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The Exemplary High School Principal: A Mixed Methods Study of How Personal Motivation and Professional Core Values Influence the Practice, Priorities and Decisions of Award-Winning School Leaders

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THE EXEMPLARY HIGH SCHOOL PRINCIPAL: A MIXED METHODS STUDY
OF HOW PERSONAL MOTIVATION AND PROFESSIONAL CORE
VALUES INFLUENCE THE PRACTICE, PRIORITIES AND
DECISIONS OF AWARD-WINNING SCHOOL LEADERS

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO
THE FACULTY OF THE GRADUATE SCHOOL OF EDUCATION
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BY

ERIN C. LUBY

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ABSTRACT

This study of award-winning high school principals was designed to distill lessons from highly effective school leaders. The research explored how personal motivation and professional core values influence the practice, priorities and decisions of exemplary principals. The research followed a sequential explanatory mixed methods design. Participants included school leaders across a 10-state region who won their State Principal of the Year award from 2007 to 2017. The first phase of data collection utilized a survey, and the second phase was comprised of semi-structured interviews.

Principals indicated they were motivated to become educators because of their desire to have a positive impact on children, the influence of others, and their passion for a subject area or co-curricular activity. Key reasons they became principals were to help others, to positively influence student achievement, and to impact school culture. Additional motivators included encouragement they received and modeling they observed from school leaders. Dispositional traits they shared – specifically optimism, a belief that all students can achieve, a growth mindset, and a passion for helping others – impacted their career choice. Personal values also significantly influenced their vocational decisions.

Principals articulated a salient integration between their personal core values and the values that inform their on-the-job decisions. Guiding values include integrity, compassion, fairness, equity, respect, empathy, and honesty. They emphasized they try
to keep students at the center of their decisions, regardless of complexities or circumstances. When making decisions, principals recommended gathering information, analyzing and weighing options, collaborating, and taking time for reflection. Their decisions are informed by the best interests of students, their values, previous experiences, and consideration of creative solutions. Data indicated that award-winning principals integrate the ethics of care, critique, justice, and the profession, constitutive elements of Shapiro and Stefkovich’s Multiple Ethical Paradigm approach to educational leadership, into their decisions as reflective practitioners.
CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

Purpose of the Study

This study was designed to explore what motivations and core values award-winning high school principals use to guide their practice. First, the research identified why exemplary principals chose to enter the field of education and what led them to the role of principal. The research then examined how the educators’ daily practice and priorities are influenced by these same theoretical concepts of personal motivation and professional core values. By analyzing how motivation and values inform the vocational and on-the-job decisions of excellent principals, this study aimed to provide a model for how school leaders can align theory with best practice.

A wealth of existing research articulates the significant impact that a building leader, specifically a school principal, has on student achievement (Fullan, 2010; Gajda & Militello, 2008; Larsen & Hunter, 2014; Mitchell, Kensler & Tschannen-Moran, 2015; Odden, 2011; Ripley, 2013; Robinson, Lloyd & Rowe, 2008; Schmoker, 2006; Waters, Marzano, & McNulty, 2003). High quality principals are constitutive elements of effective schools: “given the perceived importance of leadership, it is no wonder that an effective principal is thought to be a necessary precondition for an effective school” (Marzano, Waters & McNulty, 2005, p. 5). Larsen and Hunter (2014) continue that “a principal’s leadership is critical to the success of a school” (p. 75). Ripley (2013) hones
in on the decisions that principals make as crucial elements of their leadership: “The leader matters more than any other factor. Yes, the teachers are critically important, too, but you can’t pick your child’s teacher in our system…Nothing matters more than the decisions the principal makes about whom to hire, how to train, and whom to let go. (p. 215). This underscores the importance of training, recruiting, and supporting highly effective school principals (Gajda & Militello, 2008; Hallinger & Heck, 1996; Schmoker, 2006; Waters et al., 2003).

Jim Collins (2005) speaks to the importance of leadership within the business and nonprofit sectors in a different, but equally compelling, way. In his research on how organizations move from “good” to “great,” he surmises that “Greatness flows first and foremost from having the right people in the key seats” (p. 14). Collins asserts that this applies to the education sector as well as other fields. Motivated, high-quality leaders, involved at all levels of education, are vital to establishing positive change in their schools and systems (Council on Foreign Relations [CFR], 2012, p. 57). For any organization, including any school, to be highly successful, talented people need to be in key positions within the organization (Collins, 2001; Collins, 2005). This study of high school principals begins by analyzing how and why award-winning educators (“the right people”) entered the field of educational leadership (“the key seats”) (Collins, 2005).

In addition to analyzing the key motivations and beliefs that informed the vocational choice of award-winning principals, this study explored how personal and professional core values inform their decisions as practitioners. For leaders, internal beliefs or values are always involved with their decision-making (Raun & Leithwood,
Leithwood and Steinbach (1993) concur: “What principals do depends on what they think” (p. 106). Larsen and Hunter (2014) suggest that “secondary principals spend a significant amount of their mental capacity looking deeply into decisions and weighing them in relation to their core values and beliefs” (p. 84). These decisions often do not come with a road map and require thoughtful and deliberate consideration. Larsen and Hunter (2014) describe this as “sparsely mapped terrain [that] an administrator must traverse using her/his core values as a guiding compass when confronted with the challenges of daily decision-making” (p. 72). This study will examine the link between beliefs and actions – both in terms of vocational choice and on-the-job decisions – of highly effective secondary school principals.

Though research on the impact of excellent principals is plentiful (CFR, 2012; Fullan, 2014; Marzano et al., 2005; Schmoker, 2006; Ripley, 2013; Waters et al., 2013), much can be learned by listening directly to the reflections and perspectives of successful high school principals. This study intends to add to the body of existing research by asking award-winning leaders directly how they integrate their values and motivations with their practice. Vogel (2012) articulates,

Additional research is needed with a larger sample of educational leaders to identify a core set of values that, taken together, can form a practical ethical framework that assists educational leaders in responding to the often competing purposes of schooling to better serve both the larger society and those who have special needs. (p. 12)
The researcher believes this examination of the connection between motivations, core values, and decisions will address this gap. She hopes that this study of distinguished “voices from the field” may provide a map for current and future school leaders, district administrators, and educational leadership training programs, to follow.

**Research Questions**

The following research questions guided this study of how personal motivation and professional core values influence the practice, priorities, and decisions of award-winning high school principals:

1. What motivations and values lead outstanding high school principals to choose their career paths?
   a. Why did they decide to enter the field of education?
   b. Why did they decide to become principals?
   c. How did they know this was the right path?

2. What personal and professional core values do outstanding secondary principals use to guide their priorities and how do these values impact their decisions?

3. What are the implications for current and future principals, educational leadership training programs, district supervisors, and those involved with hiring school leaders?

**Significance of the Problem**

In recent years, a number of metrics have indicated that the United States is lagging behind other countries in its educational outcomes for students. International and
domestic data show that educational achievement by American youth is mediocre at best and that the rate of improvement is insignificant (Council on Foreign Relations [CFR], 2012; Hanushek & Peterson, 2013; Hanushek, Peterson, & Woessmann, 2012; National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2016; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD] 2012; Ripley, 2013). In a recent task force report on U.S. Education Reform and National Security (2012), its authors succinctly express the problem: “It is apparent to the Task Force that U.S. students are not developing the knowledge and skills they need to contribute to America’s future economic growth or security” (CFR, 2012, p. 41). This committee, chaired by former New York City Schools Chancellor Joel I. Klein and former U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, warns that the “nation’s prosperity is endangered” as a result of mediocrity and stagnation (CFR, 2012, p. 3). The Council on Foreign Relations continues that “poorly educated and semi-skilled Americans cannot expect to effectively compete for jobs against fellow U.S. citizens or global peers, and are left unable to fully participate in and contribute to society” (CFR, 2012, p. 8).

**International Comparisons**

International comparative metrics such as the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) and the Trends in International Math and Science (TIMSS) tests indicate that student achievement in the United States is average compared to other countries. Ripley (2013) summarizes, “Compared to most countries, the United States was typical, not much better nor much worse” (p. 4). Additionally, PISA and TIMSS results indicate that when comparing aggregate student scores in the United States
longitudinally to identify trends, results indicate little improvement over time. 

International metrics relate mediocre and stagnant results for American students.

**Program for International Student Assessment (PISA).** The PISA, an international exam administered in more than 70 countries and educational systems every three years, is prominent among these global comparative indicators. Coordinated by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), the PISA measures the performance of 15-year old students in mathematics, science, reading literacy and problem solving. Acting Commissioner of the National Center for Education Statistics Peggy Carr (2016) articulates that the “PISA’s goal is to assess students’ preparation for the challenges of life as young adults” (NCES, 2016).

Following the release of the 2009 PISA results, former U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan presented a disconcerting interpretation: “The findings, I'm sorry to report, show that the United States needs to urgently accelerate student learning to remain competitive in the knowledge economy of the 21st century” (2010). Results and commentary did not change following release of the 2012 results. For example, the 2012 exam indicated that the average Mathematics score for American students was lower than the average for all OECD countries, with 29 of 70 countries scoring higher than the United States (OECD, 2012). The United States’ results were equally mediocre on the Science and Reading components of the 2012 PISA, with 22 countries scoring higher than the United States in Science and 19 countries scoring higher in Reading (OECD, 2012). Following the release of the 2012 PISA results, Duncan reiterated his earlier message: “The big picture of U.S. performance on the 2012 PISA is straightforward and
stark: It is a picture of educational stagnation. The brutal truth, that urgent reality, must serve as a wake-up call against educational complacency and expectations” (2013).

Results from the 2015 PISA exam, released in December 2016, indicate no measurable change in the average scores of 15-year old students from the U.S. on Reading literacy and Science exams since the previous test in 2012 (NCES, 2016). The U.S. average (score of 496) was not measurably different from the OECD average (score of 493) in Science. In Reading literacy, the U.S. average (score of 497) was also not much different from the OECD average (score of 493). Mathematics results have continued to decline since the 2009 test, placing the United States below the average for all OECD test nations. For example, during the 2015 test round, the U.S. average in Mathematics (score of 470) was below the OECD average (score of 490). This Mathematics average has declined from its 2012 average (score of 481) and 2009 average (score of 487). The economic implications of these results are significant: “economists had found an almost one-to-one match between PISA scores and a nation’s long-term economic growth” (Ripley, 2013, p. 24). Likewise, correlation data between PISA results and college matriculation rates is striking: “PISA scores were a better predictor of who would go to college than report cards” (p. 24).

**Trends in International Math and Science (TIMSS).** A second international indicator is the TIMSS assessment, a cross-national comparative study coordinated through Boston College and the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (NCES, 2016). The TIMSS assessment has been administered internationally six times to students in 4th-grade and 8th-grade, in 1995, 1999, 2003,
2007, 2011, and 2015 (NCES, 2016). In 2015 there were more than 50 educational systems that participated in the 4th-grade test and more than 40 systems that participated in the 8th-grade test. In the United States, about 10,000 students and 250 schools at each grade (for a total of 20,000 total students and 500 total schools) were selected at random to represent the country for the 2015 TIMSS assessments (Carr, 2016; NCES, 2016).

Results of the 2011 TIMSS assessment reveal that United States scores are average in comparison to results from other countries. For example, on the 2011 8th-grade Mathematics test, the United States scored in the top-24 of the 57 nations that participated. On the 2011 8th-grade Science test, the United States scored in the top-23 of the 56 nations that participated (NCES, 2012). In this same year (2011), United States 4th-grade students’ aggregate scores placed the U.S. in the top-15 internationally in Mathematics (compared to the top-24 result of U.S. 8th-grade students) and in the top-10 internationally in Science (compared to the top-23 result of U.S. 8th-grade students). This illustrates that the United States’ rank, in comparison to other countries, decreased as students moved from 4th-grade to 8th-grade in 2011 (NCES, 2012). When comparing average scores and country rankings between the 2011-2015 TIMSS exams, the same results held true. There was no measurable change in average scores between 2011 and 2015 in 4th-grade Mathematics, 4th-grade Science, or 8th-grade Science. The United States improved in 8th-grade Mathematics, as the US average score of 518 was higher than the TIMSS average score of 500. However, when comparing overall improvements longitudinally, results indicate that the international rank of the United States has not improved measurably since 2007, indicating a lack of aggregate growth in test results.
Assessment validity. Critics of these assessments call attention to validity and reliability issues evident in the PISA and TIMSS (Brown, 2013; Carnoy & Rothstein, 2013; Hanushek & Peterson, 2013; Meyer, Heinz-Dieter & Zahedi, 2014; Tampio, 2015). A particularly insightful critique can be found in a report for the Economic Policy Institute (EPI), where Carnoy and Rothstein (2013) caution that sweeping generalizations about PISA and TIMSS test results do not capture the complexity or nuances present in test administration. They point out disparities in the sample of testers from country to country. They assert that these exams are not reliable indicators because testers in different countries come from highly varied contexts and backgrounds. For example, Carnoy and Rothstein argue, “For a valid assessment of how well American schools perform, policymakers should compare the performance of U.S. students with that of students in other countries who have been and are being shaped by approximately similar home and community environments” (p. 82). They continue that the data does not capture the nuance of how student performance changes over time, and there are significant inconsistencies in test results that call into question assessment validity (p. 82). Ultimately, the Economic Policy Institute’s report cautions: “To make judgments only on the basis of national average scores, on only one test, at only one point in time, without comparing trends on different tests that purport to measure the same thing, and without disaggregation by social class groups, is the worst possible choice” (as cited in Carnoy & Rothstein, 2013, p. 84).

These arguments are valid, and policy-makers should not consider the PISA and TIMSS in isolation when analyzing the state of education in the United States (Brown,
2013; Carnoy & Rothstein, 2013; Hanushek & Peterson, 2013; Meyer et al., 2014; Tampio, 2015). Hanushek and Peterson (2013) recognize flaws in the PISA, but still argue that it is a useful data point when assessing academic achievement: “While there are issues of measurement that warrant further examination and there are some apparent differences across subject area, the overwhelming fact of weak academic achievement among American youth can no longer be in dispute” (p. 15). Andreas Schleicher, Director for Education and Skills and Special Advisor on Education Policy at the OECD, also recognizes that the PISA is an imperfect instrument, claiming “but it was better than any other option, and it got better each year” (as cited in Ripley, 2013, p. 19). Schleicher, who created and still coordinates the PISA, adds, “without data, you are just another person with an opinion” (as cited in Ripley, 2013, p. 19). Though imperfect, these results provide a comparative frame of reference for consideration in evaluating the effectiveness of the United States’ educational system (Duncan, 2013; Hanushek & Peterson, 2013; Ripley, 2013). The Council on Foreign Relations (2012) provides this concise interpretation: “Measured against global standards, far too many U.S. schools are failing to teach students the academic skills and knowledge they need to compete and succeed” (p. 3).

**Domestic Data**

Domestic data about student learning and academic growth in the United States depict a similar level of stagnation and mediocrity that is illustrated by international metrics. Longitudinal results from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) tests indicate that student growth in the United States remains insignificant, and
that strikingly low percentages of students earn “proficient” ratings in many subject areas (NCES, 2015). Additional domestic indicators, including high school graduation rates and a prominent and increasing achievement gap between students of varied socio-economic and racial/ethnic backgrounds, paint a similarly disheartening picture of educational achievement in the United States.

**National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP).** The results of the NAEP tests, released as “The Nation’s Report Card” through the U.S. Department of Education, provide another source of data on student growth and proficiency in the United States (U.S. Department of Education, 2016). NAEP assessments are given to representative samples of U.S. students in 4th-grade, 8th-grade, and 12th-grade in multiple subjects every few years, allowing for longitudinal analysis of trends. According to the National Center for Educational Statistics, “NAEP provides a common measure of student achievement across the country” and “is a continuing and nationally representative assessment of what our nation’s students know and can do” (2010).

There are three achievement levels for each subject and grade on the NAEP tests: Basic, Proficient, and Advanced. “NAEP results are reported as percentages of students performing at or above the Basic and Proficient levels and at the Advanced level,” according to the NCES (2010). *Basic* is defined by NAEP as “Representing partial mastery of prerequisite knowledge and skills that are fundamental for proficient work at each grade” (NCES, 2015). *Proficient* is defined by NAEP as “representing solid academic performance for each grade assessed” (NCES, 2015). *Advanced* is defined by NAEP as “superior performance” (NCES, 2015). Results from the 2014 NAEP U.S.
History, Geography, and Civics assessments indicate that 18% of 8th-grade students scored at the proficient level in History, 27% were proficient in Geography, and 23% were proficient in Civics. Results from the 2015 tests in Mathematics (26% at proficient), Reading (38% at proficient), Science (32% at proficient) and Writing (27% at proficient) also illustrate that the clear majority of U.S. students possess only a basic level of knowledge (NCES, 2015).

The low percentages of American students achieving the standard for proficiency set forth by NAEP is concerning. Tracking longitudinal NAEP scores over a series of years corroborates this analysis. Science scores increased by 2% from 2009-2011, but results in other subject areas indicate no significant change during these same years. For example, the average score of 8th-grade students on 2014 NAEP U.S. History, Geography, and Civics assessments showed no meaningful change since 2010, the last assessment year (NCES, 2015). Though some results indicate sporadic improvement, it is minimal. The Council on Foreign Relations (2012) explains, “Despite selective improvement, the big picture performance of America’s educational system is all too similar to results from three decades ago. Too many students are falling behind academically and are leaving high school unprepared for college and work” (p. 56).

**Graduation rates.** Ripley (2013) points to graduation rates as another domestic indicator of note: “Not long ago, zero countries had a better high school graduation rate than the United States; by 2011, about twenty countries did” (p. 5). According to a report from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), the international percentage of the population aged 25 to 64 years old that completed high
The graduation rate for high school in 2001 was 64%, and in 2012 was 76% (OECD, 2012). The United States average in 2001 was 88% (compared to the OECD average of 64%) and in 2012 was 89% (compared to the OECD average of 76%). While this graduation rate increase of 1% in the United States is an improvement, this gain is not keeping pace with the 12% increase made by other countries in the same 11-year span. There is certainly less room for growth for the United States because its graduation rate is higher than most to start with, but this is a point of reference nonetheless.

Kamenetz (2015) reminds that graduation rates are subjective numbers. Recent metrics and political discourse have indicated that graduation rates are going in the right direction in the United States. In an October 2016 speech on education, former President Barack Obama applauded the United States for achieving a graduation rate that is “the highest on record” (Obama, 2016). Peggy Carr, Acting Commissioner for the NCES, states in *The Condition of Education 2016* report that “the status dropout rate, or the percentage of 16- to 24-year old students who are not enrolled in school and do not have a high school credential, declined from 10.9 percent in 2000 to 6.5 percent in 2014” (NCES, 2016). These statistics indicate that graduation rates are trending in the positive direction, which is important given this context: “Today, there are basically no good jobs for high-school dropouts. To land a job that pays a living wage, most people will need at least some college” (Duncan, 2012).

**Achievement gaps.** Another domestic indicator is a prominent achievement gap in the United States (Cooper & Mulvey, 2015; Kozol, 1991; McKinsey & Company, 2009; National Education Association [NEA], 2016; Scully & Staud, 2012). The
“achievement gap” is often defined as achievement differences between minority and/or low-income students and their peers who are not in those sub-groups of testers (NEA, 2016). Indicators of achievement, according to the National Education Association, include access to key educational opportunities such as advanced courses and higher education, and attainments such as high school diplomas, college degrees, and employment (NEA, 2016). A recent analysis by McKinsey and Company (2009) identifies four distinct achievement gaps: between the United States and other countries; between black and Latino students and white students; between students of different income levels; and between similar students educated in different systems or regions (p. 5).

The achievement gap in the United States presents a serious equity and justice issue. Scully and Staud (2012) summarize the gravity of this disparity: “The effects of this growing achievement gap are far-reaching and dangerous for our country” (p. 385). Consequences of poor achievement can include lower high school and college graduation rates, lower earnings, poorer health, and higher rates of incarceration (McKinsey & Company, 2009, p. 5). The achievement gap also has significant ramifications on the national economy and the United States’ GDP. McKinsey and Company state, “the persistence of these educational achievement gaps imposes on the United States the economic equivalent of a permanent national recession” (p. 6).

**Education as “The Great Equalizer.”** In 2010, Former Secretary of Education Arne Duncan asserted that “The United States has a long way to go before it lives up to the American dream and the promise of education as the great equalizer.” Mediocre to
poor results on achievement metrics – evident in NAEP results, graduation rates (though improving), and achievement gaps – has led many educational reformers to call for change. When triangulating this domestic data with international performance indicators, including longitudinal results from the PISA and TIMSS assessments, this call increases in resonance. Hanushek and Peterson (2013) speak with a sense of urgency: “Nothing is more important for the long-run future of the United States than the knowledge and skills of the next generation” (p. 2).

The Instructional Leader

Mediocre and stagnant educational achievement in the United States is a problem that educational reformers have taken on vehemently (Hanushek & Peterson, 2013; Hess, 2013; Schmoker, 2006; Tampio, 2015). Critical voices emphasize these key reasons for poor achievement: poor teacher preparation programs, the lack of respect for the profession of teaching, low standards for those entering the teaching force, inequalities in the funding structure for public schools, an over-emphasis on testing, and entrenched bureaucracy as some of the barriers to student achievement in American schools (Brown, 2013; Hanushek & Peterson, 2013; Hess, 2013; New York Times Editorial Board, 2013). This study will explore one commonly posited solution to the problem of educational achievement in the United States – ensuring that highly effective school leaders are in principal positions in American schools. Odden (2011) emphasizes the importance of impactful principals: “Every effective school has a strong performance-oriented principal” (p. 35).
A deep well of research articulates the need for school improvement and the effect a building leader has on student achievement (Fullan, 2010; Gajda & Militello, 2008; Larsen & Hunter, 2014; Mitchell et al., 2015; Odden, 2011; Ripley, 2013; Robinson et al., 2008; Schmoker, 2006; Waters et al., 2003). Much can be learned from listening directly to the outstanding school leaders at the helm of successful schools. By focusing on what led a select group of award-winning principals to assume the principalship, what core values they base their decisions upon, and how they align those motivations and values with their practice, this study provides a new look at a critical issue in education. As students in the United States take new rounds of international and domestic tests, a fresh analysis through the viewpoint of the outstanding principal is timely.

Conceptual Framework

Multiple Ethical Paradigm Framework

This study examined key questions through the lens of The Multiple Ethical Paradigm framework articulated by Shapiro and Stefkovich (2011). The Multiple Ethical Paradigm framework asserts that there are four primary ethical viewpoints through which decisions and actions can be analyzed: the ethic of justice; the ethic of critique; the ethic of care; and the ethic of the profession. Shapiro and Stefkovich maintain that the three commonly accepted ethics of justice, care, and critique are insufficient alone because they do not capture the moral aspects of the educational profession. They add the ethic of the profession to the paradigm for professional decision-making in education. Shapiro and Stefkovich (2011) explain:
We propose that there should not be one best ethical paradigm. Instead, we believe that by using different models, students, and practitioners will be able to work through their own personal and professional ethical codes, try out what they discovered about themselves by reflecting on the solutions they reach as they analyze diverse ethical dilemmas, and gain greater insights into the conceptual underpinnings of the ethical paradigm or paradigms they have chosen. (p. 9)

They suggest that school leaders should view educational decisions through these four lenses, integrating all four ethics into their practice. Figure 1 illustrates the Multiple Ethical Paradigm framework utilized as the conceptual basis of the study.

Source: Adapted from Shapiro & Stefkovich (2011, 2013)

Figure 1. Multiple Ethical Paradigm Framework

Ethic of justice. The ethic of justice focuses on rights and law. Through this lens, practitioners consider legalities, policies, and equity when making decisions. The ethic suggests that educators consider whether exceptions can be made to policies, and if
so under what circumstances. Shapiro and Stefkovich (2013) explain that when applying this lens,

one may ask questions related to the rule of law and the more abstract concepts of fairness, equity, and justice. These may include questions related to issues of equity and equality; the fairness of rules, laws, and policies; whether laws are absolute, and if exceptions are to be made, under what circumstances; and the rights of individuals versus the greater good of the community. (p. 6)

When applying the ethic of justice, school leaders are cognizant of laws and mandates while also balancing questions of fairness and individual rights.

**Ethic of critique.** The ethic of critique is based on the critical theory perspective, “which has, at its heart, an analysis of social class and its inequities” (Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2013, p. 7). This perspective often lends itself to challenging the status quo, critiquing questionable laws, and analyzing social structures that perpetuate injustices. Through this lens, practitioners consider which voices have not been heard, who holds power and privilege, and which inequities need to be identified and changed (p. 9).

Application of this lens “asks educators to go beyond questioning and critical analysis to examine and grapple with those possibilities that could enable all children, whatever their social class, race, or gender, to have opportunities to grow, learn, and achieve” (p. 9).

The ethic of critique also suggests that school leaders “deal with the hard questions regarding social class, race, gender, and other areas of difference” (p. 15).

**Ethic of care.** The ethic of care emphasizes the primacy of loyalty, trust, empowerment, relationships, and encouragement in decision-making. “Although the
Ethic of care has been associated with feminists, men and women alike attest to its importance and relevancy,” explain Shapiro and Stefkovich (2011, p. 17). Noddings (1992) explains, “Caring is the very bedrock of all successful education and… contemporary schooling can be revitalized in is light” (p. 27). Questions that emerge when applying this lens include: “Who will benefit from what I decide? Who will be hurt by my actions? What are the long-term effects of a decision I make today? And if I am helped by someone now, what should I do in the future about giving back to this individual or to society in general?” (Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2013, p. 12). When applying the ethic of care, educators blend emotion and reason in their decision-making, ultimately showing care and concern for others in their priorities and resolutions (p. 12).

**Ethic of the profession.** Shapiro and Stefkovich (2013) argue that a fourth ethic should be added to the accepted three (ethic of justice; ethic of critique; ethic of care). They contend that the accepted three alone miss “a consideration of those moral aspects unique to the profession and the questions that arise as educational leaders become more aware of their own personal and professional codes of ethics” (p. 12). The ethic of the profession integrates the standards of the profession with administrators’ own personal and professional codes of ethics. It maintains that there is a dynamic relationship between professional codes of ethics, personal codes of ethics, standards of the profession, individual professional codes, and ethics of the community. The best interest of the student is firmly centered at the core of the ethic of the profession. This paradigm requires introspection, self-awareness, and integration of personal and professional codes into decision-making. Shapiro and Stefkovich describe professional ethics as “a dynamic
process requiring administrators to develop their own personal and professional codes…based on life stories and critical incidents…[and] based on the experiences and expectations of their working lives as well as a consideration of their personal codes” (p. 15). Figure 2 provides a representation of the ethic of the profession.

Figure 2. Ethic of the Profession

The researcher interpreted her data using the four ethical paradigms set forth by Shapiro and Stefkovich (2011, 2013) – the ethics of justice, care, critique and profession. Through the lens of this conceptual framework, she investigated why award-winning high school principals decided to enter the field of education and to assume the role of principal. The researcher then analyzed how the principals’ on-the-job decisions are influenced by their core values and personal codes of ethics. By considering how
motivation and values inform the vocational and on-the-job decisions of excellent principals, this study proposes a model for how school leaders can align theory with best practice.

**Research Methodology**

**Mixed Methods Design**

The researcher employed a mixed methods design for this study of award-winning principals. Specifically, she studied educational leaders in the Midwest who have been honored by their state principal association as *State Principal of the Year* and subsequently recognized by the National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP) as highly effective principals. The researcher narrowed the sample by focusing on honorees from 10 Midwest states between the years 2007-2017. She refined her sample sequentially as the phases of data collection proceeded. First, she surveyed a sample of 103 award-winning principals from the Midwest region of the United States. Next, the researcher interviewed a sub-sample of six principals who responded to the survey for a more thorough analysis of the research questions. The complete data set included surveys of award-winning secondary principals in the Midwest and semi-structured interviews of a select group of the survey respondents.

A mixed methods design was appropriate for this study because the researcher felt that one data source was not sufficient for an in-depth analysis, she sought to make the exploratory findings generalizable, and she saw a need to explain initial results (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). Ivankova, Creswell and Stick (2006) articulate that “the rationale for mixing both kinds of data within one study is grounded in the fact that neither
quantitative nor qualitative methods are sufficient, by themselves, to capture the trends and details of a situation” (p. 3). Therefore, this study involved strategies of collecting both numeric and text information from a variety of sources, with the aim of increasing the validity of the study and reducing bias (Creswell, 2013; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam, 2009).

The first phase of the study was primarily quantitative in nature. The numeric information collected from surveys helped control for bias that could emerge in the researcher’s personal interpretation of subsequent interviews (Creswell, 2014; Merriam, 2009; Schwandt, 2015; Stake, 2010). Quantitative data alone, however, would not allow the voices of exemplary school principals to resonate. Qualitative data, including answers to open-ended questions on the survey and data from the subsequent interviews, was included in the overall analysis. By collecting narrative information as well as quantitative responses, the researcher was able to analyze unanticipated information and to capture the perceptions of principals (Merriam, 2009).

The type of mixed methods design the researcher employed was the sequential explanatory design, which is “characterized by the collection and analysis of quantitative data in a first phase of research followed by the collection and analysis of qualitative data in a second phase that builds on the results of the initial quantitative results” (Creswell, 2009, p. 211). This strategy enabled the researcher to “explain and interpret quantitative results by collecting and analyzing follow-up qualitative data” (p. 211). Strengths of this particular strategy include its straightforward nature and ease of implementation due to the clear and orderly steps involved (Creswell, 2014; Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011;
Additionally, this type of design leads to clear description and reporting because data collection and analysis occurs in phases (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011; Ivankova et al., 2006). The researcher began by collecting and analyzing primarily quantitative data in Phase One of the study, with a few questions that provided qualitative data. She built on those results by collecting purely qualitative data from interviews in Phase Two of the research. Figure 3 illustrates the study’s sequential explanatory design, including its multi-phased data collection and analysis procedure. The first phase of the study informed the participant selection and final interview protocol for the second phase of data collection. The two phases were then integrated into the overall analysis, as Figure 3 depicts.
Participants and Data Collection

The research included current or past principals who have been honored by their state principal association and by NASSP as *State Principal of the Year* on the secondary level. This participant group was narrowed to focus on those who earned this recognition over an 11-year span, between the years 2007-2017. The research included honorees from the following 10 states in the Midwest: Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, Nebraska, Ohio, and Wisconsin. The final sample included 103
Midwestern award winners who were sent an invitation to participate in the research that included a link to a survey. The survey was designed by the researcher to identify why the honorees decided to enter the field of education, why they were drawn to the principalship, and how their beliefs and motivations inform their decisions as principals. This was the first phase of the investigation’s sequential explanatory mixed methods design.

Following survey administration to the larger group of exemplary principals, a smaller pool of survey respondents was identified for a deeper exploration of the topic. This second phase of research consisted of semi-structured interviews of six of the distinguished principals that participated in the survey. This sub-sample of six principals who have been recognized as a *State Principal of the Year* by their state association and by NASSP was designed to include:

- Principals with diverse backgrounds including age, experience, and gender
- Principals from diverse types of schools, who represented students of varied socio-economic status and racial/ethnic backgrounds
- Principals that have led significant growth in their schools during their tenure

Figure 4 indicates how the researcher identified principals for both the initial survey and the follow-up interviews.
The researcher collected data during the interview and survey phases of the investigation and triangulated the data in order to strengthen the study’s validity. Data analysis from Phase One of the research informed the participant selection and protocol employed in the second phase of the study, the survey phase. The researcher collected and organized her findings from both phases of the study. She proceeded to analyze her complete data set using Shapiro and Stefkovich’s (2013) Multiple Ethical Paradigm Framework as her conceptual framework. This theoretical framework guided the researcher in triangulating the data in order to increase validity, reliability, and
generalizability. Figure 5 depicts how the researcher triangulated and analyzed data through the lens of the Multiple Ethical Paradigm framework.

Figure 5. Triangulation and Analysis of Data Using the Conceptual Framework

**Researcher Bias**

The researcher carried with her a number of biases that she acknowledged and reflected upon during this study. Fine, Weiss, Weseen, and Wong (2003) remind investigators that, “Our obligation is to come clean ‘at the hyphen,’ meaning that we interrogate in our writings who we are as we coproduce the narratives we presume to ‘collect,’ and we anticipate how the public and policy makers will receive, distort, and misread our data” (p. 195).
This “interrogation” also requires that researchers “recognize [their own] biases and values to the best of [their] ability and acknowledge them” (Willis, 2007, p. 210). Throughout the study, the researcher employed a number of strategies to recognize her biases and ensure they did not impact her investigation.

The researcher served as a high school principal with personal experience in school leadership as she completed this study. Therefore, she brought her own perspectives as a practitioner, as well as her own beliefs about motivation, ethics, and decision-making frameworks to the study. Since she collected and analyzed the data through this lens, she inherently brought bias to the study based on her lived experience. Next, she had recently decided to become a high school principal as she completed her study, so her own experience of discerning this path was present as she researched what led others to the principalship. Additionally, the researcher worked in a non-public school system, and the NASSP award winners studied were primarily principals in public schools. Her experience was primarily within the private sector; therefore, she has limited lived experience of all the subtleties of leadership within public school systems.

In order to minimize bias, the researcher maintained a journal and discussed her biases with her chair throughout the study. Ortlipp (2008) asserts that this sort of exploratory and reflective journal writing allows a researcher to identify and reflect on his/her “role as researcher, interviewer, and interpreter of the data generated via interviews, and to record decisions made and theoretical justification for the decision” (p. 703). Honest discussion of biases and presuppositions increased reflexivity, therefore strengthening the validity of the research. Additionally, the research design itself –
consisting of multiple data sources and quantitative and qualitative measures – was created to increase the validity of the study and reduce bias. Instruments, analysis, and commentary were validated by the researcher’s dissertation chair, committee, and colleagues who were working on their dissertations concurrently. As another strategy to increase validity, the researcher thoroughly pilot tested the survey and interview protocol before she employed them in the actual study.

**Study Limitations**

A number of study limitations were present in this examination of the link between personal and professional core values and decisions. One limitation was that the research was confined to principals from 10 states, all located in the Midwest region of the United States. The research included high school principals from Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, Nebraska, Ohio, and Wisconsin who were awarded the *State Principal of the Year* award between the years 2007-2017. This use of convenience sampling limited the study’s generalizability because the principals included in the sample represented a specific region of the country (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). Although the researcher invited over 100 principals to participate in the study, the sample did not proportionately represent the entire population of exemplary principals across the United States. Additionally, participants did not represent the regional differences that might be evident if all states were included (Fink 2006).

A second study limitation was that participants were identified through an award bestowed by different state administrator organizations. Principals recognized each year as *State Principal of the Year* from their states’ principal organizations were subsequently
honored by NASSP and considered for the National Principal of the Year award (NASSP, 2016). The criteria for receiving this honor varied based on rubrics and processes from each state administrator association (NASSP, 2016). Therefore, there was no common rubric across all states used to define the “exemplary” principals included in this study. Awards can be politically influenced, so without a common metric to identify the 50 honorees across the country each year, this variation posed a study limitation. However, there were specific rubrics used to select the winners in each state; though the criteria varied somewhat from state to state, the process and selection factors remained rigorous. Ultimately, the researcher felt that because State Principals of the Year were honored by both the local state administrator organizations and the national administrator association, this group of principals serves as an appropriate sample of highly effective school leaders.

**Summary**

This study examined what motivations and core values award-winning secondary school principals use to guide their decisions and practice. First, the research identified why exemplary principals chose to enter the field of education and what led them to the role of principal. Next, the research explored how the educators’ on-the-job decisions and actions are influenced by these same theoretical concepts of personal motivation and professional core values. The researcher analyzed data using the conceptual foundation of the Multiple Ethical Paradigm framework, presenting findings and conclusions that she hopes will provide a model for practitioners.

**Summary of Terms**
CFR – Council on Foreign Relations.


NAEP – National Assessment of Educational Progress. Administered by the National Council for Educational Statistics (NCES).


NEA – National Education Association.

OECD - Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development.

PISA – Programme for International Student Assessment. Created and administered by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD).

CHAPTER II
LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to review the existing literature related to how motivation and values influence the decisions of award-winning high school principals. This chapter will include an exploration of the following themes: the impact and growing leadership challenge of the principal, the deciding factors that led principals to school leadership, the moral dimension of the principalship, the challenges of decision-making in schools, and the need for an ethic of the profession as a guide for decision-making. These themes are central to the study of how personal motivation and professional core values influence the practice, priorities, and decisions of award-winning secondary principals. This review of research will serve as the philosophical foundation for the study.

Current literature examined will be relevant to the following research questions:

1. What motivations and values lead outstanding high school principals to choose their career paths?
   a. Why did they decide to enter the field of education?
   b. Why did they decide to become principals?
   c. How did they know this was the right path?
2. What personal and professional core values do outstanding secondary principals use to guide their priorities and how do these values impact their decisions?

3. What are the implications for current and future principals, educational leadership training programs, district supervisors, and those involved with hiring school leaders?

**The Impact of the Principal**

An extensive body of research speaks to the significant impact a building leader, specifically a school principal, has on student achievement (Fullan, 2014; Gajda & Militello, 2008; Larsen & Hunter, 2014; Mitchell et al., 2015; Odden, 2011; Ripley, 2013; Robinson et al., 2008; Schmoker, 2006; Waters et al., 2003). Odden (2011) succinctly articulates: “Every effective school has a strong, performance-oriented principal” (p. 35). Principal leadership is an essential contributor to student achievement, second only to the direct instructional quality offered by teachers (Ash, Hodge & Connell, 2013; Leithwood, Seashore Louis, Anderson & Wahlstrom, 2004; Waters et al., 2003). This investigation focused on how motivation and values inform the decisions of award-winning principals because “a principal’s leadership is critical to the success of a school” (Larsen & Hunter, 2014, p. 75). This study intended to derive leadership lessons from highly successful principals that add to the body of existing research.

School culture is one of the key areas where principals can positively influence their schools (Hallinger, 2011; Hallinger & Heck, 1998; Leithwood, Anderson, Mascall, & Strauss, 2010; Robinson et al., 2008; Waters et al., 2003). Frick and Gutierrez (2008)
describe school leaders as the “culture mediators or culture builders of the school community” (p. 37). For example, principals that ingrain the belief that all children can succeed, or that demand all decisions are founded upon the best interest of the students, can build a powerful culture of student achievement. Of all the roles in schools, “principals are the key factor in building and sustaining a school culture in which both teachers and students can succeed” (Metropolitan Life Insurance, 2013, p. 23). This focus on creating a supportive culture with high expectations for all is vital: “the school leader is critical to nurturing a climate…that expects, respects, celebrates, and strives to continuously improve learning and academic achievement” (Mitchell et al., 2015, p. 247). Effective principals create and support a strong academic climate by focusing on student and teacher growth.

One key to creating a high-achieving culture is the intentional and consistent integration of the school’s mission into all aspects of a school. Principals that prioritize the tenets of the school mission statement when making decisions, provided the mission statement is solid, often create conditions for positive outcomes. Hallinger (2003) explains, “instructional leadership influences the quality of school outcomes through the alignment of school structures (e.g. academic standards, time allocation, curriculum) with the school’s mission” (p. 333). Mitchell et al. (2015) continue that “School leadership is strongly related to the conditions that directly influence student academic performance” (p. 246). By aligning structures and programs with school mission and vision, educational leaders can create systems that contribute to success. These systems inculcate the conditions that reinforce student growth.
Effective principals possess pedagogical skills that positively influence the instruction that occurs in their buildings. Robinson et al. (2008) articulate that the significance of the principal goes well beyond team-building, collaboration, and setting direction. They argue, “Educational leadership involves not only building collegial teams, a loyal and cohesive staff, and sharing an inspirational vision. It also involves focusing such relationships on some very specific pedagogical work” (Robinson et al, 2008, p. 665). They go on to identify a number of pedagogical leadership skills that foster achievement: “monitoring teaching, offering support, promoting professional development, sharing decision making, and nurturing leadership among the faculty line” (p. 246). Fullan (2014, 2015) summarizes that principals should act as “lead learners” by modeling continuous learning and supporting others in their ongoing learning. This allows principals to develop collaborative and focused systems and expectations within their schools, which indirectly affects learning outcomes for students.

Hallinger (2003) emphasizes that it is through instructional leadership that principals most significantly impact student achievement: “the preponderance of evidence indicates that school principals contribute to school effectiveness and student achievement indirectly through actions they take to influence what happens in the school and in classrooms” (p. 333). Professional development, for example, is one area where a principal can markedly impact student achievement. Principals that focus on building the collective capacity and professional capital of the educators in their building positively influence student learning outcomes (Fullan, 2014; Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012; Leithwood et al., 2004; Odden, 2011; Robinson et al., 2008). Effective principals instill a
climate of professional growth by creating professional development opportunities, articulating and reinforcing expectations, and providing supports for the teachers who have a direct impact on student learning in their classrooms. Successful principals strongly influence student achievement gains by empowering teacher leadership and offering tangible resources and opportunities that help teachers improve their craft (Frick & Gutierrez, 2008; Hallinger, 2011; Leithwood et al., 2010; Marzano et al., 2005; Mitchell et al., 2015).

The role of the principal is a pivotal one. Second only to the quality of instruction provided by teachers, principals can meaningfully improve student outcomes. Fullan (2014) refers to the principal as the “Learning leader – one who models learning, but also shapes the conditions for all to learn on a continuous basis” (p. 9). Through culture creation, aligning systems with mission, instructional leadership, capacity building, and creating learning communities and relationships, principals can maximize their impact. The potential impact a highly effective principal can have on student achievement underscores the importance of studying what led exemplary school leaders to the principalship, and how they maximize their impact.

The Growing Challenge of School Leadership

A variety of challenges and complexities come with the opportunities and potential inherent to the principalship. One is the breadth of required skills and dispositions needed for success in the role. While school leaders can delegate some responsibilities to members of their teams, they must possess a varied range of knowledge, experience, and vision (Fullan, 2014; Hess, 2013; Huber, 2004). Hancock,
Hary and Muller (2012) specify key dimensions of this broad skill-set: “Principals oversee basic operations, influence instructional and logistical activities, ensure compliance with governmentally imposed mandates, assign work requirements, supervise teachers and staff, prepare and monitor reports and records, and interact with multiple constituencies such as parents and community leaders” (pp. 353-354). Essential dispositions include flexibility and agility in order to respond to varying and complex needs, constraints, and demands (Hallinger, 2003; Vogel, 2012). This broad range of required skills and dispositions “require[s] extraordinary vision and competence on the part of school leaders,” continue Hancock et al. (2012, p. 354).

Next, many argue that the challenges of the job are growing in the current milieu. Markle and VanKoevering (2013) provide a compelling case for how the principalship has changed since the 1960s. They highlight myriad differences between the challenges of a principal in the 1960s and a principal today, citing varied demands and needed skills between these eras. They surmise that these differences include: a heightened need for adaptability, anticipation, and communication; today’s principals need to be change agents that can manage a diverse array of tasks; they need to be adept in utilizing data to lead school improvement in this era of high-stakes accountability (Markle & VanKoevering, 2013). Fullan (2014) agrees that:

Principals’ responsibilities have increased enormously over the past two decades. They are expected to run a smooth school; manage health, safety, and the building; innovate without upsetting anyone; connect with students and teachers;
be responsive to parents and the community; answer to their districts; and above all, deliver results. (p. 6)

Fine and McNamara (2011) add, “In the 21st Century, in an era of wars, terrorism, natural disasters, financial uncertainty and high-stakes testing, educational leaders are faced with even more daunting decision-making difficulties than in a more tranquil period” (p. 266). Aarons (2010) speaks to additional pressures that today’s principals face as many work to improve underperforming schools. Vogel (2012) attests that “Educational leadership is becoming increasingly complex as American society becomes more diverse and schools are held responsible for multiple social tasks at the local, state, and federal levels” (p. 1). This is particularly evident as student needs continue to change: “As administrators grapple with the challenges of meeting the needs of diverse students, the importance of the role of the principal as the instructional leader of the school has become more pronounced” (Mitchell et al., 2015, p. 223). These added complexities due to changing times create nuanced challenges for the instructional leader.

**Attracting and Retaining Principals**

Amid this context, schools and districts are struggling to attract and retain school principals (Aarons, 2010; National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2010; Pounder & Crow, 2005). Ash et al. (2013) articulate,

New jobs for school principals will continue to increase by approximately ten percent through 2020 as a result of growth in enrollments of school-aged children. At the same time, large numbers of retirements and fewer applicants for these
critical and challenging positions are due in part to the increased pressures and complexities of the job. (pp. 94-95)

This can have deleterious effects on schools. Tekleselassie and Villarreal (2011) explain that “turnover of proficient and skilled school leaders undermines the school’s capacity to realize a sustainable and continuous growth and change process leading to successful implementation of educational programs and initiatives” (p. 282).

Researchers identify a combination of enrollment demands, a high level of anticipated retirements, premature departures from the job, and lack of interest among certified candidates as factors influencing what they call a “principal shortage” (Aarons, 2010; Ash et al., 2013; Hancock et al., 2012; NCES, 2010; Pounder & Crow, 2005; Tekleselassie & Villarreal, 2011). Pounder and Crow (2005) point out specific areas where there are shortages in educational leadership – the high school principalship, the district superintendency, and specific geographic locations such as remote rural areas or high-challenge urban communities (p. 56). With fewer qualified candidates interested in the principalship, Hancock et al. (2012) argue that the “current principal shortage…will increase precipitously in the next decade unless active measures are undertaken to recruit replacements” (p. 353).

The solution is not as simple as replacing retiring principals with new leaders. Gajda and Militello (2008) assert that “the principal shortage is more than an issue of balancing recruitment and retirement; retaining highly qualified principals has become equally problematic” (p. 15). Barriers to retention include the stress of the principalship, relatively low salaries compared to the responsibilities of the position, work load and
time commitment, bureaucracy, and student discipline (Fullan, 2015; Gajda & Militello, 2008; Huber, 2004; Metropolitan Life Insurance, 2013; Pounder & Crow, 2005).

Tekleselassie and Villarreal (2011) cite broadly that individual background, school characteristics, workplace conditions, and emotional aspects of the job are reasons for high principal attrition levels. They further specify that excessive work load, recent educational reforms, salaries that are not commensurate with the demands and hours required of the job, and lack of job satisfaction and fulfillment are key reasons for high principal mobility and turnover (Tekleselassie & Villarreal, 2011).

A recent study by Metropolitan Life Insurance (2013) provides statistics that complement this narrative. In its survey of 500 United States K-12 principals, Metropolitan Life found that 75% of principals stated that the job has become too complex. This view was shared regardless of demographics such as school location, grade level, or proportion of low-income students (Metropolitan Life Insurance, 2013, p. 23). The study continued that almost half (48%) of principals described that they feel under great stress several days or more each week. In the four years between the Metropolitan Life 2008 and 2012 surveys, job satisfaction ratings of public school principals dropped by nine percentage points, from 68% very satisfied (2008) to 59% very satisfied (2012). These reasons for principal mobility and attrition call for attention, particularly because of the pronounced impact that effective principals can have on student growth and school stability.
Career Choice and Motivation

Given the significance of the principal, the growing challenge of the role in today’s climate, and the difficulties in attracting and retaining effective school leaders, an investigation into why school leaders entered the field and what they need to sustain their great work is timely. This study of the vocational and on-the-job decisions of award-winning secondary principals was apropos amid this context.

Existing research speaks to why principals, in general, decided to become school leaders. Huber (2004) identifies that principals are attracted to school leadership roles because of the opportunities to positively impact student and teachers, to make a difference in learning environments, to create positive change, and to experience personal challenge. Tekleselassie and Villarreal (2011) add that principals find the following enriching:

- direct personal feedback as opposed to control and supervision by superiors;
- ability to work closely with students, teachers, and parents; opportunities for professional growth and learning; ability to plan the school’s budget without involvement from above; and a sense of autonomy and personal accountability for what happens in their schools. (p. 257)

Additional research indicates that principals assumed their roles because they were attracted to an increase in responsibility, wanted a career challenge, desired to have a broader impact on more students, and saw the principalship as the next career step (Gajda & Militello, 2008; Hancock et al., 2012). This study intended to add to the body of
existing research by delving into the motivations and core values that led excellent principals to the position.

A broader view of motivation research provides a lens through which these distinguished educators’ decisions can be analyzed. Daniel Pink (2009) asserts that a “carrots and sticks” approach to motivation, based on extrinsic factors such as rewards and punishments, is typically counter-productive. If an organization’s baseline pay is fair and its workplace environment is congenial, Pink argues that an external rewards and punishments schema has significant flaws. He asserts that for Twenty-First Century organizations to thrive, they should be founded upon the intrinsic motivators of autonomy, mastery, and purpose. Pink (2009) maintains that people desire freedom over their task, time, team and technique (autonomy); they want to become better at something that matters (mastery); and they want to work toward a cause greater and more enduring than themselves (purpose). He adds that these elements lead to enhanced job satisfaction and to higher job performance. Organizations that provide opportunities for autonomy, mastery, and purpose cultivate satisfied and higher-performing employees (Pink, 2009).

Renowned educational researcher Michael Fullan (2015) adds a fourth factor to Pink’s theory of motivation. Fullan agrees with Pink that a degree of self-directed autonomy, a sense of purpose, and an opportunity to work toward mastery are key motivators. Fullan adds a fourth element of intrinsic motivation: collaboration with peers to do something of value. He argues that autonomy and collaboration need not be at odds; rather, “individuality with connectedness” or “connected autonomy” in a cooperative culture are highly fulfilling elements in a workplace (Fullan, 2015;
Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012). Fullan (2015) asserts that schools that cultivate autonomy, mastery, purpose, and collaboration foster satisfied and high-performing employees. These motivated members of the faculty and staff go on to directly and positively impact student achievement.

Thomas Sergiovanni (1992, 2005, 2007) adds an ethical perspective to the body of research on motivation. Sergiovanni asserts that the traditional rule of extrinsic motivation – the motivation to do what gets rewarded – has its place. A second motivating factor is the intrinsic motivator of doing what is personally rewarding. He adds a third motivation that comes from morality and ethics: “What we believe in, and what we feel obligated to do because of a moral commitment, gets done…It gets done, and it gets done well, without close supervision or other controls” (Sergiovanni, 1992, p. 27). Sergiovanni confirms the arguments posed by Pink and Fullan, but includes a moral dimension to the research on motivation.

These motivating factors are not unique to the field of education. However, research on the extrinsic and intrinsic motivators that influence decisions and create job satisfaction has direct applications to education. This body of research is germane to the first research question of this study: What motivations and values lead outstanding secondary principals to choose their career paths? An examination of this question in light of the motivational underpinnings of autonomy, mastery, purpose, collaboration, and moral leadership will help identify what led highly effective principals to the position.
The Moral Dimension of School Leadership

Educational leadership is a moral enterprise (Frick & Gutierrez, 2008; Foster, 1986; Fullan, 2010; Larsen & Hunter, 2014; Raun & Leithwood, 1993; Sergiovanni, 1992; Starratt, 1994; Strike, Haller & Soltis, 2005; Vogel, 2012; Walker, 1995). “Actions by school leaders will be strongly influenced by their personal values, and personal codes of ethics build on these values and experiences,” state Shapiro and Stefkovich (2011, p. 23). Frick and Gutierrez (2008) summarize the moral aspects of the position:

In addition to possessing a commitment to assume special responsibilities to children and youth (part of which involves responding to their best interests), practitioners see other, equally important unique moral considerations in their work, including leading and supporting the moral enterprise of teaching and learning, answering to and balancing out the requests of many constituents via negotiation and compromise, being a role model under close public scrutiny inside and outside the work environment, and possessing special dispositions of feeling committed, or duty bound, to work-life expectations. (p. 56)

Ethical codes, morals, and values influence the on-the-job decisions of principals (Frick, 2011; Frick & Gutierrez, 2008; Larsen & Hunter, 2014; Leithwood & Steinbach, 1993; Raun & Leithwood, 1993; Starratt, 1994; Vogel, 2012; Walker, 1995). Frick and Gutierrez (2008) assert that the principalship is an “uniquely moral” responsibility: “Administrative decision making requires more than the mechanical application of existing rules, regulations, and various levels of school and school-related policy…The
endeavor is profoundly moral; hence, because the enterprise is so special—or uniquely moral—the leadership of the enterprise is special as well” (p. 56). Foster (1986) exhorts that, “Each administrative decision carries with it a restructuring of human life: that is why administration at its heart is the resolution of moral dilemmas” (p. 33). Decision-making itself, within the context of school leadership, carries an important moral responsibility.

Sergiovanni (1992) argues that it is not enough to agree that school leadership has moral elements. “If we want our theory to reflect emerging practice,” he states, “we need to move the moral dimension of leadership away from the periphery and right to the center of inquiry, discussion, and practice” (p. 3). He suggests that leadership practice with a moral dimension based on purpose, values, and beliefs can transform schools (Lavery, 2012; Sergiovanni, 2007). Walker (1995) concurs: “Our conversations about educational leadership would benefit from a more careful attention to the ethical domain” (p. 559). Palestini (2013) adds that the ethical dimension of school leadership should be considered a science in of itself. He emphasizes that educational leadership is a type of moral science: “The paradigm of natural science does not always apply when dealing with human issues. As a moral science, the science of administration is concerned with the resolution of moral dilemmas” (p. 27).

**The Challenges of Decision Making in Schools**

The second research question of this study builds upon the first by delving deeper into the factors that influence exemplary principals’ decisions regarding their schools. While the first research question focuses on the motivations and values that led principals
to choose their career paths, the second question identifies what factors influence their daily decisions as school leaders. According to Raun and Leithwood (1993), a leader’s values are inseparable from his or her decision-making process. Sergiovanni (1992) articulates a direct link between a school leader’s values and his or her decisions: “Values play an important part in constructing an administrator’s mindscape and in determining leadership practice” (p. 9). Larsen and Hunter (2014) define these “values” as “a construct, a set of core internal beliefs that define an ideal reality; these values are used by leaders to develop action plans for aligning actual reality with their ideal reality” (p. 76).

Decisions can become dilemmas for school principals as they weigh their core values with the realities of complex situations. Palestini (2012) suggests that “administration involves the resolution of various dilemmas, that is, the making of moral decisions” (p. 29). Sergiovanni (2005) reminds leaders to keep ethics at the center of these dilemmas: “Leadership as a moral action is a struggle to do the right thing according to a sense of values and what it means to be a human being” (p. 115). Larsen and Hunter (2014) assert the importance of examining dilemmas through the lens of principals’ values and beliefs. “Secondary principals spend a significant amount of their mental capacity looking deeply into decisions and weighing them in relation to their core values and beliefs,” they assert (Larsen & Hunter, 2014, p. 84).

Decisions can be particularly challenging when situations are ambiguous or circumstances are complex, when a principal’s core values are at odds with mandates, or
when professional codes clash with personal values. Frick and Gutierrez (2008) describe this as a state of “moral dissonance” because of clashing codes:

Disparities often exist among the diverse ethical perspectives related to the education of children, the professional codes meant to inform decision making and conduct, and the personal moral values of administrators that influence their judgment and behavior…When reflective school leaders attempt to integrate these sources of guidance, the typical result is moral dissonance, or a clashing of codes.

(p. 33)

Larsen and Hunter (2014) call this “sparsely mapped terrain an administrator must traverse using their core values as a guiding compass when confronted with the challenges of daily decision-making” (p. 72). This study intends to respond to the “sparsely mapped terrain” by asking highly successful principals directly how they navigate these challenges.

Even when school leaders have a clear grasp of personal core values and professional codes, ambiguity and complexity can provide barriers to clear decision-making. Decisions are often not simple, clear, or direct: “Ethical situations often require that hard choices be made under complex and ambiguous circumstances” (Strike, Haller, & Soltis, 2005, p. 3). Larsen and Hunter (2014) exhort: “Leaders both consciously and unconsciously process (i.e., perceive, categorize, and interpret) situations as they define reality and design plans of action. Because schools are complex organizations, leaders are often faced with ambiguous or conflicting situations that must be mentally processed
to develop plans of action” (p. 74). These conditions can blur a clear course of action, even for the most successful, discerning, and experienced school principals.

Another source of disequilibrium can arise when leaders weigh their need to fulfill state and federal mandates with their obligation to do what they feel is in the best interest of students. Core values and required mandates can be at odds, adding another layer of complexity to the decisions that principals face. Larsen and Hunter (2014) articulate that principals often must weigh the demands of external mandates regarding school improvement with a course of action that their core values and espoused beliefs dictate (p. 72). Frick and Gutierrez (2008) speak to this tension:

There clearly exist two sets of empirical findings on the professional qualities and job-related practices of school leaders. One set suggests that principals can be ethically attuned, vigilant culture builders who focus decisions and actions on the needs of children; another set indicates that the moral intent of school leaders is lost to rationally derived, policy compliance-oriented decision making and bureaucratized rule following. (p. 39)

This can be a difficult space for a principal. When outside mandates are at odds with what leaders’ feel is in the best interest of the students in their care, they feel this disequilibrium strongly. In all cases, Larsen and Hunter (2014) explain:

Principals are attempting to maintain their sense of equilibrium: they want to balance their moral obligation as a public servant—tasked to lead mandate implementation—with their obligation to provide moral leadership, guiding the organization using their core professional values and beliefs that are primarily
aimed at keeping kids, relationships, flexibility, and variability as priorities.

(p. 84)

This study intends to ask successful principals directly how they “maintain their sense of equilibrium,” in hopes of distilling wisdom from these exemplars that can inform practitioners and educational leadership training programs.

**Navigating Dilemmas**

A body of research provides guidance for how school leaders should navigate the “internal disequilibrium” that arises from competing ethical demands when making decisions. Bolman and Deal (2013) suggest a situational approach, with actions contingent upon variables present in each situation. These variables include context, the nature of the people involved, relationships, ability, organizational structure, cohesiveness of the group, resources available, and clarity of job descriptions (Bolman & Deal, 2013). They assert that leaders should learn to perceive these situations through four different lenses – symbolic, political, structural, and human resource – in order to respond most appropriately to each situation. When applying this situational leadership approach, Bolman and Deal continue that leaders should not rely on one frame alone. Leaders should balance the frames, identifying which approach is best for the unique nature of each situation. The practice of re-framing through these different lenses, in order to identify the best course of action, is an effective way to proceed when ethical quandaries create cognitive dissonance (Bolman & Deal, 2013).

This type of situational leadership practice, many argue, leaves out a key affective component of leadership. Robert Palestini (2013) states that “left on its own, situational
leadership theory is secular and amoral” and continues that leaders must “lead with heart as well as mind” (p. 255). Palestini suggests that leaders should see themselves as servants of those who follow, adding that a leader’s success can be monitored by the fulfillment, effectiveness, ability to change, and amount of growth of his or her followers. This approach aligns with the seminal work on servant leadership by Robert Greenleaf (1977). Greenleaf defines the “servant-leader” in this way:

The servant-leader is servant first… It begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve, to serve first. Then conscious choice brings one to aspire to lead. That person is sharply different from one who is leader first, perhaps because of the need to assuage an unusual power drive or to acquire material possessions… The difference manifests itself in the care taken by the servant-first to make sure that other people’s highest priority needs are being served. The best test, and difficult to administer, is: Do those served grow as persons? Do they, while being served, become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become servants? And, what is the effect on the least privileged in society?

In many ways, Palestini presents a modern iteration of Greenleaf’s foundational concept of servant-leadership. Both models provide guidance for secondary principals who might struggle to discern the best course of action when faced with a complex and challenging dilemma.

Research by Sergiovanni (1992, 2005, 2007) echoes Greenleaf’s servant-leadership paradigm and Palestini’s charge to lead with heart. He articulates that there are five sources of authority – psychological, bureaucratic, technical-rational,
professional, and moral. The first three (psychological, bureaucratic, and technical-rational) have their place, he argues, but should be used primarily by leaders to buttress the professional and moral sources of authority. Professional authority comes from context and from dialogue and partnership with teachers. Moral authority comes from shared community values and ideals. Sergiovanni (1992, 2005, 2007) surmises that moral and professional authority present ideals for those in leadership positions.

Sergiovanni (1992) continues that moral leadership entails the integration of the head, the heart, and the hand: “The head of leadership is shaped by the heart and drives the hand; in turn, reflections on decisions and actions affirm or reshape the heart and head” (p. 7). By integrating the head (thoughts, logic), heart (care, empathy) and hand (action), Sergiovanni explains that school principals will practice moral leadership. “Leadership is a personal thing,” he states, where “each principal must find her or his way, develop her or his approach if the heart, head, and hand of leadership are to come together in the form of successful principalship practice” (Sergiovanni, 2007, pp. 19-20).

Ultimately, all of these leadership ideals – situational leadership, leading with heart, servant-leadership, moral leadership, and integrating the hand, heart, and head – should focus on the best interest of students. Ash et al. (2013) bring this to a practical level: “The driving ethic for any educational institution answers the question: What is best for students? Answering this question binds the various elements of effective principalship into a working model” (p. 95). What is best for students will always help leaders identify the most appropriate course of action, especially when faced with a challenging dilemma: “in responding to this inevitable discord, the ethic of the profession
is grounded in a reasoned consideration of the educational shibboleth ‘serve the best interests of the student’ (Frick & Gutierrez, 2008, p. 33). Frick and Gutierrez go on to assert that “as a moral imperative of the profession,” principals should recognize the preeminence of the best interests of students when charting a course of action.

**Professional Ethic for Educational Leadership**

The tension inherent to clashing codes and dilemmas illustrates the need “for an articulated professional ethic for educational leadership” (Frick & Gutierrez, 2008, p. 39; Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2011). Researchers have identified this gap for many years. For example, Cooper (1990) articulated that without an ethical paradigm for the field of education, “Administrators must develop skill in thinking about ethical problems toward the end of creating a working professional ethic of their own” (p. 2). Walker (1995) reiterated that “Perhaps the primary theoretical challenge is to develop an empirical…set of core ethical values, to define these values, and to develop processes to resolve context and conflict difficulties” (p. 558).

Three commonly accepted ethics for educational leadership exist: the ethic of critique, the ethic of justice, and the ethic of care (Frick, 2011; Shapiro & Gross, 2013; Shapiro & Stefkovich; 2013; Starratt, 1994; Vogel, 2012). Starratt (1994) encourages school leaders to integrate these three ethics as they interpret situations encountered in schools and identify how to proceed. Starratt (1990) suggests, “The blending of each theme encourages a rich human response to the many uncertain ethical situations that school community faces every day, both in the learning task as well as in its attempt to govern itself” (p. 57). School leaders should integrate these three themes into their work
as educators, he continues, interweaving the lenses in order to discern the most ethical and appropriate course of action in any given situation.

Shapiro and Stefkovich (2011, 2013) agree with Starratt’s assertion, but they believe that the three ethics of critique, justice, and care are incomplete. What the three ethics alone “tend to ignore is a consideration of those moral aspects unique to the profession and the questions that arise as educational leaders become more aware of their own personal and professional codes of ethics” (p. 12). Vogel (2012) continues that these three dimensions of critique, justice, and care do not adequately cover the moral dimension, or the value-laden dimension, of educational leadership:

The integration of the three ethics of critique, justice, and care demonstrate the desire and commitment of educational leaders to lead not just with their mind, but also with their heart. Values are nebulous concepts that vary in meaning with each individual, however the reoccurring identification of core values such as integrity, fairness, service, stewardship, respect, and relationship building appear to form the basis of what may be a professional ethical framework. Additional research is needed with a larger sample of educational leaders to identify a core set of values that, taken together, can form a practical ethical framework that assists educational leaders in responding to the often competing purposes of schooling to better serve both the larger society and those who have special needs. (p. 12)

This speaks to the need for a practical ethical framework that recognizes the primacy of a core set of values to complement the three accepted ethics of critique, justice, and care. Vogel (2012) adds that there is a need for additional research in this area of educational
leadership. Walker (1995) concurs: “The possibility of a set of ‘core ethical values’ provides a tremendous opportunity not only for some interesting research projects that test this claim, but for professional educational leaders groups to promote specific ethical commitment among members” (p. 560).

**Multiple Ethical Paradigm Framework**

In response to this gap, Shapiro and Stefkovich (2013) present an ethical paradigm that considers the “moral aspects unique to the profession” (p. 18). According to Shapiro and Stefkovich, the Multiple Ethical Paradigm framework integrates the three accepted ethics (critique, justice, and care) with the moral aspects of the profession, or the “ethic of the profession.” Frick and Gutierrez (2008) summarize that the ethic of the profession “attempts to provide an explanation of the various moral considerations that are part of professional decision-making practice and how these considerations converge and are subsequently processed by a school leader” (p. 53). Through their Multiple Ethical Paradigm framework, Shapiro and Stefkovich (2011, 2013) propose that principals assess situations and make decisions by using four primary ethical viewpoints – the ethic of justice; the ethic of critique; the ethic of care; and the ethic of the profession.

The ethic of justice focuses on rights and law. Through this lens, practitioners consider legalities, policies, and equity when making decisions. Shapiro and Stefkovich (2013) explain that these questions arise when utilizing the ethic of justice: “questions related to the rule of law and…fairness, equity, and justice. These may include…questions related to issues of equity and equality; the fairness of rules, laws, and policies;
whether laws are absolute, and if exceptions are to be made, under what circumstances; and the rights of individuals versus the greater good of the community” (p. 6).

When applying the ethic of justice, school leaders are cognizant of laws and mandates while also balancing questions of fairness and individual rights.

The ethic of critique is based in the critical theory perspective, “which has, at its heart, an analysis of social class and its inequities” (Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2013, p. 7). This ethic considers which voices are unheard, who holds power and privilege, and which inequities need to be changed (p. 9). Application of this lens “asks educators to go beyond questioning and critical analysis to examine and grapple with those possibilities that could enable all children, whatever their social class, race, or gender, to have opportunities to grow, learn, and achieve” (p. 9). When applying the ethic of critique, school leaders strive to listen to unheard voices and change social structures that perpetuate inequities. The ethic of critique “asks educators to deal with the hard questions regarding social class, race, gender, and other areas of difference” (p. 15).

The ethic of care maintains the importance of loyalty, trust, empowerment, relationships, and encouragement. “Although the ethic of care has been associated with feminists, men and women alike attest to its importance and relevancy,” explain Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2011, p. 17). Noddings (1992) explains, “Caring is the very bedrock of all successful education and…contemporary schooling can be revitalized in is light” (p. 27). Questions that emerge when applying this lens include: “Who will benefit from what I decide? Who will be hurt by my actions? What are the long-term effects of a decision I make today? And if I am helped by someone now, what should I do in the future about
giving back to this individual or to society in general?” (Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2013, p. 12). When applying this paradigm, the primacy of care for others is evident in the decisions and actions of school leaders.

The ethic of the profession asserts that there is a dynamic relationship between professional codes of ethics, personal codes of ethics, standards of the profession, individual professional codes, and ethics of the community. At the center of this professional ethics paradigm is the “best interest of the student.” This paradigm includes the standards of the profession as well as administrators’ own personal and professional codes of ethics. Shapiro and Stefkovich (2013) describe professional ethics as “a dynamic process requiring administrators to develop their own personal and professional codes…based on life stories and critical incidents…[and] based on the experiences and expectations of their working lives as well as a consideration of their personal codes” (p. 15). Though the “ethic of the profession” articulated by Shapiro and Stefkovich is not one succinct list of values, it provides a framework that captures the moral and the value-laden aspects of the profession. At the core of the ethic of the profession – foundational to the interplay of personal, professional, and communal standards and codes – is what is in the best interest of students (Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2013).

Through their Multiple Ethical Paradigm framework, Shapiro and Stefkovich (2011, 2013) propose that principals assess situations and make decisions by using four primary ethical viewpoints – the ethic of justice; the ethic of critique; the ethic of care; and the ethic of the profession. Shapiro and Stefkovich (2013) argue that “it is important to try out diverse approaches for the solving of ethical cases…working through a multiple
ethical paradigm process [will] provide current and future educational leaders with options for dealing with complex and difficult ethical dilemmas that they will face daily” (p. 2). Approaching situations through a Multiple Ethical Paradigm approach, they continue, will “assist educational leaders in grappling with complexities, uncertainty, and diversity” (p. 3). This conceptual framework serves as the interpretive basis for this study of the practice, priorities and decisions of highly effective high school principals.

Summary

Research indicates that a principal’s potential impact is significant, the demands of the role are many, and the challenges are growing. Research also identifies that there is an increasing gap between the number of projected principal vacancies and the number of qualified and interested individuals for these positions. Yet the principal plays a pivotal role in the success of a school. Given these realities, a study of the motivating factors that led highly effective school leaders to choose the principalship is timely. Many of the same factors influencing principals’ career choice are also at play as they navigate dilemmas and make decisions for their schools. The moral dimension of leadership, including the core values that guide principals, significantly influences their practice, priorities, and decisions. This study of highly effective principals’ decision-making frameworks – evident in their career choice and in their day-to-day decisions as practitioners – is a timely addition to the body of research.

This literature review starts with an analysis of existing research related to the first research question about factors that motivated exemplary school leaders to pursue the principalship. An examination of what led distinguished principals to their roles is
unique and appropriate given the impact that principals can have on student achievement, the growing challenge of the principalship, and recruitment and retention issues related to the role. Literature reviewed on these topics culminates in a section on career choice and motivation. This body of literature is germane to the study of what led distinguished principals to the field of education and to the principalship.

Next, the literature review provides background related to the second research question about factors that influence principals’ priorities and decisions. The literature review attempts to analyze how the same theoretical concepts of core values and motivations that influenced career choice also influence the daily practice of distinguished principals. Included in this review is research on the moral dimension of school leadership, the challenges of decision making in schools, how principals might navigate dilemmas they encounter, and how they can integrate the Multiple Ethical Paradigm framework into their practice.

The researcher attempted to identify significant literature germane to ethical leadership, motivation, and core values in educational leadership. This study was designed to examine the link between these factors and the practice, priorities, and decisions of award-winning principals. In doing so, the study answered the third research question about implications for practice. The researcher hopes the study will have meaningful implications for current and future principals, educational leadership training programs, district supervisors, and those involved with hiring school leaders. This analysis of how motivation and values inform the decisions of excellent principals intends to provide a model for how school leaders can align theory with best practice.
CHAPTER III
RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Introduction

This study was designed to explore what motivations and core values award-winning high school principals use to guide their practice. First, the research identified why exemplary high school principals chose to enter the field of education and what led them to the role of principal. The research, then, explored how the educators’ daily decisions and actions as principals are influenced by these same theoretical concepts of personal motivation and professional core values. By analyzing how motivation and values inform the vocational and on-the-job decisions of excellent principals, this study aimed to provide a model for current and future practitioners and educational leadership training programs.

Though research on the impact of excellent principals is plentiful (CFR, 2012; Fullan, 2010; Schmoker, 2006; Waters et al., 2005), much can be learned by listening directly to the perspectives of highly effective principals. This study of award-winning school leaders asked these exceptional educators directly why they decided to enter the field of education and what led them to the principalship. The research went on to examine how they make decisions as building principals, particularly when they are faced with dilemmas that do not present one clear course of action. By asking these
educational leaders how their beliefs and values inform their vocational and on-the-job decisions, key voices from the field emerged as a model for others.

The purpose of this chapter is to articulate the methodology the researcher employed throughout the study. This chapter includes the following sections: Research Design, Sample, Data Collection Procedures, Data Analysis, Ethical Considerations and Minimization of Bias, and Validity and Reliability. Each element of the research methodology was thoughtfully designed and executed to answer the study’s central questions:

1. What motivations and values lead outstanding high school principals to choose their career paths?
   a. Why did they decide to enter the field of education?
   b. Why did they decide to become principals?
   c. How did they know this was the right path?

2. What personal and professional core values do outstanding secondary principals use to guide their priorities and how do these values impact their decisions?

3. What are the implications for current and future principals, educational leadership training programs, district supervisors, and those involved with hiring school leaders?
Research Design

Mixed Methods Strategy

The study utilized a mixed methods design to investigate the core values and motivations of principals in Midwest high schools who have earned a significant national honor in the past 11 years. The researcher identified a sample of educators recognized as State Principal of the Year in their states. These same honorees were recognized by the National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP) for their honor on the state level, making them eligible for the National Principal of the Year contest. All participants were distinguished among their peers as exemplary principals, as indicated by the significant award they received.

The researcher collected data sequentially in a two-phased approach during this study. First, a large Midwestern sample of 103 award-winning principals was invited to complete a survey. The survey was designed by the researcher and adapted from Hancock et al. (2012), Vogel (2012), and Walker (1995). The survey included a section for demographic data, a section with questions utilizing a Likert scale, and a narrative section comprised of three open-ended questions. Following the survey phase of the study, the researcher selected a sub-sample of respondents to interview for a deeper qualitative analysis.

This mixed methods design was appropriate because the researcher felt that one data source was not sufficient for this study, she hoped to generalize exploratory findings, and she wanted additional data to explain initial results (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). Ivankova et al. (2006) articulate that “the rationale for mixing both kinds of data within
one study is grounded in the fact that neither quantitative nor qualitative methods are sufficient, by themselves, to capture the trends and details of a situation” (p. 3). Therefore, the study involved strategies of collecting both numeric and text information from a variety of sources, with the aim of increasing the validity of the study and reducing bias (Creswell, 2013; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam, 2009). The inclusion of quantitative information collected from the survey minimized researcher bias that could emerge from the researcher’s personal interpretation of subsequent interviews (Creswell, 2013; Merriam, 2009; Schwandt, 2015; Stake, 2010). Quantitative data alone, however, would not allow the voices of exemplary school principals to resonate. Qualitative data, including answers to the open-ended questions on the survey and data from the subsequent interviews, was included in the overall analysis. Qualitative components of the study provided the researcher an opportunity to analyze unanticipated data and to capture the perceptions of principals (Merriam, 2009).

**Sequential Explanatory Design**

The researcher utilized a sequential explanatory design for her mixed methods investigation. Sequential explanatory design is “characterized by the collection and analysis of quantitative data in a first phase of research followed by the collection and analysis of qualitative data in a second phase that builds on the results of the initial quantitative results” (Creswell, 2009, p. 211). This strategy enabled the researcher to “explain and interpret quantitative results by collecting and analyzing follow-up qualitative data” (p. 211). Strengths of sequential explanatory research design include its straightforward nature and ease of implementation due to the clear, sequential steps
involved (Creswell, 2014; Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011; Ivankova et al., 2006).
Additionally, sequential explanatory research design leads to clear description and
reporting because data collection and analysis occur in phases (Creswell & Plano Clark,
2011; Ivankova et al., 2006). The researcher collected and analyzed survey data in Phase
One of the study, and then built on those results by collecting interview data in Phase
Two of the research. Figure 6 illustrates the study’s mixed methods design.

This methodology allowed the researcher to triangulate both methods and sources,
facilitating a deeper understanding of the research questions and enhancing credibility
(Denzin, 1978; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Patton, 1999). By studying the problem through
multiple modes, the researcher was able to answer questions that could not be addressed
by a quantitative or qualitative study alone (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). The
quantitative elements of the study provided numeric data to answer the research
questions, and the qualitative elements helped the researcher tell the story behind the
numbers.
Phase One. The first phase of research included a survey designed to investigate the motivations and core values that award-winning high school principals use to guide their practice. This instrument consisted of three parts: questions soliciting demographic and school information, a series of quantitative questions requesting responses on a
Likert scale, and three open-ended questions. The researcher distributed the survey to 103 award-winning principals across 10 states. She identified this sample with the goal of creating a large enough group to enhance generalizability (Creswell, 2014; Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). This first phase of the study enabled the researcher to solicit a range of voices required for a thorough and generalizable look at the research questions.

**Phase Two.** The second phase of the sequential explanatory study built upon the first phase by interviewing select participants from the first phase of the study. Robert Stake (2010) asserts that interviews are valuable methods of “obtaining unique information or interpretation held by the person interviewed” (p. 95). The researcher interviewed six survey respondents for about 45 minutes each in order to glean more detailed perspectives related to the research questions. The researcher understood that the second phase of the study would be inductive and flexible, influenced by themes that emerged from the first phase of research (Merriam, 2009; Stake, 2010). The final details of the interview protocol were “grounded in the quantitative results from the first phase,” which is typical of sequential explanatory mixed method research designs (Ivankova et al., 2006, p. 13). The interview protocol, therefore, was adapted in response to emergent themes from Phase One of the study (Merriam, 2009). This flexibility illustrates the inductive process characteristic of qualitative studies (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011; Merriam, 2009; Schwandt, 2015). Ultimately, the second phase elucidated the connection between exemplary principals’ core values and their decision-making processes by capturing the voices of a smaller group of award-winning principals.
Sample

State Principal of the Year Honorees

The researcher studied a select group of distinguished high school principals in her exploration of how personal motivation and professional core values influence the practice, priorities and decisions of award-winning secondary principals. The sample included past and current high school principals who earned their State Principal of the Year award and were subsequently honored by NASSP for this designation. NASSP began its annual principal recognition program in 1993 with its National Principal of the Year award and its State Principal of the Year distinction. NASSP State Principals of the Year are identified by each state administrator association, or affiliate of NASSP, through their own state processes. Each of the 50 states, the District of Columbia, the U.S. Department of State Office of Overseas Schools, and the Department of Defense Education Activity select one middle level and/or high school principal to represent their state annually for the award (National Association of Secondary School Principals [NASSP], 2016). These representatives are recognized by their state administrator association as State Principals of the Year. They are subsequently considered as candidates for the National Principal of the Year award (NASSP, 2016).

This is a significant honor for high school principals on the state and national levels. Though the criteria for receiving this honor varies based on stipulations from each state administrator association, any principal that earns the State Principal of the Year designation through his or her state organization is recognized by NASSP and considered for the National Principal of the Year honor (NASSP, 2016). The researcher considered
this group of principals distinguished because *State Principals of the Year* are honored by both the local state administrator organizations and the national administrator association.

**Phase One.** In Phase One of the study, the researcher invited state award winners from 10 states in the Midwest Region of the United States to complete a survey (United States Census Bureau, 2016). The sample included honorees from the following states: Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, Nebraska, Ohio, and Wisconsin. The researcher refined the sample to include those principals who have earned the recognition in the past eleven years, between the years 2007-2017. The researcher used this criterion to identify 103 current or former principals to invite to participate in the survey phase of the study.

**Phase Two.** The researcher completed a series of semi-structured interviews after surveying the larger group of award-winning principals. Phase Two of the study entailed interviewing a sub-sample of survey respondents in order to add depth and validity to the research. Principals eligible for this second phase of research completed the initial consent and survey process and then provided another consent to participate in a follow-up interview. From that group, the researcher identified 10 current or former principals that fit the following criteria:

- Principals with diverse backgrounds including age, experience, and gender
- Principals from diverse types of schools, who represented students of varied socio-economic status and racial/ethnic backgrounds
- Principals that have led significant growth in their schools during their tenure
Six of the 10 principals invited to the interview round of research completed the interviews. Figure 7 illustrates the progression of participant selection for data collection. The researcher believes that this multi-phased progression produced a high-quality participant sample, strengthening the validity of the investigation.

**Figure 7.** Progression of Participant Selection for Data Collection

**Sampling Strategy**

The researcher employed a purposive sampling strategy for this study. She specifically targeted *State Principal of the Year* designees because she believed this participant sample would allow her to glean the most useful data related to the research questions. Sharan Merriam (2009) articulates the rationale behind this sampling strategy: “Purposeful sampling is based on the assumption that the investigator wants to discover,
understand, and gain insight and therefore must select a sample from which the most can be learned” (p. 77). Schwandt (2015) argues that in a purposive strategy, “units are chosen not for their representativeness but for their relevance to the research question, analytical framework, and explanation or account being developed in the research” (p. 325). The researcher intentionally studied principals recognized as State Principal of the Year by their state administrator association and NASSP because she believed they would provide meaningful insights specific to the research questions.

The researcher also utilized a convenience sampling strategy, which “is just what is implied by the term – you select a sample based on time, money, location, availability of sites or respondents, and so on” (Merriam, 1998, p. 63). Due to cost and time constraints, the researcher needed to limit her sample to a reasonable size, while also allowing for variation. Therefore, the study employed a convenience sampling strategy, focusing on award winners from 10 states in one region of the country. The researcher believed that these purposive and convenience sampling strategies would provide rich information about the intersection of core values and decisions of exemplary high school principals.

**Data Collection Procedures**

**Preliminary Procedures**

The researcher began by making a Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) request the National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP). The request letter (see Appendix A) asked NASSP to provide the following information:
• A listing of names and contact information for individuals who were *State Principals of the Year* on the High School level between the years 2007-2017.

• A listing of names and contact information for individuals who were finalists for the NASSP *Principal of the Year* award between the years 2007-2017.

• A listing of names and contact information for individuals who won the NASSP *Principal of the Year* award between the years 2007-2017.

The FOIA request indicated that contact information should include first and last name, public school district, state, mailing address, phone number and email address. This request allowed the researcher to identify the participants for both phases of the sequential explanatory study. This information was sufficient for both phases of the study because the researcher identified a sub-group of the initial sample for interviews in the second phase of the study.

The researcher utilized SurveyMonkey for all communications related to Phase One of the study. After inputting participant email addresses into SurveyMonkey, she used the platform to send an electronic consent form (see Appendix B), a letter requesting participation in the survey (see Appendix C), and the survey (see Appendix D). The consent pages at the beginning of the survey explained the purpose, procedures, risks and benefits, methods for maintaining confidentiality, and voluntary nature of the study. Participants had to select “Yes” to the question “Do you consent to participate in this survey” before accessing the survey questions.

The researcher employed a re-consent process for Phase Two of the study. She identified 10 principals to contact for follow-up interviews after participants completed
the survey. She emailed each of them with a new letter of invitation (see Appendix I) and consent form (see Appendix H) for the interview. The second consent form requested two levels of consent:

- Consent to be interviewed via Zoom video conference software
- Consent to be audio recorded during the interview

The researcher asked interview participants to sign and date the interview consent form and email it back to her before the interview. The researcher engaged in semi-structured interviews with principals once this re-consent procedure was finished.

**Sequential Data Collection**

**Phase One.** The researcher employed her consent and survey protocol to the sample of 103 distinguished principals identified for Phase One. She selected the SurveyMonkey platform for data collection because of its convenience and efficiency. She hoped that this simple and efficient process would increase the response rate for Phase One of the investigation and simplify the data analysis process. She sent an initial request for participation (see Appendix C) and followed up with three reminder emails over the course of a month. She sent the first reminder one week after the survey was opened (see Appendix E), the second reminder two weeks after opening the survey (see Appendix F), and a final reminder about three weeks after the survey was live (see Appendix G). The researcher believes that repeated requests and timely reminders helped her achieve a response rate of 40.8%.

The researcher adapted the survey from Hancock et al. (2012), Vogel (2012), and Walker (1995) to collect data about the motivations and core values that award-winning
high school principals use to guide their practice. This survey consisted of three parts: questions soliciting demographic and school information, a series of quantitative questions requesting responses on a Likert scale, and three open-ended questions. The first section of the survey collected demographic information and details about participants’ current role, level of education, and years of experience. These introductory questions gathered data regarding the high schools that participants worked in when earning the State Principal of the Year award. This data allowed the researcher to disaggregate by subgroup, identify demographic and school-type trends, and identify a diverse group of candidates for the interview phase of the study.

The second section of the survey included three questions that participants were asked to answer utilizing a Likert scale. These questions were designed to gather “a quantitative or numeric description of trends, attitudes, or opinions of a population by studying a sample of that population” (Creswell, 2014, p. 249). Question 20 asked participants, “Please rate the level of importance of these motivating factors in your decision to become principal,” listing 20 factors for participants to rate from 1 (“unimportant”) to 5 (“very important”). Principals were also given space to indicate prominent motivating factors that were not among the 20 they were already asked to rate. Question 23 asked participants, “Please rate the degree to which you encounter challenging decisions, or dilemmas, in these areas of your work as principal,” listing 20 areas of school life for participants to rate from 1 (“never”) to 5 (“to a great degree”). Principals were also given space to indicate causes of significant on-the-job dilemmas that were not among the 20 they were already asked to rate. Question 26 asked
participants, “Please rate how strongly you agree or disagree with the following statements,” providing a series of seven statements related to the intersection of personal values, professional values, vocational choice, and daily decisions as principal.

The final section of the survey asked open-ended questions that allowed the principals to share narrative data. These questions intended to elicit reflections related to how about principals’ core values intersect with their decisions. Question 27 asked, “What was the primary reason you decided to enter the field of education?” Question 28 asked, “What is a key guiding principle or value you utilize to inform your on-the-job decisions?” Question 29 asked, “How do you determine a course of action when faced with a dilemma as a principal?” Principals provided narrative responses to the final three questions, allowing the researcher to capture the voices of the exemplary principals that participated in the survey.

**Phase Two.** The second phase of data collection, the interview phase, was designed to explore the research questions in a deeper manner. The researcher finalized the interview protocol after taking into consideration what emerged from survey results. Her data analysis informed the final design of the interview protocol, illustrating the inductive and flexible nature of the study’s sequential explanatory methodology. The researcher also utilized results from the survey to identify the sub-sample of survey respondents for follow-up interviews. She invited 10 respondents to interview, striving for a group of 5-8 interviewees with the following characteristics:

- Principals with diverse backgrounds including age, experience and gender
• Principals from diverse types of schools, representing students of varied socio-economic status and racial/ethnic backgrounds

• Principals that have led significant growth in their schools during their tenure

The researcher emailed a second consent form (see Appendix H) and an initial letter to request an interview (see Appendix I) to the 10 potential interviewees. She sent one follow-up email to those who did not respond. Six of the 10 principals invited to interview completed the re-consent process and the interviews, resulting in a 60% response rate for Phase Two of the study.

The researcher created her interview protocol prior to collecting any data, and then she refined the protocol after analyzing data from Phase One. Patton (2002) suggests utilizing six different types of interview questions: experience and behavior questions, opinion and value questions, feeling questions, knowledge questions, sensory questions, and background and demographic questions. The researcher integrated varied question types into her interview protocol in accordance with Patton’s guidelines. The final protocol included 16 questions focused on the link between personal motivation, professional core values and principals’ priorities and decisions (see Appendix J). She completed the interviews using the Zoom video conference platform over the course of a few weeks.
Data Analysis

Triangulation

The researcher interpreted all data collected in light of the research questions about how personal motivation and professional core values influence the practice, priorities and decisions of award-winning secondary principals. A key consideration throughout the research process was triangulation of data, defined by Schwandt (2007) as:

A procedure used to establish the fact that the criterion of validity has been met. The fieldworker makes inferences from data, claiming that a particular set of data supports a particular definition, theme, assertion, hypothesis, or claim. Triangulation is a means of checking the integrity of the inferences one draws. It can involve the use of multiple data sources, multiple investigators, multiple theoretical perspectives, and/or multiple methods. The central point of the procedure is to examine a conclusion (assertion, claim, etc.) from more than one vantage point. (p. 298)

The researcher enhanced the validity of her study by using multiple data sources as well as multiple methods for this investigation (Denzin, 1978; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam, 2009; Patton, 1999). She analyzed multiple data sources, including a survey and semi-structured interviews, and triangulated the sources to examine the consistency of the data that emerged. The study also incorporated varied methods, allowing the researcher to employ methods triangulation. Traingulation of data sources and research methods facilitated a more in-depth understanding of the research questions (Denzin,
1978; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam, 2009; Patton, 1999). Figure 8 illustrates the study’s triangulation of data sources and research methods in this investigation of award-winning secondary principals.

Figure 8. Triangulation and Analysis of Data Using the Conceptual Framework

**Phase One.** Phase One primarily entailed analyzing numerical data that came from the survey. The investigator utilized SPSS statistical software to analyze quantitative survey data. The analysis entailed descriptive statistical procedures focused on the following measures of central tendency: mean, variance, and standard deviation. The researcher also analyzed frequencies and percentages related to each quantitative segment of the survey. Phase One of the study included open-ended questions in the
survey, requiring qualitative analysis as well. The three questions at the end of the survey, in particular, required extensive qualitative analysis. The researcher analyzed responses to the open-ended questions by coding the data, identifying themes, consolidating the themes, and interpreting results in light of the conceptual framework. Data analysis from the survey informed data collection in Phase Two of the study and overall interpretations.

**Phase Two.** The interview phase of research produced narrative data that added to overall interpretations. The researcher utilized a transcription service, rev.com, to transcribe the data for analysis. When she received the transcripts from rev.com, she coded the data by labeling the text, establishing groups of similar data, identifying interrelated themes, and producing a written description of how themes converged or diverged (Creswell, 2014; Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011; Merriam, 2009). The analysis of qualitative data collected was “primarily inductive and comparative” because “making sense out of data involves consolidating, reducing, and interpreting what people have said and what the researcher has seen and read – it is the process of making meaning” (Merriam, 2009, pp. 175-176). The researcher looked for saturation, which Merriam describes as the point when the investigator “begin(s) to see or hear the same things over and over again, and no new information surfaces as you collect more data” (p. 219).

**Conceptual Framework**

The researcher interpreted the data about participants’ vocational and on-the-job decisions through the lens of Shapiro and Stefkovich’s (2013) Multiple Ethical Paradigm framework (see Figure 9). This conceptual framework maintains that there are four
primary ethical viewpoints through which educational leaders should view their practice. Shapiro and Stefkovich (2013) assert that school leaders are most effective when they analyze situations through all four lenses because the ethics complement one another “in view of the complexities and diversity of this current era” (p. 1). The researcher utilized this conceptual framework in her analysis of the personal core values and professional motivations that influenced principals’ decisions to enter the field, assume the principalship, and that guide their decisions when dilemmas arise in their schools.

Source: Adapted from Shapiro & Stefkovich (2011, 2013)

Figure 9. Multiple Ethical Paradigm Framework

Ethical Considerations and Minimization of Bias

The researcher carried with her number of biases that she acknowledged and reflected upon during this study. Fine et al. (2003) remind investigators to “interrogate in our writings who we are as we coproduce the narratives we presume to ‘collect,’ and we
anticipate how the public and policy makers will receive, distort, and misread our data” (p. 195). This “interrogation” also requires that researchers “recognize [their own] biases and values to the best of [their] ability and acknowledge them” (Willis, 2007, p. 210).

Throughout the study, the researcher employed a number of strategies to recognize her biases and ensure they did not impact her investigation.

The researcher served as a high school principal with personal experience in school leadership as she completed this investigation. Therefore, she brought her own perspectives as a practitioner, as well as her own beliefs about motivation, ethics, and decision-making frameworks to the study. Since she collected and analyzed the data through this lens, she inherently brought bias to the study based on her lived experience. Next, she had recently become a high school principal when completing the study, so her own experience of discerning this path was present as she researched what led others to the principalship. Additionally, the researcher worked in a non-public school system, and the NASSP award winners studied were primarily principals in public schools. Her experience was primarily within the private sector; therefore, she has limited lived experience of all the subtleties of leadership within public school systems.

The researcher acknowledged those biases and utilized reflexivity throughout the investigation to critically inspect the research process. Schwandt (2015) defines reflexivity as:

a very important procedure for establishing the validity of accounts of social phenomena. [It is a] Process of critical self-reflection on one’s biases, theoretical predispositions, preferences, and so forth…It can point to the fact that the inquirer
is part of the setting, context, and social phenomenon he or she seeks to understand…reflexivity can be a means for critically inspecting the entire research process. (p. 268)

In order to minimize bias, the researcher maintained a reflexive journal and discussed her biases with her chair throughout the study (Creswell, 2014; Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011, Merriam, 2009; Ortlipp, 2008; Schwandt, 2015). This exploratory and reflective journal writing allowed the investigator to identify and reflect on their “role as researcher, interviewer, and interpreter of the data generated via interviews, and to record decisions made and theoretical justification for the decision” (Ortlipp, 2008, p. 703). Furthermore, honest discussion of biases and presuppositions between the researcher and her chair increased reflexivity, therefore strengthening the validity of the research. By keeping a journal and discussing her predispositions and preferences throughout the study, the researcher attempted to place bias away from data analysis and research conclusions (Denzin, 1978; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam, 2009; Patton, 1999; Schwandt, 2015).

Validity and Reliability

Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggest that the “trustworthiness” of an investigation is critical to its validity and its worth. They argue that trustworthiness includes the establishment of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Credibility is defined in this context as confidence in the reality, or truth, of the findings. Transferability is defined as being applicable to other contexts. Dependability entails showing that findings are consistent and can be repeated. Finally, confirmability is defined as research that is neutral and free from researcher bias or motivation (Lincoln &
Guba, 1985). Put another way, Merriam (2009) states that the quality of research is contingent upon its internal validity (credibility), external validity (transferability) and reliability (dependability).

Many measures were taken in this study to increase the credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability of the study. The research design itself – consisting of multiple data sources and mixed methods – was created to increase the credibility and confirmability of the study. The mixture of methods and sources allowed the researcher to triangulate data and come to reliable conclusions (Creswell, 2014; Denzin, 1978; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Patton, 1999). Next, the researcher pilot tested her survey instrument and interview protocol on current school principals and colleagues in order to verify the credibility and reliability of both (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011; Merriam, 2009; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). She made improvements to the survey and the interview protocol based on feedback she received. Finally, the researcher debriefed with peers to practice reflexivity throughout the study, enhancing the credibility and confirmability of the investigation.

Thomas Schwandt (2015) asserts that “generalization refers to the wider relevance or resonance of one’s inquiry beyond the specific context in which it was conducted” (p. 128). The generalizability of a study is similar to what Lincoln and Guba (1985) call transferability and what Merriam (2009) refers to as external validity. Phase One of this study was designed to include a large enough number of participants, including a maximum variation of principals, to ensure generalizability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam, 2009). The researcher attempted to include thick description in her analysis of
the data, helping others relate to the findings of the study (Merriam, 2009; Schwandt, 2015; Stake, 2010). The researcher hopes that these intentional measures made the study generalizable, therefore increasing its external validity and ensuring that results are transferable.

The quality of an investigation also hinges upon what Lincoln and Guba (1985) call dependability and what Merriam (2009) refers to as reliability. To ensure a dependable and reliable investigation, the researcher sampled until reaching a point of saturation or redundancy (Creswell, 2014; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam, 1998; Merriam 2009). Additionally, instruments, analysis, and commentary were validated by the researcher’s dissertation chair and colleagues who were working on their dissertations concurrently. The study’s design, sampling plan, instrumentation, and use of thick description in reporting are just a few measures employed to increase the credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability of the study.

Summary

This mixed methods study was designed to identify the motivations and core values that award-winning high school principals use to guide their practice, priorities and decisions. The research delved into what led exceptional principals to enter the field of education, to assume the principalship, and how their beliefs inform their daily decisions. By analyzing the link between exemplary administrators’ core values and their hands-on practice, the study aims to provide a model for current and future practitioners and leadership training programs.
There were two phases of the sequential explanatory mixed methods study. Phase One consisted of an online survey of principals recognized as State Principal of the Year by their state administrator association and by NASSP between the years 2007-2017. Data from the first phase informed the second phase of data collection – semi-structured interviews of a smaller group of distinguished principals. Following both phases, the researcher integrated the quantitative and qualitative data to interpret the study in its entirety. The researcher triangulated data sources and methods in analyzing the study through the Multiple Ethical Paradigm framework posited by Shapiro and Stefkovich (2013).

The researcher went to great lengths to reduce bias and present valid interpretations. She practiced reflexivity with her chair and committee to critically inspect the research process. By journaling, conversing with her chair, and debriefing with peers, she employed strategies to minimize personal bias. By pilot testing her instruments, the researcher invited critical feedback to assure validity of her instruments and the resulting data. By triangulating multiple data collection procedures and a mixed method design, she increased credibility and confirmability. The sample size allowed for saturation and maximum variation, therefore enhancing the study’s reliability.

This chapter presents a review of the methodology used to collect and analyze data for this dissertation study. It includes the following sections: Research Design, Sample, Data Collection Procedures, Data Analysis, Ethical Considerations and Minimization of Bias, and Validity and Reliability. Each element of the methodology was thoughtfully designed to investigate the guiding questions about the intersection of
exemplary principals’ motivations, values, and decisions. In Chapter IV, the researcher presents the findings of the study, organized by phase of data collection and common themes that emerged during the sequential data analysis process. Chapter V provides a discussion of key findings, conclusions, and implications for educational practice.
CHAPTER IV

PRESENTATION OF THE DATA

Introduction

This study was designed to explore the motivations and core values that award-winning high school principals use to guide their practice. First, the research identified why exemplary high school principals decided to enter the field of education and to assume the principal position. The research then analyzed how the same theoretical concepts of personal motivation and professional core values influence the educators’ practice and priorities as principals. This study aimed to provide a model for current and future practitioners and educational leadership training programs by illustrating how highly effective high school principals integrate their motivations, values, and decisions.

The following research questions guided this study of how personal motivation and professional core values influence the practice, priorities, and decisions of award-winning high school principals:

1. What motivations and values lead outstanding high school principals to choose their career paths?
   a. Why did they decide to enter the field of education?
   b. Why did they decide to become principals?
   c. How did they know this was the right path?
2. What personal and professional core values do outstanding secondary principals use to guide their priorities and how do these values impact their decisions?

3. What are the implications for current and future principals, educational leadership training programs, district supervisors, and those involved with hiring school leaders?

**Mixed Methods Study Design Overview**

The study implemented a sequential explanatory mixed methods design, which is “characterized by the collection and analysis of quantitative data in a first phase of research followed by the collection and analysis of qualitative data in a second phase that builds on the results of the initial quantitative results” (Creswell, 2009, p. 211). This strategy enabled the researcher to “explain and interpret quantitative results by collecting and analyzing follow-up qualitative data” (p. 211). Strengths of this strategy include its straightforward nature and ease of implementation due to the clear, sequential steps involved (Creswell, 2014; Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011; Ivankova et al., 2006). Additionally, sequential explanatory design leads to clear description and reporting because data collection and analysis occurs in phases (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011; Ivankova et al., 2006). The researcher utilized an ongoing and emergent data analysis process, allowing insights gleaned from the first phase of the study to inform the selection criteria and interview protocol in the second phase of the study.

The study’s methodology included two distinct phases of data collection and analysis. In Phase One, the researcher surveyed principals who had won the State
Principal of the Year award across a 10-state region between the years 2007-2017. The sample included 103 current or past principals who earned the award through their state administrator association. After updating honorees’ contact information based on public information, the researcher invited them to participate in the survey. This survey was primarily quantitative in nature, but it also included a few open-ended questions that led to a qualitative analysis. After analyzing survey responses from the first phase of data collection, the researcher selected participants for the second phase of data collection. The researcher built on the results of Phase One of the study by interviewing six participants who responded to the survey. Figure 10 illustrates the study’s sequential explanatory mixed methods design, including its multi-phased data collection and analysis procedure.

**Phase One: Survey Phase**

**Target Population and Sampling Plan**

The researcher submitted a FOIA request to NASSP and received a comprehensive list of all State Principal of the Year award winners between the years 2007-2017. The list included name, contact information, district and school name, and year honored. The researcher sorted the data by state, narrowing the sample to honorees from the 10-state region identified for the study. She continued to cull the list by focusing solely on those principals who were recognized at the high school level. Figure 11 illustrates the process used to refine the initial list provided by NASSP.

**Figure 10.** Sequential Explanatory Mixed Method Design

**Figure 11.** Process Used to Refine Comprehensive List from NASSP
Next, the researcher updated the list of honorees by looking up public online information related to current jobs and emails. The researcher found that many possible participants changed jobs since earning the *State Principal of the Year* distinction because they were honored any time between 2007 and 2017. For example, many participants moved into district leadership positions such as the superintendency since earning the award. The researcher updated contact details for each honoree to ensure she had the most current information available.

In examining the information provided by NASSP, it became evident that there was not a clean cutoff of 10 high school principals honored annually from the 10-state region. In most years, NASSP honored 10 high school principals from the targeted states (one per state), but that was not always the case. For example, in the 2013 *National Principal of the Year* contest (which considered 2012 *State Principal of the Year* awardees), there were 14 high school honorees from the 10-state region studied. This was because the states of Kansas, Michigan, Minnesota, and Nebraska recognized two different high school principals that year. On the other hand, in the 2017 *National Principal of the Year* contest (which considered 2016 *State Principal of the Year* awardees), there were only seven high school *State Principals of the Year* from the 10 states studied. This was because award recipients from Indiana, Iowa, and Missouri were honored for their work at the middle school level. In order to maintain fidelity to her research questions, the researcher refined the list from NASSP to only include high school honorees in the targeted region. For most years, this meant that there were 10 honorees (one per state), but the number of honorees varied by year.
In order to ensure an adequate sample size with maximum variation, the researcher decided to include high school principals honored over an 11-year span, from the years 2007-2017. The researcher’s original plan was to study honorees across a 10-year span, including recipients from 2008 through 2017. However, once she realized that many possible participants retired or changed jobs, their email addresses were no longer valid, or they were recognized as middle school principals, she decided to include another year of honorees in her sample. The final sample included honorees from 2007 through 2017. This reflects the emergent and flexible design characteristic of qualitative research studies. Merriam (2009) explains: “Ideally…the design of a qualitative study is emergent and flexible, responsive to changing conditions of the study in progress” (p. 16). The researcher found that her investigation called for a pliant approach, and she adjusted in response to new information and changing conditions.

The remaining list contained 106 school leaders eligible for the study. After consolidating the most current email addresses she had, the researcher imported them into SurveyMonkey. All communications for Phase One of the study, including invitations, consent form, and the survey itself, utilized the SurveyMonkey platform. Three possible participants did not receive communications because they opted out of all SurveyMonkey correspondences. This left the researcher with a final sample size of 103 school leaders who received the invitation to participate in the study. Therefore, the final sample size for Phase One of the research study was 103 State Principal of the Year honorees.
Response Rate

Of the 103 principals invited to participate in the survey round of the study, 42 recipients elected to complete the survey. This resulted in a 40.8% response rate for Phase One of the study. Each of the 10 states were represented by between one and seven participants from the sample of 42. Honorees from Illinois participated with the highest frequency (16.7%, \( n=7 \)), while honorees from Indiana participated with the lowest frequency (2.3%, \( n=1 \)). Table 1 illustrates the frequency and percentage of participation by state.

Table 1

*Survey Response Representation by State*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>State</th>
<th>Frequency (#)</th>
<th>Percentage (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Illinois</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>16.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indiana</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iowa</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kansas</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>14.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Michigan</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>14.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Minnesota</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>9.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Missouri</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nebraska</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>14.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ohio</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>9.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wisconsin</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>9.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Recipients from each of the 11 years included in Phase One responded to the survey. Table 2 illustrates the survey responses by the year honorees earned the *State Principal of the Year* award. State honorees from 2012 (eligible for the 2013 *National Principal of the Year* award) made up the largest segment of the respondent pool (21.4%, \( n=9 \)). This is not surprising because there were 14 possible respondents in that year’s
group of honorees. By contrast, state honorees from 2008 (eligible for the 2009 National Principal of the Year award) made up the smallest segment of the respondent pool (2.3%, n=1).

Table 2

Survey Response Representation by Year of Recognition as State Principal of the Year

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year of National Award</th>
<th>Frequency (#)</th>
<th>Percentage (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2017</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>7.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2016</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>9.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2015</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>7.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2014</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>7.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2013</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>11.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>21.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2011</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>7.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>7.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>9.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>9.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Demographic Information

Age, gender, and race/ethnicity. There was a 32-year age range among the 42 participants. The youngest participant was 36 years old, and the oldest was 68 years old. The mean age of all participants was 50.5 years. Table 3 reflects the minimum, maximum, and mean age of all participants.
The gender breakdown of the 42 participants was very uneven, though it mirrored
the gender breakdown of all possible participants from the 11-year span invited to
participate in the study. Of the participants in Phase One, 37 of 42 were males (88.1%)
and five of the 42 respondents were females (11.9%). Table 4 illustrates the gender
downbreakdown of the 42 survey respondents. Table 5 indicates the gender breakdown of the
entire sample of honorees, regardless of whether honorees received the survey or
responded to it. Both tables portray a striking disparity between the frequencies and
percentages of men and women who earned the distinction and who were, therefore,
eligible to participate in this study. Across the past 11 years in the 10 states studied, 89
men have earned the State Principal of the Year award (84%), while only 17 women have
received this honor (16%). In six of the 11 years, either zero or one of the recipients was
female. This disproportion was most marked in 2015 (0 of 9 recipients were women),
2009 (0 of 11 recipients were women), and in the four years there was only one female

Table 3

Survey Response Representation by Age Range and Mean

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Minimum</th>
<th>Maximum</th>
<th>Mean</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>36</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>50.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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female. This disproportion was most marked in 2015 (0 of 9 recipients were women),
2009 (0 of 11 recipients were women), and in the four years there was only one female
Table 4

Survey Response Representation by Gender

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Frequency (#)</th>
<th>Percentage (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>88.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>11.9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 5

Total High School Awards Distributed by Gender Across 10 Midwestern States: 2007-2017

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>State Award Year</th>
<th>Total Awards</th>
<th>Male # (%)</th>
<th>Female # (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2017</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4 (67%)</td>
<td>2 (33%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2016</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>4 (57%)</td>
<td>3 (43%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2015</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>9 (100%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2014</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>7 (70%)</td>
<td>3 (30%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2013</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>9 (90%)</td>
<td>1 (10%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>13 (93%)</td>
<td>1 (7%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2011</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>8 (80%)</td>
<td>2 (20%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>7 (70%)</td>
<td>3 (30%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>11 (100%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>8 (89%)</td>
<td>1 (11%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>9 (90%)</td>
<td>1 (10%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total 2007-2017</td>
<td>106</td>
<td>89 (84%)</td>
<td>17 (16%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. This table lists the year recipients were honored at the state, not national, level. Honorees at the state level are eligible for the national award in the following year.

Similarly, when disaggregating the participant pool by race/ethnicity, a strikingly homogenous group is reflected. Much like the conspicuous gender imbalance, the racial/ethnic profile of all possible participants (103) and those who responded (43) was disproportionate. Approximately 90.5% (n=38) of respondents were White/Caucasian,
and the remaining participants were relatively evenly distributed across Black/African American (2.4%, n=1), Hispanic/Latino (4.8%, n=2), and Asian/Pacific Islander (2.4%, n=1) populations. Table 6 illustrates the frequencies and percentages of participants based on race/ethnicity.

Table 6

*Survey Response Representation by Race/Ethnicity*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Race/Ethnicity</th>
<th>Frequency (#)</th>
<th>Percentage (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Asian/Pacific Islander</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black/African American</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic/Latino</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White/Caucasian</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>90.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Educational background.** Table 7 reports the frequencies and percentages of highest degree attained by survey respondents. The most frequent degree earned among the 42 participants was a doctoral degree in education (42.9%, n=18). Of those who received doctorates, 16 participants (38.1%) earned Doctor of Education (Ed.D.) or Doctor of Philosophy (Ph.D.) degrees in Educational Administration or Leadership, and two participants (4.8%) earned Doctor of Education (Ed.D.) or Doctor of Philosophy (Ph.D.) degrees in Curriculum and Instruction. The next most frequent degree earned was a Master’s in Education (38.1%, n=17). One participant with a Master’s Degree reported he is currently a Ph.D. candidate nearing his dissertation defense. Five principals earned Education Specialist degrees (Ed.S.) in Educational Administration or Leadership (11.9%, n=5). A couple participants earned Master’s Degrees in another content area (4.8%, n=2).
Table 7

*Frequencies and Percentages by Highest Degree Earned*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Degree</th>
<th>Frequency (#)</th>
<th>Percentage (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Master’s Degree – Educational Administration</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>40.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ed.D. or Ph.D. – Educational Administration or</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>38.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leadership</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ed.S. – Educational Administration or Leadership</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>11.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ed.D. or Ph.D. – Curriculum and Instruction</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Master’s Degree – Other Content Area</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Current position.** Approximately 2/3 of participants reported that they are no longer high school principals (61.9%, \( n = 26 \)), while approximately 1/3 of participants continue working as high school principals (38.1%, \( n = 16 \)). Of the 16 current high school principals, 14 (87.5%) remain at the school they worked in while earning *State Principal of the Year* honors, and two (12.5%) are high school principals in different schools.

Nearly 60% of the participants reported that they are still working in the district where they were employed when they won the award (\( n = 25 \)). Seventeen participants (40.5%) are no longer in the same district they worked when earning *State Principal of the Year* honors. Table 8 reflects the frequencies and percentages related to the 42 respondents’ current position types.
Table 8

Frequencies and Percentages by Current Position Type

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Current position type</th>
<th>Frequency(#)</th>
<th>Percentage(%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>District leadership</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>45.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High school principal</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>38.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elementary school principal</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Changed careers</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Educational consultant</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Representative to State Board of Education</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professor of Education at a university</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Retired or Semi-retired</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 12 lists the titles of current positions held by the 42 participants. Most participants stated that they have assumed district leadership positions (45.2%, n=19) since earning State Principal of the Year recognition. Of the 42 participants, 10 are currently serving as Superintendent (23.8%), seven are Assistant or Associate Superintendent (16.7%), and two work in director roles in the District Office (4.7%). Individuals in the second largest group of participants reported they are still employed as high school principals (38.1%, n=16). Two participants (4.7%, n=2) have moved on to elementary school principal positions, including one who retired from the high school principalship before assuming the principalship at a private elementary school. Five respondents have assumed other roles, mostly in education, since being honored by NASSP. Their titles include: Education Quality Consultant, District Representative to the State Board of Education, Assistant Professor of Education Leadership, and Executive Director of a community organization. One participant stated that he is retired or semi-retired.
Participants indicated their years of experience in the following areas: total years in the field of education, total years as principal, and number of years as principal at the time they were recognized as *State Principal of the Year*. Most participants have served as principal in one school (33.4%, \( n=14 \)) or two schools (42.8%, \( n=18 \)). The rest of the participants have been principals in three or more schools. Table 9 illustrates the number of schools honorees served in at the time they earned their state award.
Table 9

Frequencies and Percentages by Number of Schools Served as Principal

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number of Schools</th>
<th>Frequency (#)</th>
<th>Percentage (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>33.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>42.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>14.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5+</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Total years in education.** Participants reported their total years of educational experience, regardless of role within the field. Most frequently, participants spent 21-25 total years in the field of education (23.8%, n=10) and 26-30 total years in the field of education (23.8%, n=10) at the time they completed the survey. Table 10 and Figure 13 represent total years of experience in the field of education regardless of position.

Table 10

Frequencies and Percentages by Total Years in the Field of Education

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Years of Experience (#)</th>
<th>Frequency (#)</th>
<th>Percentage (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>11-15</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16-20</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>21.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21-25</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>23.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26-30</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>23.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31-35</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>16.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>36-40</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>9.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40+</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Figure 13. Total Years of Experience in the Field of Education

**Total years as principal.** Figure 14 illustrates the total years of experience participants accrued as principals at the time they completed the survey. One participant stated he had 1-5 years of experience as a principal (2.4%), 17 participants have been principals for 6-10 years (40.5%) and 12 have been principal for 11-15 years (28.5%). Three of the principals surveyed have held the position for 16-20 years (7.1%), seven for 21-15 years (16.7%), one 26-30 years (2.4%) and one for 31-35 years (2.4%). Figure 14 portrays honorees’ total years as principal, regardless of when they earned the *State Principal of the Year* award.
Years as principal at the time of the award. Table 11 and Figure 15 illustrate participants’ years of experience as principal at the time they earned the State Principal of the Year award. Almost 2/3 of respondents had between 1-10 years of experience as principal when earning the award. 11.9% of participants (n=5) had 1-5 years of experience in the role upon being honored, and 52.4% of participants (n=22) had 6-10 years in the principalship when they earned the award. 23.8% of participants (n=10) had been principal for 11-15 years, 4.8% (n=2) were principals for 16-20 years, 4.8% (n=2) were principals for 21-25 years, and one participant (2.4%) had been principal 26-30 years when earning the State Principal of the Year award.
Table 11

*Frequencies and Percentages by Years of Experience as Principal When Earning Recognition*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Years of Experience (#)</th>
<th>Frequency (#)</th>
<th>Percentage (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1-5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>11.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6-10</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>52.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11-15</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>23.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16-20</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21-25</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26-30</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Figure 15. Years of Experience as Principal When Recognized as Principal of the Year*

**Combined experience.** Figure 16 combines three previous sets of data related to participant experience. The figure captures total years of experience in the field of education, total years of experience as principal, and number of years as principal at the time of recognition. First, total years of experience in the field of education, regardless of role, follows a bell curve with the most frequent answers being 21-25 years (23.8%, \( n=10 \)) and 26-30 years (23.8%, \( n=10 \)). Next, when looking specifically at years of experience as principal, the most frequent answers are 6-10 years (40.5%, \( n=17 \)) and 11-
15 years (28.5%, n=12). Over 2/3 of respondents reported having between 6-15 total years of experience as principal, regardless of when they earned the State Principal of the Year award. Finally, when assessing the range of years of experience principals had at the time they were honored, there was a higher frequency of principals recognized in their earlier years as principal than later in their careers. Over half of the respondents had 6-10 years of experience as principal (52.4%, n=22). 88.1% of participants were honored when they had between 1-15 years of experience as principal, with 11.9% of respondents earning the award in their first five years as principal. 52.4% of respondents were recognized during years 6-10 of the principalship, and 23.8% earned the award when they had between 11-15 years of experience as principal.
Figure 16. Years of Experience in Education, as Principal, as Principal at Time of Award

School Information

The next section of the survey collected information about the schools the principals worked in when they earned the *State Principal of the Year* award. The 42 participants represented different types of school districts and school types when they were recognized. Nearly 2/3 of participants worked in a one high school district when they were honored by their state administrator associations (61.9%, n=26). Slightly less than 1/3 worked in a multiple high school district (n=13), and the remainder worked in a
unit district \((n=3)\). Respondents also characterized the location, enrollment, and socioeconomic status of the schools they represented while earning the *State Principal of the Year* award.

**Location.** The majority of participants won the award working in a suburban school \((52.4\%, n=22)\) or a rural school \((38.1\%, n=16)\), with a small percentage working in an urban school \((9.5\%, n=4)\). Table 12 depicts the frequencies and percentages by location of school where the 42 respondents worked when they earned the award.

Table 12

*Frequencies and Percentages by Location of Schools Represented*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School Location</th>
<th>Frequency (#)</th>
<th>Percentage (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>38.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suburban</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>52.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>9.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Enrollment.** Principals reported the enrollments of the schools they worked in while earning recognition by their state administrator associations. Most principals \((30.9\%, n=13)\) were honored while working at a school of 500-1000 students, and the second most frequent enrollment size represented was 1501-2000 students \((23.8\%, n=10)\). Seven principals \((16.7\% \text{ of respondents})\) earned the award while serving a school size of under 500 students, and another seven were recognized while working at a school with an enrollment of 1001-1500. Table 13 reflects frequencies and percentages by school enrollment served at the time participating principals earned the award.
Table 13

**Frequencies and Percentages by School Enrollment Size**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Enrollment Size</th>
<th>Frequency (#)</th>
<th>Percentage (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Under 500</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>16.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>501-1000</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>30.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1001-1500</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>16.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1501-2000</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>23.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2001-2500</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>9.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3001-3500</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Socioeconomic status.** Another characteristic reported by principals was the socioeconomic status of the students they served when earning the award. Nine participants (21.4%) worked in a school they characterized as serving students from a low socioeconomic status (n=9). Forty-eight percent (47.6%) of respondents worked in a school they characterized as serving students from a middle socioeconomic status (n=20). Nine percent (9.5%) of participants described their school population as having a high socioeconomic status (n=4), and 21.4% described their population as having mixed socioeconomic status (n=9). Table 14 depicts the socioeconomic status of the schools that principals served in at the time of recognition.

Table 14

**Frequencies and Percentages by Socioeconomic Status of Schools Represented**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Socioeconomic Status</th>
<th>Frequency (#)</th>
<th>Percentage (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>High</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>9.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>21.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>47.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mixed</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>21.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Factors that Influenced Decision to Become Principal

Question 20 asked: “Please rate the level of importance of these motivating factors in your decision to become a principal.” This section included 20 factors that potentially influenced survey participants’ decisions to become principals (i.e., desire for a professional challenge, ability to influence school culture, opportunity to make a positive impact). Participants rated each factor’s level of influence on a scale from “unimportant” (1) to “very important” (5). Table 15 and Figure 17 summarize the influence of each possible motivating factor.

Table 15

*Factors Influencing Respondents’ Decisions to Become Principals*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factor</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std. Deviation</th>
<th>N</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ability to create change</td>
<td>4.43</td>
<td>.668</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ability to make a positive impact on people</td>
<td>4.78</td>
<td>.419</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ability to significantly influence school culture</td>
<td>4.76</td>
<td>.484</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Desire for a professional challenge</td>
<td>4.24</td>
<td>.958</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Desire for a personal challenge</td>
<td>4.10</td>
<td>1.144</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Desire to have a broader impact</td>
<td>4.69</td>
<td>.468</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Desire to leave the classroom</td>
<td>1.90</td>
<td>.958</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Desire to influence student learning</td>
<td>4.45</td>
<td>.705</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Felt called to the position</td>
<td>3.95</td>
<td>1.188</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greater prestige and status</td>
<td>1.98</td>
<td>.897</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increased responsibility</td>
<td>3.33</td>
<td>1.262</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increased freedom and autonomy</td>
<td>3.05</td>
<td>1.306</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increased influence over staffing</td>
<td>3.26</td>
<td>1.127</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increased salary and benefits</td>
<td>3.29</td>
<td>.995</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opportunity to take the next career step</td>
<td>3.74</td>
<td>1.083</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opportunity to be a teacher of teachers</td>
<td>4.17</td>
<td>.881</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opportunity to leave previous job</td>
<td>1.60</td>
<td>.798</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opportunity to relocate</td>
<td>1.60</td>
<td>.912</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Received support/encouragement from others</td>
<td>3.55</td>
<td>1.292</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stepping stone to a higher position</td>
<td>2.22</td>
<td>1.291</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The three highest rated reasons for becoming a principal were the ability to make a positive impact on others (M=4.78, SD=.42), ability to significantly influence school culture (M=4.76, SD=.48), and desire to have a broader impact (M=4.69, SD=.47). Those top reasons were followed closely by the desire to influence student learning (M=4.45, SD=.71), the ability to create change (M=4.43, SD=.67), and the desire for a professional challenge (M=4.24, SD=.96). The least influential factors in participants’ decisions to become principals were the opportunity to leave one’s previous job (M=1.60, SD=.80), the opportunity to relocate to a more desirable location (M=1.60, SD=.91), and the desire to leave the classroom (M=1.90, SD=.96). Figure 17 illustrates the mean score of each motivating factor in descending order, from “very important” to “unimportant.”

![Figure 17. Factors Influencing Respondents’ Decisions to Become Principals](image-url)
At the end of the section on factors that influenced participants’ vocational choices, the survey included a follow-up qualitative question. Respondents had the option of answering this open-ended question: “If there was a prominent motivating factor in your decision to become a principal that is not listed above, please indicate it here.” This allowed participants to list factors that influenced their vocational decisions that were not already listed. Table 16 summarizes the additional responses provided by theme. This table also indicates whether these comments built upon a factor listed in the quantitative section participants had just completed, or whether principals articulated a new influence unrelated to the motivators listed in the survey.

Table 16

Summary of Additional Motivating Factors

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme of Response</th>
<th>Comment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Desire to help students</td>
<td>Built upon factor #2 (“Ability to make a positive impact on people”)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Built upon factor #8 (“Desire to influence student learning”)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Encouraged by others</td>
<td>Built upon factor #19 (“Received support and encouragement from others”)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Saw great potential for positive change in an underperforming school</td>
<td>Built upon factor #1 (“Ability to create change”)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Built upon factor #3 (“Ability to significantly influence school culture”)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accomplish what others say is “impossible”</td>
<td>Built upon factor #4 (“Desire for a professional challenge”)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Built upon factor #5 (“Desire for a personal challenge”)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Desire to impact community and state organizations</td>
<td>Built upon factor #6 (“Desire to have a broader impact”)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drew inspiration from modeling of great leaders</td>
<td>New factor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commitment to equity issues</td>
<td>New factor</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
A number of responses reiterated, or built upon, motivators listed in the quantitative survey. For example, participants summarized that they became principals in order to help students. One principal indicated, “It might be covered above but it was to make the lives of my students better.” This added to a couple of the motivating factors listed in the survey (#2 – “Ability to make a positive impact on people” and #8 – “Desire to influence student learning”). A handful of participants added to factor #19 from the survey (“Received support and encouragement from others”). For example, one listed that “Others told me I would be ‘good’ in the position.” Another wrote, “I was asked to consider the position by three colleagues I highly respected at the time (Superintendent, Curriculum Director, and High School Principal).” One principal elaborated on factor #6 (“Desire to have a broader impact”) by articulating his desire to influence particular state and community organizations: “Impact community / state with engagement in related organizations (High School State Athletic Association, Chamber of Commerce, etc.).”

Participants also listed a handful of motivating factors that were not represented in the survey. Table 16 identifies these comments as “new factors.” For example, one participant said he drew inspiration from the modeling of great leaders he worked with. He stated, “I was inspired by the Principal I worked with as an AP to take what he taught me and apply it in a new setting.” Another listed a commitment to equity issues as the reason she became a principal.
Sources of Challenging Decisions as Principal

Question 23 asked participants, “Please rate the degree to which you encounter challenging decisions, or dilemmas, in each of these areas of your work as principal.”

Principals rated the degree to which they face challenging decisions in twenty areas of their job (i.e., discipline, school safety, community relations) on a scale from “never” (1) to “a great degree” (5). Table 17 and Figure 18 summarize the degree to which principals reported they encounter dilemmas in a variety of areas of school leadership.

Table 17

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source of Challenging Decisions</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std. Deviation</th>
<th>N</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Athletics programs</td>
<td>3.79</td>
<td>.871</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Board of Education</td>
<td>2.81</td>
<td>1.018</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Co-curricular programs</td>
<td>2.95</td>
<td>.882</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community relations</td>
<td>2.76</td>
<td>.983</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Curricular programs</td>
<td>3.38</td>
<td>.987</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Equity and justice issues</td>
<td>3.21</td>
<td>1.048</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Facilities</td>
<td>3.07</td>
<td>.947</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faculty/staff: remediation</td>
<td>3.36</td>
<td>.906</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faculty/staff: hiring</td>
<td>3.45</td>
<td>1.064</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faculty/staff: supervision</td>
<td>3.52</td>
<td>1.065</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Financial/budgeting</td>
<td>3.52</td>
<td>1.065</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Litigation issues</td>
<td>2.24</td>
<td>.906</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outside mandates</td>
<td>3.57</td>
<td>.887</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent concerns</td>
<td>3.62</td>
<td>.854</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scarcity of resources</td>
<td>3.29</td>
<td>1.019</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School safety</td>
<td>3.21</td>
<td>1.094</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student discipline</td>
<td>3.52</td>
<td>.969</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student retention</td>
<td>2.57</td>
<td>1.085</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers' union</td>
<td>2.38</td>
<td>.987</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technology integration/implementation</td>
<td>2.98</td>
<td>.897</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The areas that principals reported encountering the most challenging decisions were athletics (M=3.79, SD=.87), parent concerns (M=3.62; SD=.85), and outside
mandates (M=3.57, SD=.89). The next three areas of challenge shared the same mean of 3.52: student discipline (M=3.52, SD=.97), financial/budgeting (M=3.52, SD=1.01), and faculty/staff supervision (M=3.52, SD=1.07). The potential sources of challenging decisions that attained the lowest mean scores were litigation issues (M=2.24; SD=.91), teachers’ unions (M=2.38; SD=.99); and student retention (M=2.57; SD=1.09). Figure 18 illustrates the mean scores by area of the school where principals encounter challenging decisions in descending order, from “a great degree” to “never.”

Figure 18. Degree that Challenging Decisions Arise by Area of School
At the end of the section identifying specific areas of school leadership where principals contend with challenging decisions, the survey included a follow-up qualitative question inquiring about the same theme. Respondents had the option of answering this open-ended question after completing the rating section: “If there is another area of school leadership that causes significant dilemmas not listed above, please indicate it here.” This allowed participants to list common sources of dilemmas that were not already listed. Table 18 summarizes the additional responses provided by theme. This table also indicates whether these additional comments built upon sources of dilemmas listed in the quantitative section principals had already completed, or whether the comment articulated new sources of dilemmas not listed in the survey.

Table 18

*Summary of Additional Sources of Challenging Decisions*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme of Response</th>
<th>Comment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Personnel issues</td>
<td>Reiteration of sources #8, 9 and 10 (“Faculty/staff: remediation; hiring; supervision”)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>State and federal mandates</td>
<td>Reiteration of source #13 (“outside mandates”)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crisis management</td>
<td>Built upon source #16 (“School safety”)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time away from home</td>
<td>New source</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social-emotional issues</td>
<td>New source</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A number of principals reiterated that personnel issues are sources of significant challenge. These comments built upon factors already listed in the survey (sources #8, 9 and 10 – faculty/staff remediation, hiring, and supervision). For example, one principal listed “teacher behavior,” and another added “hiring QUALITY teachers” as sources of difficulty. Another principal spoke to the challenge of ensuring that faculty employ
modern pedagogy in their teaching methods. He described the challenge in this way: “1970s! Fixed mindset with traditional pedagogy with students who learn differently!”

Principals emphasized source #13 (“outside mandates”) as a cause of tension in their follow-up answers. One principal listed the “constantly changing landscape of state and federal initiatives” as a key challenge, and another indicated that “Federal mandates causing state mandates on education that was intended to be locally controlled” create problematic decisions for him. Additionally, “crisis management – students and staff” was included as a significant challenge. Though these comments relate to source #16 listed in the survey (“school safety”), they build upon that area of leadership by focusing specifically on crisis management. Participants also listed sources of on-the-job dilemmas that were not represented in the survey. Table 18 identifies these as “new sources.” For example, many participants indicated that time away from home was a key challenge they encountered as principals. For example, one principal listed “time away from family in order to be ‘all in’” as a poignant source of tension. Another principal indicated “social-emotional issues” as an area of great challenge.

**Impact of Personal Values on Professional Decisions**

Question 26 asked participants “Please rate how strongly you agree or disagree with the following statements” about their perception that personal values are related to professional decision-making. The section included seven statements related to vocational choice and on-the-job decisions. Respondents were asked to rate their agreement on a scale that ranged from “strongly disagree” (1) to “strongly agree” (5).
Table 19 and Figure 19 summarize the perceived impact of professional values on vocational and on-the-job decisions.

The following statements shared the highest mean score of 4.69 out of 5.0: “The ethical dimension of my work is prominent when I am sorting through dilemmas” (M=4.69; SD=.56), and “The ethical dimension of my work is prominent in my day-to-day decisions” (M=4.69; SD=.52). The statement “When I find myself sorting through a dilemma, my values play a significant role in my decision” had the third highest mean (M=4.60; SD=.54). The next highest mean score was in response to this statement: “My personal ethics are tied closely to my work as school principal” (M=4.57; SD=.77).

Table 19 lists the mean and standard deviation for each statement in the order the statement was listed on the survey. Figure 19 illustrates the mean score of each statement in descending order, from “strongly agree” to “strongly disagree.”

Table 19

*Perceived Impact of Personal Values on Professional Decisions*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factor</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std. Deviation</th>
<th>N</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>My decision to enter the field of education was related to my personal values</td>
<td>4.50</td>
<td>.707</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My decision to become a school principal was related to my personal values</td>
<td>4.38</td>
<td>1.011</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My decisions as a school principal are related to my personal values.</td>
<td>4.38</td>
<td>.795</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When I find myself sorting through a dilemma, my values play a significant role in my decision.</td>
<td>4.60</td>
<td>.544</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The ethical dimension of my work is prominent in my day-to-day decisions.</td>
<td>4.69</td>
<td>.517</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The ethical dimension of my work is prominent when I am sorting through dilemmas.</td>
<td>4.69</td>
<td>.563</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My personal ethics are tied closely to my work as a school principal.</td>
<td>4.57</td>
<td>.770</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Figure 19. Perceived Impact of Personal Values on Professional Decisions

**Qualitative Survey Question Overview**

The final section of the survey included three open-ended questions focused on the intersection of values and decision-making. Question 27 concentrated on what led principals to choose the field of education. Question 28 asked participants what guiding principles or values inform their practice and priorities as school leaders. Question 29 focused on how principals identify solutions for dilemmas they face in their schools. Table 20 lists the specific questions participants answered at the end of the survey.
Table 20

**Qualitative Questions from Survey**

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<thead>
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<th>Number</th>
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<td>Q. 27</td>
<td>What was the primary reason you decided to enter the field of education?</td>
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<td>“How do you determine a course of action when faced with a dilemma as a principal?”</td>
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**Decision to Enter the Field of Education: Qualitative Responses**

Question 27 asked participants “What was the primary reason you decided to enter the field of education?” Responses varied regarding when participants identified the field of education as their career path. One principal “knew that in 3rd grade,” and another said, “I always knew I wanted to be a teacher,” indicating they knew early on that they wanted to pursue education. This was not always the case, as another principal responded that she entered the field “by chance” later in her college career.

In order to identify why award-winning principals entered the field of education, the researcher coded the data from the qualitative questions and consolidated the codes into categories. A number of verbs were repeated in the responses, leading the researcher to categorize according to the verbs utilized. The most common reasons principals entered the field of education were a desire to “help” (8 references), to “make a difference” (7 references), to “impact” (5 references), and to “influence” (4 references).

**Potential to help students grow.** Principals most frequently referenced the verb “help” when explaining why they decided to become educators. Once participant entered
the field “to help others learn, develop, and grow.” Another said he was motivated “to invest in and help others develop into their best selves.” A third principal entered the field “to make a difference for kids. To help them enjoy the process of learning.” This emphasis on “making a difference in the lives of young people” through “meaningful work” was repeated consistently throughout the responses.

**Potential to impact and influence.** Principals commonly articulated that their desire to “impact” and “influence” led them to the field of education. One principal pointed to his desire “to impact change.” Another said he wanted “to have a greater impact on my school and community.” It was specifically one principal’s “dissatisfaction with the operation of public schools” that fueled his drive to have a larger impact. Whether respondents said they wanted to have a “positive influence” or the “ability to influence others,” the word “influence” also echoed throughout the responses. One participant explained his motivation for entering education in this way: “to influence the decision-making process for all children.”

**Passion for education.** Participants reiterated the words “love” and “passion” to describe why they decided to become educators. For example, responses included: “I love children,” “I love working with kids and watching them grow,” “I love most everything about school,” and “I love learning.” Similarly, respondents described feeling passionately about students and education. “I had a passion for working with kids,” summarized one principal. The emphatic language of “love” and “passion” evident in numerous responses – whether principals were describing students, education, learning, or making a difference – was a common theme.
Opportunity to teach and coach. Many emphasized that they were drawn to coaching as well as teaching. “As a young man (college age) my motivations were I liked working with kids, I wanted to coach sports, and I enjoyed my content area (social studies) so it seemed like a good match,” explained one respondent. Another articulated he became an educator “to teach and coach kids and be a role model for them.” A third specified the content area and sport he was drawn to, stating that he entered education “to teach social studies and coach football.” The combined opportunity to teach and coach drew many to the field of education.

Influence of family and mentors. Another key theme was the influence of family members on principals’ vocational decisions. “Both of my parents were teachers and multiple members of my extended family chose education as their calling,” said one principal. Another reiterated, “My parents were educators and they often focused on positive aspects of the profession.” Teacher mentors also played key roles in participants’ decisions to become educators. “I had many wonderful teachers that helped me along the way. I wanted to positively impact the lives of others in the same way,” articulated one principal. Another echoed the same inspiration: “I was influenced positively by so many great teachers...and I want to have the same positive influence on students in my classroom.”

Match between skills and needs of the profession. Participants also said they chose education because of the match between their skills and the needs of the profession. For example, one principal explained that his personal disposition fit the relational nature of education: “I have always enjoyed working with people. This
includes staff, students, families, and the community at large. Education is a ‘people business’ and my skills seems to fit our ‘business’ well.” Another explained that he “developed an aptitude and skill set. As a second career educator, my experiences in the military and in corporate training provided early opportunities for success.”

Guiding Principles that Inform Decisions: Qualitative Responses

Question 28 asked participants: “What is a key guiding principle or value you utilize to inform your on-the-job decisions?” Principals listed values that govern their own personal and professional lives and a number of commonalities emerged. “Integrity” was articulated by five participants, with two specifically stating “my personal integrity.” “Honesty” and “compassion” were common responses. A number of principals cited “fairness” and “equality,” emphasizing the imperative that “all students” must be treated fairly and equitably. “Respect” was another theme, with one respondent elaborating: “respect everyone’s journey.” One principal connected his guiding principles as a practitioner with who he is as a person: “You show compassion, respect and forgiveness not because of who they are but because of who you are.”

Personal connection to decisions. Many principals made personal connections when talking about their professional decisions. For example, many stated they think of their own family members when making decisions for the students in their buildings. One principal said he considers the “goals and aspirations for my own children” when making decisions. Another said he tries to recall the “Golden Rule – Do unto others as you would have them do unto you” as his guidepost. Two principals responded with similar questions they consider when making decisions. One replied, “How would I want
my family member to be treated?” The second echoed: “Am I treating the children I
work with as I would want my own children to be treated?”

**Students-first mindset.** Over half of the responses included a clear articulation
of a “students-first” mindset. For example, one principal stated, “Make all decisions
through a ‘student-centered’ lens! What is best for the students and then everything else!”
Another described his guiding principle in this way: “What is best for kids - sounds
cliché, but it is true.” A couple principals contrasted this with an “adult-first” mindset,
suggesting they make decisions based on “What’s best for kids, not adults” and “students
first, adults second.”

Some participants added nuance to the “best for kids” principle. One emphasized
student achievement: “focus on what will make a difference for student learning.”
Another highlighted both student achievement and overall well-being: “We make
decisions with the best interests of our students in mind in relation to their academic
achievement and social/emotional well-being.” A third principal focused on holistic
student growth: “Everything is about how can we benefit kids holistically.” Another
emphasized: “Tough decisions often bring me back to that principle--what will most
improve the quality of education for our students.”

**Personal and professional ethics.** Another recurring theme was the importance
of doing “what is right,” regardless of what backlash may result from a particular
decision. One principal summarized the moral responsibility he feels: “Do the right
thing. There might be easier alternatives, or it might be politically better to take a
different path, but in the end to create the most success for students, you have to do the
right thing even if it is not well liked.” One principal asserted the same moral fortitude when describing what guides his decisions: “Do what is right regardless of the situation. Each student deserves our best and each student’s needs will be different.” A number of principals specifically referred to ethics – both personal and professional – indicating the influence of their personal and professional codes of ethics on their choices.

Balancing competing goods. Principals articulated some of the tensions involved in sorting through difficult decisions in high schools. Many spoke about the “competing goods” often present in the situations they encounter, blurring a clear path forward. One spoke to the tension between caring for an individual student and caring for the whole school, certainly both important considerations. He explained:

As a principal, many decisions happen over the course of any given day. Some of the decisions are easy, but frequently, the decisions are difficult. Principals must always think of what is best for the student, but occasionally what is best for a particular student may be in conflict with what is best for your school.

Understanding this delicate balancing act is important and being able to clearly articulate your rationale is vital to successful outcomes.

The art of adeptly managing this “delicate balancing act” was emphasized in multiple ways. Another principal, for example, explained that he considers options in light of relationships and school culture. He described this as a “cost/benefit analysis”:

School culture and relationships are pivotal in my decision making process. As a principal, you inevitably are going to have to make tough decisions. How you arrive at those decisions must be communicated clearly and you must do a
cost/benefit analysis on how those decisions are going to impact your school's culture and the relationships you have with people in your community.

**Decision-Making When Facing Dilemmas: Qualitative Responses**

The final question on the survey, Question 29, asked participants: “How do you determine a course of action when faced with a dilemma as a principal?” Principals shared a variety of insights when describing their decision-making processes, particularly when sorting through a dilemma. Their action steps included: gather data, analyze the information from a variety of perspectives, weigh options and consequences, and balance the good of the individual with the good of the whole community. Principals emphasized the importance of consistent collaboration with stakeholders. They reiterated the importance of taking the time needed, whenever possible, to analyze the dilemma thoroughly. Finally, participants suggested they reflect on dilemmas through the following lenses: what is in the best interest of students, personal and professional values, lessons learned from past experiences, and creative solutions that may be present.

**Gather information.** Principals said they begin by gathering data and information when faced with difficult professional decisions. The process of collecting “data,” “facts,” “all pertinent information,” and “personal reports” is integral to their decision-making. One principal asserted the primacy of facts over emotion when dealing with a dilemma: “I do my best to remove emotion and deal with the facts and details as best I can.” Another said that gathering information is essential because it helps him answer the question: “What is the real problem?”
Principals suggested several ways to gather information, including “Prepare by reading background material” and “determine the legalities of the issues and the policies of my district.” One responded, “Collecting information from multiple stakeholders is also important.” “Get both sides of the story,” another implored. Principals asserted they need this information to understand all aspects of the situation. One recommended this course of action: “Seek to understand the dilemma, gain knowledge about the dilemma from those who are involved.”

**Analyze and weigh the options.** Next, principals explained the importance of “weighing what is in the best interest of the student and school community.” This includes weighing the care for the individual and the care for the larger school population. It also includes weighing potential courses of action with possible ramifications. “Analyze what the possible outcomes and consequences are first,” one participant responded. Another explained his process in this way: “Weighing all options…weighing what is best for individual and the school as a whole.” One principal used the “cost/benefit analysis” image again to describe how he identifies the best course of action. He explained:

I put a lot of emphasis on looking at the big picture. I am acutely aware that my decisions have the opportunity to impact a wide range of people, so I do my due diligence in really analyzing an issue before making a decision. It is important for me to do a cost/benefit analysis of each decision to help me arrive at the best possible solution. Seeking first to understand the dilemma is critical at arriving on a solution that is going to justifiable.
Whether principals referred to this process as doing a cost/benefit analysis, weighing the interest of the students and the interests of the larger school community, or assessing options and possible consequences, they agreed that this is a key action step. Regardless of how they labelled this part of the decision-making process, they consistently articulated the need to engage in a thoughtful and deliberate analysis of all available information.

**Collaborate.** Almost half of the respondents highlighted working with others to arrive at the best solution. Most frequently, the word “collaboration” was used, but respondents also suggested that they “discuss,” “solicit advice,” “gather input from,” “rely on” and “consult with” key individuals. Principals referenced a range of people whom they collaborate with, including the school’s leadership team, superintendent, other principals, mentors, their professional networks, and parents and students. One principal articulated that his approach is to: “Rely heavily on my mentors and professional network.” This emphasis point was reiterated throughout the responses: “I discuss the dilemma with my superintendent and other principals in my district. I reach out to colleagues.” A team approach, one principal said, is beneficial because it solicits varied perspectives: “Team decision. More thoughts in the room equals a better decision and one we can live with.” Another respondent humbly acknowledged the limitations of his own viewpoint: “Many times I do not have the right answer so I solicit advice from key individuals.” The overarching theme was that award-winning high school principals work with others to analyze the situation and determine the best course of action. They do not do this in isolation.
Allow time. A number of participants said they try to allow themselves time for adequate reflection and consideration. One suggested that it is essential to “permit time to thoroughly consider all options and ramifications.” Another explained, “I take time to think things through from all angles and perspectives.” Principals concurred that this important reflection time helps them gather and understand relevant information, thoughtfully weigh all options, thoroughly analyze the situation, and collaborate with fellow administrators before proceeding with a decision.

Reflect on considerations. Principals articulated a number of key considerations, or lenses, they use to frame their reflections. Viewing the decision through these perspectives helps their interpretation and analysis, ultimately allowing them to determine the best possible course of action. The considerations they articulated fall into a couple of categories: the best interest of students; personal and professional values; past experiences and precedent; creative solutions; and best teachers’ perspectives.

When sorting through dilemmas, this group of exemplary principals overwhelmingly said they focus on what is best for students. One principal suggested: “Keep the students at the center when making decisions.” Another echoed: “Keep the best interest of kids central to the issue.” Whether participants described keeping “students at the center,” thinking of “what’s right for kids,” or considering what would “most improve the quality of education for students,” this same theme was reiterated throughout the responses. Some also referred to caring for the “good of the community,” or for “all who are involved.” One principal articulated the importance of caring for
students and the entire community in this way: “Do what is right for the common good of the whole learning community, specifically kids.”

Principals stated that their personal and professional “values/belief systems” animate their responses to dilemmas. One participant explained the integration of his personal values into his professional decisions by stating: “I lean heavily on my personal beliefs and values and align them with my professional experience in determining the most viable, impactful course of action.” Another said he chooses “What is right based upon my values” when he faces a difficult decision. One principal suggested this imperative: “make a decision you can live with.” Another said he abides by this personal and professional tenet: “let my conscience guide me.” Often these values are articulated in the school’s mission and vision statements, suggested another principal: “I found it best to begin with your common vision and mission and be certain that your actions and words follow this vision.” The integration of personal and professional values emanated as a key theme in the responses.

Many principals named specific values that animate their decisions. They pointed to honesty, fairness, and trust as salient values that guide their decision-making. For example, one principal asserted: “I live by - and make decisions based on the following: My faith in God; Respect for others; Integrity; Compassion; and Excellence.” Another said he grounds his decision-making in ethics: “I seek to find the most fair and ethical solution to a dilemma.” Another said he strives to make decisions that are “fair to all and maintains dignity for all.” Another participant indicated: “When dealing with student issues, I try to focus on equity over equality. Responses illustrated that principals
integrate their personal and professional values, especially when they sort through
difficult situations or dilemmas. “It’s always the right time to do the right thing,”
summarized one highly effective leader.

In addition to considering dilemmas in light of personal and professional core
values, principals suggested that they lean heavily on what they have learned from past
experiences. One principal explained his roadmap for sorting through what he calls “gray
area decisions.” He relies heavily on the intersection of his values and his experiences:

It always comes back to being anchored in your values combined with drawing
from your experience. It is important to collaborate, get all the information, and
then be decisive. This marries the ideas of having some objective cornerstones
(values) combined with trusting your instincts (experience & intuition) for making
those gray area decisions.

Multiple principals stressed that lessons from past experiences help them in their
decision-making processes. They also conveyed that they examine school precedent as a
factor in their decision-making.

A couple final reflections surfaced from the survey. Though they were not
prolific in the results, these responses added unique considerations. One principal
suggested the importance of looking for creative options. He advised that school leaders
should “look for creative, middle ground solutions when possible.” He continued by
emphasizing the importance of relationships and trust: “Don’t disrupt relational trust –
ever.” Another respondent said he try
teachers. When faced with complex decisions, he asks himself, “what would my best teachers think about the situation?”

**Decision-making process graphic.** Figure 20 provides a graphic representation of the principals’ decision-making processes. The figure captures specific action steps in the center circle. Principals suggested they engage in these actions: *gather* data, *analyze* the information from many angles, and *weigh* options against possible consequences. Concepts in the three surrounding circles frame those action steps, informing the decision-making process. Working with others to identify a course of action was such a common theme that *ensure collaboration* surrounds the acts of *gathering*, *analyzing*, and *weighing* in this graphic. Principals suggested that collaboration with colleagues should be ongoing throughout the decision-making process. *Allow time when possible* surrounds the action steps because principals advised that leaders should slow down and ensure a thorough analysis of the situation before deciding upon a course of action. Finally, *reflect on considerations* joins *ensure collaboration* and *allow time* on the outside of the circle. Principals maintained they reflect on their dilemmas through a number of lenses, captured in the box on the graphic. These considerations are: best interest of students; personal and professional values; past experience and precedent; creative solutions. Together, these factors inform the actions of gathering, analyzing, and weighing information.
A common point of emphasis by principals was that there comes a time when the principal must make a decision and then move forward. After engaging in the decision-making process illustrated above, participants asserted that it’s important to “be decisive” and act upon the decision. One veteran principal articulated this adage: “All included for the conversation. Remember this…someone has to decide.” Another stressed the importance of maintaining fidelity to those decisions: “Once you make a decision stick with it, especially if you have done your research.” Another accentuated that after making the decision, he collects data to evaluate the efficacy of the choice.

Figure 21 provides a graphic representation of what survey respondents said are integral steps that need to follow a decision. After engaging in the process identified in
Figure 20, principals said they make a decision and communicate directly, transparently, and clearly. They highlighted that they try to “stick with” the decision, provided it was thoroughly researched and vetted. Finally, they emphasized the importance of collecting data following the decision for later evaluation.

Figure 21. Graphic Summary of Steps Following Decision According to Survey Responses

Phase Two: Interview Phase

This study examined how exemplary principals’ values impact their decisions, focusing on the specific areas of vocational choice and on-the-job decisions. In the interview phase of the study, the researcher asked a series of questions designed to delve more deeply into the intersection between values, motivation, decisions, and priorities. Given the vital impact that principals can have on teacher formation and student growth, the researcher hopes this exploration will inform current and future school leaders, education training programs, and district supervisors.

Sampling Plan and Response Rate

After completing the first phase of data collection, the researcher identified 10 of the 42 survey respondents for follow-up interviews. Her objective was to cultivate a sample characterized by maximum variation. The 10 participants invited to interview represented a variety of school types, locations, and sizes. They received the State
Principal of the Year distinction while working at schools serving different student populations, including varied socioeconomic statuses and enrollments of the student body. She also considered demographic information, years of experience, and the current jobs of survey respondents when identifying possible interviewees. Her goal was to invite a range of principals to participate in Phase Two of the study because they would bring a variety of perspectives to the interviews.

Six of the 10 principals she invited to interview agreed to complete the interview. For this second phase of data collection, the response rate was 60%. The researcher asked principals from six states to participate, and those she interviewed represented four states – Illinois, Michigan, Ohio, and Wisconsin. Their current positions varied, though all six leaders remain in the field of education. Two of the participants are still principals, two are now assistant superintendents, and two are superintendents in their districts. The six principals interviewed represent a variety of school types, including rural, suburban, and urban schools; lower income, middle income, high income schools; and small, medium, and large school enrollment sizes.

The researcher conducted semi-structured interviews with the six participants for this phase of the study. The interview protocol built upon findings in the first phase of research, illustrating the emergent and flexible nature characterized by this research design. The researcher followed a re-consent process for the interview phase, utilizing a second consent form (see Appendix H), a new letter to request an interview (see Appendix I), and an updated interview protocol (see Appendix J). The interview protocol was designed to follow the research questions guiding the study. The researcher
organized and presented findings from the interviews by research question. She utilized pseudonyms for the six interviewees to protect their confidentiality.

**Research Question 1: Vocational Decisions**

The first research question focused specifically on vocational decisions. The study began by examining what led exemplary principals to choose the field of education as their career path. The study then delved into what motivated them to choose the principalship within their selected career field. This prong of the study went on to investigate how the award-winning school leaders knew that the principalship was the right path for them. The researcher also inquired about reasons that interviewees either remain in the role of principal or reasons they have moved to district office positions.

This examination of vocational choice relates directly to the first research question and its sub-questions:

1. What motivations and values lead outstanding high school principals to choose their career paths?
   a. Why did they decide to enter the field of education?
   b. Why did they decide to become principals?
   c. How did they know this was the right path?
Decision to Enter the Field of Education

Research Question 1a asks: “What motivations and values lead outstanding high school principals to choose their career paths? Why did they decide to enter the field of education?” All six interviewees began their educational careers as classroom teachers. Though the timing of their decision to pursue the field of education varied, they all opted to pursue teaching. In order to engage in a deeper investigation of what brought these outstanding school leaders to the field of education in the first place, the researcher asked several questions focused on that theme.

Participants articulated they decided to join the field of education at different times in their lives. Nicholas, for example, “always kind of knew” that he was interested in education because he “just had so much fun in high school.” He explained: “I knew I would really enjoy it, and I have every step of the way.” Because of his own personal enjoyment of his high school years, Nicholas’ interest in education was clear to him from an early age.

Ethan explained, “education was in the back of my mind” when he was deciding upon a career path, though he was considering other options such as law. A number of teachers influenced Ethan’s career choice, leading him to pursue graduate work that prepared him for teaching and coaching. In his early years as an educator, he “fell in love with teaching.” He decided to further his studies with a Doctorate in Educational Administration while continuing to practice as an educator. Graduate studies helped him recognize he was in the right field.
John and Craig indicated that their desire to coach had a major influence on their career choice. They spoke of the significance of athletics in their own lives, and John talked about one coach who was particularly influential for him when he was a student-athlete. Both also articulated a passion for a content area (History for John and Craig, English also for Craig). Craig explained that this discernment was a process for him: “I didn’t really know what I wanted to be when I grew up. I didn’t think I wanted to be a teacher.” He gravitated toward English and History classes, which were “the areas where my passion was at the time.” Craig and John merged their passion for athletics with their interest in these content areas, beginning their educational careers as teachers and coaches. Craig also came from a family of educators; conversations with his parents about the profession helped him identify this career path.

Patrick spoke about practical and financial considerations that first led him to the business sector. He said he grew up in poverty and was grateful because: “I had teachers that really turned my life around.” Patrick began in a corporate industry, which he found enjoyable for the first year. Once he stopped feeling challenged in that industry he said, “I hated it the second year, because [I was] not learning anything, and every day was the same old, same old.” Meanwhile, he had “teachers along the way that were kind of mentors, who were like ‘Listen. You can go places. You can do things.’” They recommended he consider the field of education, and he had family in the field who spoke highly of the profession. Following a few years in a different profession, he redirected his career toward education.
As a second career educator, Ryan said he did not realize until he had been in other fields that he wanted to pursue education. His professional background includes experience in the military, corporate training, and small business ownership. He explained that his personal context had a considerable influence on his decision to enter education. He related, “I was a struggling student, K-12. I was a second language learner. I barely graduated from high school…I didn’t graduate from college until I was almost 30.” After working in different fields, personal events in life caused him to step back and reflect: “What do I really want to do?” His adult corporate training experience helped him recognize his interest in public school education and a “natural skill set” he had for teaching.

Almost all interviewees pointed to the influence that others had on their decision to enter the field of education. Ethan and Patrick spoke specifically about teachers that motivated them. John said he was “really inspired by [his] high school coach.” Craig and Patrick articulated that having family in education influenced their decisions to become teachers. Whether interviewees told stories of an encouraging coach, a teacher mentor, or family members that aroused this vocation, this inspiration by outside mentors was a prevalent theme across the interviews.

**Decision to Become Principal**

Research Question 1b asks: “What motivations and values lead outstanding high school principals to choose their career paths? Why did they decide to become principals?” This question builds upon Research Question 1a by asking participants what led them specifically to the principalship. There are many great teachers, even many with
administrative training, that opt not to pursue school leadership roles. Yet the potential impact of an effective principal can be far-reaching. In this investigation of why exemplary school leaders decided to pursue the principalship, the researcher asked a number of interview questions focused on what motivations and values impacted their choice to become principals.

Interviewees recounted stories of loving teaching, coaching, and working with student activities during early years in the field. Yet once they were in the field of education, there were a variety of factors that led them out of the classroom or off of the playing field to full-time administrative positions. For some, there were influential people that helped elucidate this path. For others, there were specific moments they can point to when they realized they were called to school administration. Some participants indicated that it was a process for them to recognize this vocation; others relayed more finite instances where they knew they wanted to be school administrators. A couple principals explained this was part of a plan they had mapped out, while others shared stories of unexpected opportunities they said “yes” to. A couple of participants pointed to frustration with prior leadership as providing an impetus to pursue school leadership.

John spoke a lot about inspiration. Not only was he inspired by his high school coach to enter the field of education, but colleagues he worked with also inspired his desire to take on leadership roles: “I worked with some really good leaders who were able to inspire and motivate, and really improve the organization.” He recounted that it took some time for him to identify educational leadership as the right path: “early on in teaching, I would look at the work that, in particular, assistant principals would do, and
thought I wanted nothing to do with that. That looked awful.” But he saw a respected
colleague from his academic department move into administration, and then had the
opportunity to work with a great principal whom he described as “so dynamic and
inspiring.”

Meanwhile, practical matters of finances and a desire to diversify his resume and
experiences led John to pursue coursework in educational leadership. His graduate
classes served as further inspiration for him. Once he was partly through his
administrative program, he said he “was chomping at the bit to get myself into an
administrative role.” John also reflected that school leadership “felt a lot like coaching.
As a head coach…I loved the feeling of building a program, motivating my athletes,
working toward goals in strategic ways.” He saw many of the same aspects he enjoyed
about coaching in school leadership. These parallels motivated him to pursue school
administration.

Similarly, Craig emphasized the impact that mentors and graduate school studies
had on his decision. A former principal and some “really good instructors” helped him
“open [his] eyes to what school administration could be.” What began as a practical
consideration (“I wanted to get a master’s because it was financially beneficial for me”) turned into a graduate school experience that helped him envision himself as a principal. When an administrative position nearby became available, he recounted his thoughts at the time: “what the heck. I’m working on my masters anyway. It will be a good way to build my resume and we’ll see where it goes from there.”
Much like John and Craig, Ryan did not enter the field of education with any plans to be a principal. “I didn’t even know. It’s not part of your context. You’re just going to become a teacher,” he said as he reflected back on his mindset when getting into education. But he recalls a distinct experience at the end of his first year of teaching when he “started to lead.” It was at this moment when his personal history, core values, and passion intersected – making clear his path to school leadership. Ryan recounted:

I'm sitting across from a teacher who's supposed to be teaching them [lower level students] how to read. And I said, ‘How many of your kids are moving up? How many were you able to help teach how to read?’ Now keep in mind I was held back because I couldn't read or speak English. She had a newspaper in front of her. And she lowers the newspaper and says, ‘I don't have any good kids this year. None of them are going anywhere.’ And she put her newspaper back up. That was the moment I decided. I was flabbergasted. I felt awful for them. I’m like, are you serious? You’re the one that’s supposed to be helping them learn how to read and get beyond this. That is awful. So at that moment I started leading in that school and organizing.

This interaction compelled Ryan to approach the principal at the beginning of his second year of teaching. He asked to meet with “every basic level teacher” to create some common standards to help “kids have a future.” His plan was to organize the teachers so that each teacher was “directly helping kids learn how to read. It’s not enough to talk about strategy.” He said the principal “thought I was crazy,” but let him do it. Ryan pointed to that precise moment as the time when he “became an educational leader.”
After sharing that story, Ryan explained he pursued formal administrative positions because he “constantly got frustrated” by people who put up barriers and focused on what could not be done rather than what could be done. He resolved to pursue administrative positions: “I’d have to get promoted so I could push people out of the way and just figure out ways to say ‘yes.’ Because it was ridiculous, sometimes, the things they’d say ‘no’ to.” This pursuit of leadership was integrally connected to the moral responsibility he feels to help all students learn: “If we can't be successful, then nobody has hope. So we have to succeed. We have to be able to create models that are scalable that everybody can learn from because if we can't do it, then kids can't have hope. And I don't believe that. I believe that we can turn it around.”

Nicholas’ journey into school administration unfolded in a different way. While he felt interested in the field of education from an early age, he described his path to educational leadership as “a falling backwards into all of these opportunities.” He said one position “kind of fell in my lap. It wasn’t planned, it wasn’t anticipated, wasn’t on my goal radar.” Another position he assumed was “totally unanticipated.” For another, he reiterated the same reflection: “I tossed them my resume…I just fell into it.” He indicated, “I felt like that needed to be my next step…and I just let go and followed the stream.” There was no precise moment Nicholas realized he wanted to be a high school principal, but he emphasized that he let go and “followed the stream” leading him toward leadership positions.

Patrick’s movement from the classroom to the principalship was part of a “plan in the back of [his] head,” but the timing was not in line with his hopes. He loved teaching
and the direct work he did with students in the classroom. Those relationships remain very important to him, regardless of his role. When the superintendent asked him to consider building-level administrative positions, he did not feel ready to leave the classroom. But he was not sure if the opportunity would present itself again and felt like he could help the direction of the district. He took the position, reflecting: “I’ll take this because that’s the opportunity that presents itself. I wasn’t really looking for it. So I made that jump and it worked out pretty well.”

School and district officials encouraged Ethan as well, and he has taken some administrative positions and turned others down. He spoke to a standard of excellence that led him to the principalship, after joking that experiencing “bad administration” inspired him to assume school leadership. He had ideas about what he could do as a principal to create a school environment “where every student has a connection and feels like they belong.” Ultimately, he decided to become a principal and remains in the position after more than 20 years as principal.

**Confirmation of Vocational Choice**

Research Question 1c asks: “What motivations and values lead outstanding high school principals to choose their career paths? How did they know this was the right path?” This question builds upon Research Question 1a by asking participants how they knew that their choice to enter the field of education was the correct path for them. It also builds upon Research Question 1b by asking participants how they knew that school leadership, particularly the principalship, was the right fit. The researcher asked a series of interview questions focused on how participants knew that pursuing education, then
the principalship, then (if applicable) district leadership was the right career choice for them. In the researcher’s investigation, it became clear she should also inquire why many participants elected to leave the principalship for district leadership positions. Two-thirds of participants in both phases of research left the principal position since earning the State Principal of the Year award, mostly for district leadership positions. This surfaced as an unanticipated finding throughout the study.

**Decision to enter the field of education.** Interviewees decided to enter the field of education at varying times in their lives. When reflecting on their decisions, they spoke of “fit” and of “signs” leading the way. Craig explained, “Everything kind of pointed me in the direction of wanting to be in education.” When talking about the prospect of teaching and coaching, for example, John said: “Those two things seemed to make sense.” Ryan articulated that he got into education “through no planning or intentional purpose.” He realized he had a natural skill set for education, recognizing that “this is a good fit for me.” Nicholas also attested to this affective feeling of fit: “it feels like home…it’s just been a big fit…I really enjoy it…it’s a great community.”

**Decision to become principal.** Many of these same feelings of “fit” and “home” affirmed that participants were following the “right path” in moving from the classroom to school leadership positions. Ethan and Craig, two participants who are still principals, spoke to this the most directly. When asked how he knows he is in the right position as a high school principal, Ethan shared, “Feedback from kids helps me know that. I am so honored to say I’m principal here. It is an honor and a privilege.”
Craig pointed to verbal affirmations that he’s received as confirmation he is in the right role. “I've had a lot of people tell me that they appreciated the work that I was doing…And I got a lot of thank yous for the time I was putting in and for a willingness to listen,” he explained. He indicated that positive reinforcement he receives from others confirms his vocational decision: “I had a teacher or a parent or one of my administrative colleagues here in the district, you know, say hey, you're doing the right things and you're making a difference and so…it made it easier to keep doing it.” Ethan and Craig reported that this sort of positive feedback from students, teachers, and parents affirms their decisions to become principals.

They both also emphasized that, as principals, they can feel the impact they have on students. Ethan explained, “I love working with kids, teachers, working on curricular issues. You don’t get that in central office. As principal I can walk into a class and feel that impact.” Craig echoed:

When I became a principal, I was not certain that I could have as much impact on students as I found in the classroom, and the impact isn't as direct, but... I can still point to impact that I'm having. I'm certain that a superintendent can do the same, but you’re…one more step away from the students, so I'm not ready to give up that.

Ethan and Craig elaborated with stories of the direct impact they feel they have on students, teachers and their schools. They pointed to this feeling of impact as confirmation that the principalship is the right fit.
Transition to District Leadership

Of the six principals interviewed, four have moved on to district leadership positions; two are associate superintendents and two are superintendents. The researcher was not anticipating so many participants would no longer be principals at the outset of her study, but once she got more deeply involved she realized this was a natural progression for the school leaders in her sample. The principals selected for this study received a significant award, distinguishing them as highly effective educational leaders in their states. Given the talent of this group, the level of success they experienced as principals, and the body of research related to principal retention, it is no surprise that many have gone on to lead the entire district. Interviewees provided a variety of perspectives on why they left the principal position, germane to this analysis of how to fill the principal seat with exemplary educational leaders.

Difficult decision. All four interviewees now working at the district office conveyed that they enjoyed, or even loved, the principalship. Nicholas articulated that he “loved being principal,” though he has since moved to the district office. Patrick echoed this same level of enthusiasm for the principalship. When he was approached to move to the district office, he reflected, “that was probably the toughest decision… I loved where I was, I loved the people I worked with.” Ryan also explained how difficult it was for him to leave his school: “I did not want to leave…it was very, very hard. Very difficult to leave.”

One of the consistent factors that made the decision to leave their buildings difficult was the added distance this would create between them and their students. For
example, Patrick’s desire for contact with students was a common refrain throughout his interview: “The hardest part was not having contact with the kids. Now I’m in a whole separate building.” But he has found creative ways to interact directly with students: “At least in a small district, I still do things like I’m our sports announcer for all the games. So I see kids, I go to all the events.”

**Reasons for leaving.** The researcher asked interviewees why they left the principal position. A handful of district leaders spoke about the challenges of timing: they did not feel ready to leave the principalship, but a need or opportunity arose that they felt they had to respond to. Ryan, for example, planned to stay at his school at least another three or four years before considering a new role, but the timing of a vacancy did not align with his ideal plan. When the district office position became available, he reflected, “if I didn't take advantage of moving, then I wasn't going to have that chance again and I would have to leave the district to do it.” Patrick also spoke about his love for the principalship and the challenge of timing. His frustration with past district leadership, however, influenced his decision: “We had a bad experience when we had an outsider come in before…It was a bad two years…that was a struggle.” When the superintendent asked him to move to the central office, he faced a poignant tension, making his decision to leave very difficult.

Though Craig is still a principal, he indicated he has thought about district leadership and the timing of a position change. But he is in the middle of several exciting school initiatives that he would like to see to completion. He explained, “I don't feel like I've done all that I can do as a building principal. There are some initiatives we have
underway aimed at improving attendance and behavior. Our ongoing efforts to improve achievement…I want to see those things through and not hand them off to somebody else and take something else on.”

A common thread among all interviewees was that the demanding nature of the principalship can take its toll. John, who has had many roles within schools and the central office, reflects on one reason why he left the position: “There’s a great argument to be made that being a high school principal is the hardest job in education.” Ryan spoke to this as well: “I couldn't survive being principal much more than 10 years. I gained 50 pounds, I lost the hair that I had. I mean, I was not looking pretty…I knew there was a shelf life. But I knew…I could do a solid 10 years.” John added this description of the role: “It is very demanding…you have to be, kind of, all things to all people. If you do the job right, it’s easily a 60-70 hour/week position.” Nicholas articulated the demanding nature of the job in a different way. He explained what he told pre-career students who interviewed him as part of their coursework in educational leadership:

I used to always tell them, ‘Get used to drowning. Just get comfortable drowning,’ and they were like, ‘What are you talking about?’ You will never catch up ... You will never get ahead. There will always be more things to do than hours in the day, and you just have to be okay with that. And sometimes just walk away, know that it will be there in the morning, and start again…You have to continue to attack it, or it will eat you alive.
Many participants spoke to a level of fatigue that set in from the demands of the job. Whether they remain in the principal position or have moved on to the district office, this was a theme that emerged in all interviews.

Ethan added concerns about school safety to list of stressors: “I worry every single day – about violence, guns, shootings. I worry every day. It was a lot more fun being a principal before Columbine.” He also spoke to the public and symbolic nature of the principalship. “One of the hardest things about the job,” he said, “is you’re always the principal. You never get rid of the title. People are always watching you.” He explained that the public nature of the job, including the level of public scrutiny that comes with it, adds additional weight and demand to the role.

Craig described two additional challenges of the principalship: isolation and lack of resources. He is in a small district and does not have assistant principals on his staff, which makes his role feel particularly lonely. This also manifests itself in the daily operations of the school. He used student discipline as an example:

Chasing student discipline when there's no one else here to do it can get tedious, and those are the moments that can be most challenging for me…When I have it on my agenda that I want to…meet with a teacher to go over feedback for an observation or analyze some test data…and I get a call that…there's been a fight on a school bus. Here in the small district…I'm the only resource available to deal with that. Whenever I stop being a principal, I will not miss that.

Craig reflected that the lack of an assistant principal can exacerbate his isolation, adding a level of challenge to his role that is unique to small schools. Craig is presently content
in his role, though he alluded to considering a move to the district office as a future possibility.

**Research Question 2: On-the-Job Decisions**

This study examined how exemplary principals’ values impact their decisions, focusing on the specific areas of vocational choice and daily practice. The first research question delved into what motivations and values led principals to decide upon their career paths. The second research question built upon the first by investigating how the principals’ on-the-job decisions are impacted by their values. Specifically, the researcher asked participants to identify their professional core values, discuss how they relate to their personal beliefs and values, and to share a story illustrating how they identify priorities as a principal. The researcher then asked about examples of difficult decisions they have made and how they navigate ethical dilemmas that arise in schools. Finally, she asked interviewees how they would advise current and aspiring high school principals to navigate ethical dilemmas that they may encounter as principals.

This examination of how values guide principals’ decisions is directly related to the second research question:

2. What personal and professional core values do outstanding secondary principals use to guide their priorities and how do these values impact their decisions?

**Professional Core Values**

The researcher asked participants to identify the professional core values and ideals that guide their practice as school leaders. Key themes that surfaced from the
interviews centered around what is best for students, a desire to help teachers succeed, and an emphasis on relationships. All participants illustrated a similarly optimistic mindset. Whether they were describing their belief in students, their consistent pursuit of improvement, or their ardent desire to make others’ lives better, principals’ positive dispositions emerged as another common theme. They also articulated a salient integration between personal and professional core values that informs their vocational and on-the-job decisions.

**Students-first orientation.** Principals echoed that a student-first orientation was a prominent core value for them. Patrick summarized this mentality: “it's got to be about students first…We only get to either work with them for such a small amount of time, and whatever decisions you make you have to kind of stick to your guns on whatever you feel is right for the kids.” Nicholas added that he considers actions from this perspective: “that’s my kid. How’s it going to impact the student? Students have to be at the core of your decisions.” Ryan added a sense of urgency and resolve to this imperative. He stated, “we have a personal, moral responsibility in the public education system to deliver for our students…if they fail, it's really because of us. We have to own the success of the students. And if they don't have a future, it's because we have failed them as a system.”

John articulated this “students-first” mentality while also emphasizing his focus on serving teachers. He explained that he tries to embody a “servant leader mindset,” working to help teachers succeed, so they can go on to positively impact student achievement. John explained, “When things would come to what's best for staff, or best
for students, students were always first.” He continued by stating the importance of supporting his teachers:

Making sure that I'm setting up my teachers to be as successful as they possibly can is ultimately what's going to move us forward as an organization. So, I really believe in, kind of that servant leader mindset, where my job is set them up for success. You're in this to kind of do what's right for the kids and the teachers and everybody that you work with.

John articulated his understanding that teachers have the most significant and direct impact on student achievement. By helping teachers succeed, John knows he is helping students succeed, illustrating his nuanced perspective of a student-centered mindset.

Relationships. Patrick emphasized the value of forming relationships as a cornerstone of his efforts as principal. “The curriculum and all that stuff is important obviously…but ninety percent of it is a relationship business,” he stated. Without relationships, he acknowledged that his impact on student growth will not be as great. Patrick explained this philosophy: “It's getting them [kids] engaged, getting them to…believe that they have a direction… because once you have a kid that has a goal, now it's a whole different conversation with them…They just need to be working towards something. A lot of times, you see kids who are working away from stuff.” Patrick’s repeated references to building relationships with students echoed throughout his interview, clearly a seminal value to him.

Mindset and disposition. The researcher was struck by the optimism, passion, and enthusiasm that all participants articulated in one way or another. In varying ways,
they shared stories illustrating their mindsets, while also conveying their values. Their mindsets were inspiring, helping the researcher see how these principals could motivate others with their positive attitudes, growth mindsets, and passion for students. For example, Ethan cited a book about the value of maintaining an optimistic perspective as a guide for his life. He explained that each year he tells students a “filling up buckets” story from the book, which describes two types of people – “bucket fillers or those who empty others’ buckets.” Through this metaphor, he said he encourages students to be their best selves, therefore making others around them better and happier. “A student came back after Graduation and said, ‘hey, I’m still filling up buckets!’ It’s magical when they fill the bucket,” he added enthusiastically.

Ryan spoke passionately about his belief that anything can be accomplished. In articulating a core value, he said: “there really is nothing that is impossible…that anything can be done as long as you decide you want to do it. I've never looked at any barriers…So I don't believe anything is not possible.” He referenced this root belief in other parts of the interview as well. For example, when describing his motivation to become a principal, he shared this reflection: “There's nothing we can't make happen. We just need to decide we're going to do it.”

Nicholas and John articulated stories about their personal and professional drive for continuous improvement. Their comments pointed to a mindset framed by what Nicholas called “an absolutely, relentless pursuit of improvement.” John called this an “orientation that we always need to get better.” He shared a story of a former friend and mentor who used to quote Ray Kroc: “You're either green and growing, or you're ripe and
rotting.” John explained, “that's something I really believe…in this business, it's all about constant improvement.” Nicholas added, “I can't stay stagnant.”

**Relationship between Professional and Personal Values**

The researcher inquired whether principals’ professional values are related to their personal values. Over half of the respondents emphatically articulated a connection between their personal and professional values. This is in line with the research by Shapiro and Stefkovich (2011), who remind, “It is not always easy to separate professional from personal ethical codes” (p. 23). For example, Craig answered, “They’re the same, they’re the same,” when describing his personal and professional core values. Ethan reiterated a similar message: “They have to be the same! We must model the core values. One of the hardest things about this job is you’re always the principal…You never get rid of the title. People are always watching you. These must be your personal values too.” Craig specifically linked his school’s value of community service to his family’s commitment to participating in service activities together. Ethan explained that the core values of his school also reflect his own personal values, but added the importance of his faith in his life. “I’m in a public school, but my faith is very important. Treat others as you want to be treated… I have to be a role model,” he stated. In an animated fashion, he conveyed that the school’s core values are also integral to his personal life.

Nicholas emphasized that his personal focus on the “relentless pursuit of improvement” carries over to his school leadership efforts. He shared a story where students began believing that “continuous improvement” was an explicit part of his
school’s mission statement because he talked about it so much. He said incoming freshmen asked him if his “catchphrase was actually a school motto.” He laughed when telling this story, summarizing that he let students know it was just his “tagline.” In this example, Nicholas’ personal and professional emphasis on making the most of every learning opportunity permeated the school.

**Relationship between Core Values and Decision-Making**

The researcher asked participants to talk about a difficult on-the-job decision they encountered as principals. She followed up with questions probing into how they worked through the decision. All participants shared at least one specific example of a dilemma they faced. Four of the examples related to personnel issues, two related to culture changes needed in order to increase expectations for students, one related to student safety, and one related to student discipline. The majority of principals articulated that they commonly face difficult situations in their roles. For example, John said quickly that “there’s been many” difficult decisions he has made as principal, and Ethan reiterated that “I’ve seen many ethical issues.”

**Clear choices.** Three participants recounted stories of situations where they knew what decisions they needed to be made, but the context surrounding the decision was nonetheless very difficult. John told the story of a difficult personnel situation, stating that he knew the direction he needed to take:

> It’s not like it was hard what the choice was. The choice was really clear. We had student interests. We didn’t need to…mortgage having a dignified program,
and treat students well, so that we could just have high performance…We knew we could have a great program and treat kids with dignity.

Clear core values elucidated the right path for John and others. Ryan echoed this sentiment: “I don’t have a long list of things that I struggle to make a decision about. And maybe that’s because I have a very clear purpose and goal and it’s either aligned to that or it’s not.” Ethan described one personnel situation where the school’s core values were violated, leaving him with “no choice but to report.” His decision was founded upon his beliefs and ethics: “Honesty, integrity are so important…wrong is wrong.” With clear core values to guide decision-making, participants indicated that they were able to chart a clear course of action when facing challenging circumstances. “It always comes back to values, and what’s right,” Nicholas summarized.

**Difficult situations.** Participants were quick to suggest that clear decisions did not necessarily make the situations they experienced easy. In some of the examples, personal friendships complicated matters. Nicholas shared this reflection regarding a complex personnel situation: “These are individuals with whom I’ve worked and developed friendships with, but you have to do what you need to do and what you’re expected to do on behalf of the kids.” Ethan also talked about a situation where a personal friend was doing something unethical. “Many said it could have been dealt with internally. They wanted to sweep it under the rug,” he said. But the right decision was clear to him, even though he knew it would create significant public backlash: “it became a community issue…he was popular beyond belief.” John echoed this sentiment when explaining a personnel situation of his own: “It was clear to me he [the employee] needed
to go. And I knew, making that decision that it was going to be a big mess.” The employee requested a public hearing, and many of his supporters showed up to the hearing to protest John’s decision: “Students and parents…would line up, and talk about what a great guy this is. Of course they don’t know what he actually said and did.” Regardless of possible backlash, or complicating factors, the principals interviewed had the moral courage to make the right decisions. “You’ve got to do the right thing, even when it’s difficult, and even if you’re going to face criticism,” John surmised.

**Culture changes.** In their stories about challenging decisions encountered, two principals spoke about how their decisions and priorities led to significant school culture changes. Both Patrick and Ryan identified a culture of low expectations in their schools as something they needed to address in their tenure as principals. Patrick described the school’s culture when he started as principal in this way: “There was just this malaise that was kind of throughout the entire building of ‘we’re just here.”’ Ryan echoed: “They didn’t have high enough expectations.”

Patrick married school performance data with research on the impact of extracurricular involvements to address this culture of low expectations. A self-described “data dork,” Patrick started by “just tearing things apart, looking at [data] going wow. It’s like, let’s look at our kids who aren’t making it. Why aren’t they making it?” He triangulated his own philosophy with student achievement data and research on how impactful extracurricular involvements can be on student achievement, deciding to raise the eligibility requirement for participation in athletics, co-curriculars, and dances. “My whole philosophy was every single thing that we do, we don’t get a ton of money, but
everything we do should go to support academics, so that was a way of making those extracurricular activities support academics,” he said. The school made the culture change with time, consistent effort, and steady communication. Patrick explained that it “took a year of just meeting with parents, meeting with the athletic boosters, meeting with the boards and walking through it and saying okay, here’s the policy.” By merging his philosophy, student achievement data, and research on best practices, Patrick was able to identify the problem and set a course of action to turn around a culture of low expectations. “That was just one of the ways that we could kinda say ‘hey, we mean business.’ We expect more of you,” he continued.

Similarly, Ryan integrated a key philosophy into his work as a principal to impact a significant culture change at his school. Early in his time as principal, he identified that teachers “didn’t have high enough expectations but they cared about the kids…they felt we’re the best kept secret.” He continued, “One of my philosophies when I’m talking about new principals, is you need to start wherever the strengths of the school are.” Ryan married the school’s strengths with the national conversation around STEM and “sold the staff on this vision of the school around its own strengths.” Slowly, the school culture changed from one of low expectations with a poor public reputation to that of a high achieving and innovative STEM school. He spent his time forging community partnerships, marketing, finding resources, and selling the vision of a highly effective STEM school. Slowly, the culture change took hold and he successfully “rebranded” the school. He explained that the school now serves as a model of school transformation.
Both principals shared a growth mindset that guided their convictions. Patrick explained this conviction that guided his decisions about student eligibility:

There’s two ways you can look at that. One is…if I raise the standards for eligibility, then a lot of kids won’t make it. My thing has always been you’ve got to believe in the kids. You can’t sell them short. If they’re going to do the bare minimum to be eligible, if you raise that, they’ll do whatever it is…it was amazing because, again, kids just met the thing…the kids just stepped up to it.

Ryan, too, articulated passion and optimism in his reflection. “I already had a passion,” he said, describing his affinity for education and his school. This mindset guided his efforts to rebrand: “There’s no reason this can’t be a great school,” he said. They began the work of raising expectations for all students, and slowly the school culture changed.

**Opportunities in high-stakes decisions.** Patrick, John, and Ethan explained how impactful high-stakes decisions can be for schools because of the message they send regarding values and integrity. Patrick described the eligibility change as “one of the defining moments” of his leadership. John suggested these challenging and often public decisions that principals face are opportunities. In these situations, principals can send an important message: “This is who we are, this is what we value, this is the kind of integrity we have. And that’s actually, the best leaders recognize that those are the opportunities to really show yourself as a leader.” Ethan concurred, adding that when school leaders operate transparently from a foundation of core values, they have great opportunities to convey key priorities and values.
Advice for Navigating Ethical Dilemmas

The researcher ended the interviews by asking participants how they would advise current and aspiring high school principals to navigate ethical dilemmas that arise in schools. “There will always be hard decisions to make. Real difficult situations that you as the leader are expected to do,” stated Nicholas. “As an administrator, those are situations you get sometimes,” added Craig.

**Measure against values.** The six principals interviewed consistently spoke about using their values and ethics to guide their decisions. Each one of them articulated this theme in a similar way. For example, John stated, “That’s what it boils down to. It’s that simple. It’s, what are your values?” Ethan concisely articulated how important this is: “You must have a bedrock of core values…Measure everything against them, almost like a rubric.” Patrick used the term “moral code” to describe his decision-making process: “You’ve got to stick to what you believe in…You have to have a moral code that you kinda live by …Your job is to make things better and…live by the ethics that you’re trying to promote in your kids.”

Interviewees explained that even if their decisions may not work out in an ideal manner, as long as actions flow from their core values, they feel that they are “always on solid ground.” Ryan explained, “As long as your focus is on protecting the student and making a decision based on what’s in the best interest of students, then usually, even if it ends up going awry, no one can criticize you for it.” Craig also acknowledged that decisions may not work out perfectly, and he makes mistakes. But he always wants to err on the side of his values: “You need to know what your core values are…so when faced
with a sticky situation…if I’m going to make a mistake I want to do it by giving
deference to those values.” John articulated the same theme by using the contrasting
metaphors of solid ground and slippery ground. He stated:

You’re always on solid ground when you’re making decisions based on your
values. If you start making decisions for other reasons…to avoid criticism, or to
avoid confrontation, or to try and just make sure everybody’s happy all the
time…then you’re ultimately going to be on really slippery ground.

Participants consistently articulated this reprise: even though a decision might go “awry,”
if it is founded upon clear core values, they will feel they have done the best they could in
the situation.

Interviewees referred to a few specific values when sharing advice for how to
navigate ethical dilemmas. Ryan explained, “In relationship to any kind of ethical
dilemma, you have to be honest, transparent, and authentic. You don’t have to have all
the answers, but you cannot take any shortcuts.” Ethan emphasized honesty also,
suggesting that the core values that guide decisions must be clearly communicated. “Be
honest and transparent about them. You can’t hide them or sweep things under the rug.
People must know what they are, so they aren’t guessing,” he said. John spoke of
integrity and credibility: “When you find the difficult situations, you have to have
integrity, because if you don’t have integrity, you don’t have credibility. If you don’t
have credibility, it’s impossible to be a leader.” Craig articulated the importance of
fairness: “We have to do what’s right, we have to do what’s just, we have to do what’s
fair.”
Strategies to guide the decision-making process. Principals articulated a few specific strategies to keep in mind when navigating ethical dilemmas. Nicholas suggested that principals remember to take time, when possible, to make thoughtful decisions. “Sometimes you just have to sit, and think, and pray a lot for knowledge of where to go…you have to let the decision percolate a bit. We’re running around like firefighters, making fast decisions a lot…you have to grant yourself permission to think about it, to sit on it,” he said.

Craig explained the importance of stopping to reflect on his biases before finalizing a decision. He emphasized that it is not possible to eliminate all biases, but recognizing them will help chart a course of action, particularly when facing an ethical dilemma. He explained:

You can never set all your biases aside but you need to know what your biases are, so that you can…flag them when they pop up…It doesn’t mean you won’t still act on them but if you’re consciously trying to think of…where are my biases then you will…lead yourself to make better decisions.

This reflective activity allows him to analyze a situation in an objective manner, he continued. “We have to look objectively at the evidence,” he said, reiterating the importance of acknowledging and reflecting on his biases.

John explained his strategy of starting with the students in mind: “We’re going to do right by kids, and what’s in their best interest, and that’s going to be where everything starts.” This came out in Patrick’s story of a difficult personnel situation with a long-time employee. The employee was “just not doing what’s right for kids…not doing what’s
right for the other educators.” Regardless of criticism, he started with the best interest of students in mind and stood by his decision, reflecting: “You get some people who are like, why are you being so mean to him? I’m not. So stick to it. I’ve known people who’ve stuck to their guns and they’ve been run out of positions, but I tell them, you can honestly sleep at night…because it was the right thing to do.”

Summary

This study was designed to capture the voices of exemplary principals in order to provide a model for practitioners, educational training programs, and district supervisors. Both phases of the mixed methods investigation explored the intersection between the values, motivations, and decisions (vocational and on-the-job) of award-winning high school principals. The survey phase of research captured quantitative and qualitative data from a larger group of exemplary principals. Follow-up interviews of six principals who completed the survey helped the researcher to engage in a deeper analysis of the research questions and capture the voices of model school leaders. The sequential explanatory mixed methods design allowed the first phase of research to inform the second phase, while also providing a straightforward way to present the findings in this chapter.

This chapter presented two data sets from the study, organized to parallel the two phases of data collection. First, the chapter shared data from the survey. The researcher began by presenting findings related to the target population, sampling plan, and response rate for the survey phase. This section also outlined demographic information and school information related to respondents. The presentation of findings from Phase One relayed analyses of the quantitative questions about motivation, core values, and decision
making. Finally, the first section of this chapter presented findings from the open-ended questions in the survey.

The second part of this chapter presented findings from Phase Two of the study, the interview phase. Similar to the outline of findings from Phase One of the study, this section began by presenting information related to the target population, sampling plan, and response rate for the interview phase of the study. It also outlined demographic information and school information related to respondents. Findings from the interviews were then organized and presented as they addressed the first two research questions of the study.

The third research question of this study is: What are the implications for current and future principals, educational leadership training programs, district-level supervisors, and those involved with hiring school leaders? The findings of this study have implications for further research as well as for current practitioners. These implications will be discussed in detail in the next chapter.
CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION

Overview

The purpose of this chapter is to interpret the findings presented in the previous chapter. This discussion will provide an analysis of data in light of the study’s research questions, conceptual framework and related literature. The chapter will begin with an overview of the research methods employed and then present conclusions organized by research question. It will also articulate limitations of the current study and present recommendations for future research.

Summary of Rationale and Research Methods

This mixed methods study was designed to analyze the intersection between the motivation, values, and decisions of highly effective high school principals. The research began by exploring the vocational decisions of exemplary principals. It investigated what led exceptional principals to enter the field of education, why they opted for the principalship, and how they knew their vocational choices were right. The study went on to examine how participants’ personal and professional values inform their daily decisions. The researcher inquired how principals sort through challenging dilemmas they face on the job, using their motivations and values as a guide.

The study utilized a sequential explanatory research design. In the first of two data collection phases, the researcher collected qualitative and quantitative data through
an online survey. The survey was distributed to Midwestern principals who earned *State Principal of the Year* recognition by their state administrator association and were subsequently recognized by NASSP between the years 2007-2017. Data from the survey informed the second phase of data collection – semi-structured interviews of a smaller group of distinguished principals. The researcher integrated the multiple data sets to interpret the study in its entirety. She triangulated data sources and methods to analyze findings through the Multiple Ethical Paradigm framework seminal to research by Shapiro and Stefkovich (2011, 2013).

**Research Questions**

The following research questions guided this study of how personal motivation and professional core values influence the practice, priorities, and decisions of award-winning high school principals:

1. What motivations and values lead outstanding high school principals to choose their career paths?
   a. Why did they decide to enter the field of education?
   b. Why did they decide to become principals?
   c. How did they know this was the right path?
2. What personal and professional core values do outstanding secondary principals use to guide their priorities and how do these values impact their decisions?
3. What are the implications for current and future principals, educational leadership training programs, district supervisors, and those involved with hiring school leaders?

**Conclusions**

**Research Question 1: Vocational Decisions**

The first research question and its three sub-questions focused on vocational decisions, or career choice. The researcher examined what led participants to choose the field of education, and then what led them to choose the principalship within their selected field. This prong of the study went on to investigate how these exemplars knew that the principalship was the right position for them. This overall inquiry into what led successful principals to the field of education and to the principalship is important because of the significant impact an effective principal can have on student achievement and growth, instructional quality, and school culture.

**Decision to enter the field of education.** Research Question 1a inquired: “What motivations and values lead outstanding high school principals to choose their career paths? Why did they decide to enter the field of education?” Survey and interview data illustrate that a key motivator for participants was their desire to influence the lives of children. Whether principals described wanting to “help,” or to “make a difference,” the motivation to positively impact students emerged as a consistent theme throughout the research. While one principal said he entered education “to help others learn, develop, and grow,” another articulated that she “wanted to work with students to make a
difference.” “I love children,” articulated another principal, emphasizing this key motivator in a different way.

Participants in both phases of the study also pointed to the influence that others had on their choices to become educators. They spoke with gratitude and poignancy about how their own teachers, coaches, and mentors positively affected their lives. For example, one principal explained, “teachers along the way that were kind of mentors, who were like ‘Listen. You can go places. You can do things.’” Others were motivated to pursue education because of the influence of family, as indicated by this reflection: “Both of my parents were teachers and multiple members of my extended family chose education as their calling.” Many shared stories about impactful coaches they had when they were students, recognizing the influence their coaches had on their own career trajectories. Whether they referred to teachers, family members, or mentors, principals consistently explained that the modeling and encouragement of others pointed them toward the field of education.

Participants also indicated that their personal experiences in school informed their career choice. One interviewee repeated that because he “just had so much fun in high school,” he was interested in pursuing a career in education. Another explained that his personal experience as a struggling student motivated him to work with children. Others highlighted their passion for a subject area, or to their desire to coach, as motivating factors when they were deciding on a career path. The data invariably reflected an integration between principals’ firsthand experiences, values, and their decisions to become educators.
When analyzing data related to this research question through the Multiple Ethical Paradigm framework, responses most directly illustrated the ethic of care and the ethic of the profession. A salient conclusion is that participants in the study elected to become educators because of their desire to positively affect student growth and learning. This illustrates the ethic of care, which holds that encouragement and compassion for others inform decisions. Data also illustrate principals’ consideration for the best interests of students, central to the ethic of the profession. Care for the student “must lie at the heart of any professional paradigm for educational leaders,” assert Shapiro and Stefkovich (2011). Additional constitutive elements of the ethic of the profession are individual codes and personal codes of ethics. Principals in this study discussed critical life events that elucidated their path toward the field of education. They also shared stories of people who inspired them to become educators. Principals’ reflections about how these personal experiences and relationships affected their decisions to become educators illustrate integral elements of the ethic of the profession.

**Decision to become principal.** Research Question 1b asks: “What motivations and values lead outstanding high school principals to choose their career paths? Why did they decide to become principals?” This question builds upon Research Question 1a by asking participants what led them into educational leadership, specifically the principalship. Survey responses indicated that principals were most significantly motivated by the opportunity to make a difference in the lives of others when considering the principalship. The motivating factors with the highest mean scores on the survey utilized the words “impact” or “influence.” For example, “ability to make a positive
impact on people” (M=4.78) and “desire to have a broader impact” (M=4.69) had the first and third highest mean scores. “Ability to significantly influence school culture” (M=4.76) and “Desire to influence student learning” (M=4.45) had the second and fourth highest mean scores. One principal concisely stated his motivation in becoming principal in this way: “to make the lives of my students better.” On a more granular level, principals consistently emphasized their desire to ensure equity, learning, and growth for all students. Interview data supported these findings from the survey.

This data is in stark contrast with the factors that were least influential in participants’ decisions to assume the principalship. While the top motivators reflect a clear concern for helping others, the factors that were least significant reflect more of a concern for self. Of the 20 factors listed as possible motivators, there was a significant drop-off between the mean scores of the top 15 factors and the mean scores of the five factors rated least influential. The mean values of the top 15 motivating factors were 3.05 or higher on a 5.0 scale. The mean score of factor 16 (“Stepping stone to a higher position”) dropped to 2.2. Similarly, the mean score of factor 17 (“Greater prestige and status”) dropped to 1.98, illustrating a distinct difference between the top 15 and bottom five factors. Factors receiving the three lowest mean scores of 1.9, 1.6 and 1.6 related to a personal desire to leave current situations (“leave the classroom,” “relocate,” and “leave previous job”). This indicates that the exemplary principals studied were motivated by their desire to care for others much more than they were motivated by factors related to self-interest. Additionally, they were less motivated by a desire to move away from their
former position than they were motivated by a desire to move toward an opportunity to have a greater positive impact on others.

Another conclusion regarding participants’ motivation for assuming the principalship is that they were highly influenced by the encouragement they received from others. Similar to the study’s findings regarding what motivated the principals to enter the field of education, survey and interview data speak to the influence that family members, colleagues, mentors, teachers, and school and district officials had in their decisions to specifically pursue the principal position. For example, one principal listed “Others told me I would be ‘good’ in the position” as a key motivator for her choice to become principal. Another said he was “asked to consider the position by three colleagues I highly respected at the time,” which led him to open his mind to the possibility. A number of principals articulated that they also drew inspiration from graduate coursework. One explained that the combination of graduate studies and encouragement from mentors “left me chomping at the bit to get myself into an administrative role.” This speaks to the impact that encouragement from others and continued studies had on exceptional principals’ decisions to become school leaders.

Similarly, principals were influenced by the positive modeling they witnessed from other administrators. Throughout the data, principals reiterated the sentiments behind this statement: “I was inspired by the principal I worked with.” Another participant explained, “I worked with some really good leaders who were able to inspire and motivate, and really improve the organization.” Yet this modeling cut both ways. Several principals also pointed to the modeling of uninspiring or ineffective leaders as the
impetus for becoming principals. One interviewee somewhat jokingly explained he was motivated to become a principal by “Bad administration!” One reflected that he “constantly got frustrated,” continuing that “I’d have to get promoted so I could push people out of the way and just figure out ways to say ‘yes.’ Because it was ridiculous, sometimes, the things they’d say ‘no’ to.” Whether participants referred to the inspiration they drew from positive administrative role models, or the frustration they felt from negative examples of leadership, modeling of others emerged as a motivator for these exemplary principals.

A final conclusion regarding participants’ decisions to become principals is that they shared a couple of dispositional or attitudinal commonalities that informed their vocational choices. These nebulous commonalities are difficult to specify because they reflect intangible, yet inspirational, qualities that emerged from survey and interview data. Participants shared a growth mindset, relaying an unwavering belief in students and an optimism that education can change students’ lives for the better. “There is nothing we can’t do. There’s nothing we can’t make happen. We just need to decide were going to do it,” said one participant. Another explained one of his guiding principles is his “orientation that we always need to get better.” A different leader spoke to a “standard of excellence” influenced by his relentless need to make lives better for his students. Survey results illustrated that principals had a passion for their students and for making a difference, a commitment to “growth of all students,” and an unwillingness to accept the status quo if it was not serving students. Though this common mindset is not necessarily a motivating factor that influenced principals’ vocational decisions, the research indicated
that participants shared similarly optimistic perspectives. These attitudinal commonalities—whether described as a growth mindset, optimistic outlook, innate belief that all children can achieve, tenacity, grit, or determination to help children succeed—not only impacted principals’ career choices, but also contributed to meaningful school improvement efforts.

Analysis of this data through the Multiple Ethical Paradigm framework illustrates that principals’ commitments to the ethics of justice, critique, care and the profession impacted their decisions to become principals. The ethic of care was clearly articulated in participants’ reflections about their vocational choices. Their desire to positively influence others led them to the position, significantly outweighing possible motivating factors related to self-interest (e.g., desire for prestige or status). Many principals explained that they are school leaders because they love students, education, and helping others. For example, one principal said she was motivated because she “love(s) working with kids and watching them grow.”

The ethics of justice and critique are also evident, most prominently in data referencing equity. Principals were motivated toward the profession by a strong desire to ensure equity, justice, and fairness for all students. For example, one principal listed his motivation “to change the economic trajectory of children in poverty” as a guiding principle. Others articulated that they were motivated by the negative modeling of ineffective leadership, indicating that their vocational choices were in response to structures and individuals that perpetuated systemic achievement gaps. Characteristics of the ethic of the profession also echoed throughout principals’ reflections. Constitutive to
the ethic of the profession is a dynamic relationship between professional codes of ethics, personal codes of ethics, standards of the profession, individual professional codes, and ethics of the community (Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2011). Quantitative and qualitative responses reflected the integral connection between professional, personal, and communal codes in principals’ practices and priorities. One participant spoke to the elements of the professional ethic in his assertion that “we have a personal, moral responsibility…to deliver for our students…if they fail, it's really because of us.” Data illustrate that participants’ decisions to become principals were informed by all four ethics: the ethic of care, justice, critique, and the profession.

**Confirmation of vocational choice.** Research Question 1c inquired: “What motivations and values lead outstanding high school principals to choose their career paths? How did they know this was the right path?” This question built upon Research Question 1a by asking participants how they knew that their choice to enter the field of education was right for them. It also built upon Research Question 1b by delving into what affirmed that the principalship was the right fit.

Participants articulated an affective “feeling of fit” when talking about education and their current roles. They shared reflections like “it feels like home” and “this is a good fit for me.” They also talked about “signs” that affirmed their choices: “Everything… pointed me in the direction of wanting to be in education,” said one principal. They articulated that the field of education lined up with areas of personal enjoyment: “My passion was in English and History, so teaching made sense.” The timing of their career choices varied. Some knew they wanted to pursue education, and
educational leadership, from an early age. Others explained that it was “completely unanticipated.” A commonality was that they were willing to say “yes” to the opportunities that emerged and follow the signs illuminating this path. One principal recapped, “I just let go and followed the stream.”

Beyond a feeling of the right fit, participants pointed to the feedback they receive from others as confirmation that they followed the right career path. Principals spoke about affirmations they receive from students, teachers, and parents. One current principal explained that when others “say hey, you're doing the right things and you're making a difference…it made it easier to keep doing it.” Participants also articulated that the feeling of having a direct positive impact on students and teachers confirms their career choice. One interviewee shared, “As principal, I can walk into a class and feel that impact. It makes all the difference.”

Even the participants that have left the principalship stressed that they truly enjoyed the principal position and felt they followed the right path in pursuing the chief building leadership role. All four of the six interviewees who now work in district office roles suggested they felt the principalship was the right position at the time. Most explained that they did not feel ready to leave the principal position when they moved to district leadership roles. “That was probably the toughest decision…I did not feel ready to go,” said one interviewee. They pointed to the relationships they had with students, the direct impact they felt they had in their school buildings, and the projects and initiatives they wanted to see through, as the biggest reasons why they hesitated to leave
the position. “I loved being principal,” said one current district administrator, while another echoed: “I loved where I was, I loved the people I worked with.”

An analysis of data through the lens of the Multiple Ethical Paradigm framework indicates that the ethic of care is most prominent. Shapiro and Stefkovich (2011) explain that “this lens tends to sometimes deal with emotions…empathy and compassion toward others are…part of this paradigm and tend to demonstrate emotions” (p. 18). Beck (1994) adds that high-quality leaders focus on relationships and connections, also key elements of the ethic of care. Participants highlighted the quality of their relationships with students and faculty as indicators that they were following the right path in assuming school leadership positions. They pointed to verbal and written affirmations that they are positively impacting others as “signs” that they are following the right path. They spoke compassionately and empathically about students, indicating emotional connections to their school communities. “I am so honored to say I’m principal here…It is an honor and a privilege,” articulated a current principal. These conclusions suggest that highly effective principals are edified in their roles by: feeling a sense of “fit,” feedback from others, relationships within the building, and seeing the direct impact of their work.

Research Question 2: On-the-Job Decisions

Research Question 2 asks: “What personal and professional core values do outstanding secondary principals use to guide their priorities and how do these values impact their decisions?” This study examined how exemplary principals’ values impact their decisions, focusing on the specific areas of vocational choice and on-the-job decisions. While the first research question delved into what motivations and values led
principals to decide upon their career paths, the second research question investigated how the principals’ daily decisions are impacted by their values. These are key questions when considering the significant impact that effective principals can have on the students and teachers in their buildings.

**Key personal and professional values.** Principals listed a series of values that guide their decisions. The most prominent values cited in both phases of research were integrity, compassion, fairness, equity, respect, empathy and honesty. A couple principals explained that personal faith also serves as a guidepost for them. One stated, “I’m in a public school, but my faith is very important,” while another said he “prays a lot for knowledge of where to go.” Many articulated that listening and relationship-building are also key drivers of their work. “Ninety percent of this is a relationship business,” reflected one participant. Participants indicated a number of attitudinal commonalities in their responses. For example, they shared stories exemplifying a growth mindset, an optimistic worldview, and a belief that anything can be accomplished. Survey and interview data also emphasized that participants feel they have a moral responsibility to “do what’s right” despite public backlash or criticism they may face regarding a decision. This adage was a consistent theme in the research: “Do what is right regardless of the situation. Each student deserves our best and each student’s needs will be different.” This presents an aspirational model for current and future principals.

Principals discussed the primacy of making decisions that prioritize student needs, shedding light on the axiom “do what is right.” One principal summarized his student-first orientation: “Make all decisions through a ‘student-centered’ lens! What is best for
the students and then everything else!” Some principals specified that they focus on student learning, the social/emotional health of their students, or holistic student growth as guiding principles. Others added nuance by acknowledging that students should drive all decisions, but that making decisions that help teachers succeed will also serve that end. For example, a principal reflected: “When things…come to what’s best for staff, or best for students, students were always first…Making sure that I'm setting up my teachers to be as successful as they possibly can is ultimately what's going to move us forward as an organization.” Participants explained this can be difficult when there are “competing goods” present in their decisions. For example, there can be tension between caring for individual students and caring for the whole school, or between tending to a specific relationship and creating a positive school culture. Principals spoke to the importance of learning how to navigate this “delicate balancing act.” These findings provide direction that educators can apply to their practice.

Principals conclusively connected their professional core values with their personal core values. This was clear throughout all data points. They indicated strong agreement with Likert scale statements that linked personal and professional values and ethics on the survey. For example, on a scale of “strongly disagree” (1) to “strongly agree” (5), the top four statements had mean scores of 4.57 or higher on a 5.0 scale. These two statements indicating the prominence of ethics in principals’ work shared the highest mean score of 4.69: “The ethical dimension of my work is prominent when I am sorting through dilemmas” and “The ethical dimension of my work is prominent in my day-to-day decisions.” The statement “When I find myself sorting through a dilemma,
my values play a significant role in my decision” had the third highest mean of 4.60. The next highest mean score of 4.57 was in relation to this statement: “My personal ethics are tied closely to my work as school principal.” This indicates that exemplary principals have very personal connections to their work as school leaders. Personal and professional values are highly integrated for these exceptional high school principals, especially when they sort through challenging and complex situations.

Qualitative data from the surveys and interviews illustrated the same linkage first between personal and professional values, and next between these values and decisions. Interviewees emphatically described commonalities between their personal and professional values. One explained, “They have to be the same! We must model the core values” when asked if there are similarities between personal and professional values. Another principal shared this in his survey responses: “You show compassion, respect and forgiveness not because of who they are but because of who you are.” Others said they consider their own family members when making decisions. For example, one participant stated that this question guides his actions: “Am I treating the children I work with as I would want my own children to be treated?” Research indicated that the ethical guideposts that inform the decisions of exemplary principals are intricately linked to their personal codes of ethics.

Analysis of this data through the lens of the Multiple Ethical Paradigm framework indicates that all four ethics – the ethics of justice, critique, care and the profession – inform the values that guide principals’ decisions. The ethic of the profession was most resonant in responses related to this research question. Shapiro and Stefkovich (2011)
explain that the ethic of the profession “expects its leaders to formulate and examine their own professional codes of ethics in light of individual personal codes of ethics, as well as standards set forth by the profession, and then calls on them to place student at the center of the ethical decision-making process” (p. 27).

This paradigm for the profession was evident in principals’ survey and interview responses. Principals articulated that they have formulated their professional codes by considering their individual personal codes. They spoke concisely about the integration of their professional and personal codes and how that linkage informs their decision-making process. They also emphasized that they prioritize the needs of their students ahead of other considerations, placing students at the center of their decisions. These codes can sometimes be at odds, creating tensions that principals need to balance and weigh by focusing on “the best interest of students.” Principals provided narrative data that exemplifies the ethic of the profession – linking their own examined personal codes of ethics and their professional codes of ethics to their decision-making processes.

**Sources of challenging decisions.** Multiple data sources highlighted specific areas in schools where principals encounter dilemmas. Principals indicated that there are often tensions present in their work, which Shapiro and Stefkovich (2011, 2013) call “clashing codes.” Shapiro and Stefkovich (2013) indicate that educational leaders may encounter four types of “possible clashes…between an individual’s personal and professional codes of ethics…within professional codes…among educational leaders…[and] a leader’s personal and professional code of ethics and customs and
practices set forth by the community” (p. 24). Principals spoke to these clashes in poignant and instructive ways.

Survey participants named athletics, student discipline, school finance, and faculty/staff supervision as areas of difficulty when asked to rate the degree of challenge presented by different areas of school. They identified “athletic programs” as the most significant source of challenging decisions, earning a mean score of 3.79 on the survey. “Parent concerns” was the second most significant source of challenging decisions, or dilemmas, in their work as principals, with a mean score of 3.62. The “constantly changing landscape of state and federal initiatives” was identified as the third most significant source of challenge for them, with a mean score of 3.57. Principals indicated that crisis management and social/emotional issues create additional sources of tension. These findings convey specific causes of heightened stress for highly effective principals, perhaps also suggesting an area for future research.

Both phases of research invited narrative responses about areas of difficulty and challenge in the principalship. Many survey participants cited that the demands of the job are particularly challenging for them, pointing to hours and stress as creating tension. One principal explained that “time away from family in order to be ‘all in’” presents a key challenge for him. This was a common theme among the data sets. Interviewees also shared poignant stories of dilemmas they encountered in their work. Four of the stories related to personnel issues, two related to changing school culture, one related to student safety, and one related to student discipline. In many cases, the dilemmas exemplified the “clashing codes” that principals need to navigate as moral
decision-makers (Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2011). This research unearthed areas of stress for high achieving principals, and it also provided guidance for practitioners when they experience “clashing codes.” At the heart of the ethic of the profession is the best interest of the students, key to sorting through tensions encountered on the job. “In educational leadership, we believe that if there is a moral imperative for the profession, it is to serve the ‘best interests of the student,’” summarize Shapiro and Stefkovich (2011, p. 25). Principals unequivocally spoke to the importance of this guiding tenet.

**Research Question 3: Implications for Educational Practice**

Research Question 3 asks: “What are the implications for current and future principals, educational leadership training programs, district-level supervisors, and those involved with hiring school leaders?” This study examined how exemplary principals’ values impact their decisions, focusing on the specific areas of vocational choice and on-the-job decisions. While the first research question delved into what motivations and values led principals to elect their career paths, the second research question investigated how the principals’ daily decisions are impacted by their values. The third research question focused on what implications these findings might have for practitioners, supervisors, and principal training programs.

**Exemplary principals’ decision-making process.** Data illustrated commonalities related to the decision-making processes of exemplary principals that provide a model for practitioners and educational leadership training programs. Principals shared a variety of insights regarding how they come to decisions, particularly when sorting through dilemmas. Figure 22 consolidates and summarizes reflections evident
from the first phase of research. The center circle captures the specific action steps of gathering data, analyzing the information from many angles, and weighing options against possible consequences. Concepts in the three surrounding circles frame those action steps, informing the decision-making process. Working with others to identify a course of action was such a common theme that ensure collaboration surrounds the acts of gathering, analyzing, and weighing in this graphic. Allow time when possible surrounds the action steps because principals asserted the importance of slowing down to ensure a thorough analysis of the situation. Finally, reflect on considerations joins ensure collaboration and allow time on the outside of the circle. Principals suggested they reflect on their situations through a number of lenses, captured in the box on the graphic. They are: the best interest of students; personal and professional values; past experiences and precedent; and creative solutions. Together, data illustrate that these factors inform principals’ actions of gathering, analyzing, and weighing information.
A common point of emphasis by principals was that there comes a time when the leader must finalize his or her decision, and then move forward toward action. One veteran principal articulated this adage: “All included for the conversation. Remember this…someone has to decide.” Figure 23 captures what survey respondents defined as key steps that need to follow a decision. They emphasized communicating directly, transparently, and clearly. They articulated that they try to “stick with” the decision, provided it was thoroughly researched and vetted. Finally, they discussed the need to collect data following the decision to evaluate the efficacy of the choice. Interview narratives validated the decision-making process identified in the first phase of the study. This research elucidates a path for current and future practitioners as they navigate
tensions inherent to the principalship. It also suggests a decision-making process that leadership training programs and district supervisors might use to help educational leaders model their practice after some of the most effective high school principals in recent years.

Figure 23. Graphic Summary of Steps Following Decision According to Survey Responses

**Values and decision-making.** Many interviewees articulated that decisions are not actually difficult for them, but the situations or surrounding circumstances can be highly challenging, complex, and tense. They emphasized that when a leader knows his or her values, decisions themselves will be clear. “I don’t have a long list of things that I struggle to make a decision about. And maybe that’s because I have a very clear purpose and goal and it’s either aligned to that or it’s not,” said one participant. Other principals emphasized, “It always comes back to values, and what’s right” and “That’s what it boils down to. It’s that simple. It’s, what are your values?” Situations may be difficult, they explained, because of elements such as relationships involved, public criticism, or entrenchment. Regardless of circumstantial complications, however, the message for current and future educational leaders was clear:

You’ve got to do the right thing, even when it’s difficult, and even if you’re going to face criticism…If you start making decisions for other reasons…to avoid
criticism, or to avoid confrontation, or to try and just make sure everybody’s happy all the time…then you’re ultimately going to be on really slippery ground. This presents an instructive model for decision-makers to refer to, particularly as they find themselves amid highly complex situations that present “clashing codes” (Shapiro and Stefkovich, 2011).

Interviewees provided a couple of strategies that also validate survey results. On principal suggested that: “You must have a bedrock of core values…Measure everything against them, almost like a rubric.” Next, interviewees explained that if they act honestly, authentically, fairly, and with integrity, they can “sleep at night.” Participants articulated that, in most cases, it is helpful to slow down and take time to discern instead of rushing to a decision. They also explained the importance of pausing to acknowledge their biases so they can come to the fairest decisions possible. Finally, one principal suggested that he “starts with the kids in mind,” articulating, yet again, the student-centered philosophy central to the ethic of the profession. The data that emerged present helpful guidance for practitioners, supervisors, and university professors from some of the best principals in the country.

**Implementing a Multiple Ethical Paradigm approach.** This study illustrates that Shapiro and Stefkovich’s (2011, 2013) Multiple Ethical Paradigm approach is a meaningful framework to apply to school leadership. Participant responses to the survey and interview questions validate the benefits of employing “a multiple ethical paradigm approach…in grappling with complexities, uncertainty, and diversity” (Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2011, p. 3). Though participants did not name the specific elements of the
conceptual framework (e.g. the four ethical lenses or the elements of the professional ethic for education), triangulation of quantitative and qualitative data elucidated that exemplary principals utilize elements of this paradigm in their decision-making. This aligns with a central argument from Shapiro and Stefkovich (2011, 2013), who explain that there is not one leading ethic, but rather all four should be utilized in decision-making. Shapiro and Stefkovich (2011, 2013) summarize:

We propose that there should not be one best ethical paradigm. Instead, we believe that by using different models, students, and practitioners will be able to work through their own personal and professional ethical codes, try out what they discovered about themselves by reflecting on the solutions they reach as they analyze diverse ethical dilemmas, and gain greater insights into the conceptual underpinnings of the ethical paradigm or paradigms they have chosen. (p. 9)

The ethics of care, critique, justice, and the profession echoed throughout principals’ responses. Data reached a point of saturation, indicating that all four ethics, in fact, are highly constitutive elements of the decisions of exemplary principals. The researcher was struck that tenets from all four ethics were integral to the leaders’ work, making this a meaningful framework with real-life applications.

The Multiple Ethical Paradigm approach aligns with the assertion by Sergiovanni (1992, 2005, 2007) that moral leadership entails the integration of the head, the heart, and the hand: “The head of leadership is shaped by the heart and drives the hand; in turn, reflections on decisions and actions affirm or reshape the heart and head” (Sergiovanni, 1992, p. 7). By integrating the head (thoughts, logic), heart (care, empathy) and hand
(action), Sergiovanni articulates that school principals will practice moral leadership. Without using the specific language of head, heart and hand in this study, principals’ responses collectively spoke to their integration of logic, care, and action.

Similarly, data confirm that highly effective principals employ a situational approach, with actions contingent upon variables present in each situation. Bolman and Deal (2013) promote this type of situational approach, explaining that leaders should be attentive to a variety of variables including context, the people involved, relationships, ability, organizational structure, cohesiveness of the group, resources available, and clarity of job descriptions. They assert that leaders should learn to perceive these situations through four different viewpoints – the symbolic, political, structural, and human resource perspectives – in order to view options and respond most appropriately to each situation (Bolman & Deal, 2013). Much like the argument that Shapiro and Stefkovich present, Bolman and Deal stress that leaders should not rely on one frame alone; they should balance the frames, identifying which approach is best for the unique nature of each situation. They suggest that the practice of re-framing, or analyzing situations through all four lenses in order to identify the best course of action, is an effective way to proceed when ethical quandaries create cognitive dissonance (Bolman & Deal, 2013). This also bears similarities to Sergiovanni’s emphasis on integrating the head, the heart, and the hand. This study of model practitioners validates the importance of learning to assess complex situations through a variety of lenses.

Integration is at the heart of all of these paradigms. Shapiro and Stefkovich argue that there is not a single best ethical lens through which educators should perceive their
work. Sergiovanni explains that educators should utilize the head, heart, and the hand in the practice of moral leadership. Bolman and Deal confirm that different situations call for different approaches. All these theories express the importance of learning to view complex situations through multiple perspectives to identify the best course of action. These theories are corroborated by this study of outstanding principals, elucidating that they have practical applications that can help current and future school leaders increase their effectiveness.

**Self-reflection.** This study emphasized how integral it is for school leaders to know their own personal and professional values, certainly another implication for practice. One principal articulated that values should be used as “the guideposts in any of your decision-making.” Another explained, “That’s what it boils down to. It’s that simple. It’s what are your values?” If educational leaders do not take the time to reflect on their guiding codes, they will not be able to use those values to navigate the important work of the principal. Study conclusions align with this recommendation from Shapiro and Stefkovich (2011): “Educational leaders should be given the opportunity to take the time to develop their own personal codes of ethics based on life stories and critical incidents” (p. 23). An implication, therefore, is that school leaders must know their own personal and professional ethical codes so they know what the “guideposts” in their decision-making are. An interviewee summed up this imperative: “You need to know what your core values are...so when faced with a sticky situation...if I’m going to make a mistake I want to do it by giving deference to those values.” Principal training programs might consider the importance of explicitly teaching self-reflection and
identification of core values. Practitioners, too, might consider making a frequent habit of reflecting on those personal and professional values that they want to guide their practice.

**Attracting and retaining effective principals.** The researcher did not anticipate the number of award-winning principals who have left the principal position since being honored by their state administrator association and NASSP. This became evident at many points throughout the research; it was most striking when the researcher was selecting participants and analyzing data during both phases of the study. Many principals have left the principalship, either for district leadership positions or other reasons. This corroborates the research on principal retention and the principal shortage described in Chapter II.

The researcher was originally planning to survey honorees in a 10-state region over a span of 10 years, with the hope of distributing her survey to 100 award-winning principals. She made a FOIA request for those who won the award between 2007-2017, anticipating that she would only need to include those who were recognized between the years 2008-2017. Once she began the process of culling the list and updating contact information based on public information, she realized that her sample was smaller than expected because of the number of honorees that changed jobs, left the principalship, or retired. As a result, she decided to include honorees over an 11-year span so that she could target at least 100 educators who had received their *State Principal of the Year* award.
In surveying 103 principals from this larger sample, 42 responded. Approximately 2/3 of participants reported that they are no longer high school principals (61.9%, \(n=26\)), while approximately 1/3 of participants continue working as high school principals (38.1%, \(n=16\)). The majority of those who left the principalship are now in district leadership positions (45.2%, \(n=19\)). Of the 42 participants, 10 are currently serving as superintendent (23.8%), seven are assistant or associate superintendent (16.7%), and two serve in director roles in the district office (4.7%).

The second phase of research was illustrative of the same attrition. The researcher invited 10 of the 42 (23.8%) survey respondents to be interviewed and six (60%) completed the interview. Of the 10 honorees invited to the interview, five (50%) are currently principals, three are currently assistant or associate superintendents (30%), and two are currently superintendents (20%). Approximately 2/3 of the educators that completed the interviews are in district leadership roles, and 1/3 continue their work as principals. Two interviewees are principals, two are assistant or associate superintendents, and two are superintendents.

These results validate educational literature related to principal retention and a principal shortage. The researcher targeted exceptional principals for her study, school leaders that have inspired tremendous levels of student achievement and growth. Yet many are no longer principals. Principals denoted the following as some of their motivations for pursing the principalship: ability to have a positive impact on students; opportunity to influence school culture; passion for helping students and education; support, encouragement, and feedback from others; and the modeling of other
educational leaders. Participants revealed the following as being most prominent reasons for leaving the position: the demanding nature of the job, whether it is related to time, stress, or worry; the loneliness of the job; lack of resources; and the public scrutiny that they feel they are always under. “I couldn't survive being principal much more than 10 years…I knew there was a shelf life,” said one principal. “It is very demanding…you have to be, kind of, all things to all people,” said another, describing the burdens of the job.

More work can be done to mitigate principal attrition and increase retention. Since the pool of educators studied comprise some of the most outstanding principals in the Midwest, it is no surprise that many have been recruited for district leadership positions. But the data corroborate research about the need to attract and retain principals, particularly highly effective principals. Universities, districts, and schools might consider a systematic response to this need. For example, they might examine how to systematically draw on the data about what motivates highly effective principals to assume the job to broaden pipelines to the principalship. They could consider creating ongoing mentoring and networking programs to help sustain and support school leaders, with the goal of increasing retention. Additional efforts to alleviate some of the most salient tension points of the job could also help attract and retain principals.

**Gender and race/ethnicity.** A final implication for practice relates to the gender and racial/ethnic disparity between honorees for this award. Over the course of 11 years (2007-2017), only 17 of 110 award winners from the 10-state region studied were women. Fifteen percent of recipients over the eleven years studied were female, while
85% of recipients were male. That disproportionality was transferred to the survey results because the pool of female participants was so small to begin with. Of the participants in Phase One, 37 of 42 were male (88.1%) and five of the 42 respondents were female (11.9%). The racial/ethnic breakdown of award winners was similarly disproportionate. Approximately 90.5% (n=38) of respondents were White/Caucasian, and the remaining participants were relatively evenly distributed across Black/African American (2.4%, n=1), Hispanic/Latino (4.8%, n=2), and Asian/Pacific Islander (2.4%, n=1) populations. These numbers indicate a striking imbalance between male and female honorees and between White/Caucasian honorees and principals of other races and ethnicities. Though a parallel set of comparative data on gender and racial/ethnic demographics of all secondary principals across the states studied were not readily available as a frame of reference, these disparities are marked. They reflect an urgent need for practitioners, researchers, and state administrator associations to address the inequity.

**Limitations**

Though this study entailed a thorough examination of how distinguished high school principals make decisions, a number of limitations are present. One limitation is that the research is confined to principals from 10 states, all located in the Midwest region of the United States. The research included high school principals from Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, Nebraska, Ohio, and Wisconsin who were awarded the State Principal of the Year award between the years 2007-2017. This use of convenience sampling limited the study’s generalizability because the
principals included in the sample represent just one region of the country (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). Though the researcher invited over 100 principals to participate in the study, survey respondents and interviewees do not proportionately reflect the entire population of principals across the country. Additionally, participants may not represent the regional differences that might be evident if all states were included (Fink, 2006).

Another limitation of the study is that participants were identified through an award bestowed by different state administrator organizations. Principals recognized each year as State Principal of the Year from their states’ local principal organizations are subsequently honored by NASSP and considered for the National Principal of the Year award (NASSP, 2016). The criteria for receiving the State Principal of the Year award varies based on rubrics and processes from each state administrator association (NASSP, 2016). Since the criteria vary by state, there is no common rubric across all states used to define the “exemplary” principals included in this study. Awards can be politically influenced, so without a common metric to identify the 50 honorees across the country each year, the variation in selection criteria poses a study limitation.

A third limitation of this study is evident in the participant group for both the first and the second phase of the study. The researcher targeted 110 possible principals for the survey after realizing that she did not have updated contact information for many. Of the 110 award-winning principals, 93 (85%) were male and 17 (15%) were female. Of the principals that responded to the survey, 37 (88%) were male and 5 (12%) were female. Since the researcher selected participants for the second phase of the study from survey respondents, the pool of possible female interviewees was also very limited. The
researcher interviewed six survey respondents with the hope of identifying a diverse group of participants. Of the 10 honorees invited to participate, all six who interviewed were men. Only one was a person of color, and only two remain in principal positions. Though the researcher was able to achieve maximum variation in some respects (school demographics and location, length of tenure as principal, experience in education), her participant pool was homogenous in other respects (gender and race/ethnicity). This impacts the study’s generalizability because the researcher did not achieve the level of variation that she intended. It also invites important questions about equity that might lend themselves well to further research.

Finally, this study utilized data collection tools that required self-reported data. The survey instrument in Phase One of the study collected self-reported reflections on personal and professional values, motivations for pursuing the field of education and the principalship, and questions related to ethical decision-making. The interview protocol included similar questions. Both phases of research collected data related to participants’ self-perceptions, posing another possible limitation of the study.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

The researcher recommends the following areas of focus for future research. First, the significant disparity between male and female award winners invites further research regarding equity. Similarly, the disparity between White/Caucasian honorees and principals of color invites research regarding systemic inequities. Principal recruiting and retention emerged as an issue in this study, as many of the exemplary principals studied are no longer in the principal position. Though participants indicated they
enjoyed the role, they also articulated that the demands, stress, public scrutiny, and isolation of the job were heavy burdens to carry. Future research into how to attract transformational leaders to the principalship and how to support them to enhance their longevity in the role would add to the body of research. Additionally, research into how the voices of a highly effective sub-set of high school principals can directly influence educational training programs would add to the body of literature.

**Summary**

Though research on the impact of excellent principals is plentiful (CFR, 2012; Fullan, 2010; Schmoker, 2006; Waters et al., 2005), much can be learned by listening directly to the perspectives of highly effective principals. This study of award-winning school leaders asked exceptional educators directly why they decided to enter the field of education and what led them to the principalship. The research went on to examine how they make decisions as building principals, particularly when they are faced with dilemmas that do not present one clear course of action. By asking these educational leaders how their beliefs and values inform their vocational and on-the-job decisions, key voices from the field emerged as a model for others.

The research utilized a sequential explanatory mixed-method design, including two distinct phases of data collection and analysis. Findings concluded that there was an integral link between the personal and professional core values of exceptional principals. The principals involved with the study were able to clearly state their guiding principles – both personal and professional – and expressed a clear linkage between their values and their practice, priorities, and decisions. They were drawn to the field by a desire to help,
impact, and influence the lives of children for the better. Encouragement and modeling of others also led them to the principalship.

The researcher hopes that these data will enhance the conversation surrounding effective high school leadership. She believes that the identification of key values that inform principals’ decisions and the steps they use in their decision-making processes will add to the body of research. Finally, the researcher hopes that this study of what motivated highly successful principals to the field of education and to the principalship will inform future efforts to attract and retain principals.
APPENDIX A

FREEDOM OF INFORMATION ACT REQUEST:

NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF SECONDARY SCHOOL PRINCIPALS
Dear NASSP Information Services Office:

This is a request under the Freedom of Information Act.

I request that a copy of the following documents (or documents containing the following information) be provided to me:

▪ A listing of names and contact information for individuals who were State Principals of the Year on the High School level between the years 2007-2017.

▪ A listing of names and contact information for individuals who were finalists for the NASSP Principal of the Year Award between the years 2007-2017.

▪ A listing of names and contact information for individuals who won the NASSP Principal of the Year Award between the years 2007-2017.

▪ Contact information should include first and last name, school district, state, mailing address, phone number and email address.

In order to help to determine my status to assess fees, you should know that I am (select one):

☒ Affiliated with an educational or noncommercial scientific institution, and this request is made for a scholarly purpose through Loyola University of Chicago.

Please notify me if the fees will exceed $25.00.

Additional comments: This information request may also be emailed to: erinluby1@gmail.com

Thank you for considering this request.

Sincerely,
Ms. Erin C. Luby
APPENDIX B

CONSENT LETTER FOR PARTICIPATION – PHASE ONE
Prior to beginning this survey, please read both pages of the electronic consent carefully. By clicking the YES button at the end of the consent letter, you are giving your consent to participate in the research study. If you do not wish to participate in the survey, then click EXIT.

Researcher: Erin C. Luby

Faculty Sponsor: Dr. Diane Morrison

Introduction: You are invited to participate in a research study being conducted by Erin Luby, a Doctoral student at Loyola University Chicago under the supervision of Dr. Diane Morrison in the School of Education. The title of her dissertation study is The Exemplary High School Principal: A Mixed Methods Study of how Personal Motivation and Professional Core Values Influence the Practice, Priorities and Decisions of Award-Winning School Leaders.

You were selected as a possible participant in this research because you have been recognized as the Secondary State Principal of the Year by your state principal association and by the National Association of Secondary School Principals in the last 10 years.

Purpose: This is an exploratory research study focused on the motivation and values of exemplary high school principals. The research seeks to identify the motivations and core values that influenced the career choice of this select group of principals. Next, the study aims to identify how these same theoretical concepts of motivation and core values influence the practice, priorities, and decisions of award-winning principals.

Procedures: If you decide to participate, please click YES below and complete this online survey of motivation and core values. The appraisal will take approximately 10-12 minutes to complete. You also may be asked, following the survey, to participate in an interview with the researcher. The interview should take approximately 45 minutes and will follow up on the survey regarding your motivation and core values as an educational leader.

Risks and Benefits of being in the study: There are no foreseeable risks involved in participating in this research beyond those experienced in everyday life. There are no direct benefits to you for participating. Indirectly, however, your participation will add to the body of the research related to educational leadership. The information you provide will further inform the field of educational leadership by helping to answer the following questions:
1. What motivations and values lead outstanding high school principals to choose their career paths?
   a. Why did they decide to enter the field of education?
   b. Why did they decide to become principals?
   c. How did they know this was the right path?

2. What personal and professional core values do outstanding secondary principals use to guide their priorities and how do these values impact their decisions?

3. What are the implications for current and future principals, educational leadership training programs, district supervisors, and those involved with hiring school leaders?

Confidentiality: Any information obtained in connection with this research study that can be identified with you will be disclosed only with your permission; your results will be kept confidential. In any written reports or publications, no one will be identified or identifiable and only group data will be presented.

Research results will be kept in a locked file cabinet in the research’s home and only the researcher and her advisor will have access to the records while working on this project. Upon completion of the dissertation, the researcher will destroy all original reports and identifying information that can be linked back to you.

Voluntary nature of the study: Participation in this research study is voluntary. If you do not want to be involved with this study, you do not have to participate. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your future relations with Loyola University Chicago. If you decide to participate, you are free to stop at any time without affecting these relationships or penalty. Your district administrators will not know whether you participated in this study.

Contacts and questions: If you have any questions, please feel free to contact me, Erin Luby, at erinluby1@gmail.com or my faculty advisor, Dr. Diane Morrison at dmorison@luc.edu. If you have questions about your rights as a research participant, you may contact the Loyola University Office of Research Services at (773) 508-2689. You may keep a copy of this form for your records.

Statement of Consent: By clicking the YES button below, you indicate that you have read the information provided above, have had an opportunity to ask questions, and agree to participate in this research study. Even after providing electronic consent, please know that you may withdraw from the study at any time.

Do you consent to participate in this survey? YES NO
APPENDIX C

LETTER TO REQUEST SURVEY PARTICIPATION – PHASE ONE
October 30, 2017

Dear {Name}:

My name is Erin Luby, and I am a doctoral student at Loyola University Chicago. I am studying exceptional high school principals for my dissertation, and am writing to request your voluntary participation in my study. The title of my study is *The Exemplary High School Principal: A Mixed Methods Study of how Personal Motivation and Professional Core Values Influence the Practice, Priorities and Decisions of Award-Winning School Leaders.*

You have distinguished yourself as an outstanding school leader by earning your *State Principal of the Year* award and by being recognized by the National Association of Secondary School Principals for this honor. Whether you still hold a principal position or not, I believe that your insights can help current and future principals serve their communities in significant ways. I hope you will complete this brief survey on how motivation and core values influence(d) your priorities and decisions as a school leader.

Below you will find a link to the online survey about motivation and core values. This electronic survey, which utilizes the Survey Monkey platform, will take approximately 10-12 minutes to complete. The first part is an electronic consent form. By clicking YES on the electronic consent pages of the survey, you are providing consent to participate in the study. Your identity and school name will not be disclosed during the study, and your participation is voluntary. You may stop taking the survey at any point if you choose to discontinue your participation.

**The survey window will be open for about two weeks, until Wednesday, November 15.** Please consider each question as it pertains to how well you know yourself. Please keep in mind you are responding to these prompts as an individual person and not how you think others would want you to respond or how you think a person your role of principal should respond. Your input is very valuable to this study.

If you have any questions, please contact me at erinluby1@gmail.com or XXX-XXX-XXXX. You may also contact my Dissertation Chair, Dr. Diane Morrison, at dmorrison@luc.edu or XXX-XXX-XXXX. I would be happy to share the results of this research with you once I have finished the study.

Thank you, {Name}, for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Erin Luby
APPENDIX D

MOTIVATION AND CORE VALUES SURVEY
Pages 1 & 2: Consent Letter and Procedures
1. Do you consent to participate in this survey?
   Yes  No

Page 3: Demographic Information
2. What is your gender?
   Male  Female  I’d prefer not to answer

3. What is your age? _____

4. What is your race/ethnicity?
   American Indian or Alaska Native
   Asian/Pacific Islander
   Black or African American
   Hispanic/Latino
   White/Caucasian
   Multiple ethnicity / Other (please specify)

5. What is the highest degree you have attained?
   Bachelor’s degree
   Master’s degree in Education or Teaching
   Master’s degree in Administration
   Master’s degree in Curriculum and Instruction
   Master’s degree in another content area
   Ed.D. or Ph.D. in Administration / Leadership
   Ed.D. or Ph.D. in Curriculum and Instruction
   Ed.D. or Ph.D. in Educational Psychology
   Other: _____

Page 4: Current Role & Years of Experience
6. Are you still a high school principal?
   Yes  No

7. Are you still working as a high school principal at the same school you were employed when earning the State Principal of the Year award?
   Yes  No

8. Are you still working in the same district you were employed when earning the State Principal of the Year award?
   Yes  No
9. If you are not currently working as a high school principal, which of the following most accurately summarizes your work now?
   N/A
   Assumed district leadership
   Returned to the classroom
   Employed in other administrative role in the field of education
   Employed in an educational consulting capacity
   Changed careers
   Retired or semi-retired
   Other: _____

10. If applicable, please list your current title _____

11. How many years of experience do you have as a principal?
   1 year to 5 years  6-10 years  11-15 years  16-20 years
   21-25 years  26-30 years  31-35 years  36-40 years  40+
years

12. How many years of experience do you have in administrative roles other than principal?
   1 year to 5 years  6-10 years  11-15 years  16-20 years
   21-25 years  26-30 years  31-35 years  36-40 years  40+
years

13. How many total years of experience in the field of education do you have?
   1 year to 5 years  6-10 years  11-15 years  16-20 years
   21-25 years  26-30 years  31-35 years  36-40 years  40+
years

14. How many years of experience as principal did you have when you received the State Principal of the Year award?
   1 year to 5 years  6-10 years  11-15 years  16-20 years
   21-25 years  26-30 years  31-35 years  36-40 years  40+
years

15. How many schools have you served as principal?
   1 school  2 schools  3 schools  4 schools  5+ schools

Page 5: School Information. Each question in this section refers to the school you worked at when you earned State Principal of the Year honors.

16. Please describe the type of district you were in when you received the State Principal of the Year award:
   Unit District  One High School District  Multiple High School District
17. Which descriptor best identifies the location of the high school you worked at when you received the *State Principal of the Year* award:

- Urban
- Suburban
- Rural

18. What was the student enrollment of the high school you worked at when you received the *State Principal of the Year* award:

- Up to 500
- 501-1000
- 1001-1500
- 1501-2000
- 2001-2500
- 2501-3000
- 3001-3500
- 3501-4000
- 4000+

19. Which descriptor best identifies the socioeconomic status of the student body at the high school you worked when you received the *State Principal of the Year* award:

- Low
- Middle
- High
- Mixed

**Page 6: Decision Making and Values survey questions**

**Section A**

20. Please rate the level of importance of these motivating factors in your decision to become a principal.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>1=Unimportant</th>
<th>2=Of Little Importance</th>
<th>3=Moderately Important</th>
<th>4= Important</th>
<th>5=Very Important</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Ability to create change</td>
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<td>2. Ability to make a positive impact on people</td>
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<td>3. Ability to significantly influence school culture</td>
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<td>4. Desire for a professional challenge</td>
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<td>5. Desire for a personal challenge</td>
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<td>6. Desire to have a broader impact</td>
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<td>7. Desire to leave the classroom</td>
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<td>8. Desire to influence student learning</td>
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<td>9. Felt called to the position</td>
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<td>10. Greater prestige and status</td>
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<td>11. Increased responsibility</td>
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<td>12. Increased freedom and autonomy</td>
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<td>13. Increased influence over staffing</td>
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<td>14. Increased salary and benefits</td>
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<td>15. Presents the next career step</td>
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<td>16. Opportunity to be a teacher of teachers</td>
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<td>17. Opportunity to leave previous job</td>
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<td>18. Opportunity to relocate to a more desirable location</td>
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<td>19. Received support and encouragement from others</td>
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<td>20. Stepping stone to a higher position</td>
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</table>
21. From the list above (question #20), please indicate the three most prominent reasons that you decided to become a principal.
   1. __________  2. __________  3. __________

22. If there was a prominent motivating factor in your decision to become a principal that is not listed above, please indicate it here. __________

Section B
23. Please rate the degree to which you encounter challenging decisions, or dilemmas, in each of these areas of your work as principal.
   1=Never  2=Rarely  3=To a moderate degree  4=To a good degree  5=To a great degree

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<th>Area</th>
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<td>Equity and justice concerns</td>
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<td>Facilities</td>
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<td>Faculty/Staff: remediation</td>
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<td>Faculty/Staff: supervision</td>
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<td>Litigation issues</td>
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<td>Parent concerns</td>
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<td>Technology integration and implementation</td>
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24. From the list above (question #23), please indicate the top three causes of on-the-job dilemmas in your role as principal.
   1. __________  2. __________  3. __________

25. If there is another area of school leadership that causes significant dilemmas not listed above, please indicate it here. __________
Section C
26. Please rate how strongly you agree or disagree with the following statements.
   1=Strongly Disagree
   2=Disagree
   3=Neutral
   4=Agree
   5=Strongly Agree

1. My decision to enter the field of education was related to my personal values.
   1  2  3  4  5

2. My decision to become a school principal was related to my personal values.
   1  2  3  4  5

3. My decisions as a school principal are related to my personal values.
   1  2  3  4  5

4. When I find myself sorting through a dilemma, my values play a significant role in my decision.
   1  2  3  4  5

5. The ethical dimension of my work is prominent in my day-to-day decisions.
   1  2  3  4  5

6. The ethical dimension of my work is prominent when I am sorting through dilemmas.
   1  2  3  4  5

7. My personal ethics are tied closely to my work as a school principal.
   1  2  3  4  5

Page 7: Open-ended questions
27. What was the primary reason you decided to enter the field of education? _______

28. What is a key guiding principle or value you utilize to inform your on-the-job decisions? ____

29. How do you determine a course of action when faced with a dilemma as a principal? ______
APPENDIX E

FIRST REMINDER LETTER FOR PARTICIPANTS
November 6, 2017

Dear {Name}:

My name is Erin Luby, and I am a doctoral student at Loyola University Chicago. I am studying exceptional high school principals for my dissertation, and am following up on last week’s request for your participation in my study.

The title of my study is *The Exemplary High School Principal: A Mixed Methods Study of how Personal Motivation and Professional Core Values Influence the Practice, Priorities and Decisions of Award-Winning School Leaders.*

You have distinguished yourself as an outstanding school leader by earning your State Principal of the Year award and by being recognized by the National Association of Secondary School Principals for this honor. Whether you still hold a principal position or not, I believe that your insights can help current and future principals serve their communities in significant ways. *I hope you will complete this brief survey on how motivation and core values influence(d) your priorities and decisions as a school leader.*

Below you will find a link to the online survey about motivation and core values. This electronic survey, which utilizes the Survey Monkey platform, will take approximately 10-12 minutes to complete. The first part is an electronic consent form. By clicking YES on the electronic consent pages of the survey, you are providing consent to participate in the study. Your identity and school name will not be disclosed during the study, and your participation is voluntary. You may stop taking the survey at any point if you choose to discontinue your participation.

**The survey window will be open until next Wednesday, November 15.** Please consider each question as it pertains to how well you know yourself. Please keep in mind you are responding to these prompts as an individual person and not how you think others would want you to respond or how you think a person your role of principal should respond. Your input is very valuable to this study.

If you have any questions, please contact me at erinluby1@gmail.com or XXX-XXX-XXXX. You may also contact my Dissertation Chair, Dr. Diane Morrison, at dmrison@luc.edu or XXX-XXX-XXXX. I would be happy to share the results of this research with you once I have finished the study.

Thank you, {Name}, for your consideration.

Sincerely,
Erin Luby
APPENDIX F

SECOND REMINDER LETTER FOR PARTICIPANTS
Dear {Name}:

Recently I’ve sent you emails to request your participation in my dissertation study of award-winning school leaders. **I hope you will take about 10-12 minutes to complete this brief survey on how motivation and core values influence(d) your priorities and decisions as a school leader.** Your input is very valuable to this research. I am a doctoral student at Loyola University Chicago, completing a study entitled: *The Exemplary High School Principal: A Mixed Methods Study of how Personal Motivation and Professional Core Values Influence the Practice, Priorities and Decisions of Award-Winning School Leaders.*

{Name}, you have distinguished yourself as an outstanding school leader by earning your *State Principal of the Year* award and by being recognized by the National Association of Secondary School Principals for this honor. **Please consider completing this survey, as your perspectives can help current and future school leaders serve their communities in significant ways.**

Below you will find a link to an online survey about motivation and core values. By clicking YES on the electronic consent pages of the survey, you are providing consent to participate in the study. Your identity and school name will not be disclosed during the study, and your participation is voluntary. You may stop taking the survey at any point if you choose to discontinue your participation.

**The survey window will only be open for a few more days, until Wednesday, November 15.**

If you have any questions, please contact me at erinluby1@gmail.com or XXX-XXX-XXXX. You may also contact my Dissertation Chair, Dr. Diane Morrison, at dmorrison@luc.edu or XXX-XXX-XXXX. I would be happy to share the results of this research with you once I have finished the study.

Thank you, {Name}, for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Erin Luby
APPENDIX G

FINAL REMINDER LETTER FOR PARTICIPANTS
November 26, 2017

Dear [FirstName]:

Thank you for considering my requests to participate in a brief survey of award-winning school leaders. I am a doctoral student at Loyola University Chicago, completing a study entitled: The Exemplary High School Principal: *A Mixed Methods Study of how Personal Motivation and Professional Core Values Influence the Practice, Priorities and Decisions of Award-Winning School Leaders.*

[FirstName], you have distinguished yourself as an outstanding school leader by earning your *State Principal of the Year* award and by being recognized by the National Association of Secondary School Principals for this honor. **Please consider completing this survey, as your perspectives can help current and future school leaders serve their communities in significant ways.** This is the final request that you will receive from me.

Below you will find a link to an online survey about motivation and core values that will take about 10 minutes. By clicking YES on the electronic consent pages of the survey, you are providing consent to participate in the study. Your identity and school name will not be disclosed during the study, and your participation is voluntary. You may stop taking the survey at any point if you choose to discontinue your participation.

**The survey window will remain open a few more days – through this Tuesday, November 28.**

If you have any questions, please contact me at erinluby1@gmail.com or XXX-XXX-XXXX. You may also contact my Dissertation Chair, Dr. Diane Morrison, at dmorrison@luc.edu or XXX-XXX-XXXX. I would be happy to share the results of this research with you once I have finished the study.

Thank you for your consideration. Best of luck to you in your future endeavors!

Sincerely,

Erin Luby
APPENDIX H

CONSENT LETTER FOR PARTICIPATION – PHASE TWO
Researcher: Erin C. Luby  
Faculty Sponsor: Dr. Diane Morrison

Introduction: You participated in the first phase of a research study conducted by Erin Luby, a Doctoral student at Loyola University Chicago under the supervision of Dr. Diane Morrison in the School of Education. The title of her dissertation study is *The Exemplary High School Principal: A Mixed Methods Study of how Personal Motivation and Professional Core Values Influence the Practice, Priorities and Decisions of Award-Winning School Leaders*. Thank you for your participation.

You were selected as a participant in this research because you have been recognized as the Secondary *State Principal of the Year* by your state principal association and by the National Association of Secondary School Principals in the last 10 years.

You have been selected for the second phase of this research study as well, which consists of a follow-up interview using Zoom video conferencing software with the researcher. Please read this form carefully and ask questions before deciding to participate in the second phase of this study.

Purpose: This is an exploratory research study focused on the motivation and values of exemplary high school principals. The research seeks to identify the motivations and core values that influenced the career choice of this select group of principals. Next, the study aims to identify how these same theoretical concepts of motivation and core values influenced the practice, priorities, and decisions of award-winning principals.

Procedures: If you decide to participate in this phase of the study, you are asked to participate in an interview with the researcher using Zoom video conference software. The interview should take up to 45 minutes and will follow up on the survey regarding your motivation and values as an educational leader.

With your consent, the researcher will interview you and audio record the interview. If you choose to participate but not to be audio recorded, the researcher will solely take notes with pen and paper during the interview. You can opt out of being audio recorded, but still participate in the interview if that is your choice.

Risks and Benefits of being in the study: There are no foreseeable risks involved in participating in this research beyond those experienced in everyday life.

There are no direct benefits to you for participating. Indirectly, however, your participation will add to the body of the research in educational research. The information you provide will further inform the field of educational leadership by helping to answer the following questions:
1. What motivations and values lead outstanding high school principals to choose their career paths?
   a. Why did they decide to enter the field of education?
   b. Why did they decide to become principals?
   c. How did they know this was the right path?
2. What personal and professional core values do outstanding secondary principals use to guide their priorities and how do these values impact their decisions?
3. What are the implications for current and future principals, educational leadership training programs, district supervisors, and those involved with hiring school leaders?

Confidentiality: Any information obtained in connection with this study that can be identified with you will be disclosed only with your permission; your results will be kept confidential. In any written reports or publications, no one will be identified or identifiable and only group data will be presented.

Research results, including audio tapes if you consent to be recorded, will be kept in a locked file cabinet in the research’s home and only the researcher and her advisor will have access to the records while working on this project. Upon completion of the dissertation, the researcher will destroy all original reports and identifying information that can be linked back to you.

Voluntary nature of the study: Participation in this research study is voluntary. If you do not want to be involved with this study, you do not have to participate. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your future relations with Loyola University Chicago. If you decide to participate, you are free to stop at any time without affecting these relationships or penalty. Your district administrators will not know whether you participated in this study.

Contacts and questions: If you have any questions, please feel free to contact me, Erin Luby, at erinluby1@gmail.com or my faculty advisor, Dr. Diane Morrison at dморrison@luc.edu. If you have questions about your rights as a research participant, you may contact the Loyola University Office of Research Services at (773) 508-2689. You may keep a copy of this form for your records.

Statement of Consent: You are making a decision whether or not to participate. There are two possible levels of consent that will be collected before completing any research activities. Please indicate your consent by putting your initials on the line by the appropriate level(s). The levels are:

1. _____ Consent to be interviewed via Zoom video conference software;
2. _____ Consent to be audio recorded during the interview.
Please indicate your level of consent, sign and date this form, and return it to Erin Luby via email: erinluby1@gmail.com.

Your signature indicates that you have read this information and your questions have been answered. Even after signing this form, please know that you may withdraw from the study at any time.

I consent to participate in the second phase of this study.

_________________________  __________________
Signature of Participant     Date

_________________________  __________________
Signature of Researcher      Date
APPENDIX I

LETTER TO REQUEST AN INTERVIEW – PHASE TWO
November 29, 2017

Dear {Name}:

Thank you for your participation in my dissertation study, entitled *The Exemplary High School Principal: A Mixed Methods Study of how Personal Motivation and Professional Core Values Influence the Practice, Priorities and Decisions of Award-Winning School Leaders.*

I appreciate the time you took to complete the survey, and I am grateful for your participation.

I hope you will consider being a part of the second phase of my research – the interview phase. This would entail an interview, using a Zoom video conference link I would provide, at a time convenient to you. I anticipate the interview would last up to 45 minutes.

Attached is a consent form for the interview. I am hoping you are willing to continue with this important study by allowing me to interview you. I assure you, again, that your identity and school name will not be disclosed during the study, and that your participation is voluntary.

Can you please let me know by Wednesday, December 6, whether you are willing to be interviewed? If you agree to continue with the study, please return the signed consent form via email and let me know a couple of preferred times for the interview. I would be happy to coordinate with you or a member of your staff a time that is most convenient. If you have any questions, please contact me at erinluby1@gmail.com or XXX-XXX-XXXX. You may also contact my Dissertation Chair, Dr. Diane Morrison, at dmorrison@luc.edu or XXX-XXX-XXXX. I would be happy to share the results of this research with you once I have finished.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Erin Luby
APPENDIX J

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL
1. Can you please describe your professional journey? [Probes: What roles have you had in education? For how long? How long have you been principal? What are you currently doing?]

2. Can you please tell me about the context of the school you worked when winning the State Principal of the Year award?

3. When you earned the honor, what indicators of success was it based upon?

4. How did you know you needed to move your school in that direction? [Probe: How did you decide that initiative was a priority?]

5. Why did you enter the field of education? Are there any snapshots or stories you recall that pointed you in this direction?

6. Please tell me about when and how you realized you wanted to be an educational leader. What moments or stories can you share that informed your decision to get into school leadership?

7. Why did you choose to work as a high school principal? What affirmed that this decision was right for you?

8. If you’ve left the principalship, can you please explain why? OR If you’re still in the role, what might lead you to move on? [Probe: How do you know that this decision was right?]

9. What professional core values or ideals typically guide your practice?

10. Are these professional core values similar or different from your personal ideals?

Please explain.
11. How do you identify priorities as a principal? Is there an example you can share where it became clear that you needed to make something a priority? [Probes: at the start of your tenure? Later on in the principalship?]

12. Tell me about a time where you had a very difficult professional decision to make. [Probes: What was the context? What factors made this difficult? How did you work through barriers to decision-making? How did you know it was the right course of action?]

13. Can you please tell me about a time in your career as an educator when you felt highly motivated? [Probes: What are the details? Why does this sort of experience energize you?]

14. Conversely, can you please tell me about those experiences that make you feel less motivated? [Probes: What are the details? Why do these sorts of experiences leave you feeling this way?]

15. How would you advise current and aspiring high school principals to navigate ethical dilemmas that arise at school?

16. Is there a decision or priority you made as a principal that you’re particularly proud of? What did you take-away from that experience that might be informative for others?
REFERENCE LIST


VITA

Erin C. Luby is the daughter of Tom and Suzanne Luby. She was born and raised in the Northwest suburbs of Chicago, Illinois, and attended Regina Dominican High School in Wilmette, Illinois. She currently resides in Seattle, Washington.

Erin completed her undergraduate studies at the University of Notre Dame, earning a Bachelor of Arts degree in Computer Applications and American Studies. She went on to earn a Master of Education through Notre Dame’s Alliance for Catholic Education (ACE) Program, and a Master of Arts in Educational Administration from Notre Dame’s Mary Ann Remick Leadership Program. Erin will graduate with a Doctor of Education in Administration and Supervision through Loyola University Chicago in May 2018.

Erin has worked in the field of education for 17 years. She has Professional Educator, General Administrative, and Superintendent licenses. She has served as teacher, Student Activities Director, Dean of Students, Assistant Principal, and Principal at the high school level. She has also enjoyed many years of athletic coaching and moderating a variety of co-curricular student opportunities. Erin currently works as a high school principal in Seattle, Washington.
This Dissertation submitted by Erin C. Luby has been read and approved by the following committee:

Diane Morrison, Ed.D., Co-Director
Adjunct Professor, School of Education
Loyola University Chicago

Sandria Morten, Ed.D., Co-Director
Clinical Assistant Professor, School of Education
Loyola University Chicago

Catherine Karl, Ph.D.
Associate Provincial Assistant for Secondary and Pre-Secondary Education
USA Midwest Province of the Jesuits