THE CONCEPTIONS AND PRACTICES SECONDARY PRINCIPALS USE TO PROMOTE AND MAINTAIN ETHICAL RELATIONSHIPS

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Abstract

Contemporary educational theory and practice emphasizes interpersonal teacher–student relationships as a means of enhancing academic performance, promoting social development, and improving class management. Unfortunately, related policy, training, and professional standards have lagged. Into this void steps the principal, who as school leader falls the responsibility of guiding staff and maintaining ethical context. This research took a qualitative approach to examining the conceptions and practices secondary principals use to promote and maintain ethical relaitonships in their schools.

Twelve principals from public secondary schools (grades 6-12) in central and coastal Virginia were interviewed, to gather their descriptions of how they perceived appropriate ethical teacher–student relationships, and their practice in promoting and maintaining them in their schools. Research findings implied that although principals were able to clearly define appropriate relationships conceptually, they articulated that they were vaguely defined in policy, and ambiguous in practice. In particular, principals characterized ethical relationship boundaries as grey and ill defined, defying prescriptive policy, guidance, and standards. Key factors in principal practice were described in terms of training staff and promoting a positive school culture and climate, while at the same time modeling expected behaviors, monitoring behaviors, and providing leadership and supervision to guide staff and make corrections as necessary. Desired teacher attributes included caring for and acting in the best interests of students, while adhering to their professional role of teacher.

INTRODUCTION

This research examined how secondary public school principals perceived ethical teacher–student relationships, and how they promoted and maintained them in their schools. A qualitative methodology was employed to gather the perceptions and practices of principals, develop themes, and examine comparisons to theoretical frameworks from literature. Contemporary empirical and qualitative studies examined aspects of the teacher–student relationship from the teacher and student perspectives (Aultman, Williams-Johnson, & Schutz, 2009; Barrett, Casey, Visser, & Headley, 2012; Barrett, Headley, Stovall, & Witte, 2006; Bernstein-Yamashiro & Noam, 2013; McHugh, Galletta, & Wallace, 2012; Ozer, Wolf, & Kong, 2008). This research sought to fill the gap in knowledge concerning the school principals' perceptions of the teacher–student relationship phenomena (Kemman, 2019).

BACKGROUND

During the 1950s and 1960s, Rogers' groundbreaking research on student centered learning advanced the notion that a more personalized teacher–student relationship would benefit students, and result in higher academic achievement (Rogers, 1951; 1969). Noddings supplemented this with the introduction of care theory, advancing the cause of a close, emotional, and personalized teacher–student relationship (Noddings, 1984). This concept that closer teacher–student relationships lead to higher student performance was gradually embraced by educational institutions, becoming a focus of teacher preparation programs, and standard practice in schools (Aultman et al., 2009; Barrett et al., 2012; Barrett et al., 2006; Bernstein-Yamashiro & Noam, 2013; Givens, 2016).

In the early 2000s, several factors coincided to raise awareness of potential ethical issues stemming from this new paradigm of closer teacher–student interpersonal relationships. The first was Shakeshaft's 2004 work on educator sexual abuse of children that raised public awareness of the vulnerability of students to educator misconduct. Barrett et al. (2006) published their seminal work on teachers' ethical concerns and ambiguity related to this closer teacher–student relationship dynamic and proposed the need for more defined professional ethical standards, similar to those of other professions whose work focused on interpersonal relations (e.g. medicine and psychology).

Since the mid-2000's, relevant scholarship focused on understanding and defining ethical teacher–student relationships, the boundaries associated with those relationships, and educator practice (Aultman et al., 2009; Barrett et al., 2012; Bernstein-Yamashiro & Noam, 2013; Boon, 2011; Boon & Maxwell, 2016; McHugh et al., 2012; Newberry & Davis, 2008; Newberry, 2010, 2013; Ozer et al., 2008; Reeve & Jang, 2006; Riley, 2010; Wubbels & Brekelmans, 2005; Yariv, 2009). Although there has been recognition of the need for professional ethics to address, define, and regulate teacher–student relationships, no institutional consensus has emerged (Barrett et al., 2012; Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2016). Training and professional development for educators in ethics has also lagged, in terms of both availability and quality (Boon, 2011; Boon & Maxwell, 2016). Due to this void of consensus and training regarding professional educator ethics, responsibility defaulted to school leadership to guide teacher ethical development and practice (Duignan, 2012; Mullen, 2016; Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2016).

REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY LITURATURE

Starratt (2014, p. 77) described professional ethics as "promoting the good intrinsic to the practice." Shapiro and Stefkovich (2016) observed that the principal must approach ethics in the context of all the complexities and uncertainties of this contemporary era, and effectively guide their staff. Contemporary literature has focused on the role of the principal as ethical guide, and three approaches in promoting and maintaining ethics in their schools. These included care theory (Noddings, 1984), professional development and practice theory (Shapiro and Stefkovich, 2016), and standards based professionalism (Barrett et al., 2012; Barrett et al., 2006).

The principal as ethical guide. Cherkowski et al. (2015), Ehrich et al. (2015), McCarley et al. (2014), Mintrop (2012), Price (2015), and Tschannen-Moran and Gareis (2015) examined how the principal influenced the teacher–student relationship and school climate by encouraging ethical context. Researchers observed principals encouraging the ethics of trust, care, and integrity, as well as conceptualizing their own behavior in terms of Starratt's (1991, 1994) ethical tripartite model of justice, care, and critique, and Starratt's (2005) moral agency framework. Duignan (2012) added the necessity of the principal to cultivate an ethic of collective responsibility, as well as an ethic of presence.

The first factor in acting as an ethical guide was the necessity of the principal to set the example, in terms of both leadership attributes and personal behavior. Both staff and the student body closely observed and took queues from the principal, and were influenced both consciously and sub-consciously by principal attitudes and behaviors (Duignan, 2012; Ehrich et al., 2015; Price, 2015; Mintrop, 2012; McCarley et al., 2014; Tschannen-Moran & Gareis, 2015). Ehrich et al. (2015) highlights that principals understand and prefer to indirectly influence the ethical climate of their schools by acting as a guide and exemplar, rather than directly engaging staff.

The second factor in the principals' role of ethical guide was training and developing the staff. Scholarly consensus indicates that staff development and training are related to ethics bearing on the teacher–student relationship (Aultman et al., 2009; Barrett et al., 2012; Barrett et al., 2006; Bernstein-Yamashiro & Noam, 2013; Boon, 2011; Boon & Maxwell, 2016; Callison, 2015; C. Martin, 2013; Maxwell et al., 2016; Mullen, 2017; Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2016). However, lack of consensus on curriculum makes it incumbent on school leadership to thoughtfully tailor this training to their context (Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2016).

The role of the principal as ethical guide for the staff necessitates insuring training takes place in the context of professional development (Warnick & Silverman, 2011). Ethics training guides teachers in understanding ethical boundaries with students and enhances their ability to cope with the many ethical challenges posed in and out of the classroom (Bernstein-Yamashiro & Noam, 2013). In the absence of consensus ethical standards in the form of an enforceable code of conduct and associated ethics of profession, educational scholars, led by Shapiro and Stefkovich (2016), advocated a Socratic, case study, workshop, and discussion format for ethics training. Niesche and Haase (2012) pointed out that Foucault's notion of personal ethics development and working toward the goal of moral telos (becoming the moral and ethical person one desires to be) was relevant to this process. Mullen (2017) demonstrated the positive effects ethics curriculum has on perspective educational leaders.

The third factor is the principals' role in managing the many peripheral influences that bear on the school. In 2001, both Shapiro and Stefkovich, and Cruickshank and Haefele published conceptual works on the ethical dilemmas facing school leadership. Both sets of authors focused

on the growing influence of peripheral influences on schools, the struggles of school leadership in managing them, and the ethical issues that arose as consequence. Additionally, Gross (2016), who first introduced his turbulence metaphor in 1998, contributed to this vein of inquiry. Specifically, Gross (2016) observed that these same peripheral pressures cause varying degrees of turbulence for educators, and this turbulence can spill over into ethical challenges. In relation to ethical teacher–student relationships, several of these peripheral factors pertain. Family, community, cultural, and social influences bear on the identity of students (Bernstein-Yamashiro & Noam, 2013; Erikson, 1950; Shapiro & Gross, 2013; Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2016). The law defines and limits personal behaviors, and provides due process and enforcement mechanisms to regulate teacher behaviors (Osborne & Russo, 2011; Zirkel, 2015). The school organization establishes roles for teachers and students, and a context for their relationship (D. Goldstein, 2015; Morgan, 2006; Shafritz, Ott, & Jang, 2011). Lastly, the phenomena of social media and communications technology in extending the ability of teachers and students to communicate and relate outside the bounds of the classroom setting, and the enhanced public visibility on teacher's personal lives (Elkins, 2014; Meese, 2015; Warnick, Bitters, Falk, & Kim, 2016).

Theoretical perspectives. Three theoretical frameworks from literature assisted in understanding conceptions and practice related to ethical teacher–student relationship boundaries. The first theory was Noddings' (1984) care theory, which advocated focus on the ethic of care. In this paradigm, the teacher uses engrossment to determine student needs, motivational displacement to match actions with needs, and is observant for student feedback to inform the process. This theory focused on the direct role of the empowered teacher as caregiver, with the role of the principal being to provide support, and facilitate that relationship.

Shapiro and Stefkovich (2016) advocated a pragmatic developmental approach to ethical relationships, focused on an ethic of professionalism. In this approach, it is incumbent on individuals as professional educators to develop their own, personalized framework of ethics applicable to their context. This process of personal ethics development was envisioned as lifelong, informed by personal practice, experience, individual study, and professional development. The role of the principal in this paradigm was to guide staff and ensure their ethical development was appropriate to the school context.

Barrett et al. (2012) and Barrett et al. (2006) advocated for a formal code of conduct and professional standards to define ethical relationships and associated boundaries, and regulate teacher behavior. In this paradigm, educational institutions developed ethical codes and standards adhered to by members of the profession. The role of the principal in this paradigm was one of informing and guiding staff on ethical conduct and compliance.

Overall, all these theoretical frameworks encompassed both the understanding and practice of leadership in maintaining ethical teacher–student relationships in schools. Each of these models contained all three elements of Northouse's (2016) foundation elements for leadership, which are personal attributes, skills, and behaviors. However, each of these ethical frameworks placed emphasis on different elements. Noddings (1984) focused on the caring and compassionate personal attributes, and ethical character of the educator. Shapiro and Stefkovich (2016) focused on ethical skills development through professional development and practice. Barrett et al. (2012) and Barrett et al. (2006) focused on managing ethical behaviors through the use of professional standards. Table 1. represents these theories and their implications for practice.

Table 1.
Ethical Theories and Implications

Lead Author	Theory	Approach	School Governance Implications
Noddings (1984)	Care Theory	Care, Compassion Character	Teacher Lead, Empowerment Principal Acts as Facilitator
Shapiro & Stefkovich (2016)	Educator Professionalism	Professionalism, Training/Practice	Teacher/Principal Collaboration Principal Acts as Ethical Guide Professional Development Necessary
Barrett et al. (2012; 2006)	Teacher Standards	Professionalism, Compliance	Teacher Complies with Standards Principal Ensures Compliance, Informs Staff Adherence to Code of Conduct and Professional Standards

Conceptual model. Contemporary scholarship identified building principals as having a number of leadership roles in their schools, including staff, instruction, and ethics (Duignan, 2012; Ehrich et al., 2015; Elmore, 2007; Knapp, Honig, Plecki, Portin, & Copland, 2014; Mintrop, 2012; Shapiro & Gross, 2013; Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2016; Starratt, 1996, 2012). Part of this leadership role for principals was assisting staff in understanding and maintaining ethical relationships with students (Bernstein-Yamashiro & Noam, 2013). Research also showed that principals have considerable influence over teacher–student relationships, which included attitudes, climate, and professional ethics (Duignan, 2012; Ehrich et al, 2015; McCarley et al., 2014; Mintrop, 2012; Price, 2015; Tschannen-Moran & Gareis, 2015). Further, principals were responsible for managing the various peripheral influences on the school, to include legal, cultural, family, social, ethical, organization, technological, and historical factors (Shapiro & Gross, 2013; Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2016).

Figure 1 graphically depicts a conceptual model of ethical teacher–student relationship. At the center is the teacher–student relationship, and associated ethical relationship boundaries. The teacher exhibits caring and professional behavior, resulting in student respect and engagement in learning. Surrounding teacher–student relationship is the principal, who creates an ethical context. Internal and external to the school are the many peripheral factors that bear on this ethical school context, and the ethical teacher–student relationship itself. The principal, to varying degrees, is able to manage many aspects of these peripheral factors, but other aspects defy management. The dashed line represents the permeable nature of school context to these peripheral factors.

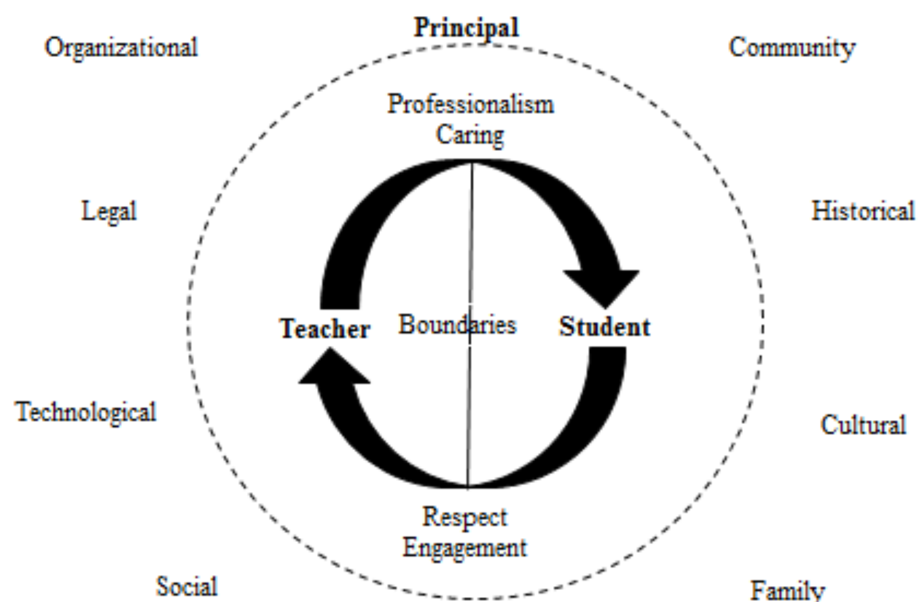

Figure 1. Ethical conceptual model.

Research questions. The research addressed three questions: How do secondary public school principals describe appropriate ethical teacher–student relationships? How do secondary public school principals describe their practice in promoting and maintaining ethical teacher–student relationship in their schools? How do secondary public school principals' descriptions of ethical teacher–student relationships and their own practice in maintaining them compare with theoretical frameworks from literature?

METHODOLOGY

A qualitative approach was selected to examine the phenomena because it was not well defined or examined in literature. Research employed the basic interpretive design described in Merriam and Tisdell (2016), grounded in the social constructivist approach. A series of 12 interviews of practicing public secondary (middle and high) principals gathered data. The interviews were transcribed verbatim to enable coding, and supplemented by a reflection memo that documented the context and non-verbal impressions.

The In Vivo coding methodology as described by Saldana (2013) was used to identify codes from the verbatim quotes of principals. Content analysis as described by Hsieh and Shannon (2005) was used to categorize these codes and develop overall themes based on the first two research questions (how principals describe ethical teacher–student relationships and how they promote and maintain them in practice). A final round of content analysis that compared themes with apriori codes, supplemented by a detailed review of transcripts and reflection memo's, addressed the third research question (how principals' descriptions of ethical teacher–student

relationships and their own practice in maintaining them compare with theoretical frameworks from literature).

RESULTS

Twelve practicing public secondary school principals, grades 6-12, from central and coastal Virginia were interviewed. Table 2 provides a general overview of the principals. Pseudonyms protect their identity of participants.

Table 2
Interview Participants

Pseudonym	Experience (Years) Principal	Education	Gender	Race	School
John	>5	10+	Male	White	High
Ally	5+	25+	Female	African American	High
Floyd	10+	20+	Male	White	Middle
Sally	5+	20+	Female	White	High
Betty	>5	20+	Female	African American	High
Hank	10+	20+	Male	White	High
Holly	>5	15+	Female	African American	Middle
Nancy	5+	20+	Female	White	Middle
Gina	5+	25+	Female	White	Middle
Ronald	10+	20+	Male	White	High
Lenard	20+	30+	Male	African American	High
Sue	10+	15+	Female	White	Middle

Ten themes surfaced as result of the coding and content analysis effort. These themes related to the research questions, five focused on how principals perceive ethical teacher – student relationships and associated boundaries, and five focused on what principals perceived as best practice in promoting and maintaining them. Tables 3 and 4 provide a listing of the themes and brief descriptions from participants to enhance understanding.

Table 3

How Principals Describe Ethical Teacher–Student Relationships and Associated Relationship Boundaries

Principal Descriptions

Themes	Descriptions
Care	Teachers need to care, and be empathetic, humane, and positive. Teachers need to love kids and genuinely want to assist and support them. Important in enhancing class management and reducing the trauma of the school experience. An enabler to student academic and social success in school. Warmth, compassion, patience, and kindness.
Best interest of the student	Best interest of the student. Put students first. Understand and embrace differences. Treat them as if they were your own children. Commitment to student success and goals
Professional relationship	Teachers need to be ethical professionals (in-role behavior). Mentorship role. Based on integrity, respect and trust. Collaboration with students, and feedback. Co-constructed based teacher role and student needs.
Personal relationships are harmful	Friendship or personally intimate relationships. Unsupervised contact outside the school. Personal private communications. Compromising or questionable behaviors. Causing physical or psychological trauma.
Relationship boundaries as gray lines	Gray line, difficult to articulate Best understood by examining specific scenarios and situations. Reactive approach. Lack of formal guidance, policies, standards, and laws. Complicated by enhanced visibility of the teacher as a public figure.

Table 4
How Principals Promote and Maintain Ethical Teacher–Student Relationships

Principal Behaviors, Skills, and Attributes

Themes	Descriptions
Modeling Expectations	Be visible. Be Accessible. Be a positive role model. Lead by example. Set the tone. Show energy, passion, school spirit, and love what you do. Display commitment and be inspirational.
Staff Development	Improve the ability of staff to build interpersonal skill necessary to manage and maintain appropriate and productive relationships with students. Mentorship of junior staff. Class management techniques. Instructional improvement. Improve staff interpersonal "soft" skills.
Positive School Climate	Activities and venues to strengthen teacher–student relationships, both inside and outside the classroom, and build a positive school culture. Extra-curricular activities. School spirit events. Enhancing school safety. Creating a system of positive reinforcements and recognition. Active positive messaging (posters, emails, media, and social media coverage). Mobilizing positive contributions from the greater school community. Minimize negative influences by creating a positive school culture distinct from the community, if necessary.
Monitoring Behaviors	Observing, being tuned-into the school. Constant communications with students, staff, parents and the community. Receptive to feedback. Be out in the school observing staff and students. Attend extra-curricular activities.
Leadership Style	Supervisory (engagement, avoiding complacency, acting as necessary and direct staff) Collaborative (participative decision-making). Empowerment of staff Teamwork Having vision, setting goals, advocating positive values and expectations. Being active and avoiding complacency Having charisma and the ability to connect with people. Coaching skills. Managing peripheral influences

Results for the third research question examining the three models from literature evolved comparing the 10 themes with the three models. Descriptions and codes associated with each theme were compared with apriori codes and descriptions from each of the models. Models

overlapped the themes in most cases, suggesting multiple theoretical approaches to them. Table 5 displays those relationships.

Table 5
The Relationship of Themes with Models from Literature

Theme	Model from literature
Care	Care
Best interest of the student	All three models
Professional relationship	Skills/practice and standards
Personal relationships	All three models
Boundaries as gray lines	Skills/practice
Model expectations	Skills/practice and standards
Staff development	Skills/practice and standards
Promote positive school climate	Care and skills/practice
Monitoring behaviors	Standards
Leadership style	All three models

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

The results of the study and scholarly research/literature bore directly on principal practice in conceptualizing and acting to promote and maintain ethical relationships in schools. As result, a number of implications for principal practice emerge, and are discussed in the following paragraphs.

Ethical teacher–student relationships and associated relationship boundaries: Clearly defined conceptually, vaguely defined in policy, ambiguously defined in practice. The trend towards closer and more informal teacher–student relationships has moved forward faster than the institution of education in the United States, legislatures, and policy maker's efforts to define, manage, and regulate it (Barrett et al., 2012; Barrett et al., 2006; Meese, 2015; Osborne & Russo, 2011; Rumel, 2015). Educational institutions have also lagged in developing curriculum, professional development, and training to support this dynamic of closer teacher–student relationships in schools (Boon, 2011; Boon & Maxwell, 2016; Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2016). Until the issue can be fully addressed in teacher preparation, guidelines for professional practice, standards, policy, and law, the result will be varying degrees of ambiguity in practice on the part of teachers (Aultman et al., 2009; Barrett et al., 2012; Barrett et al., 2006; Bernstein-Yamashiro & Noam, 2013). Principals appeared to cope with this ambiguity concerning teacher practice by deferring to their experience, providing training for staff (particularly junior staff), enhancing the visibility of the staff as a means to monitor and supervise their behavior, and by reducing opportunities for staff to engage in potentially suspect behaviors with students.

Principals agreed conceptually that teachers should establish caring and productive relationships with students that are in their best interests. Further, that the boundaries of these relationships are behaviors and actions that cause trauma and potential harm to students. They lamented that many aspects of managing this relationship were either not covered by policy, or were vague. Particularly highlighted were the use of social media and electronic communications. The result was their viewing ethical relationship boundaries as gray or blurred. Principals

generally understood these boundaries in terms of examples or scenarios, and admitted to be having a reactive approach. Influential to principals' understanding of ethical relationship boundaries and what constituted appropriate teacher behavior, was how principals conceptualized the professional role of teachers. Principals did agree that the gateway to unethical behaviors and relationships was the development of intimate or friendship relationships with students.

Set expectations and model them. "Be amongst the staff, be visible, and be genuine, and you have to model that professionalism. Therefore, if you expect them to behave a certain way at the faculty social, then you have to behave that way at the faculty social. It's that kind of stuff that folks are watching, they're watching, and they're making decisions about whether they'll follow you or not based on what they see" (Sally). Setting standards and modeling expectations were commented on by half the principals in answering the final question on providing advice to their fellow principals. Descriptions of school leaders having vision, setting goals, and modeling expectations were found in all the transcripts, as well as scholarly literature (Barrett et al., 2012; Barrett et al., 2006; Cherkowski et al., 2015; Duignan, 2012; Ehrich et al., 2015; Mullen, 2017; Young & Perrone, 2016). Setting expectations and modeling are integral elements of principled ethical leadership, and critical to advancing the intrinsic good into practice (Northouse, 2016; Starratt, 2014).

Train and professionally develop the staff. "They probably don't know how, and you have to teach'em, and that's that. Simple as that" (Nancy). Staff, particularly junior staff, may arrive at your school with minimal competency or training in establishing ethical and productive relationships with students (Bernstein-Yamashiro & Noam, 2013; Boon, 2011; Boon & Maxwell, 2016). John and Sue referred to these as interpersonal "soft skills." Although divisions generally offer programs to assist teachers in class management and discipline, it falls to the principal to insure staff receive the training and professional development necessary for them to succeed in building ethical and productive relationships with students. Principals described mentorship as a primary means to assist new teachers, and even for veteran practicing teachers. Several principals described using role-play and vignettes, similar to those described by Bernstein-Yamashiro and Noam (2013) and Shapiro and Stefkovich, (2016). This was supplemented by compliance training, recommended by Barrett et al. (2012) and Barrett et al. (2006). Researchers D. Shapiro and Takacs (2004), and Warnick and Silverman (2011) advanced the Socratic method as a basis for teacher ethics training. Study, professional development opportunities, training, and practice are foundational to ethical professional development, and the ability of the teacher to exercise judgement as a professional practitioner (Shapiro and Stefkovich, 2016).

Enhance awareness and visibility. "People are watching" (Floyd, Gina, Sally, and Lenard). Nine of the twelve principals commented on the importance of awareness, visibility, and monitoring, when asked what advice they would give to other principals regarding promoting and maintaining ethical relationships in their schools. Floyd termed it as being "tuned-in" to what is transpiring at your school. This enhanced awareness and visibility served two purposes; the first was to provide feedback on the principals' leadership, supervision, and the behavior of staff and students. The second was a means of preventing ethical missteps, by reducing the opaqueness necessary for potential misbehavior and misconduct to thrive. This included reducing opportunities for teachers and students to interact outside the school and school sponsored activities, or in cyberspace. Enhanced awareness and visibility promoted transparency, encouraged reporting, and enabled supervision. As Justice Louis Brandeis (1913) observed, "Sunshine is said to be the best of disinfectants."

Tend to your own professional development. During the first section of the interview protocol, principals described their leadership preparation. It was notable that none of the principals indicated that they had specialized training or professional development to assist them in managing, promoting, or maintaining ethical teacher–student relationships and associated boundaries, other than compliance training provided by the division legal staff. This dearth of training and professional development opportunities for principals, and the poor quality of what was available, has been commented upon by researchers and scholars (Bakopoulos, 2013; Boon & Maxwell, 2016; Meakin, 2014; Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2016). It is therefore incumbent on principals to seek out meaningful professional development opportunities, and continue to develop their practice as a lifelong endeavor (Niesche & Haase, 2012; Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2016).

Professional development can take several forms, which were elaborated on by principals and scholarly literature. These included university curriculum, seminars, workshops; mentorship, compliance updates, and scenario/role play (Bernstein-Yamashiro & Noam, 2013; Callison, 2015; Mullen, 2017; Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2016). Keeping abreast of relevant scholarly research and literature, conferring with colleagues, and reflecting on personal experience, feedback, and practice were also highlighted (Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2016; Starratt, 2012).

Appreciate ethical leadership approaches from literature. Northouse (2016) leadership model focuses on the leader employing personal attributes, skills, and behaviors in concert. These three areas are captured by three ethical models from literature, care theory (Noddings, 1984), professional development and practice theory (Shapiro and Stefkovich, 2016), and standards based professionalism (Barrett et al., 2012; Barrett et al., 2006). Each of these models approached the uncertainties of ethical leadership from one of those perspectives, and attempted to define ethical teacher–student relationships and associated ethical relationship boundaries. Each of these models also provided guidance and suggestions on how principals can promote and maintain ethical relationships in their schools. Taken as a whole, these three models and Northouse's (2016) model offer significant conceptual and practical guidance to principals on developing and honing their leadership style.

CONCLUSION

The embrace of educational theory and practice that encourages close interpersonal relationships between teachers and students, has unfortunately not been accompanied policy and professional standards related to its governance, or the curriculum and professional development necessary to prepare teachers and guide their practice. Although close teacher–student relationships have been shown as an effective means of enhancing academic performance, promoting social development, and improving class management, related ethical concerns have arisen. Into this void steps the principal, who as the school leader falls the responsibility to train and guide staff in ethically navigating relationships.

Principals perceived that ethical teacher–student relationships enabled academic achievement and social development of students, and enhanced the ability of teachers to manage their classrooms. Integral to this relationship were the themes of teachers possessing the attributes of care, empathy, and humanity for their students, and acting in their best interests. Also important was the necessity of teachers to understand and act within the bounds of their role as teacher and mentor. Principals perceived their role as enabling these relationships by promoting a positive context, embodied in the school culture and climate that promoted and supported these relationships. Key to this was not only taking actions that directly promoted positive school

climate, but also their personally modeling behaviors they sought to promote to staff, students, and the greater school community in their practice. Managing peripheral influences on the school, staff, and student body, particularly those that potentially interfered with ethical and productive teacher–student relationships, was perceived by principals to be an important aspect of their role. Principals managed these influences by embracing what they considered positive influences, while attempting to reject, mitigate, minimize, or reshape the negative.

The examination of principals' perceptions of ethical teacher–student relationship boundaries revealed that principals neither had, or necessarily desired, specific definitions. Principals conceptually perceived these relationship boundaries as the dividing line between acting in the best interests of students and harming them. However, they articulated these boundaries as grey lines, which defied definitive definitions, and required principals to exercise their judgement and experience to understand. Although principals preferred having general guidance and policies, they avoided prescriptive codes and specific definitions, as well as the notion of compliance. Principals appeared to value their flexibly and discretion in managing ethical relationship boundary issues. Interestingly, they perceived social networking and the resulting enhanced public visibility of staff as impinging on this, causing them to act more forcefully and to have less flexibility and discretion in dealing with potential ethical relationship boundary issues. Principals described the development of overly personal teacher–student relationships as the gateway to potential misunderstandings and misconceptions regarding ethical relationship boundaries. As result, principals stressed enhanced visibility as a means of prevention, and monitoring as a means of detection.

Principals were aware of potential ethical relationship boundary issues that could arise from teachers attempting to balance care and putting the best interests of student first, while at the same time attending to their role of teacher and mentor. The examination of principal practices revealed a dichotomy in their approach to promoting and maintaining ethical teacher–student relationships in their schools. On one hand, principals sought to improve teacher skills in developing and managing ethical and productive relationships with students. On the other hand, they also engaged in supervisory behaviors of modeling expectations, monitoring behaviors, and inserting their leadership, as they deemed necessary. This duel approach sought to improve staff skills, while at the same time recognizing the human condition and the necessity of shaping, monitoring, and correcting behaviors. Related to this duel approach, was the necessity of promoting a positive and ethical context for the teacher–student relationship to thrive in.

Leadership and leadership style emerged as a theme that related to all the other themes. Principals tended to describe their leadership as a blend of collaboration and supervision, which varied depending on the individual principal, and the context of the school. Northouse (2016) leadership model appears to apply, describing leadership in terms of personal attributes, skills, and behaviors. As did three models from literature that focused on personal attributes (Noddings, 1984), skills development (Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2016), and behaviors (Barrett et al., 2012; Barrett et al., 2006). Principals described how all three of these areas were critical aspects of their leadership. Related to leadership was the principals' role and responsibility in managing the many peripheral factors that affect ethical relationships in their schools. Further, attempting to reduce trauma associated with the school setting, and making the school an inviting place that reinforced student identity.

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