study at any time. Additionally, details submitted to the IRB as well as protections employed for the course the study were available for potential participants review and consideration. The related consent is detailed in Appendix C.

Positionality

Research embodies a shared space, shaped by both researcher and participants (England, 1994). The research I engaged in was shaped not only by who I am, but also with those whom I interacted. While “identity” may be viewed as a socially and historically constructed concept, our lived experience highly influences our beliefs, understanding, morals, and values. In essence, what is commonly referred to as our worldview (Merriam, 2009). Thus, as I conducted my research, I remained mindful my worldview is highly influenced by my family, peers, and my workplace. Such influences play a role in shaping my understanding of not only who I am, but in particular, my understanding of people, and their practices.

Born and raised in Kansas, I spent all of my K-12 years in a small town in Central Kansas. There was little racial diversity in the community or the schools. The majority of the town’s youth and adult population were lifelong residents. Work, school, or church related activities seemingly connected most of the population in one way or another. While I now live in the suburbs of a much larger city, the geographical location of where I live and work continues to isolate me from a certain experiences. Thus, I exercised caution and did not presume my experiences were necessarily reflective of the reality of the school districts and communities included in the study.

In addition to being born and raised in Kansas, I am presently an Assistant Director of Special Education for a Special Education Interlocal in South Central Kansas. As a career educator of 22 years, the personal knowledge and experience I have gained as a general educator, a special educator, and now as an Assistant Director of Special Education strongly influence my thinking. My commitments to this work, along with my personal beliefs remain closely tied to the ideals of social justice. While perhaps only ideals to some, I firmly believe all students can

learn, all students should have access to quality education, and all children should be include in the education system to the fullest extent possible.

While I remain highly interested in furthering my own understanding regarding improving the lives of children with disabilities, I have found the professional development programs offered to area administrators remain primarily focused on empirically validated practices. Such focus leaves little opportunity for participants' philosophical deliberations or in depth reflection on the moral justification for administrative practice. Furthermore, my own work remains highly focused on problem solving and the laws and regulations designed to safeguard students readily influence such work. However, the inherent focus of the law on legal compliance and what is in the best interest of a child are not always compatible and reconcilable. As a result, at times, I experience a fair amount of turmoil when contemplating such professional decisions. Thus, I found myself increasingly interested in reflecting on not only my own moral justification for practice, but also the role principals' values and ethics play in decision-making for special education.

Experience with such internal conflict paired with my knowledge, beliefs, and ideals readily influences my work with the principals and teachers in our collaborative efforts to ensure the provision of a Free and Appropriate Public Education (FAPE). Likewise, the methodologies I chose, and the questions I asked for the purposes this study were built on my prior knowledge, experience, and environment. Given such influences, I continually asked where self and the phenomenon under study were intertwined. Failure to continuously examine this question would have likely resulted in untamed subjectivity, and in turn, muted the emic voice (Peshkin, 2001). Unlike in my professional role where I regularly consultant with building and district administrators regarding the oversight of special education services, my role in this study was

not to judge if participants provide strong or poor oversight for special education services. While it would have been easy to judge or become involved in perceived supervision wrongs, I remained mindful to maintain my role of researcher. Thus, my purpose was not to make the school leaders under study better than they are; rather my role was to respect and remain open to the ideas of others. To do otherwise, risked undermining the nonjudgmental persona and would have been in direct conflict with the aims of qualitative research, specifically the “strength of the researchers in their capacity to take the role of others” (Peshkin, p.245). Furthermore, Peshkin (2001) cautioned the failure to openly acknowledge and keep such personal bias in check may impede a deep understanding of the phenomenon. This would have increased the risk of writing a study autobiographical in nature rather than one truly reflective of the participants’ perceptions.

Given the qualitative approach of the study, I acted as the data collection instrument (Merriam, 2009). This approach paired with my inherent closeness to the topic under study means I was intentional in separating my personal beliefs from the collection and analysis of the data (Marshall & Rossman, 2010). Known as reflexivity (Creswell, 2015), I remained mindful to set time aside to actively reflect upon and locate in what ways I too was a part of the study and in turn, the self-influences I brought to the study. By intentionally addressing self, I was able to separate personal and theoretical commitments and closely scrutinize ethics and epistemology. Such close connection between researcher reflexivity and writing not only ensured good data, but communicates to the reader a researcher committed to writing not only to learn, but perhaps more importantly, my commitment to unlearn (Kleinsasser, 2000). Furthermore, the use of peer review offers additional assurances the findings and interpretations honored the stories of the participants, rather than my own (Marshall & Rossman, 2010).

Chapter 4

Findings

Through in-depth study of principals' moral and political stories, this qualitative study captured principals' perspectives involving decision-making as it relates to students with disabilities (Creswell, 2012). Following the transcription, organization, and theme development based upon data collected as a result of individual interviews, and response to vignettes from four elementary principals and three secondary principals, this chapter aims to provide an explicit rendering of the concepts collected in light of the literature reviewed and the theoretical framework selected. The study was guided by three primary research questions,

1. How do principals describe their leadership role/responsibility for special education?
2. What ethical dilemmas do principals identify in association with making decisions regarding special education students?
3. How do principals navigate dilemmas associated with making decisions for special education students?

As participants offered responses to the initial interview questions, while unprompted, they frequently referenced a particular student, situation, or occurrence. In addition, when asked how they might respond given certain situations or occurrences, many responded with their thoughts and details regarding a similar, yet perhaps more authentic or memorable experience. As a result, not only were the data sets from the interviews and vignettes complimentary in nature, but also naturally intermingled with one another. While the data from the initial interviews and vignettes might have been reported in a very distinct fashion, in this instance, doing so might have actually distracted from genuine description of the phenomenon under study. Thus, when reporting the data, I embraced the principals' approach, the resulting commingling data, and in

turn, differentiated the data sets in a distinct, yet still relatively subtle manner. Emerging from the complimentary data sets were particular themes surrounding the influence of principals' experiences on their beliefs and leadership practices, the perceived complexities of leadership for special education, supports associated with navigating complexities, as well as participants' deliberative process (what), focus (how), and description of motivation (why) when providing leadership and making decisions for special education programs. Rich descriptions of the study participants posed specific risks to confidentiality as a result of deductive disclosure (Kaiser, 2009). Thus, in an effort to offer a detailed, accurate account of the phenomenon under study, yet protect the identities of the individuals who participated in their research, I substituted pseudonyms for any real names throughout this chapter.

Characteristics of Participants

Participants reported various backgrounds, some of which included school counseling, sports coach, law enforcement, instructional coaching, and corporate training. Several suggested it was the combination of diverse professional and life experiences that somehow influenced their decision to become a principal. While the majority of the participants reported being in the field of education for 20 plus years, the time participants' served in the role of principal, and were charged with the supervision of special education programming, ranged anywhere from 3 to 17 years. Luke, Grant, Kay, and Sue were all elementary principals charged with the oversight of either a Pre-K-5 or a K-5 program, with student populations ranging from 231 to 410 students. Each elementary principal reported experience with supervising and/or interacting with programs for both high incidence and low incidence disability not only as a result of previous time in the classroom, but in their current administrative role. Mark, Karen, and Tom all supervised teaching and learning at the secondary level, either in a middle school for students in grades 6-8,

or provided the oversight for student programming at a comprehensive high school for students in grades 9-12. The student population in each of these attendance centers ranged from 519 students at the middle school level to 810 students at the high school level. Like their elementary counterparts, Mark, Karen, and Tom all reported they had acquired both classroom as well as administrative experience associated with a relatively diverse population of students with disabilities. In addition to the professional experiences that shaped their beliefs and leadership for special education, three of the participants described a personal familiarity with the impact and challenges associated with disability. These three participants reported they had either experienced disability first hand, or acted as a primary caregiver for an immediate family member with a disability.

Table 1
Participant and Site Demographics

Participant	Grant	Kay	Luke	Sue	Karen	Mark	Tom
Building Enrollment	231	391	233	410	810	519	605
Grade Range	K-5, Special Ed. 3 & 4, 4yr. old at-risk	K-5, Special Ed. 3 & 4	K-5, Special Ed. 3 & 4	K-5	9-12	6-8	6-8
Years in Administration	17	3	10	14	15	4	10
Initial Career Path in Education	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
Personal Experience with Disability	No	No	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	No

Intersection of Principals' Experiences, Beliefs, and Leadership Practices

Leaders by definition often pursue change. Consequently, principals' decision-making affects people and the vast majority of decisions have some sort of an ethical component, even if a small one. In turn, leaders' decisions and their approach to decision-making often are subject to scrutiny by others. For this same reason, ethical dilemmas or decisions of a particularly sensitive or complex nature often shift to the building principal. The norms, values, assumptions, and behaviors leaders fall back on when navigating complex situations originate with individual beliefs, experiences, and identities (Chávez & Sanlo, 2013). The seven principals who participated in the study reported not only do professional and personal experiences influence their beliefs and personal definition of disability, but readily influenced their professional practice and approach to leadership for special education.

Personal Definition of Disability

When asked to offer a definition of disability in their own words, principals suggested the term was relatively broad, and covered a wide scope of diverse conditions. The definitions suggested many participants viewed disability primarily as a relation between an individual and the social environment, and in turn, focused on the exclusion people with particular characteristics may experience from major domains of social life (Altman, 2001). For example, Tom suggested,

A disability is a barrier or a factor that keeps the student from accessing life functions or perhaps learning curriculum in the same way that maybe a peer of the same age would be able to access the curriculum or be able to perform life skills. So there is some type of roadblock that's out of their control that is limiting life functions.

Like Tom, others referenced the barriers, difficulties, dilemmas, or roadblocks resulting in disadvantage for an individual or group of people. Sue asserted, “A disability is something that doesn’t allow a person a level playing field with the majority of people.” In turn, participants acknowledged such restrictions and inequalities make the navigation of educational and other life experiences challenging. Furthermore, many highlighted a strong level of concern regarding those who experience such difficulties, as well as the largely negative connotation the word disability still has. Relatedly, Karen offered,

I hate that word actually. The word itself makes it sound like a student can't do something. So, I'm not a fan of the word disability, even though that is the word that is often used. I think it puts too much focus on what a student is unable to do. I'm more of an educator that wants to focus on what can they do, and how can they adapt.

Correspondingly, Mark shared, “I think I just wanted to try to think about how to word that positively. It just means that there may be somebody who needs support in an area. Disability sometimes has such a negative connotation.” The views and concerns the participants expressed were consistent with those of Dunn and Burcaw (2013) who suggested disability often remains primarily viewed as an identity context. Such context associates an individual among a particular group of people with diminished value or ability and in turn, a member of a minority commonly subjected to marginalization, prejudice, or discrimination.

Yet, participants seemed genuinely disheartened with this as a potential outcome for any segment of the school community. Mark further suggested the charge to alter such negative connotation is ever present and said, “I just want to try to get disability viewed in a more positive light.” Rather, principals focused less on impairment or difference, and instead on how others’ response to disability likely affects students in the school environment. Participants remained

optimistic with the right focus and leadership; elimination of the physical and attitudinal barriers in the school environment remained a reasonable expectation. In addition, they held hope students might experience independence and control in a manner similar, or perhaps even equal, to that of their nondisabled peers. However, such a strong sense of commitment to change negative connotation associated with disability, and develop a more inclusive, person-centered approach was not without influence. Rather, many participants confided their mindset and sense of charge resulted either from very personal experience with disability, and/or as the result of a role model who influenced their sense of duty to act as a change agent and bring about improved outcomes for students with disabilities.

Touched by Disability

At least three participants mentioned they had been touched by disability not only in their professional capacity, but too as a result of personal experience. In turn, they credited the challenges experienced when confronting a family member's disability for their increased awareness. Furthermore, they cited such experience as a reason for their strong resolve to improve conditions for students with disabilities in the school and community setting. Reflecting on how her daughter's injury resulted in some short-term physical needs, Kay explained,

She was in a wheelchair for a while, so we had to navigate the whole piece of accessibility. There were places her class went that she could not physically go because we could not wheel that wheelchair through where she needed to be. So, that really kind of brought about an awareness.

Such lived experience associated with confronting even temporary limits served to further participants' sense of appreciation, sensitivity, and need to advocate for individuals facing similar challenges on a regular basis.

Still others suggested their knowledge and understanding came about from firsthand experience with disability, or as a result of their direct support of a family member with a long-term disability. Participants indicated such experience served as a significant source of motivation to advocate for all students. Some alluded to how such experience cultivated a sense of empathy and understanding when working with parents less familiar with navigating the system to support their child in the school and community setting. Karen commented,

I think that having a child with a disability actually has made me better at representing children and their needs. As I go through IEPs and things like that, I often think of the parents that don't truly know their rights and what they have to do. So I feel like I kind of have to be that person that puts myself in their shoes because they just they trust us so much.

Reflecting on personal, lived experiences influencing the definition and a sense of responsibility for special education students, Mark offered,

My oldest daughter has been tested at her elementary school for special education when she was in second grade. She just went through another evaluation with the school psychologist. The first time she didn't qualify, but she is now receiving all of the tier supports they offer.

Along with the experiences in the immediate family unit, Mark further shared, "I've also got a niece who is three who's nonverbal autistic," further qualifying the potential impact on his leadership as a result of experiences with disability extending across the family unit.

Consequently, such deeply personal experience participants served to shape and influence the assessment and approach they took in their ongoing leadership efforts aimed at addressing the needs of all students.

Finally, and perhaps as a result of such personal experiences, principals made certain to underscore the value of including student with disabilities. Participants endeavored to center their leadership efforts and the primary work of other school personnel around a strong emphasis on similarities rather than differences. Luke said, “I don't picture them as anyone different. To me, they're a student just like everyone else. I understand there is strength in these students being in the classroom, being at recess with them, being in the lunchroom.” While not all participants suggested they were personally touched by disability, others described a relationship with a role model. Such relationship and example instilled in them the values and beliefs related to the desire to diminish difference and respond in care in their ongoing efforts to ensure the inclusion of all student populations.

Foundation for Beliefs and Approach

Much of what the participants described with regard to their leadership approach when working with vulnerable populations connected to the authenticity of the relationship and being cared for by a particular individual. Several participants credited a person or particular role model as a primary source of inspiration and influence for their leadership approach. Principals felt such relationships were particularly influential when it came to populations of students they perceived to be in need of additional nurture and care. Tom shared, “I think part of it is my mom. Just, you know, look out for others, be empathetic, and want to help others.” Karen too referenced the strong influence of a “mother like” figure and commented,

I had a fifth grade teacher that was really inspiring. I really hated school. My house wasn't safe, and my school wasn't safe. Neither place wasn't really safe for me. My teacher was safe. She was my safe place, she took care of me. Her and I have actually maintained a friendship. She's been at all of my special events taking pictures, just like

she was my mom. I really never had any teachers comparable to her for the rest of the time. I thought the world needs more people like her, so I'm going to be one of those people. I just didn't have anybody else that inspired me quite like that.

Later, within the context of response to a vignette, detailing her actions and advocacy for a student and a parent she viewed as particularly vulnerable, Karen again alluded to the influence of such a relationship on her leadership saying, “So that’s where I felt once again I was kind of that mama, when nobody else was.”

While not necessarily a mother figure, others too cited individuals that approached them in care, and again, highlighted a sense such relationship had a direct and positive impact on their development, perspective, and actions as a school leader. Sue stated, “I had good teachers who were caring.” Mark too attributed his insights and leadership practices largely to the care and long lasting influence of a particular teacher who, “just kind of followed me through my school career, and I kind of wanted to be like him.”

As a result of such lived experiences, many of the principals described unwavering commitment, focus, and a sense of responsibility as the school leader to ensure vulnerable populations, including students with disabilities, feel well supported, safe, cared for, and genuinely included in the school community. In particular, participants emphasized the importance of their efforts and the combined efforts of other school personnel to prioritize the student over the disability. In this vein, Grant offered,

Principals set the tone for the building. We set the tone for the culture, the beliefs, how we treat others, and the services we offer. If I have a certain thought process on someone or group of individuals, that will likely be shared by the teachers.

However, participants suggested making continuous progress toward such aim requires careful navigation of a number of complexities with regard to their leadership for special education.

Complexities of Leadership for Special Education

Principals felt their roles and responsibility for special education included ensuring people with disability felt well supported, safe, cared for, and genuinely included. Yet, participants' comments suggested making continuous strides towards such aim remains a relatively complex leadership task. They detailed experiences related to the ongoing navigation of a wide variety of potential dilemmas. Through participants' response to the semi-structured interview questions and vignettes, themes emerged surrounding myriad complexities principals regularly face when making decisions for special education. Principals indicated primary concerns around attitudinal barriers, organizational challenges, communication barriers, fiscal and resource challenges, as well as a general lack of knowledge and sensitivity. Participants suggested such concerns, if left unchecked, posed threats to the quality of programming for students with disabilities.

The Complexities of Attitudinal Barriers

In contrast to the potential impact on physical or systematic barriers, the law, regulation, and policy has a lesser influence on people's attitudes. Participants specified they readily draw upon their own personal and professional experience with disability to inform their leadership for special education. However, participants indicated one major hurdle they face when providing for the supervision, support, and leadership for special education includes the attitudes and thinking of school personnel and the larger community. Specifically, principals implied there are challenges associated with the melding of various beliefs, feelings, values, and dispositions when ensuring the provision of quality services for students with disabilities. For instance, some

principals cited concerns and offered specific examples regarding practices and procedures being more adult oriented versus student oriented. Sharing his frustration as he recalled an approach some personnel used to avoid staying for the duration of an IEP meeting, Tom said, “The teachers would go in, talk about what happens (in their class), then ask what questions anyone has, and then they were dismissed. They were dismissing the general education teachers from the meeting!” While the practice of dismissing school personnel whom were likely necessary to fully inform the development of the IEP predated the principal’s time in the building, he quickly called such practice into question. He further asserted, “When we set up an IEP that way, it doesn't seem we're here for the kids or for the student. It seems we're here because we have to be, and we're focused on getting the teachers out of here.” Sharing similar sentiments and frustration regarding an overemphasis on procedures versus conducting student-centered meetings, Karen said,

We just go over the IEP. Make sure there are no changes that need be made as a team. But, it's like we just meet to meet. We put stuff on it kind of like a checklist. Simply address the red tape. That's how I feel about it in this building.

In addition, principals articulated concerns regarding emotions or philosophical differences between school personnel and parents getting in the way of holding a student centered IEP meeting. Tom suggested, “Sometimes a person feels like they win if they get everything they want in the IEP. This person or this team feels they win if they don't. I always try to direct it back to the kid.” Offering to reflect on a more familiar, yet similar experience when given a vignette, Grant recounted a situation where the true spirit and aim of the process, intended to center on the needs of child, seemingly got lost in a lengthy dispute between the school and a set of parents. He shared,

Probably one of the most complex situations I have dealt with, did not actually involve special education, but the parents wanted the child in special education. When I came, the girl was on a 504 plan, but the parents wanted special education. They had identified multiple disabilities, but the contention from the district and the Interlocal was that she misses half of her school time, so how do we know that regular education curriculum is not sufficient for her.

Grant went on to detail the related conflict that ensued between the school and the parents regarding the child's chronic absenteeism. Describing personnel's efforts to meet the child's educational needs, the resulting time and attention demanded of him and other school personnel, and the contentious atmosphere despite such efforts, Grant shared,

We went with the 504, but the parents made a complaint to the Office of Civil Rights, and said we were not fulfilling their child's educational needs. So I mean, there was just a lot of stuff we had to do. If you have ever been involved in a complaint, that's an interesting time.

However, as participants further reflected upon and shared experiences associated with the navigation of such concerns regarding others' thinking, it became evident participants' uneasiness was not limited just to the IEP or conference table.

The Complexities of Navigating Detrimental Mindsets

Principals also indicated various beliefs, feelings, values, and dispositions act to influence the larger, long-standing practices within their buildings. At both the elementary and secondary level, participants suggested many staff view special education as a place for identified students to go, or in other instances, as a form of justification to limit their access to a particular general education setting. As she recounted experiences with the initial inclusion efforts for some

students with significant disabilities, Kay suggested a common reaction typically included something like, “What! I can't help those kids! You know you can't. What am I supposed to do with them?” Reflecting on the consequences of mindsets that special education is a place versus a service, Kay further emphasized, “They are limiting opportunities for these kids because well, there is a regular kid that needs that spot in that class, so your special education kid can't have that spot.” Sharing in her counterpart's concerns and referencing the principal's role in advocating for the acceptance of diverse student populations, Sue asserted, “Students should be able to work in the classroom and do their best. They don't have to be perfect.”

Secondary principals shared similar concerns. They suggested while school personnel are often quick to use the word inclusion, the faith and fidelity of implementing such educational placement is likely in question. As she reflected upon the current inclusion practices within the building, particularly for those students with the most significant disabilities, Karen stated,

The inclusion part, that's something where I know we have some work to do. I still feel like, they're kind of just in the area. They're in the hallways with the kids, but I still feel like they do their own thing, and they're not necessarily a part of our student population.

Concerns regarding the negative effect such mindsets may have on improving practices and outcomes for special education programs were not limited only to those in the school setting. At least two participants suggested the larger community too has room for growth regarding the mindset around providing service for student with disabilities. As Karen later engaged in further reflection regarding the authenticity of the inclusion efforts in her building, she went on to suggest any real inquiry regarding school personnel's inclusion efforts is “just now kind of coming up to the top of the water.” When asked to further expand, she offered, “I don't know if we've just kind of been able to get away with that. Honestly, we're just in a very affluent area.”

Thus, implying the higher socioeconomic status and the status of many exemplary schools in the area perhaps precluded not only school personnel, but also parents and community members from actively reflecting on and conversing regarding school-wide practices for student with disabilities. Further supporting the other participants' notion the community's beliefs, feelings, and values create complexities in the building leaders efforts to include students to the fullest extent possible, Tom suggested, "In our community, it's like, you can't go to school here. Parents don't want "those" kids around their kids. So I think, I feel like some area schools are very dismissive of kids with special needs." Given the community's influence on the mindset and practice of school personnel, principals acknowledged not only this complexity, but also the related importance of navigating such diversity and the charge to remain persistent in their efforts to seek opportunity for unity on behalf of all students.

The Complexities Surrounding Organizational Structure and Culture

Organizations such as schools have a moral capacity (Brief & Smith-Crowe, 2016). As the leader of an organization, principals remain largely accountable for the oversight of a building's core purpose and values. In addition to the dilemmas associated with the influence of the community and personnel's beliefs, some participants articulated dilemmas potentially attributed to organizational structure and culture. For instance, some participants cited the partnership between the member districts and Interlocal. While such partnership comes with benefits, it also creates unique challenges in their ongoing efforts to provide leadership for special education. Specifically, many principals were concerned regarding not only the inclusion of certain student populations, but if special education personnel truly felt valued and included as part of the larger school community. Several of the principals suggested having school personnel employed by another entity and subject to a different negotiated agreement and policy

and procedures, yet expected to fully integrate into the building culture and norms established under a second agency present with some unique challenges. Tom offered,

Special education teachers are oftentimes paid less, or they have less insurance. So sometimes, I think they are not as valued as much by our district as maybe a general classroom teacher, even though they know they're putting in more work than them.

Relatedly, Kay recalled her frustration early in her tenure with overhearing people say, “That's the Coop people,” making reference to the distinction some felt necessary to make between personnel employed by the district and those employed by the Interlocal. She further offered, “I told them no! They're *all* in this building. This is *all* our staff. Everybody who works here, we work with all the same kids.”

Additionally, participants elaborated on the importance their leadership focus and efforts played in attending to staff morale, collegiality, and culture in relationship to meeting the needs of all students. Kay went on and emphasized, “These are still all of our kids. We work to build relationships so it's not a division between the special education teachers and the classroom teachers. It's more of a team approach and how can we all work together to make this successful for everyone.”

In addition, some participants went on to suggest part of navigating complex situations for students with disabilities meant calling upon the school personnel to examine and reflect upon their instructional practice. For Tom, one vignette elicited memory of a student discipline matter, the staff's initial response to the incident, and some staff members' subsequent questioning of why he failed to administer a more severe disciplinary consequence. He offered,

I mean it was partly because it was related to his disability, but some of it was related to how we were handling it. How we were doing things in our own building. I don't tell

the teachers that we have our problems, because I don't want them feeling like I am slamming somebody. But as a principal, you kind of know that it's not just the kid. Part of it is the way we're doing things. So, that is a challenge.

As Mark responded to a vignette, he too offered similar insights and said,

We can't just have an environment where teachers just give up on kids and say I'm going to send him to the office all the time because I don't like him or because he is too much work, or she is too much work. So we have to have a calculated, professional approach so it is not an emotional response to a student who is probably giving the teacher an emotional response.

However, in their efforts to address what are perhaps underlying cultural issues, principals reported when they encouraged staff to examine, reflect upon, and consider altering their instructional practices, it often created yet another layer of complexity to navigate as instructional leader. Rather, when they offered feedback and pushed personnel to conduct a thorough examination of the individual and collective professional practice surrounding particular student related matters, it seemingly created insecurity in some staff, and in other instances, was perceived as threatening. As Tom offered yet a second related scenario and detailed school personnel's work with another particularly troubled young man, he expanded on the efforts he and the instructional specialist put into coaching staff through the situation. In summary of his experience with this particular situation, he suggested perhaps it was not necessarily the young man that posed the greatest challenge, but rather the culture of the building, staff mindsets, and a lack of some individual's willingness to be coached through and

reflect up the situation. He said,

Sometimes people take it personal, like you're saying they aren't good. That's just not the case. I am just saying we can be better. What we were doing wasn't working. I think that teacher was frustrated because she is really good. I mean she is successful and always has success with kids. I think she was frustrated because she wasn't. Her success usually just comes really easy, and in that case, it wasn't.

Thus, participants acknowledged the importance of remaining intentional and focused when attending to staff's morale, efforts to unify staff members employed by the Interlocal and the individual district, and building the level of unity and trust necessary to truly examine and adjust professional practices. Principals specified key to making strides with such unification efforts was a strong foundation of communication at the building level, not only between the building and the Interlocal, but also between the building and the larger community.

The Complexities of Communication

Several principals cited communication as a key component in ensuring quality services for all students. However, the provision of quality special education services within the member districts relied on a diverse composition of professionals and organizations working together. Reflecting on the importance of communication for the purpose of educating both school personnel and community members regarding disability, Kay commented, "It simply comes down to helping people understand why we do the things we do." Yet, principals asserted such independent efforts regarding communication were not enough.

Principals emphasized the role others such as the Interlocal, the member districts, the teachers, and other stakeholders must play in assisting with their efforts to improve and maintain strong communication. Grant expressed the importance of, "Just having and all keeping those

open lines of communication.” Similarly, Luke offered, “Communication is something it seems we always ask the teachers to do more.” Principals also expressed concerns regarding the impact the lack of communication between the building and the Interlocal may play on service for student with disabilities. Tom offered,

I’ve talked to my colleagues in the area. Some of the people say their Assistant Director who is in charge of their area, well they only see them once a month or something like that. Well, I mean, we don’t see ours ever. We just don’t see them. So, I think in our neck of the woods, if they don’t hear anything, they just assume everything is ok. Pretty soon, teachers quit worrying about someone helping them and just figure it out themselves. So, I don’t think the teachers call on the Interlocal often either. I don’t think they feel a really close connection with the Interlocal.

While principals expressed concerns regarding disconnects in communication with the Interlocal, their concerns were not solely limited to the Interlocal. Similar to the concerns regarding the perceived communication gap between the Interlocal and the local buildings, a few participants suggested the structure and practices of the local districts too present challenges with effective communication. Describing concerns related to communication within the district, Tom asserted, “It is like we have two systems here. I don’t think communication is as good, because we are so big.” Thus, both the organizational structures and practices of the Interlocal and the member districts were perceived to create obstacles principals must navigate in their efforts to ensure effective communication in the ongoing effort to provide quality education services for all.

Finally, principals admitted they had concerns about communication at the building level as well. For instance, reflecting upon the possible adult actions, or lack of action, potentially

affiliated with recent student related concerns, Karen said, “I think our communication is a little bit lacking. I’m just kind of shocked that our teachers don’t even really know about what the students’ disabilities are in their classroom.” Thus, principals were concerned about the ability to achieve effective communication both within and across agencies. Furthermore, they acknowledged the potential threat communication concerns posed to the students, the school community, and ultimately, the larger community with regard to services and supports for students with disabilities. Left unchecked, principals recognized ineffective communication within and across agencies strained the effectiveness of the collective organization and the shared goal to provide quality educational services to all students.

The Complexities of Resource Challenges

Further complicating the navigation of their roles and responsibilities in relationship to special education, principals at both the elementary and secondary levels cited challenges associated with sustaining quality services for all students in the face of increasing resource scarcity. Participants expressed while the student related needs continue to grow, they regularly must grapple with an allocation of resources they view as increasingly insufficient to meet students’ needs. As Luke put it, “We just don’t always have the monetary resources to get the kids exactly what they need.” In the face of such insufficient fiscal supports, other related resource challenges emerge as well. Principals asserted challenges such as larger class sizes, a lack of general program resources, and the inability to attract and maintain highly qualified teaching staff all posed further threats to the integrity of programming in their building. Tom concurred and offered, “I’m talking about *all* programming resources. It’s just a smaller operation here. I just don’t know that they can provide good coverage or supports.” Sharing similar sentiments regarding the Interlocal’s increasing struggle to secure the resources necessary

to support instructional programming for all students, but particularly programming for students with the most significant disabilities, Luke added, “They need a lot of things, but I know they don't technically have a lot of money, so we don't have a lot of money.” Thus, not only the districts’ thinning resources, but the Interlocal’s limited resources to distribute across nine member districts readily challenged principals’ leadership efforts in meeting the needs of increasingly diverse student populations.

In addition, secondary principals sensed students at the secondary level experienced even a greater impact associated with the lack of resources. The number of students served in a general education or special education classroom may influence the classroom environment, interactions in the learning environment, and the relationships between student and teachers. Consequently, participants were concerned budgetary reductions resulting in increasing class sizes both in all classrooms posed potentially negative consequences for many students, but especially those deemed at-risk such as special education students. Mark said, “Sometimes we have great big class sizes and that means maybe kids don't get access to the resources they need.” Still others expanded and articulated particular frustration with an increasing inability to attract, hire, and maintain highly qualified special education personnel. They discussed the potential impact it has on not only students, but also any negative consequence it may have on the workload and morale of the remaining staff. As Karen reflected on a particular program in her building, the decision to hire a long-term sub to fill a vacant licensed position in the program, and the consequences of such decision, she said, “It doubled the work for the other teachers. They were spending almost you know three hours a night trying to keep up.” While the scarcity of such resources weighed heavily on principals’ minds, most expressed a low expectation for change. Thus, participants expressed a genuine sense of conflict. Principals were deeply

troubled by the mismatch of available resources and student related need and in turn, the potential implications such mismatch posed for students, teachers, and the surrounding community.

The Complexities of Time Constraints

At both the elementary and secondary level, administrators indicated they felt extremely pressed for time with regard to the charge to properly fulfill their responsibilities for special education. When discussing potential barriers to leadership for special education Mark shared, “My biggest problem is time. With administrators, everything is about time. I just don't have enough time.” When elementary principals were asked about barriers to leadership for special education, they too shared similar concerns. Kay offered,

Barriers? Really, it's time. I would say most of the administrators who don't sit in meetings, it's because there aren't enough people to handle all of the other things. If I'm in an IEP meeting, and I have a kid who has a meltdown, I'm all there is.

However, the principals' concerns regarding time in relation to quality services for student disabilities were not necessarily limited just to their own leadership. Rather, participants were relatively quick to move beyond the discussion of their own needs, and expressed primary concern around the demands placed on their licensed staff members. Kay suggested given the ongoing evolution of demands on licensed special education staff, perhaps such expectations are simply not reasonable and stated, “I don't think people truly understand how much extra time it takes for those teachers to coordinate with everybody else. I think that special education teachers often don't have the planning minutes that the other teachers have.” Luke further reiterated similar concerns and said, “I sure can assume there's a lot of stress, and I think giving them more plan time, giving them more support, would help deviate from that stress and help keep them in

classrooms.” Principals reflected a strong sense the professional expectations of special education teachers and the time allotted to complete their responsibilities were likely misaligned. Echoing the concerns expressed by the elementary principals, Tom referenced the possible warning signs of inequities in work load and said, “You know, when you leave here at night, and really any school probably in the area, the last cars in the parking lot every night are your special ed teachers.” Others further communicated a general sense of uneasiness regarding the time allotted to special education teachers in relationship to their workload, and the potential inequalities the affiliated demands created. Mark asserted,

I think that they should have time to manage the paperwork built into their workday. But most schools that I work in, special education teachers work after hours on IEPs, because they're responsible for direct student contact when students are in the building. Any good teacher is not going to pick paperwork over a kid.

Referencing not only the programs within her own building, but others she was familiar with across the district, Kay was of the opinion perhaps limits with respect to special education caseloads might be a part of the solution,

I wish there would be limits to the numbers of kids that one person is responsible for their IEPs so that there is time for them to do their jobs the right way, and that we're not just expecting extra of them, saying well that's part of your job. So you know, you've lost lunch every single day or we sent a kid back to your classroom during your plan time because you didn't have a paraprofessional for a special class, so they had to come back to your room. We don't do that to regular education teachers, but it's kind like it's just the expectation for teachers that teach special education.

Thus, while principals had concerns about the demands on their own professional time in relation to their leadership for special education, participants seemed generally resigned such inequities between time and professional responsibilities remain inherent to their leadership positions. Instead, the majority of participants were far more conflicted regarding the potential implications for stress, burnout, and/or poor performance the lack of time and work related demands on special education teachers might yield. Principals expressed genuine concerns not only for the well-being of their teachers, but the likelihood the increasingly adverse working conditions may ultimately undermine other efforts to improve programming for students with disabilities.

The Complexities Surrounding a Lack of Knowledge about Special Education

As participants reflected on the complexities surrounding their responsibilities for special education, several participants suggested there remain some general voids in their professional knowledge base related to special education service. Participants expressed worry such voids hindered or limited their leadership efforts and support of other personnel in meeting the needs of a diverse student population. Elementary principals suggested such voids might warrant a review of even the most basic responsibilities. Kay expressed,

The class you have in building administration over special education law is maybe a semester. If you're lucky, it's the whole semester, but most likely it's just part of a semester class. So providing just some reminder trainings every once in a while about what our responsibilities are would be helpful.

When asked to expand on what such training might include, she further suggested,

Ensuring understanding of what the administrator's role is in that process. Why it's important that they sit in on every meeting, the entire meeting, and not just come in, sign a paper and then walk away. You know, it's not just something I have to do, but there is a

reason that I'm supposed to be there. Understanding what a really a good IEP goal is and how the IEP team determines accommodations and modifications. Just more information on that whole process.

Other elementary principals shared similar thoughts. As Luke detailed particular experiences with low incidence populations in his building, he suggested additional training and support to aid principals in “further understanding of students’ needs and disabilities” might aide in the assurances of quality services for special education.

Others indicated they felt comfortable with the basics, but wanted to ensure they continued to grow in their knowledge and leadership practices. Principals stated a deep appreciation for as well as indicating they relied heavily upon district and/or Interlocal resources to problem solve or trouble shoot as the situation warranted. Citing reasons she brought in outsiders to assist with one student related matter with circumstances similar to those detailed in a vignette, Sue said, “Sometimes there are people out there that have some different ideas, and I think a new set of eyes to see what's going on is needed.” Kay further affirmed a sense of appreciation for such collaboration as she too recalled certain situation and indicated, “Just having somebody who understands and understands the kids that you can have a conversation with so we can try to work things out.” While participants expressed a lack of knowledge with their roles and responsibilities could get in the way if allowed to do so, several emphasized the leadership for special education was not an individual one, rather must be a shared leadership approach. As Mark indicated, “I don't need to be the expert, but I need access to the experts.” Thus, given the complexities and the diversity associated with leadership for special education, participants found value in opportunities for additional knowledge, support, and a shared leadership approach. Participants’ perceptions regarding the types of supports, level of support,

and the intensity of support they felt necessary varied. However, across all participants was a collective belief that leadership for special education should not be an exercise in solidarity, rather required an approach of shared leading and learning.

A Shared Leading and Learning Approach

Principals typically further develop the necessary skill sets to lead, guide, support, and mentor school personnel with time and experience. As participants discussed how they navigated the dilemmas often associated with their leadership for special education, not one participant suggested they approached such complex leadership tasks alone. Instead, each participant seemed to be of the mindset accomplishing effective services for special education could not be done in the absence of the mutual support, advice, collaboration, and understanding of all school personnel. Participants described an approach valuing and promoting a sense of shared responsibility and ownership for the academic and social-emotional progress of all students.

Yet as previously mentioned, principals indicated they rarely feel pressured to have all the answers. Rather, when providing leadership for special education, they learn and lead almost simultaneously. Mark said, “So, what I've realized with special education is, I'm never going to be the expert, and I'm fine with that. If people come to me and I don't know the answer, I go find the answer.” Thus, principals saw value in the opportunity for professional growth when seeking to consult or work alongside other, more knowledgeable staff members. In addition, once they had initially assess their obligations and the desired outcome with any given situation, principals felt it important they then consulted with, collaborated with, and empowered other school personnel with the prerequisite knowledge necessary to assist with navigating such situations. Mark further elaborated saying, “The complexities of such situations and the outcomes of unique

situation often hinge on technicalities and things like that. It can be difficult to navigate through. So I just try to ensure I use the support personnel.” Taking such a leadership approach supported assurances; those school personnel regularly charged with the provision of special education services have the skills, supports, resources, and knowledge necessary to meet the needs of all students. As participants further described their role as a “lead learner” versus sole decision maker (Bell, Schargel, & Thacker, 2014), they did not limit their description to only the district and building level supports associated with such charge. Rather the larger narrative began to further underscore the importance they sensed building and nurturing relationships played in enhancing learning for all students.

Professional Supports at the District Level

All of the principals suggested they had a strong appreciation for the personnel at the district level whom they were able to call upon when in need of support with special education matters. Each participant reported an awareness of the personnel available to support them. Principals indicated they felt comfortable calling upon a variety of district administration, as well as the Interlocal’s leadership and support teams, to assist with efforts surrounding leadership for special education programming. Grant reported, “I call if I have questions. I call the Assistant Director at the Coop and ask questions. Our superintendent was a special ed director for a long time, and so he and I have conversations.” Mark suggested he is never hesitant to pick up the phone or shoot a quick email seeking support and said, “Rarely, really never, is there a complex issue in special ed that I don’t tap one of those resources.” While all of the participants reported they felt knowledgeable about whom to call when they had support needs, many also shared an appreciation for the levels and types of supports received. Karen expressed particular

satisfaction regarding the levels of support she has experienced and sang the praises of special education administration,

The Assistant Director has actually been one of the first Special Education Directors that I feel like gets their hands dirty and gets in here with us, and I've not seen that. I've been in other districts, and I've not seen that. It's been a breath of fresh air.

A similar message resonated from others including Grant who said, "We work closely with our Special Education Assistant Director. So I'm confident that what is in place is working, and our kids are being serviced."

In addition to mentioning the personnel in place to offer supports, principals commented on not only the opportunity to interact face to face, but the value placed on other tools and offerings they perceived support their leadership efforts for special education. At the elementary level, when asked about supports, Grant offered, "We have webinars instead of going to meet with them. They have webinars on special education that we either watch or watch after recording trainings with them." Thus, while principals clearly appreciated the face-to-face time with special education administration and support staff, given the geographical size and demands of the combined member districts, principals understood the associated challenges, and remained open to and appreciative of alternate forms of support.

The School Psychologist - A Primary Source of Support

In addition to the supports at the district level, principals detailed a genuine appreciation for the personnel they lean on at the building level in association for their leadership for special education. While principals repeatedly mentioned the importance and the value of quality teachers to carry out special education programming, when asked whom they consistently turn to for support and consultation with complex decision-making for special education matters, over

half of the participants mentioned the school psychologist. Participants reported a close, working relationship with the school psychologist and in turn, highlighted their collaborative work with the school psychologist when addressing complex, student related matters. Principals were quick to offer their affirmation of the work done by these professionals with Mark saying, “The school psych we have is just exceptionally knowledgeable on special education.” He further added,

Our school psychologist is very clear on procedure. She’s focused on what’s best for kids. So, she’s just a very knowledgeable person who I respect a great deal. She’s my first stop, and if I need to go beyond that, then I do.

Like their secondary colleagues, elementary principals too suggested the school psychologist was a primary “go to” person. Reflecting on a similar complex disciplinary decision involving a student with a disability in response to a vignette, Luke recalled how the school psychologist assisted in his ability to step back from the situation, and ask how the actions of well-meaning adults may have overwhelmed the student. He even suggested adult actions might have contributed to one student’s significant behaviors. As a result, he said he found himself asking,

You know, we put him in the least restrictive environment, but did we move him too soon? Did we do that to him, not necessarily him do that to us? We did need to take a look at that all a little more carefully and say ok, maybe it was rushing it. Maybe it was us not seeing the whole picture of this student. What could we have done better to support him and the classroom?

As a result of such experience, Luke suggested the frequency of his communication with the psychologist increased and said, “We now sit down and talk a lot more about students and what

their true needs are.” Others conveyed a similar reliance and sense of trust in the school psychologist when navigating the complexities associated with special education. Grant offered, “we work with the school psychologist pretty closely here, just to ensure all aspects of student programs are being fulfilled.” In addition, later reflecting on the possible actions he would take and the supports he might seek in response to circumstances detailed in a vignette, Grant again referenced the school psychologist as a primary resource and support. He said, “I’d like to ask questions and get input from people smarter about that stuff than I am. First of all, the psychologist.” Kay too referenced the school psychologist as a primary point of support in the building for both administration and teaching staff and shared, “I have lots of conversations with our psychologist. I even moved his office and got him an office this year with us.” Thus, participants at all levels expressed a strong sense of value, professional confidence, and gratitude for the school psychologists’ knowledge base, broad training, and accessibility. As a result, principals viewed the school psychologist as one of the most valuable and readily accessible resources for the purposes of consultation surrounding complex decision-making for vulnerable population of students within the school setting.

Lack of Supports Beyond the Confines of the Local District

In general, principals reported satisfaction with the supports offered at the district and building levels with the complexities associated with their leadership for special education. Yet, noticeably absent, was any mention of outside supports they readily called upon when navigating demands or seeking to reduce the stressors affiliated with their work. One participant briefly reflected specifically on how difficult it might be to turn to others when trying to maintain a healthy work and family balance, and the general absence of others truly capable of relating to the profession’s professional challenges. Discussing his need for balance, Mark offered, “I want

to help our kids in our building, but I also have a family that I need to make a priority too.” Further expounding on a sense of isolation and loneliness that sometimes accompanies the charge of school leadership Mark said, “My spouse is not in education, and it's just hard for outsiders to understand. They're not in the same activities, and don't share in the same common languages.”

Thus, surrounded by others at home and work, one of the last things principals may anticipate is a sense of loneliness. Yet called upon regularly to make decisions that affect many, isolation from their peer groups or the sense they lack a true peer group may leave principals at risk for emotional isolation. Furthermore, such lack of opportunity to connect with others and mitigate the impact of the demands, stress, and the sense of loneliness may have negative implications on principals' leadership for increasingly diverse student populations.

The “What,” “How,” and, “Why” of Principals' Leadership for Special Education

Called upon to continually reflect and take the necessary steps to enact change, school leaders are charged with far more than merely supporting practices already in place. In turn, the views of what needs to be changed, how to enact such change, the intended outcomes of such change, and finally, who benefits from such change are deeply intertwined with the leader's personal values and beliefs (Vogel, 2012). Thus, participants' responses to both the interview questions and vignettes revealed a tendency towards a particular set of values and beliefs. Such values and beliefs shaped the participants' description of the primary aim (what) set of actions (how), and finally the chief motivation (why) central to their leadership efforts for special education.

The “What” Behind Principals’ Leadership for Special Education

It is widely documented that principals’ strongly influence school operations (Knapp, Copland, Plecki & Portin, 2006; Leithwood, Louis, Anderson & Wahlstrom, 2004). The participants in this study too highlighted the importance their leadership plays in the development of all students, but particularly those with disabilities. As participants described their leadership for special education, they suggested the primary aim remains the assurance of a safe, accessible, and accepting environment promoting inclusion and equity for all students. To illustrate, Kay said, “We need to make sure we are supporting students, not creating more deficits for them.” Mark reiterated this point and stated, “I view myself as the leader, the example here. My priority is ensuring student safety, student education, and student experience.” While some made only a general reference to ensuring students feel a part of the building, Mark went on and spoke specifically to his leadership charge to promote and motivate changes in attitudes and practices of school personnel and the community toward children with disabilities. He said,

The tone that I set in the school resonates beyond the teachers and the staff and impacts the students and community as well. I think that if I try to work on a positive climate, a professional climate, a supportive climate, then those things are going to trickle down to the students.

Some principals advanced they were not satisfied with efforts impacting only the immediate school community they served. Instead, they suggested their actions were deliberate in assuring they model such core beliefs for all stakeholders in hopes of impacting the larger community. While initially prompted by a vignette, Lance was quick to offer his own spin on a situation and described an incident involving a student with severe autism melting down in the hallway in the

presence of a parent. While acknowledging it was a difficult situation, Luke asserted such situations also presented opportunity. He explained, “Our environment is a little more heightened maybe because of our structured learning room. They (students) tend to stand out you know. But at the same time that student stands out, the community sees me supporting that student as well.” Mark also suggested the opportunity and charge to model acceptance, value diversity, and promote inclusion extends well beyond the confines of the building for which he is responsible. He said, “There is not a lot of distinction between who I am as a principal and who I am as a community member. It really just bleeds over. So whatever I do here, I do everywhere else.” Thus, participants took seriously the charge for ensuring an accepting environment and suggested promoting inclusion and equity for all students extended not only to the building they oversee, but also into the larger community.

The “How” Behind Principals’ Leadership for Special Education

In describing the aim to fully promote inclusion and equity for all students, principals indicated they felt led to respond to such aim with great purpose and care. As participants reflected on their responsibilities for special education, they offered insights regarding particular leadership responsibilities attended to regularly. The core efforts that emerged from principals’ description of their leadership for special education supported a heavy emphasis on people first and included: creating high standards and expectations, nurturing the school culture and climate, ensuring a safe and effective instructional environment, and serving as a role model and advocate for students.

Creating high standards and expectations. While perhaps stated in many different ways, researchers agree effective principals are responsible for creating a vision of commitment to high standards and the success of all students (Wallace Foundation, 2012). Participants in this

study concurred. Despite the challenges of hiring and retaining high quality personnel, several participants' comments focused on their charge to maintain high standards for personnel working with students with disabilities as well as the outcomes for students. Detailing the charge to safeguard a vision of high standards and success embraced and upheld by the larger school, Tom asserted,

Being a leader is not a license to do less, it's a responsibility to do more. So, maybe I'm not in the classroom as much, but how I impact kids is I put people in the right places and get the right people in front of kids. I'm a guy looking for a champion for kids. They don't care where the kid lives, what their background, how intelligent they are, or what limitations they may have.

Relatedly, Mark offered, "I have high expectations of whom we hire. I feel like it is part of my responsibility to hire for long term success."

While principals suggested ensuring the provision of high quality school personnel was key to ensuring the quality of special education programming, having the right staff on board reflected only one piece of their description to promote long-term success for a diverse student population. In conjunction with ensuring they hired the right personnel, principals also asserted a standards-based, strategic approach to the education of students with disabilities remained key in effectively reducing any remaining separateness that may exist. Sue stated,

I still maintain they need to meet the standards just like everybody else does. I think the hardest part of special education is not enabling kids. Not allowing it to be a crutch. We all struggle with that. We want them to be successful, all of our kids, but we have to look for different ways to help them without doing it for them. So, for me, it's talking to the

adults, making sure they know what's going on with the kids, and making sure they are using the best strategies.

Correspondingly, principals reiterated the importance of setting the bar high for all students. Furthermore, they touched on the potential unintended consequences of reduced standards or expectations for special education student. At the elementary level, as he offered response to one scenario, Grant referenced personnel's obligation to maintain high expectations for students with disabilities. He said, "Students need to be able to be pushed number one. They also need to be able to have the same kind of opportunities to be with the same kind of students of their own age group class grade. Furthermore, Mark suggested,

I would love to see us approach students in a way where we do not feel guilty if we are allowing a student to struggle. I think we learn a lot through our struggles and our failures. When we don't allow a student to struggle, and we just spoon-feed them. That creates a bigger problem for the student who already struggles. We have situations where they're no longer self-advocating, where they're less motivated, where you know it's not really their work, so they don't have the intrinsic pride in it.

Other participants shared perceptions regarding the importance they felt staffs' behavior and attitude toward maintaining high expectations played in ensuring improved opportunities and outcomes for students with disabilities. Kay said, "I think in practice, staff tend to change their expectations. We kind of forget about trying to stretch them and push them as far as we can. Not lowering the bar just because we know what their disability is." Mark offered, "I think it starts with how I treat our teachers and what expectation I set for teachers, paired with my expectation of the students. It's about us all playing a part to achieve a climate where all students can be successful to the greatest of their ability." Thus, as part of their leadership

efforts, participants believed an expectation of high standard and achievement must remain front and center. In turn, the principal's role as a "lead learner" and the charge to act as a role model for the education of all students is further emphasized (DiPaola & Walther-Thomas, 2003).

Nurture the school culture and climate. In addition to setting a tone of high expectations for all, many maintained it was essential to construct and maintain a nurturing culture and program to support all students' learning. Presenting his perspective on the importance culture and climate plays in his leadership for students with disabilities, Mark said,

Hopefully we're able to eliminate many of the negatives by creating a positive climate, a climate where the students can then be successful to the greatest of their ability. So, I think the climate and the culture, even those are very much buzz words, are buzz words for a reason. I think that they have an impact and I think then I'm in charge of that.

Also central to the participants' message was the importance of school culture and environment. Principals spoke to the responsibility to create and support an environment fostering academic and social success, ensuring all students are fully included in academic and extracurricular activities. Reflecting specifically on a program within the building serving a population of students with significant disabilities Karen said, "I want to have it so they feel a part of the building, you know, they are a Cougar." Further detailing her experiences with this student population and their opportunity to participate in adapted extra-curricular and social opportunities such as lunch, Karen expanded and said,

I want it to be more of an inclusion model than let's go watch, cheer them on, then send them back. They eat lunch on their own at a certain time. I want it to be more of they eat lunch and we have people that sit with them and enjoy lunch with them. There are some things I want to move toward to make them feel more a part of our student body.

Collectively, participants felt it was important school personnel's actions support an environment where all students not only feel welcome and included, but also are viewed as contributing, valued members of the school community. Kay suggested, "It is about helping to build some of those relationships so that teachers can start having conversations around, "Hey, I have this kid in my class, and he's been such a great addition." Thus, many of the principals suggested key to meeting the needs of students with disabilities was the charge to model the acceptance of children with disabilities. Ongoing to such efforts was the creation and consistent attendance to a set of high expectations intended to support a culture and climate of a learning environment intended to welcome and support all students.

While discussing the concentrated efforts necessary to establish a culture and climate supporting the larger aim of inclusion and acceptance, principals emphasized the importance for school personnel to collaborate and become comfortable with inclusion in concept and practice. Referencing the importance of meeting people where they are in their understanding and professional practice, Kay said, "Starting in those places and giving teachers the opportunities to have conversations with special education staff about the things that are working well and the things that aren't working well is important." Others stressed not only the opportunity for ongoing conversation, but also the responsibility to provide staff direct support and guidance and opportunity for professional learning in this area. Discussing his leadership efforts Tom said, "I try to provide guidance and get them to workshops. I think that is another part of seeing value or feeling that the work you're doing is important. My leader wants me to get better at what I am doing, so they're going to support me in that venture." Thus, principals asserted attending to and supporting the collective work of school personnel was imperative. Thus, principals contended modeling a positive set of shared beliefs, values, and assumptions as the foundation for such

work remained significant in the efforts to promote students' ability to learn and promote inclusion and equity for diverse student populations.

Relationships built on trust. Yet another theme emerging from the study was the importance principals placed on the work affiliated with building relationships and trust with school personnel and parents. Reflecting the importance of relationship and his efforts to support staff and parents with a rather intense behavior related situation he described in response to a vignette Tom suggested,

You have to support your teachers, let them know that you have their back, but you also have to support the parents to let them know you have theirs, and you're going to do everything you can to help their kid be successful.

Karen referenced an approach she had employed in an effort to build trust with several families as well. She shared, "So my goal as a leader is to try to really play the part of a parent too. To look at it from a parent's eyes and ask what can I ask or say that they might not know too. In parentis locus." Presented with a vignette, Karen's response naturally gravitated towards the description of a similar experience and her frustration surrounding school personnel's response to a student's act of aggression. She explained, "I felt like no one was advocating for that kid except me. The parents were so emotional and didn't know what to do. They needed support, you know." Despite the ongoing demands on time many referenced, participants reiterated the importance of putting in the time necessary to truly connect, develop relationships with others.

Kay asserted,

Parents need to know that I care enough about their kids. I want to know what the school can do to assist them instead of, "Oh, I'm really too busy for your kid right now and I'm

just going to come in and sign this piece of paper and leave.” You just let me know if there is something you need.

Around such efforts to build relationship with parents, principals stressed the importance empathy may play in forming strong trust and relationship. In addition, they emphasized such attentiveness to relationship helped assure school personnel had an understanding of the full scope of individual student related needs. Relating to the inherent complexities of working with parents as portrayed in one vignette, Kay recalled similar experience with one family and some personnel’s impatience with the parents attempt to advocate for their child. She said, “We need to understand that they’ve lost. Nobody has a baby and thinks, oh I hope this child is born with a disability so that everything in my life gets to be different.” Furthermore, in the absence of such empathy, some principals suggested school personnel might lack true understanding of the population they serve. Some participants advanced the role they believed empathy plays in promoting understanding and fostering partnership between the school and family. Empathy was suggested to have a particularly important role when tough decisions must be made. Kay suggested, “We need to help staff understand that we need to empathize with what their life is like, and what we can do to help. Not just what we needed to happen for us.” Reflecting on how such limited focus may influence personnel’s recognition of the barriers to learning for students, Karen said, “It’s been really enlightening to see maybe how we need to be thinking about things here. I’m not sure that we a have a clear picture of what our special education teachers need to be doing with our students.” Thus, participants’ deemed a deliberate focus on building trust and relationship remained fundamental in the ongoing efforts to ensure an environment of academic and social success for all students.

Ensuring an effective, safe learning environment. In addition to creating high expectations, nurturing the school culture and environment, and developing relationship based on trust, principals recognized the importance of building the skills and knowledge of others to fully influence the learning environment for all students. Principals suggested a lack of awareness regarding disability or instructional strategies potentially impede the ability of school personnel to ensure a safe, accessible, and accepting environment. When discussing leadership for special education Tom said, “I think one of my biggest strengths is providing a safe and nurturing environment for kids.” Further detailing efforts to support learning in a safe and secure setting, some principals suggested need for deliberate focus and efforts to diminish difference or the negative connotation often associated with the need for either academic or social emotional supports. Offering explanation in support of such a stance, Tom offered, “I want getting help to be a badge of honor, not a stigma or a place where the kids who can't read go.” As Kay reflected on her charge to provide the emotional support a few students required to be fully included in school she said, “I'm their safe spot. They should feel like they can come in and they can sit in my office, or they can crawl under my table, or whatever. That's a safe place for them.” Principals reiterated the charge to encourage all staff's collaboration, thus, ensuring the contribution, accountability, and cohesiveness necessary for a unified system of the supports to target all students' needs, no matter the level of disability.

However, accomplishing the aim of a unified system serving all students likely requires the sense of safety extend beyond the student population, and to the teachers. Participants relayed based upon their experience, only when teachers feel supported and safe are they truly in the position to take risks to explore potential strategies and solutions associated with meeting the

needs of an increasingly diverse population. Karen said,

I still have trouble even using the phrase principal. I'm a teacher. Teachers impact students. In my case, my classroom just happens to be teachers instead of students. So, I'm always thinking about what is it that I can teach the teachers that will then impact the students. So, I want to make sure that I'm providing for them things that they can use in the classroom. Things that are applicable. When I provide that for them, I provide that support, and I provide even that safety net to fail. All of those things are going to impact our students.

Thus, through offering teachers the support needed and enabling risk, principals strive to help cultivate not only an environment of ongoing professional growth. Such efforts likely further extend the opportunity for learning for increasingly diverse student populations.

Serving as a role model and advocate. Perceptions of school administrators' integrity and character are formed while interacting with students, teachers, parents, and other members of the communities (DiPaola & Walther-Thomas, 2003). Offering affirmation of this, Tom asserted, "You are the face of school culture and climate as a leader." Participants reported interaction with stakeholders paired with the vulnerability of certain student populations strengthened a sense of personal and professional responsibility to approach their role for special education with support, integrity, value, and fairness. Luke offered, "My leadership role is always to make them feel valued and supported." Furthermore, some participants emphasized the importance they felt modeling integrity and character in both school and community play. Reflecting on such needs, and how her response to those needs then comes into play for the entire student population Kay asserted, "I think we need to teach kids compassion and understanding and help them to know that everybody has difficulty with something." Yet simply

modeling compassion, understanding, value, and acceptance may not be enough. Principals asserted it was crucial other school personnel fulfill the role of advocate, and communicate the message all students are valued and remain a shared responsibility. Karen advanced much of the same. As she referenced her own trials and tribulations she faced with one unique student situation that paralleled those presented in a vignette said, “I always want to know as much as I can about whatever it is that a child is struggling with.” She elaborated further saying,

I think that comes from having a personal connection with a child with a disability. I am always educating his teachers about his disability. I’m always finding ways to share that. Because in my kid’s instance, he does not look like a disabled child. He doesn’t talk like, walk like, or sound like a disabled child, but he has an impairment that causes a reading disability.

However, the expectation of understanding, acceptance, and advocacy were not limited to only the building leader. Integrated into the discussion surrounding a scenario offered, Sue highlighted the expectation she holds of her staff and said, “I think it is important that everybody should be given the same cards in one way or another to make it more equitable.” To promote inclusion and equity for all students, principals suggested they must not become complacent in their role model and as advocate. Rather a part of the larger charge is to help focus teachers’ attention on celebrating individuals’ uniqueness, understanding differences, and setting goals for embracing the diversity of all learners.

The “Why” Behind Principals’ Leadership for Special Education

Intertwined with principals’ description of a primary aim promoting inclusion and equity and their account of the responsibilities intended to support such aim, was insight into their primary motivation or the “why” behind their leadership efforts. Bound by policy and

procedure, principals' description of the work and the related motivation for such work was in some instances connected to a prescribed end goal or a duty set forth in policy or law. However, principals' responses to the interviews and vignettes focused less on the technical aspects of the work. Instead, most elected to reflect on building and maintaining relationships, and in turn, the importance they felt care played in diminishing difference and increasing acceptance of students with disabilities.

Many of the statements coded from both the interview and vignettes were closely interrelated and focused on principals' description of the climate, environments, and opportunities they wanted to create in their schools, with a primary emphasis on building, supporting, and preserving relationships. Referencing educator, writer, and motivational speaker Todd Whitaker's focus on people and relationships (Whitaker, 2017), Tom indicated, "I'm a Todd Whitaker fan. So, it's about people, not programs." Sue affirmed, "I am about building relationships with them. I think because of that, kids are more willing to work with me. It also creates an environment where the teachers want to create those relationships too." Thus, at the core of the motivation principals described, existed the formation of relationship in response to meeting the needs of a vulnerable group of individuals. In addition, the majority of participants comments supported their primary aim (the what), the definition of their responsibilities (the how), and finally the motivation for fulfilling those responsibilities and actions when carrying out those responsibilities (the why) were born out of the existence of relationship with an individual or a group of people they deemed to be in need.

Such connection and in turn relationship, seemingly created a moral charge for the participants not only to respond in care, but in a manner intended to further foster relationship, unity, and the support of others in the school community in response to individuals or groups of

people in need. Luke said, “I think it first starts with the cohesion of our staff and the willingness to cooperate with each other, to work with each other, and to care about one another.” Offering a similar sentiment as she related to a situation described in one vignette, Sue said, “I think that getting to know the child first and foremost is one of the most important things. Helping them and making them feel welcome here at school is key.” Relatedly, detailing his own example of such efforts to foster relationship, unity, and support, Tom detailed,

We greet kids at the door, we welcome them. As a staff, we probably send 50 to 100 cards home a week to kids based on a boy’s or girl’s integrity, respect, responsibility, and compassion. We try to make kids feel that what they are doing is important and that they are connected to our school and feel safe coming here.

Tom expounded on his leadership experiences as related to a scenario surrounding the impact adult response may play in meeting the needs of diverse student populations. He affirmed he had personally witnessed the impact quality relationships can have in the effort to diminish difference, and indicated,

What we’ve seen is if you have good relationships and a teacher like Mrs. H, you could get a kid to run through a brick wall without a helmet. They get kids to believe that they can, and celebrate every time a kid makes an accomplishment.

Mark concurred with the others’ sentiments and said,

I think that middle school can be some special times for kids. They can have great relationships with teachers and really start to narrow in on their strengths and opportunities for growth. I think you can engage in rigorous academics and create an environment where kids get some fulfillment out of it and not just hate coming to school. Then, even though they struggle, they know that the teachers have their best interests in

mind, and so does the school. Hopefully, they see it not as something we're doing to them, but something we are doing for them. That's a hard sell to a middle school kid. Additionally, participants' strong desire to focus on the acceptance of each student in an approach of compassion and care remained evident. Tom detailed the charming, yet strong personality of one young man as he related a personal experience back to a scenario described in a vignette. He expounded saying, "He would tell you I love you one minute, and tell you "F you" an hour later. So it was difficult, because I really get attached." Further asserting the importance of the manner in which personnel communicate a sense of care to students and the impact on students, Tom further emphasized, "The one thing is, kids know. Kids know if you care about them. It doesn't have to just be about what you say or do, but it can just be your body language." As he went on to describe his related, yet authentic experience, he said,

The teacher was not self-aware that she was treating him differently. Even though she was trying to be positive, it was without a smile on her face or in a different tone. So the positive comments didn't really come across as positive, if that makes sense. Not genuine. Kids know that. Special needs kids know that. You know when people are being genuine and if somebody cares about you.

Participants regularly emphasized the importance of integrating care into their leadership efforts. In particular when responding to vignettes or referencing efforts in similar situations, many referenced again the Interlocal service model. Such service model sometimes requires the reassignment of students with disabilities to another school, and principals understood such practice helped ensure students received proper access to the supports called for in their IEP. In offering response to one scenario, Mark recalled the point he recognized the neighborhood school was likely not the right setting for a particular student. He said, "At some point we have

to be honest with ourselves as to whether we have the correct resources for this student to be successful, or if we are limiting the student's growth in some way." Yet, participants suggested the responsibility for finalizing such decisions for students within the context of efforts focused on relationship and care, often remained at odds with the other. In turn, the majority of principals expressed the decision to relocate a student to receive services remains one of the most difficult situations they manage despite the potential benefits of such relocation. Participants indicated a sense of mixed feelings about such decisions, and in some instances suggested they felt called to run interference between the Interlocal, teachers, and the families of children with disabilities. Even when approached with care and compassion, principals reported these were the types of decisions that often left them feeling as if they somehow disappointed or even failed the student in need. Following a vignette, Mark described the angst he felt in similar situations requiring the relocation of a student with significant disabilities. He divulged, "I don't like to send students to other places, because then I feel like I have let them down personally."

Given such internal conflict, some principals detailed their efforts to preserve an outcome that remained focused on the educational needs of the child, yet was driven by relationship and care. Detailing the level of obligation to the student and the parents in gathering all necessary assurances before determining a student's needs cannot be met in the neighborhood school, when given one scenario, Sue opted to reflect on her related efforts on behalf of a student with an emotional disturbance and offered,

I don't know if I am stubborn or what, but it takes a lot of my time. I want to see what the kid does. I want to make sure it is not about a teacher creating the problem, or it is not the result of an outside source. I want to try to do everything we can to keep them in the building.

In addition to the importance placed on committing the time, resources, and interventions in supporting the student, principals highlighted the importance they believed trust and relationship played as a precursor in holding what is often an emotionally charged conversation with parents. In response to one scenario, which called in part, for the relocation of a student to meet their educational needs, Mark again echoed the difficulties administrators face in making such decisions. Speaking to the concerted efforts made to ensure parents know such recommendation is truly based on a child's best interests he shared,

I like to get to know the parents and hopefully build some form of relationship, so that when they did get a recommendation, they would know it is coming from the right place.

From somebody that cared, and somebody who looked into it and invested time.

Following her initial response to a scenario detailing the trials both she and other school personnel faced in association with relocating one young man from their building, Sue too elected to expand further regarding the intentional effort and response she felt necessary in such situations. She said,

I have tried really hard to get to know the parents and how they feel before we make any decisions for the kids. Regardless of how difficult it is, we still need to use our resources first before we say to a parent, there is a program someplace else for your child.

Prompted by one scenario, Kay offered the personalized details of an experience with a set of parents who acted as fierce advocates for their set of twins with autism. She too highlighted the importance relationship played in successful relocation and a positive transition with not only for the student, but also for the family. She said,

A student with disabilities, especially if they are severe, just adds so much to a parent's stress level. I think we just don't know. We stretch parents who already in regular life have to try to figure out how to keep up.

As she reflected further on this scenario, Kay recognized a strained relationship existed between the parents and school personnel. In turn, a parent's related sense a child may not particularly be welcome at school may prevent the parent from truly being an active participant in problem solving on behalf of their child. Thus, she asserted, "In order for a move to happen and be successful, I had to build a relationship with those parents. They had to know that we wanted their kid here, but here just wasn't the best for their kid." In the face of such quandary, principals suggested they are called to double their efforts to nurture and extend relationship with students and families and further the aim of an approach centered in care. Yet, as she further detailed her experiences, Kay emphasized, such efforts to connect as well as extended compassion and care paid off. Reacting to one vignette, she recalled the importance of a particular turning point in the relationship with one family, the mother in particular and said,

She was just grateful that she felt like we did want her kids here. It was like that was the whole turning point in the relationship. Then the conversations about moving them was not about we have to get these kids out of here, but we want your boys to be there because these are all of the benefits they are going to have we just can't provide. So you know, it is about building that relationship with the parents first.

Principals emphasized such instances also demanded well thought out decisions with emphasis on the manner in which such message was delivered and received remained key. As he shared his experience related to a vignette, Mark revisited his efforts to balance the internal strife felt

when relocating a student with the charge to ensure the student was served in program truly aligned with his unique needs. He said,

I'm not trying to get rid of the student; I'm trying to figure out how to help him. There's a big difference. I just didn't want the student to feel like I was pushing him away, like I didn't want him here. I really had a hard time with the move, because I had formed a relationship with him.

As he offered his concluding thoughts within the context of a vignette regarding the complexities surrounding decision-making for special education, Mark asserted, "I need to know for me to sleep at night that we did it right." Thus, while the effort to build relationship and extend care is significant in many settings, principals recognized it remains particularly important in human service enterprises and social institutions such as schools. In turn, principals took seriously their role for influencing a safe, accessible, and accepting environment promoting inclusion and equity for some of society's most vulnerable members.

Chapter 5

Conclusions and Implications

This final chapter offers a review of the study surrounding the ethical framework(s) principals employed when navigating the complex ethical issues associated with their decision-making for special education. Along with a brief review of the conceptual framework used, also described in this chapter are the key conclusions developed through the analysis and synthesis of data collected throughout the study. Finally, a review of the study implications paired with proposals for future research serve to round out, and conclude this chapter.

Review of the Study

This study served to expand understanding of the ethical framework(s) principals employed as well as provided insight into the perspective of the principal surrounding the navigation of complex ethical issues associated with their decision-making for special education programming. The review of the literature detailed not only the rapid evolution of principal from manager to instructional leader for all students, but highlighted the dilemmas modern day principals regularly face as a result of competing interests and pressures paired with the law's primary focus on legal and technical action. Yet, despite such challenges and pressure to direct their focus on accountability, at the center of such decisions, are people. In turn, principals find themselves called to attend to a primary set of ethical principles to guide and inform their decision-making that readily affects others.

In relationship to such demands and expectation, I referenced the perspectives of consequentialism, deontology, virtue ethics (Northouse, 2015) as well as the perspective of care ethics (Held, 2006; Noddings, 2013), in my examination of principals' moral and political stories with regard to their leadership for special education. Accordingly, during ongoing analysis, I

devoted particular attention to participants' description of their aims, actions, and motivation in association with their leadership for special education. Such descriptions of their aims, actions and motivation were then linked back to the deliberative process, focus, and descriptors of motivation directly affiliated with the various ethical perspectives embedded within the conceptual framework. In turn, such approach allowed me to cull forth the particular perspective participants favored when making ethical leadership decisions.

Conclusions

As participants described their leadership for special education they referenced various ethical positions covering the different perspectives. However, without exception, all participants in the study discussed particular leadership actions, described specific thought processes, and/or detailed particular values consistent with the ethic of care. The ethic of care places strong emphasis on respect, care, nurturing, and relationships. Further concepts commonly affiliated with the ethic of care include concepts such as empathy, trust, unity, and empowerment (Gilligan, 1982; Noddings, 2013; Vogel, 2012). The frequency with which participants referenced concepts attributable to care resulted in well over half of the statements coded in affiliation with the care perspective.

The descriptors of their leadership efforts were not mutually exclusive to only this perspective. However, the frequency with which participants' cited the importance of relationship, as well as their primary description of the matter, manner, and motivation (Louis, Murphy, & Smylie, 2016) surrounding their leadership practice pointed to a perspective and underlying approach predominantly focused on relationships and extending care. As a result, caring was deemed the best perspective to help explain how these principals navigate the ethical dilemmas associated with special education that exists beyond the legal context. Key

conclusions included participants' primary process of cultivating a climate where all people matter, a focus on people first, a moral commitment to look beyond the rules, rigor, and regulation, and a fundamental motivation to cultivate support and promote unity through shared leadership. In addition, a final, yet important conclusion highlights principals' acute awareness of the rhetoric versus the realities, and their related concerns regarding the risk of diminished opportunity to fully advance leadership from a care perspective.

Deliberative Process - Cultivating a Culture Where People Matter

Principals frequently referenced the climate, culture, and opportunities they desired to establish in the school setting. Describing their related efforts, they asserted a primary aim surrounding their roles and responsibility for special education included ensuring people with disability felt well supported, safe, cared for, and genuinely included in the school and larger community settings. Furthermore, as principals offered their perspective surrounding their critical examination of various dilemmas, they detailed how they weighed one course of action versus another. While they concentrated largely on students, principals also frequently referenced considerations regarding the teachers, the larger community, and considered the potential significance their decision-making had on the interplay between various groups. In close alignment with Nodding's (2013) perspective on care, participants' responses implied a good portion of their deliberative process surrounded attending to, learning about, and trying to better understand the people and the community they served. First, such an approach assured principals made fully informed decisions. In addition, this approach increased the likelihood those readily impacted by their decision-making were more likely to feel as if they were seen, heard, listened to, and in turn, felt they truly mattered. Finally, principals remained sensitive to

how their decision-making served to further model, promote, and cultivate conditions under which all people felt valued and a sense of connectedness with one another.

Yet, participants conceded, the aim to cultivate conditions where people feel genuinely valued and included remains one of the loftiest, time consuming, and complex leadership tasks they regularly face. Specifically, principals highlighted dilemmas surrounding attitudinal barriers, organizational challenges, communication barriers, resource challenges, time constraints, as well as a general lack of knowledge and sensitivity. In addition, participants suggested individually and collectively, such complexities posed ongoing and significant threats to the quality of programming for students with disabilities if left unchecked.

Focus - A People First Mindset

Despite such challenges, emerging from principals' accounts detailing their navigation of complex issues remained a people first focus, with primary attention given to building and preserving human relationships. However, principals asserted creating an environment built upon trust, care, and fully committed to human relationship requires not only action, but also a truly conscious demeanor on their part. Several participants referenced a particular role model as a primary inspiration and influence on their leadership approach. Such reference was particularly common when describing their work with certain populations of students they perceived to be in need. Correspondingly, they highlighted the virtues and values they readily attributed to such positive relationships, some of which included dignity, trust, empathy, unity, and compassion. Such personal and professional values, paired with their descriptors of action including: creating high standards and expectations, nurturing the school culture and climate, ensuring a safe environment further suggested care was evidenced not only in their values, but also through their focused actions.

Yet, no one set of values, behaviors, or a particular set of actions in isolation supported the care perspective. Rather it was through the complimentary combination of values, behaviors, and action that caring leadership is practiced, and in turn, was evidenced in participants' descriptions in this study. Furthermore, principals' explanations suggested when care was fully established as a leadership practice, it not only guided them in how to respond to the needs of others, but help better define why and in what matter they should assist (Held, 2006).

Moral Conduct – Looking Beyond the Rigor, Regulation, and Rules

Participants also exhibited a strong, moral commitment to continue to stretch themselves. They spoke of the need for their staff, and the larger community to look beyond the traditional markers of compliance and task-orient approaches historically associated with successful schools. Specifically, they identified value in striving for a better balance. Principals were committed to exerting equal energy and effort to further acknowledge and increasingly advance the roles relationship and care play in creating safe, accessible, and accepting schools for all students. However, such desire to move away from and focus less on the managerial aspects of their work generated ambiguity and discomfort and demanded principals navigate and mediate yet another set of professional tensions. Over emphasis on student achievement, internal and external pressures related to teacher performance paired with the inherently legal nature of special education, undoubtedly created reduced opportunity to focus on relationship and extend care in the school setting. NCLB, its related performance demands, as well as subsequent efforts to tie student results directly back to teacher performance measures were meant to hold schools accountable for all students' learning and performance. While perhaps well intended, in many ways, participants implied this era of education back-fired in many ways, but particularly for vulnerable or at-risk student populations. Principals sensed the intense focus on meeting

performance indicators at all costs further perpetuated some personnel's notion of special education as a "place" for a student as opposed to a service to a student. As a result, some school personnel felt compelled to exclude certain students from the classroom in efforts to meet performance standards. With a primary aim centered not necessarily on the individual student or students, but on attaining a certain cut score, the opportunity for school personnel to readily attend to cultivation of relationships and extend themselves in care likely suffered.

While schools cannot go back in time and correct any resulting collateral damage, principals expressed a general sense of hope. Participants expressed cautious optimism in the increasing interest researchers, policy makers, school leaders, and employers are showing with regard to how schools support and develop non-academic skills and predispositions important not only for school, but post-secondary life. Current reform efforts and initiatives coming out of the Kansas Department of Education such as Kansans Can perhaps provide school leaders hope the last couple of decades imparted a few valuable lessons. While the latest initiatives do not abandon academic press and preparedness, they do initiate focus on students' social and emotional growth as it relates to skills such as teamwork, perseverance, and critical thinking (Kansas State Department of Education, 2017). Thus, after a decade plus on "accountability by number," comes a fresh perspective and consciousness that school leaders, personnel, and the larger community must attend to more than just the traditional makers of school success. Such new initiatives no longer focus solely on achievement and a primarily task-oriented approach. Rather they support research (Cranston et al., 2003) as well as principals' assertions surrounding the importance of cultivating relationships and care play in the school environment and the potential impact not only on short term achievement, but on long-term, post-school success.

While such reform efforts offer promise, principals felt attention and commitment to building relationships and extending themselves in care must become a priority, should more formally occupy a place in staff development and the schools' ongoing work (Louis et al., 2016). In the absence of moral driven, focused leadership from principals and other personnel who share ownership for developing care in schools, principals feared the largely task-oriented aspects of the last few decades threaten to creep back in. Failure to advance such aims could result in missed opportunity for school personnel to focus on aspects of schooling that participants contend hold strong promise to impact students, school communities, and larger society in positive and meaningful ways.

Motivation - Cultivating Support and Unity Through Shared Leadership

Principals viewed themselves as key to such efforts. However, given the time, energy and ongoing effort necessary to meet and sustain such aims, they understood such work requires the effort of not just one individual, or even just a few. Principals' comments suggested they desired to find ways to inspire others to take on greater leadership roles. Thus, a primary motivation or end goal principals shared was the desire to further cultivate the necessary support and unify others around the ongoing work to truly support all students. As a whole, principals clearly sensed the greatest potential to reach such aims likely remained in the collective powers of a shared leadership approach. It was through such shared knowledge, action, and effort principals identified the greatest promise to build the support, unity, and relational capacity to establish schools and communities fully committed to promoting education equity and opportunity for all students. Such appreciation for promoting collaboration, cooperation, and shared responsibility further reiterated principals' understanding and genuine value of the role interdependency between people plays in ensuring improving conditions and opportunity for all

students.

Principals actively spoke to their efforts to combine the knowledge, understanding, and skill sets of other school personnel when providing leadership and making decisions for special education. Such a collaborative approach allowed them to co-create options and approaches for addressing the complex problems cited in association with their leadership for special education. In addition, principals recognized the impact cultivating leadership in others could play not only in extending their leadership and values, but the potential to create a sense of shared ownership in meeting the need of diverse student populations.

By remaining purposeful with providing school personnel with the time and supports they need, principals saw potential to help school personnel grow in their comfort levels surrounding ongoing and authentic analysis of individual, collective, and school wide practices. In turn, not only would this likely support and grow school personnel's comfort level with active consideration and discussion surrounding current practices, but also encourage identification of areas for improved practice. Instead of the principal acting in isolation and exerting enormous amounts of time and effort to create buy in with others, school personnel are afforded the opportunity to not only identify concerns, but to be active participants in addressing such concerns. In turn, collective ownership and opportunity for ongoing, shared leadership is developed (Northouse, 2015). Rather than the leader leading, the principal is able to take his or her place alongside other school personnel (Bell et al., 2014). It is not one individual endeavoring to lead, rather such an approach encourages and promotes the ideas and ideals developed by the collective group to emerge and lead the way. Finally, such opportunities for shared participation and ownership in ongoing reflection, discussion, and practice also serve to support the development of informal and formal structures for accountability. This further aids

in the regular, ongoing analysis of the shared professional practices by not just a few individuals, but garners the support of many. The result is the capacity to sustain efforts long term supported by not just one person, rather the collective efforts of all school personnel in meeting the needs of all students.

Rhetoric versus Reality

Often the expectation of building relationships and extending care is inherently implied and even projected as an expectation of those working in the field of education. Yet, principals indicated school leaders and personnel remain overloaded by the demands affiliated with the profession. Consequently, participants hinted large gaps remain between the rhetoric and the reality. Their sense was this was particularly true when it came to finding sufficient opportunity for school personnel to truly focus on building relationships and extend themselves in care in the school setting. Despite such gaps, in alignment the literature and from the shared perspective of care, principals were keenly aware at the heart of school leadership is a complex, moral relationship between people (Bonde & Firenze, 2013; Ciulla, 2014; Northouse, 2015). In turn, participants' descriptions of the "how," "what," and, "why" surrounding their leadership for special education were far less focused on the process, policy, and procedure.

The general aims of schooling tends to center around safety and nurturance; supporting student learning, development, independence, self-reliance, and ability to function in and contribute to community; promoting academic success and general well-being; as well as preparing students for work, further education, and citizenship (Coulter & Wiens, 2008). Schools, in turn serve as a significant social structure for children, and thus, the interactions between students, teachers, counselors, and administrators all play important roles in meeting such needs of increasingly diverse student populations (Frick et al., 2013). In accordance with

meeting such a continuum of instructional and social aims, society expects educators to care about their students. In alignment with such expectations, most serving in the profession would likely concur extending care is an important piece of what they do. Yet, after over well over a decade of school personnel being relentlessly hammered regarding accountability, coupled with numerous other pressures affiliated with modern day public education, principals' accounts suggested school personnel feel dejected, overwhelmed, and bewildered. They believed school personnel sincerely care about the students they serve, and likewise the work they do. Yet, principals insinuated the pressures personnel continually face have significant consequence including a lack of time, energy, and the emotional capacity for genuine focus on relationships and communicating concern and care for students and one another.

Consequently, principals and their staff decried the unintended consequences of such a task-oriented, imbalanced approach to school organization and leadership. While expectations surrounding accountability will likely remain high, other stakeholders such as parents, community members, employers, and policy makers recently have taken note of such imbalance as well. In turn, principals are prepared to use such opportunity to further promote reasonable balance between the task-oriented measures in school and the importance relationship, non-academic skills, and other predispositions play in students' success. More than ever, principals sensed it was critical school personnel convey a message regarding the importance care, relationship, and non-traditional markers of success likely play in the school setting and students' post school life.

Implications

This study expanded the understanding of the ethical framework(s) principals' employ and principals' perceptions of the complex ethical issues associated with decision-making for

special education programming, and highlighted the importance cultivating relationships and caring plays in schools. While a great deal of literature focuses on the importance of care between teachers and students, this study extends the work on ethics and school leadership. Furthermore, it highlights the importance the role of care plays in leadership, particularly for vulnerable student populations in the school setting. Consequently, this study may serve to offer counterbalance to the tendency to approach special education as primarily a legal enterprise. In addition, this study may serve to advance further consideration of new approaches to pre-service training and professional development, school leadership practice, and the study of leadership for special education as an ethical imperative.

Implications for Pre-Service Training and Professional Development

Principals remain at the center of many school related transformations. However, the charge for approaching school leadership is also an ethical imperative. Therefore, building school leaders' capacity to support others in cultivating relationship and extending care in schools cannot depend solely on the principal. Rather the accountability for developing the necessary aims, virtues, and mindset in school leaders and other school personnel belongs to many (Fullan, 2003; Louis et al., 2016). Yet historically, the topic of ethics goes relatively untouched in principal pre-service preparations, and the same can be said for the subsequent professional development often offered to school leaders while serving in the field. Thus, those providing oversight of preparatory programs, certification, evaluation, and ongoing professional development opportunities for principals need to contemplate how to support and grow school leaders' capacity for ethical consideration when making decisions. Perhaps further consideration should be given to how caring school leadership might best be cultivated, nurtured, and advanced. Moreover, the challenge for developing such capacity extends not just to the principal, nor his or

her capability to influence individual teachers, or small groups of select school personnel.

Rather such leadership must have the capability of influencing yet even the larger school-wide and extended community settings. Therefore, principals require specific supports and direction with not only initial planning, but for the ongoing support and continuing development of diverse groups of stakeholders in order to meet such aims.

Implications for Leadership Practice

All students deserve to be part of a caring community where they have opportunity to feel valued and contribute in a school setting fully dedicated to honoring and celebrating diversity. Only when principals attend to both the legal and ethical dimensions of leadership are they able to fulfill the critical role of providing educational opportunities for students with disabilities (Bon, 2012; Frick et al., 2013; Theoharis & Causton, 2014). Yet, due to the inherent legal nature of special education, the importance ethics plays in principals' decision-making may be overshadowed by the compliance, policy, and processes frequently associated with the oversight of special education programming.

From an ethical standpoint, the human service orientation of leadership for special education paired with the stress and demands of navigating complex decision-making for such programs likely necessitates principals engage in regular reflection and contemplative learning (Burnell & Schnackenberg, 2015; Turkel & Ray, 2004). Yet the challenge of finding and protecting the necessary time for regular personal and professional reflection and contemplation remains. In order to fully attend to such ethical considerations, and positively influence others thinking and actions within the schools and the larger community setting, principals must be afforded the time necessary to care for themselves and reflect upon their leadership regularly. In addition, protecting the necessary time and ensuring principals prioritize opportunities to

connect, debrief, and learn with and from others is essential. Only when such reflection and contemplative learning is established as a true priority for school leaders, can principals truly be prepared to actively move forward and cultivate and garner the support of other stakeholders. Furthering such understanding and garnering the support of others increases the promise of meeting the cognitive and social needs of all students, but particularly those not well served in the past (Fullan, 2003). Failure to properly acknowledge and attend such significant considerations increases the likelihood managerial tasks will overshadow and crowd out aims intended to round out and improve the educational experience for vulnerable student populations.

Implications for Further Study

Research has progressively focused on ethical standards, ethical competencies, and models of ethical decision-making associated with school leadership (Ciulla, 2004; Mayer et al., 2009; Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2010). Yet, investigations specific to ethics and leadership for special education remain in their infancy (Bon & Bigbee, 2011; Howe & Miramontes, 1992). In addition, research within the context of districts acting jointly and cooperatively for the purposes of providing special education services also remains relatively scant. Thus, both special education as well as the manner in which the provision of special education services are provided offer possible opportunity for further focus and research in relationship to ethical standards, ethical competencies, and models of ethical decision-making associated with school leadership (Frick et al., 2013; Gardiner & Tenuto, 2015; Hasazi & Shepherd, 2009).

Participants' description of their leadership and how they navigate through complex dilemmas for special education were based upon their own personal and educational experiences and were filtered through their understanding as a result of such experiences. Relatedly, many participants credited a particular person or role model as a primary source of inspiration and

influence for their leadership approach. Participants suggested having such role model, and specifically being cared for by this individual, significantly contributed to their approach for leadership. Thus, additional investigation regarding in what ways a role model may contribute to being an ethical leader, if ethical leaders have specific experiences or traits in common, and/or if ethical leadership can be taught may be warranted.

In addition, it is important to bear in mind this study was limited to the perspective of only the principal with regard to their decision making for a particular student population. Advancing the idea of school leadership as an ethical imperative and the ways in which caring supports impacts students likely requires a broader approach. While emphasis on ethical leadership and caring in schools may in large part influence necessary reform and address some concerns regarding practices and outcomes for student with disabilities, in isolation, it is likely not enough. Rather, the principal's influence and at what levels ethical leadership has the greatest potential for impact must be considered not only as it relates to one particular student population, but within the context of the larger school, and at the community level.

Finally, while extending the work on ethics and school leadership highlighting the perspective of principals with regard to the role care plays in leadership for special education, this study serves to generate further questions for investigation. These include but are not limited to: In what ways does ethical leadership matter? How does ethical leadership impact student outcomes for student with disabilities? In what ways can ethical leadership be cultivated, nurtured, and promoted not only in and among principals, but within teachers and the larger communities supporting increasingly diverse student populations?

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APPENDICES

Appendix A

Individual Interview Protocol

Hello, my name is Christy Skelton and I am a doctoral student at Wichita State University in the Educational Leadership program. I am also an Assistant Director of Special Education for the Sedgwick County Area Educational Services Interlocal #618, thus affording me the opportunity to work closely with principals as they navigate complex issues associated with decision-making for special education programming. However, my role here today is in contrast to my professional one. Instead, my interests lie in ensuring the field has the necessary information to properly inform and address the full continuum of support needs principals have when attending to special education decision-making. I appreciate your willingness to take part in my research. This study will examine the ethical framework(s) principals' employ when navigating complex issues associated with decision-making for special education programming. You were selected as a participant in this study because of your role as the primary administrator assigned to the oversight and supervision of special education programming for the building. Before we begin, I would like to share a few procedures for our conversation. With your approval, I would like to audio record our conversations for response clarity and to assure the accurate analysis of data when reporting the findings of this study. Any audio recordings I transcribe will be made available your review, ensuring accuracy of the transcription. Although we will be on a first name basis, no names or identifying comments will be used when I report the results of this session. You can be assured of complete confidentiality. This session will last approximately 45-60 minutes. Again, thank you for your willingness to participate in this study.

Interview Questions

1. Before we proceed any further, let begin with a few initial questions:
 - a. Do I have your permission to record our interview?
 - b. Have you read the informed consent?
 - c. Do you have any questions concerning the consent document ?
2. Please introduce yourself with your name, position, and years of experience in your current position.
3. What was your experience before becoming an administrator and what in particular led you to choose this career path?
4. Has disability touched your life? If so, please share how.
5. Tell me about the special education services in your building.
6. Describe the responsibilities you have:
 - a. Toward students with regard to special education.
 - b. Towards the school community with regard to special education.
 - c. Towards the public with regard to special education.
7. What keeps you up at night regarding your responsibilities in association with special education?

8. Who acts as your support system?
9. What types of supports do you have available when faced with a special education situation in your school?
10. Who do you tend to turn to and which supports do you most often seek out when faced with making special education related decisions?
11. Are there any barriers that make it difficult for you to access supports or fully attend to such matters, and if so, would you please share your perceptions of such barriers?

Appendix B

Vignettes

My name is Christy Skelton and I am a doctoral student at Wichita State University in the Educational Leadership program. I am also an Assistant Director of Special Education for the Sedgwick County Area Educational Services Interlocal #618, thus affording me the opportunity to work closely with principals as they navigate complex issues associated with decision-making for special education programming. Given my professional position, principals often seek support with or relay information regarding their experiences and decision-making for special for special education. It is from such work I have developed and will share with you a few scenarios detailing such situations or occurrences, while remaining attentive to ensuring no personally identifiable information is shared.

As the primary administrator assigned to the oversight and supervision of special education programming for the building, you will be asked to share how you might respond given certain situations or occurrences and what supports are in place to help guide your decision-making. I anticipate principals will report wide variances in their approaches and the supports made available to them when addressing such situations. My role here today is in contrast to my professional one. I am neither here to consult nor evaluate. Instead, my interests lie in ensuring the field has the necessary information to properly inform and address the full continuum of support needs principals have when attending to special education decision-making.

With your approval, I will audio record our conversation for response clarity and to assure the accurate analysis of data when reporting the findings of this study. Although we remain on a first name basis, no names or identifying comments will be used when I report the results of this session. You are assured of complete confidentiality. I anticipate this session to last approximately 60-90 minutes. Again, thank you for your willingness to participate in this subsequent session.

Before we proceed, do I have your permission to record our interview today?

Vignette 1

Ms. C, is a well-respected, highly effective teacher in her 15th year of teaching. Visiting with colleagues in the teacher's lounge, Ms. C complains about a special education student experiencing extreme difficulties while fully included in her classroom. She identifies the student by name, sharing details about the student's academic and behavioral performance and begins openly questioning the child's educational placement in the general education classroom. A licensed staff member who was present in the lounge comes forward and expresses concerns to you.

1. This scenario may bring to mind a special education situation you have faced. If so, would you please share that experience with me?
2. What are the particular issues associated with this situation?

3. What considerations do you take into account when approaching such a situation?
4. Describe the deliberative process you use when approaching such a situation.
5. Is there anyone you might turn to for guidance or support in such an instance?
6. Reflect for a moment on the decision you made in relationship to the situation you described. How did that decision work out:
 - a. For you?
 - b. The special education student?
 - c. Others involved?
7. In what ways did your decision influence you future decision-making for special education?

Vignette 2

Ms. K gives the class directions for a writing assignment. Ryan is not paying attention and misses the directions. Despite a number special education services and supports in place, Ryan often engages in behaviors that result in individual and class-wide distractions such as tapping his pencil, humming, and talking out of turn. Ryan asks for the directions to be repeated. Other students begin to ridicule Ryan for not paying attention. Frustrated with his lack of accountability and the other students' behavior, Ms. K ignores Ryan's request to repeat the directions as well as the other students taunting, and continues to pass out the material necessary for the assignment. A few days later, Ryan's mother calls and expresses concerns about this incident and others seemingly similar in nature.

1. This scenario may bring to mind a special education situation you have faced. If so, would you please share that experience with me?
2. What are the particular issues associated with this situation?
3. What considerations do you take into account when approaching such a situation?
4. Describe the deliberative process you use when approaching such a situation.
5. Is there anyone you might turn to for guidance or support in such an instance?
6. Reflect for a moment on the decision you made in relationship to the situation you described. How did that decision work out:
 - a. For you?
 - b. The special education student?
 - c. Others involved?
7. In what ways did your decision influence you future decision-making for special education?

Vignette 3

At a recent IEP meeting, Mr. D shared out data associated with a student's present level of educational performance in the content area of math. Following consideration of the information presented with regard to the student's performance math and the services needed, the IEP team determined that a change in educational placement was necessary for math instruction. However, directly following the IEP meeting, one school based team member quietly indicates

their intent to submit a dissenting opinion with regard to the change in placement, offering they would detail their reasons within the written statement of dissent. Upon review of the staff member's dissenting opinion, it seems there may be concerns regarding the fidelity of the data Mr. D shared and thus, the primary basis upon which the recommended change in educational placement was made.

1. This scenario may bring to mind a special education situation you have faced. If so, would you please share that experience with me?
2. What are the particular issues associated with this situation?
3. What considerations do you take into account when approaching such a situation?
4. Describe the deliberative process you use when approaching such a situation.
5. Is there anyone you might turn to for guidance or support in such an instance?
6. Reflect for a moment on the decision you made in relationship to the situation you described. How did that decision work out:
 - a. For you?
 - b. The special education student?
 - c. Others involved?
7. In what ways did your decision influence your future decision-making for special education?

Vignette 4

A new family moves into the school district. With a total of five school age children, records obtained indicate one of the five children received special education services in the previous district of enrollment. Of the five siblings, two also happen to be twin, 4th grade boys. One of the twins is the student with the IEP and has a significant disability, while the other twin is typically developing.

Following a review services and supports outlined in the IEP during a move in meeting, it becomes clear that the educational needs of the student with the significant disability can not be met in the neighborhood school. Administration explains programs for students with the most significant disabilities are not offered in every building. Rather such services are "clustered" in particular schools across the member districts participating in the Interlocal. This ensures the specially trained personnel, special resources and equipment, modified curriculum and materials, specially designed environment, and highly differentiated instruction necessary to meet those students needs is readily available to ensure each student's FAPE.

Their first experience with an Interlocal, the parents seemed shocked to learn their children, especially the twins boys, will not be educated within the same school and/or district. Mom indicates she is not in agreement with the child's assignment to another attendance center. Furthermore, she is adamant he will not be attendance until this is resolved to her satisfaction and requests additional information regarding possible avenues for dispute resolution. By week's end, you are notified by district administration a formal complaint and a request for Due Process have been filed with the State Education Agency with regard to this matter.

1. This scenario may bring to mind a special education situation you have faced. If so, would you please share that experience with me?
2. What are the particular issues associated with this situation?
3. What considerations do you take into account when approaching such a situation?
4. Describe the deliberative process you use when approaching such a situation.
5. Is there anyone you might turn to for guidance or support in such an instance?
6. Reflect for a moment on the decision you made in relationship to the situation you described. How did that decision work out:
 - a. For you?
 - b. The special education student?
 - c. Others involved?
7. In what ways did your decision influence your future decision-making for special education?

Vignette 5

Gage is a 5th grade student who hit his teacher following redirection for undesirable language in class. Following review of the incident, school administration suspended him for three days. Gage was also suspended for four days the first nine weeks of the school year after he was caught stealing money from a teacher's purse. Thus, the school has imposed seven FAPE free days for the purposes of carrying out disciplinary action. Following notification of the most recent three-day suspension, his parents invoke protections under the IDEA. The parents claim they have previously expressed concerns about his behavior and have requested the school's assistance with his behavioral concerns, but have received little or no response from the district regarding such requests.

1. This scenario may bring to mind a special education situation you have faced. If so, would you please share that experience with me?
2. What are the particular issues associated with this situation?
3. What considerations do you take into account when approaching such a situation?
4. Describe the deliberative process you use when approaching such a situation.
5. Is there anyone you might turn to for guidance or support in such an instance?
6. Reflect for a moment on the decision you made in relationship to the situation you described. How did that decision work out:
 - a. For you?
 - b. The special education student?
 - c. Others involved?
7. In what ways did your decision influence your future decision-making for special education?



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Appendix C

Consent Form

Purpose: You are invited to participate in a research study intended to increase understanding of the ethical framework(s) principals' employ when navigating complex ethical issues associated with decision-making for special education programming.

Participant Selection: As a principal employed by one of the member districts comprising the Butler County Special Education Interlocal, you were purposefully selected as a possible participant in this study because your Superintendent identified you as the primary administrator assigned to the oversight and supervision of special education programming for the building. Approximately six to nine participants will be sought from across two member districts of the Butler County Special Education Interlocal to participate in individual interviews and provide response to vignettes.

Explanation of Procedures: Should you elect to participate, your participation will consist of an individual interview that will take approximately 45-60 minutes. Samples of questions include 1) Describe some examples of dilemmas you have encountered associated with special education matters and 2) When a dilemma presents itself, what does your decision-making process involve? Following the initial interview, I will schedule a subsequent session. In this subsequent session, I will ask you to respond to certain situations or occurrences, entailing some form of moral dilemma associated with decision-making for special education. Given a scenario, I will ask you to share details such as how you would go about gathering any relevant information and the sources you would likely consult with, as well detail how you would evaluate your decision-making options in such a situation. I anticipate this second session will take approximately 60-90 minutes. With your approval, I would like to audio record our conversations for response clarity and to assure the accurate analysis of data when reporting the findings of this study. Any audio recordings I transcribe will be made available for your review, ensuring accuracy of the transcription.

Discomfort/Risks: There are minimal risks anticipated with participation in this study. However, if at any time you feel uneasy with a question, you may opt to pass. During each session, you are encouraged to be open in your responses. All of your responses will remain confidential and your participation is voluntary throughout the course of the study.

Benefits: The purpose of this study is to gain a better understanding of the ethical framework(s) principals' employ when navigating complex ethical issues associated with decision-making for special education programming. Your participation may result in an opportunity to revisit the complexity of your own leadership role as well as actively reflect on how you as well as other principals navigate the dilemmas associated with complying with the law while trying to do what

is best for students. Results may be published in academic journals and presented at conferences in order to share what I have learned from the research study.

Confidentiality: Any identifiable information acquired through your participation in this study will remain confidential. Participation in the study will remain strictly voluntary. I will maintain strict adherence to proper measures to ensure the confidentiality of participants. Pseudonyms will be used to conceal names in an effort maintain the confidentiality of study-related information. However, to provide assurances the study is properly completed and with the utmost level of diminished risk to participants, there are instances where this information must be released. By signing this form, you are permission to share information about you with the following groups:

- Office for Human Research Protections or other federal, state, or international regulatory agencies;
- The Wichita State University Institutional Review Board;
- Butler County Special Education Interlocal, #638

Results of this study may be published. However, in such instance, any publication or presentation regarding the study will not include the names of participants.

Please be advised the related research records will be retained for at least 5 years following the completion of the research and will be maintained on secure data password protected storage. Signed participant informed consent documents and written research summary will be maintained.

Refusal/Withdrawal: Participation in this study remains voluntary. Your decision to participate or decline will in no way influence your future relations with Wichita State University or your employing school district. Should you elect to participate in this study, you are free to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty.

Contact: If you have any questions about this research, you can contact Mrs. Christy Skelton at 316-619-7205 or clskelton@shockers.wichita.edu or contact: Dr. Jean Patterson at 316-978-6392 or jean.patterson@wichita.edu, CLES, Wichita State University Wichita, Ks. 67260-0142. Should have questions pertaining to your rights as a research subject, or about research-related injury, you can contact the Office of Research and Technology Transfer at Wichita State University, 1845 Fairmount Street, Wichita, KS 67260-0007, telephone (316) 978-3285.

You are under no obligation to participate in this study. Your signature below indicates that:

- You have read (or someone has read to you) the information provided above,
- You are aware that this is a research study,
- You have had the opportunity to ask questions and have had them answered to your satisfaction, and
- You have voluntarily decided to participate.

You are not giving up any legal rights by signing this form. You will be given a copy of this consent form to keep.

Printed Name of Subject

Signature of Subject

Date

Printed Name of Witness

Witness Signature

Date