



Educational tug-of-war: internal and external accountability of principals in varied contexts

Educational
tug-of-war

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Raymond A. Gonzalez
Wayne, NJ Public Schools, Wayne, New Jersey, USA, and
William A. Firestone
*Graduate School of Education, Rutgers,
The State University of New Jersey, New Brunswick, New Jersey, USA*

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Abstract

Purpose – Principals face shifting accountability pressures from many sources. The most notable recent change in the USA has been the growing pressure from state and federal government. The purpose of this study is to explore the extent to which the accountability pressures experienced by principals in one American state were the same as those reported in research documenting “objective” changes in those pressures.

Design/methodology/approach – This qualitative study uses interviews with New Jersey middle school principals. The purposeful sample includes principals who had been in their buildings at least three years and enhances variation on socioeconomic status (as measured by New Jersey’s rating of “district factor groups”) and school achievement. The authors averaged three years of achievement data and controlled for variation in poverty, ethnicity, language proficiency, and enrollment. A total of 37 principals were contacted; 25 were interviewed. Principals first rank ordered seven sources of accountability. They were then interviewed to learn why the one they ranked highest was most important.

Findings – The most frequent top source of accountability was “your own conscience.” Principals who selected this option highlighted a sense of personal responsibility, responsibility to the children in their charge, and how conscience mediates among competing accountabilities. Accountability to one’s conscience was most prevalent in high achieving schools.

Originality/value – Frequent reference to internal responsibility among leaders suggests that they continue to feel a strong sense of internal accountability in spite of increasing external pressures. It also illustrates the range of external, often conflicting pressures that principals face which include pressures from the public and the district office as well as state and federal government. In this increasingly prescriptive and contradictory environment the principal’s moral code is important to her or his school.

Keywords Leadership, Accountability, Schools, Leader values, Ethics, United States of America

Paper type Research paper

A half-century ago, theorists spoke of schools as “loosely coupled.” In spite of their apparently centralized structure, neither the superintendent’s authority nor school board goals provided strong direction (Bidwell, 1965; Weick, 1976). Principals’ accountability to other sources of authority were viewed as weak so that – like teachers – they could reconcile students’ variable abilities, motivations, and accomplishments to the uniform, bureaucratic demands stemming from curriculum, assessment, and other sources. Doing so required considerable autonomy (Bidwell, 1965). Since then,

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power over education system has increasingly flowed to the state and federal levels (Conley, 2003; Rowan and Miskel, 1999), most obviously through the reauthorization of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) (McDonnell, 2005). The increased assessment and accountability requirements in this legislation have changed the balance between central direction and local discretion.

The purpose of this study was to learn if the accountability pressures principals experienced were what would be predicted from changing national trends. A secondary concern was to understand if principals in situations where these state and federal policy should have more or less impact described expected levels of pressure. We expected all principals, but especially those in poor schools with low test scores, to report very limited autonomy. Instead, we expected them to say that they were accountable to external authorities, especially NCLB requirements. That was not the case. We interviewed a sample of middle school principals in New Jersey. While these principals described several sources of accountability, what was striking was how many reported that they still felt most accountable to themselves. Accountability to self was most pronounced for principals leading high achieving schools. Most principals who felt the greatest accountability to an external source, including NCLB, worked in low achieving schools.

Background

This section briefly reviews recent thinking on accountability as it applies to the school principals. It then summarizes the changing political context of American education to suggest its implications for the accountabilities that are most likely to be experienced by principals.

Accountability

Recently, accountability in the USA has been linked to state and federal assessment systems that publicize test results and sometimes punish poor performance. This is apparent in papers studying the “Texas accountability system” (Booher-Jennings, 2005) or the “accountability illusion” (Cronin *et al.*, 2009) that analyze assessment programs. More broadly, accountability refers to any situation where one party must provide an accounting of her or his actions to someone else (Adams and Kirst, 1999). Principal-agent theory is a well-developed scheme to explain behavior in these situations. First used by economists, this theory predicts the relative influence of a “principal” or source of formal authority who is owed an account from an “agent.” While the source[1] has authority over the agent, agents often have influence not available to sources – typically, various kinds of information (Miller, 2005).

While this theory explores many situations that give advantage to one party over the other, it pays limited attention to those where the agent must attend to several sources at once (Miller, 2005). Yet, conflicting demands from multiple sources has been the recurring problem in education (Firestone and Shippy, 2005). Partly to describe those conflicts from a policy designer’s perspective – i.e. those who apply authority, not the agents – researchers have developed typologies of sources of authority. While differing at the margins, these typologies overlap substantially in identifying major mechanisms that policy makers use to obtain agent compliance. These include bureaucratic, political, market, professional, and moral accountability (e.g. Adams and Kirst, 1999; Firestone and Shippy, 2005).

Principal-agent theory assumes that sources of accountability are experienced as outside the individual. Yet, some responsibilities generate inner, more personal

commitment (Selznick, 1992). Moreover, school leaders sometimes feel responsible for things for which they are not held accountable while being held accountable for things that they may not feel responsible for because they lack control of the situation (Allen and Mintrom, 2010). To address this problem, researchers explored “internal accountability.” Initially, they focussed on responsibility to school staff or an occupational group (Newmann *et al.*, 1997), but the concept now includes other internalized obligations. Here we summarize five separate types of accountability: three external and two at least partly internal. We highlight the source of authority and the mechanism that each type features.

Bureaucratic accountability. Bureaucratic accountability is part of the formal authority relationship between superiors and subordinates built into the modern organization (Scott, 2003). Formal authority requires that the subordinate (agent) accept directives from the superior (source) within the latter’s sphere of authority and follow the rules that define a job. These rules typically define the accounts that the subordinate must provide to the superior. Bureaucratic accountability allows the superior to reward or punish the subordinate. Incentives depend on the subordinate’s account and are governed by pre-established rules, but can include removal from one’s position. Historically, the dominant account has been formal reporting up the “chain of command” (Adams and Kirst, 1999) but performance metrics are becoming more common (Colyvas, 2012). In education, indirect accountability has expanded recently with the rise of state testing (Firestone and Shipps, 2005).

Political accountability. Political accountability requires that elected representatives (agents) respond to constituent (source) demands (Adams and Kirst, 1999). This accountability begins with the ballot box. Parents, tax payers, business people, and union members vote for their representatives and expect to be listened to or to vote for someone else. As voting expands into lobbying, citizens’ express “voice” to signal officials about how well officials’ work is received (Hirschmann, 1970). Ultimately, political accountability includes both elected representatives and functionaries appointed by elected representatives. Thus, educators must account to the public because they are employed by elected officials.

Market accountability. Market accountability increases competition. Customers (sources) get satisfaction by exercising their freedom of choice. Parents signal their displeasure when they “exit” a school (Hirschmann, 1970). In strong markets, educators treat parents and students as valued customers. Mechanisms like vouchers and charter schools have marketized education in the last few decades. Moreover, wealthy parents exercise choice by moving from one district to another. Educators (agents) provide accounts to parents and/or students to maintain a market, and the circulation of families signals educators about how well their services are received (Adams and Kirst, 1999; Firestone and Shipps, 2005).

Moral accountability. Moral accountability refers to the individual responding to his or her own values; source and agent are one and the same. Moral accountability is not so much intrinsic incentives as internalized obligation (Sergiovanni, 1992). Principal agent theory does not address moral accountability well; the purpose of that theory is generally to identify and help understand the relative influence of sources and agents, assuming they are different entities (Miller, 2005).

Still, the moral agent can hold commitments to aims that extend beyond the personal. According to Adams and Kirst (1999, p. 471), “Educational policy treats moral dimensions of educational accountability as individual idiosyncrasy, thus not worth addressing. As a result, this mode of accountability garners little attention,

except as a rhetorical target.” Yet, they recognize that agents can be accountable to their own conscience. Analysts have examined the principals’ moral commitments, the contexts and processes for adopting those commitments, and the attention that must be given to know when one is actually acting on those commitments and when one is using them as a cover for baser self-interest (Begley, 2006). Others have suggested that ideals like social justice and democratic community or an ethic of critique or of caring should provide guidance to school leaders, assuming that these ideals would be internalized (Furman and Shields, 2005; Starratt, 1991). Research on principal valuation processes and problem solving shows how principals use ethical obligations to guide action, especially in high stakes situations where tension runs high and where policy analysts may expect decisions to be driven by accountability pressures (Begley, 2006; Leithwood and Steinbach, 1995).

Professional accountability. Professional accountability is to a group to which one belongs, so it has both internal and external elements. Some accounts of professional accountability examine how the profession serves an external source through certification and accreditation. Then the state and the professional association collaborate to develop and enforce standards of practice (Adams and Kirst, 1999). Individuals provide an account at the start of their career when they get certified, and sometimes later through recertification. Often they are prepared in formally accredited institutions. This account is not so much of the professional’s actions as for the capacity to meet standard for professional knowledge and professional norms or rules of behavior. While most attention has been given to certification and accreditation, peer solidarity and informal enforcement of norms is another mechanism for professional accountability, making colleagues another source of authority (Adams and Kirst, 1999). Although there is a moral aspect to professional accountability and a sense in which it is internalized, this accountability is more to a group – even when that group is more one’s workplace peers than “the profession” – while moral accountability is more personal.

Differentiated attention to accountability. Research on standards and state testing provides useful insights into how these bureaucratic accountabilities shape educators’ work. This research explores the effects of high stakes testing on teachers more than principals. Responses to such tests include narrowing the curriculum to tested subjects and even topics in tested subjects that are known to be on the test (Hamilton *et al.*, 2008). Another response is using instructional formats like those on the tests. The distribution of teaching to the test has been understudied, but scoring and accountability systems can create variable effects. For instance, where students must reach a certain proficiency level, those who are just above or below that level are “on the bubble,” and teachers tend to focus on them (Booher-Jennings, 2005). Schools and principals that clearly do or do not meet the NCLB “adequate yearly progress” criteria pay much less attention to those requirements than schools that have trouble meeting those criteria or just barely exceed them (Brown and Clift, 2010). Apparently, school principals’ interest in certain accountabilities depends on their success in meeting them.

Changing accountabilities

In the 1970s American schools were independent bureaucratic organizations with few accountability systems in place. The legitimacy of school administrators was high and – except in civil rights – state and federal intervention was relatively low (Tyack, 1974). Still, schools and districts were loosely coupled internally. Teachers looked to principal for support but rarely expected or received much direction (Corwin and Borman, 1988; Lortie, 1975). Moreover, teachers were not sure how to assess their work.

Reference to testing was mostly about teacher-made tests and then in passing (Lortie, 1975). The difficulty in assessing their work reflected the broader ambiguity about what teachers were expected to accomplish, again especially in high schools (Herriott and Firestone, 1984). This loosely coupled context might have encouraged professional accountability except that educators were generally isolated from each other (Corwin and Borman, 1988; Lortie, 1975). If anything, schools depended on moral accountability.

Things began to change in the late 1970s when states adopted minimum competency testing policies. In the next decade, states began regulating local districts more aggressively, especially by increasing high school graduation standards and state testing (Firestone *et al.*, 1989). By the end of the 1980s, 41 states tested for “accountability” in at least one grade and publicized results so that parents, taxpayers, board members, and district staff could assess a school’s progress. Fewer states (18) tested for higher stakes purposes like high school graduation. Increased testing probably raised political and market pressures more than bureaucratic accountability.

Until the 1990s, the federal government played a very minimal role in testing policy. State assessments varied substantially in item design, grades and subjects tested, and uses of data. The reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1994 required that, to be eligible for Title I funding, states must develop challenging content and performance standards and link their testing programs to those standards. States had to hold schools accountable for making progress towards their performance standards and ensure that schools took corrective action in case of persistent failure. However, sanctions were not specified (McDonnell, 2005).

The reauthorization of 2001 – NCLB – did specify sanctions. In addition to earlier requirements, NCLB required each state to test students in specific grades, define proficient performance on state tests, report proficiency levels – not only over all but for specific ethnic and low-income subgroups – identify schools in need of improvement (INI) for specific subgroups that do not meet proficiency targets, and mandate remediation strategies for schools INI. In effect, NCLB required sanctions for schools (and principals) that did not meet test-based proficiency targets although states still had considerable leeway in defining those targets (McDonnell, 2005). Every indication was that these new rules would substantially increase bureaucratic accountability for schools and principals, perhaps especially in poorer schools where these policies had the most impact (Camilli and Monfils, 2004; Phillips and Flashman, 2007).

Bureaucratic accountability was well established in New Jersey. The state was one of the first to adopt minimum competency tests. In addition to increasing the rigor of its assessments, it was an early adopter of core curriculum content standards. In part because of high profile school finance litigation, state monitoring of administrative processes began in the 1970s and was often refined to align better with the testing regime and its outcome measures (McDermott, 2011). By the mid-2000s, students were tested in every grade required by NCLB in mathematics and language arts, proficiency criteria were established, a program was in place to provide assistance to schools “INI,” and a state designed Quality Single Accountability Continuum monitoring system coordinated with the state testing program. In practice, however, the accountability linked to both testing and process monitoring fell more on schools serving poor than rich children.

Methods

This is a qualitative study of the meaning of accountability to principals (Maxwell, 2005). It was part of a larger study examining several aspects of principal accountability. To explore possible variation in perception and meaning of that concept, a purposive

sample was used to ensure that principals came from different settings. This section briefly describes the sample, data collection, data management and analysis, and the role of the researchers.

Sample

The population for this study was New Jersey public middle school principals who had been in the same school for at least three years. To control for variables associated with student age, the population was limited to schools that went up to eighth grade but not lower than fifth grade. We used a stratified purposeful sample (Miles and Huberman, 1994) to select participants who would maximize variation on two factors – including the threat created by NCLB accountability requirements – that might shape principals’ understanding of accountability.

The first variable was school socioeconomic status (SES) which appeared to be associated with principals’ responses to being labeled “INI” (Diamond and Spillane, 2004). The New Jersey Department of Education uses the “district factor group” (DFG) to measure school and district SES. This composite measure includes variables such as percent of population with no high school diploma, occupation, unemployment, population density, and income that is calculated each decade by the New Jersey Department of Education.

The second measure was school achievement since poor performance initiates the “needs improvement” status under NCLB. To disentangle achievement from SES, a regression model was computed that identified unexpectedly high and low achieving middles schools. The dependent variable was a composite of the language arts literacy scores and mathematics scores on the New Jersey’s eighth grade state assessment for 2004, 2005, and 2006. The independent or explanatory variables used in the regression included measures of ethnicity, poverty, language proficiency, enrollment, per pupil resources, and district contextual factors such as DFG. The result of the least square regression produced a list of outlier school principals whose performance was higher or lower than expected based upon the ordinary least squares residual values that ranged from -3.022 to 4.719.

Data on especially high and low achieving schools and especially wealthy and poor schools was used to identify the initial sample of principals. A total of 37 principals who were equally distributed across the four quadrants – i.e. high SES-high achievement, high SES-low achievement, etc. – were recruited. Eventually, 25 principals agreed to participate in the study. Their distribution is shown in Table I.

Data collection

The study used in-depth interviews to elicit information about the meaning of accountability. An electronically administered pre-interview survey collected data from each participant to guide the in-depth interview.

The main question in the pre-interview survey asked principals to rank seven sources of authority to whom accountability might be owed. These sources had been identified

SES	Predicted achievement	
	Lower than expected	Higher than expected
Low	4	6
High	9	6

Table I.
Sampling matrix

through reviewing the literature and a pilot study. These sources were the district/central office, parents, state testing/adequate yearly progress, your own conscience, board of education, teachers, and other principals (see Appendix 1 for this question).

After surveys were returned, respondents were interviewed using a standardized open-ended interview (Patton, 2002) assuming a conversational approach (Marshall and Rossman, 1999). This approach is useful for gaining information about principals' perceptions in their own words. The interview guide (Appendix 2) was developed in three phases. First, draft guides were developed to address the main questions of interest. After review, the guide was piloted with four respondents to ascertain that questions obtained relevant information and identify the best sequence of questions. Finally, the guide was revised, retested, and minor adjustments were made.

All interviews were digitally recorded from start to finish. After each interview, the researcher immediately added additional field notes, including information that was not captured on tape. Each interview was transcribed and saved as a separate file in a format that allowed for easy import into the data analysis software program.

Data management and analysis

As interviews were completed, all data were organized and analyzed using NVivo, a qualitative research software program. Analysis for this paper focussed on the interview questions that asked about the meaning of accountability to the highest ranked source of accountability in the survey. Our purpose was to understand principals meanings of different kinds of accountability and which ones they found most compelling. Analysis followed procedures outlined by Marshall and Rossman (1999) and Miles and Huberman (1994) to code data, test for understandings, and search for alternative explanations. Initially, we planned to use coding categories like "bureaucratic accountability" or "legal accountability" that came from the typology described earlier. The analysis would explore how principals understood those categories and why they felt as compelled as they did by these sources of guidance and constraint. Actual analysis showed that it was more reliable to code responses for the source of authority mentioned – like "superiors," oneself, and "NCLB" – than mechanism like bureaucratic or market constraint. Respondents were clearer about the sources of constraint, and some sources used more than one mechanism for their influence. For instance, pressures from parents were sometimes interpreted as political accountability and sometimes as market accountability. Still, these sources could be related to the more general mechanisms of authority presented in the initial typology.

Tables were used to summarize and display the findings for each case to facilitate cross-case comparison of the principals' responses. Throughout the analytic process the researchers continually cycled through the data first to identify themes and then to identify data supporting, challenging, or elaborating those themes (Marshall and Rossman, 1999).

Role of the researcher

Interviews were conducted by two researchers. Their work was coordinated by a third researcher with extensive experience with qualitative methods. Clearly defining the roles of the researcher was critical to ensuring reliability of the data collected and safeguarding against any technical and ethical problems (Marshall and Rossman, 1999).

Several factors support the reliability of the data being collected by more than one researcher. Both interviewers helped develop the overall study from the beginning, and both contributed to the design of the interview protocol. Both interviewers were very

familiar with the research questions, goals, and objectives of all aspects of the study. Reliability is further enhanced in the creation of the data collection instruments. The interview guide provided a clear structure for interviews that was well understood by both interviewers. This structure included both questions to ask and probes to follow up with. The on-line survey obtained data free from the possible influence from either researcher's presence.

To establish trust and avoid ethical problems, the interviewers offered full disclosure of the research interests to the participants prior to the interview. When negotiating entry with the principals, researchers relied heavily on their professional affiliation with the participants. It helped that both interviewers were or had been principals themselves. Principals were initially telephoned at their workplaces. The initial conversation provided a brief introduction of the interviewers' professional and academic background, a general description of the study, and an invitation to participate. Participation requirements were clearly outlined ahead of time. Principals who agreed scheduled a time and place to conduct the interview and received a confirmation via e-mail and US mail. This communication provided a link to the pre-interview survey and informed consent form.

Findings

Recognizing that principals deal with multiple accountabilities, this section describes principals' reports of their most important accountability source and then elaborates meaning of accountability to that source. Most respondents report that their first accountability is internal, almost all of them saying they first feel accountable to themselves. This was somewhat surprising and raised a question about what it means to be accountable to oneself. We explore this question in two ways. First, we describe respondents' perspectives on accountability to each source. Principals who emphasized accountability to themselves also emphasized their sense of personal responsibility, responsibility to children, and using a moral code to balance among the conflicting accountabilities they still felt. Many were immune to increasing accountabilities, but felt that those accountabilities were poorly aligned and used their personal codes to chose a course of action. Second, the distribution of accountability across school contexts is examined. Principals who emphasized external accountabilities tended to be in low achieving schools while those who emphasize internal accountabilities were often in high achieving schools.

Sources of accountability

Based on coded responses from the interviews, most principals report that their first accountability is to themselves. In total, 14 principals selected their own conscience as their most important source of accountability (see Figure 1). Beyond that, there was an almost even distribution among other sources. Parents, the superintendent, and AYP/NCLB were each identified by three different principals and two stated that they were most accountable to teachers.

This section presents the conceptions of accountability as described by the principals through their interviews. Principals' understandings will be described according to the constituency specified as the source of accountability.

Accountable to self

The 14 principals who selected accountability to self described being motivated by an obligation to act rather than responding to a specific external pressure. This obligation

usually came from one or more of four specific sources: personal responsibility, an obligation to the children in the school, the use of one's conscience as a moral compass, and a personal connection to the school.

Personal responsibility. Six principals emphasized that they felt a personal sense of responsibility to do a good job. Their first motivation was not to respond to external demands. Rather as Principal B4[2] explained:

I need to get up in the morning and look myself in the mirror and say, okay, I'm doing the best job that I possibly can for the students, for my staff, for my parents and for me to think that I truly am leading. So that's where it starts, it starts with my conscience.

Similarly, Principal A3 saw her actions as a reflection of her core values and beliefs as a person and a professional. She said, "I understand that this is my job, and no matter what I've ever done in my life, I do it to the best of my ability. I live with integrity and honesty. I do nothing that does not lead with integrity."

Personal responsibility was very important to these principals. They took stock of their actions each day. Principal A4 used this internalized obligation to keep himself in check and determine when he had acted inappropriately:

It's a level of integrity. When I drive home tonight – or to the gym where I run – I replay my day and I have to ask myself, "Have I been the best [states his name] I can be? [...]. And I swear to you – I swear to God – there are days [...]. I can't wait 'til the next morning 'cause I wanna be at that door, and wanna bring that kid over and say, "I need to talk to you." [...]. I'll say to them, "I'm sorry. I was too tough on you yesterday. I was too harsh. I over-reacted." And – and that's a level of integrity and decency and dignity and loyalty that I think is absolutely necessary.

Accountability for these principals was a way of making sure that they lived their lives commensurate with their own values and beliefs. These principals used this form of accountability to navigate the complexities often associated with their job.

Responsibility for students. This sense of personal responsibility was often accompanied by a recognition that schooling was intended to promote children's learning which led them to "put the kids first" (Principal C5). Six principals discussed their responsibility to students. Judgments about meeting children's needs were often multifaceted and not based so much on an analysis of achievement data as an overall assessment of what the principal was accomplishing. Principal B5 was relieved that "I've never been in the position of doing something that I don't feel is comfortable. Doing something that is not good for the kids. I mean you can see it." Principals felt that their responsibility to themselves and their students were inter-related as both Principal

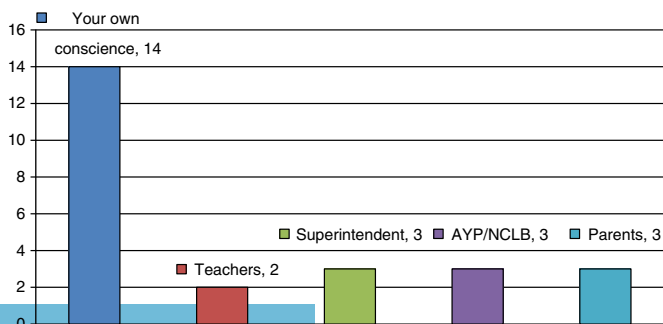


Figure 1.
"Most accountable"
sources discussed
during interview

A4's and B4's previously quoted comment indicate. Similarly, Principal B3 saw his responsibility to himself and his students as related:

I don't think I could live [with] myself if I didn't feel that I was addressing the students' need. I'm not saying that I'm not following what they imposed the curriculum all day, yes, but I'm not as rigid. That's not my focus. My entire focus is not on that. I want to address the whole child.

Moral compass. Most principals felt some responsibility to several sources of accountability and experienced those sources as making contradictory demands. Because of these contradictory pressures, six participants used accountability to their own conscience to stay focussed. Their personal responsibility became their filter to sort through the multiple pressures they faced. When pulled in different directions by various constituent groups, they used their personal values to navigate a course of action. In the end, the demands that most aligned with their personal values won out:

My conscience is what I am [...] Even though we got all these stuff, for a lack of better word, coming at us from everywhere [...] accurate test taking, how we administer the test, all those things, accountability to the central office, to the parents [...] I have to do it the way that I went into this profession, that the kids come first, that is what we are here for (C6).

You know there are a lot of things that frustrate the leadership of any school because there are so many variables. You have so many bosses. Almost anyone can be your boss, but at the end of the day, you are responsible for leading the academic charge so you have to negotiate your priorities [...] if you always follow what's right for children, you don't have priorities and you know what to do next and you make the right decisions even if they are the hard ones (B6).

The belief that principals described repeatedly was general, but clearly focussed on the work of schools, doing what was "right for children." Principal B2 felt that doing what was right sometimes ran contrary to others' expectations; however, as long as he focussed on the children, he could reconcile conflicts from other potential sources of pressure and influence:

I always do the right thing. Sometimes, it might be controversial and I take a stand if I know it's the right thing to do. Because when I go home, I want to go home with a clear mind and say, "I did the right thing." And if it's an argument or a battle with money, contractors, a parent, a student, the policies in the realm of education always got to be bigger than one person so I have to be satisfied when I do the right thing.

Ultimately, the internal pressure from these principals' conscience was perceived to be the greatest motivating factor in their work.

Personal connection. For two principals, internal accountability came through a personal connection. In one case, this connection came through location. In the other, it resulted from family history.

As a resident of the community where he worked, Principal D4 claimed a special interest in the success of the school district, and he set his standards accordingly. He said, "I've lived in this community thirty years, so this is just not another place for me, you know, I'm three miles away from here. Uh – so the expectations are high for myself. And I think people realize that I set the expectations, and therefore – they better get on with them!" His motivation stemmed from the pressure to perform his job effectively both as a professional and a community member.

Principal B1 attributed his intrinsic drive to experiences that shaped his entire outlook on life. Growing up in the depression, he learned not to take education and employment for granted. He recalled his father's words, "as long as you are taking pay from an employer you do the job. If you no longer want to do the job [...] get another

job. And that's the way I approach it." Consequently, his commitment to hard work and appreciation for being employed drove him to give it his all for his 44-year career in education:

A year ago last February first, standing right here at this desk I had a stroke [...] and I missed three and a half months of work. Today I still have over 300 accumulated sick days. I could have missed more than three and a half months of work. I could have collected disability insurance plus my full pay if I had chosen to do that [...] We can come up with a lot of excuses, but at the end of the day you got to go home go to sleep at night and you got to get up in the morning and do it all again. If you aren't doing it within parameters that you can live with then you are not going to be doing it very long [...] I've been doing this for 44 years [...] and if I couldn't operate by that philosophy I don't think I could have gone quite that long.

The internal pressure motivated these principals by aligning their actions to their core values and beliefs as professionals and individuals. To them, there is no worse sanction than not being true to oneself.

In sum, although often cross-pressured by multiple accountabilities, these principals did not respond first to an external source of authority. They had a personal, if rarely specified moral code to live up to that included a special obligation to "put kids first" that is best conceptualized as moral accountability.

Accountable to other educators

Another source of accountability expressed by principals came from the obligation they felt to the other educators with whom they worked. These leaders viewed themselves as members of a team of professionals who worked together across classrooms, grades, and schools to support the needs of their students. Three participants described this relationship with other educators in their interviews. Two principals felt most obligated to their teachers while one described a secondary obligation to other principals as well.

Teachers. Two principals viewed themselves as vital members of a team of educators who worked together to meet students' needs in their school. They defined teachers as the key personnel responsible for providing direct instruction to the students while the principals supplied the resources and support necessary to carry classroom work. These principals reported different ways they helped their staff ranging from providing supplies and resources through running interference with external distractions to setting a clear vision:

In my belief, I'm the one that needs to be held accountable to teachers. They look to you for everything that transpires in the school district and to set a clear vision as a principal [...] The other ones that are actually on the list didn't seem to affect me as great as my belief as being accountable to teachers [...] I think that's the team concept [...] Consistently, it's the fact that we're a team. I'm with you so I'm held accountable with them (D5).

[Teachers] are on the frontline or in the trenches for lack of a better term to use. I guess you could translate that however you need to, but I need to clear the way for them to do their job. I need to get the obstacles out of the way, make sure that they have the resources [...] I am fortunate to have quite a few risk takers here on the staff and I have to let them know that it is okay to take a risk (D6).

Other principals. Only one respondent mentioned accountability to other principals. Although not identified as her primary source of accountability, Principal B4 illustrates the interdependent relationship she experienced with the elementary school and high school where she received and sent students. As a middle school principal she felt she owed it to her professional colleagues to build upon the foundation set by the sending

elementary school in order to best prepare the students for successful entry into the high school:

You need to be aware of who's sending you those children in the middle school and where they're headed. And so there's accountability when you are in the middle school to both ends. There's an accountability to elementary school principals that you're providing the proper transitioning tools for those children to make it once they hit the middle school and there's an accountability to the high school principals to make sure you're preparing them in those three years that they are here they'll have the tools to function at the high school. So that's where the accountability of the principals come in, being in middle, I've got no sides.

Much like the accountability to teachers reported by others, this principal felt obligated to do her part to support students as a member of team within the school district.

This obligation to other educators is professional accountability, not so much through certification and accreditation as through peer obligation. As experienced by these principals, it has a strong internal and communal aspect; these principals do not want to let their colleagues down.

The following sections move beyond internal accountabilities to examine the external sources of accountability experienced by principals in the study.

Accountability to superiors

Another source of accountability for participants came from their formal superiors within the formal structure of the school district. These principals responded first to their subordinate role, whether they said they reported to the superintendent, the central office, or the school board. Principals treated these three different entities somewhat interchangeably and felt responsible for carrying out assignments from all of them and providing them with accounts. While many principals in the study felt pressure from their superiors, only three identified this source as their most prominent accountability.

These principals had a basic line authority conception of accountability. Principal C2 saw this relationship as an artifact of the organization of public schools. Central office and the superintendent had the authority to give directions that the principals followed:

I think that's because ultimately that's who I answer to. If I don't fulfill my obligations and responsibilities to the superintendent or Central Office, then I'm at risk of losing a job or whatever it is [...] So I always feel like it goes back to the Board of Ed, the superintendent, their expectations and their policies, because that's what I'm charged to do is really deliver on those. Not always what the whims of parents are, the whims of teachers are, the whims of the state, you know, it's all – to me the immediate responsibility is to the Central Office.

He believed that he was hired by a board of education that represented the community and he was required to meet the terms of his employment. He further commented:

I think accountable, meaning to implement, to support the policies and the expectations set forth by the Board of Ed which is an extension of the superintendent – or the superintendent probably is a little bit of an extension of the Board of Ed – just making sure that I implement those policies and support those policies, and what their expectations are of me since they pay my salary.

Principal C4 understood that within the bureaucratic structure of the school district, the superintendent set the priorities and it was her job to follow his direction. Fortunately for her, she agreed with his belief system. According to her, "The things that he responds to tells me what his priorities are. And the things that frustrate him like the state office and what they are doing with him and just shows that there is a strong alignment with his principals and what he expects his administrative team to

do.” Her respect for his leadership and expertise shaped her perception of accountability as a positive experience.

For these principals, line accountability simplified the complex environment of the job by helping them to know exactly who they reported to and what was expected of them. However, it made things more difficult when it conflicted with other accountabilities. Principal A3, who claimed to be driven primarily by her accountability to her conscience also acknowledged the boss to whom she reported. “I have to be accountable to my boss in the board of education and with their cost of sending me paper work, and things that at nature [...] I’m not saying I agree with it, but I have to be accountable.” Principal B3 had a similar experience and felt pulled in different directions by conflicting demands:

Of course, there’s going to be some from the top. There’s always going to be demands like elimination of certain programs that they feel aren’t important to the students [...] That’s an added pressure that you have to kind of balance and also the many changes that are happening within the curriculum that again come from the top; and having to be a mediator between the teachers and central office; and having to make [teachers] buy into a change in the curriculum and then having teachers be – I wouldn’t say defiant, especially the veteran teachers that are – they’re not in agreement with curriculum changes or what they have to teach or how they have to teach. That’s always difficult to mediate with the teachers. You want to be supportive but yet, you have to meet with what the district is asking me to do and having to police it in the classroom because of that door being closed.

Dissonance arose when there was a misalignment between the principal’s values, beliefs, and priorities and those of their superiors. Then principals felt caught in the middle.

The pressures that came from the top were sometimes compounded by other factors. For instance, a change in superintendents influenced Principal D1’s feeling of accountability:

It’s been very difficult for me for the last year and a half. For seven years I had a superintendent who was very hands-off. You know, I could just about do anything and he would support anything I did. I was extremely loyal to him. He was extremely loyal to me, and then he left. We got an interim who was just basically interested in doing whatever the Board of Education wanted, and there was a lot of politics involved. And now we have a new sort of permanent superintendent, and – that’s probably why I put that first as I was going through the survey. I’ve had a bad year and a half. It’s really been – it’s so bad that I wanna take [...] the first job as an assistant principal in a decent high school.

His experience illustrates how changing leadership may make top-down accountability more important to principals at some times than others. Uncontrollable increases in oversight may lead to negative perceptions of accountability.

Accountability to superiors is fundamentally bureaucratic. Principals who emphasized top-down accountability acknowledged this formal authority as the reason to defer to the central office. Job security also drove principals to respect the chain of command. Whatever pressures motivated their superiors, these principals were accountable to their bosses.

Accountable to NCLB

With all the attention on NCLB, its accountability pressures and high-stakes testing more generally only dominated in the thinking of three principals. According to these principals, the sanctions they faced ranged substantially in their severity. One principal was primarily concerned with having his school labeled as failing:

Well I think state testing is how schools are labeled. If their testing is below the norm or below the accepted rate by the state you’re designated as a school under review or school in trouble if you will. And that leaves such a terrible stigma with parents, with the community and once

you've obtained that status of being a school that's a non-achiever, it's very difficult to climb out of that hole that you're in. So I think state testing and how school does with state testing is very important in terms of determining the future of that school (A1).

Another was more concerned with job security as a result of having been labeled a "School INI" for so long that the state or district could remove staff:

[...] 'cause really that's what comes down – if No Child Left Behind is enforced the way it's supposed to be they can actually remove you from your position based on that (C7).

Both the label of failing school and the actual threat of removal were perceived as a sanction.

In addition, as schools remained in the "in needs of improvement" status for several years – and before removal became imminent, there was a threat of loss of autonomy as external overseers came in and offered direction. However, this oversight sometimes had a positive aspect. Principal A2 received regular visits from a team of external representatives who reviewed the school's practices and provided corrective action measures to be implemented:

About a week ago I had a one-day [CAPA] benchmark meeting and prior to the visit I had a phone conversation with the representative coming out and somehow we got on this whole thing about the number of visits I've had in the past four years. I remember telling her that that when you come out you are going to see some good stuff [...]. I will tell you initially the process felt very punitive. I kind of felt like you know as a principal I'm being targeted as this bad guy because my scores aren't what they should be.

In spite of his initial reservations, "over the years I've kind of used the process as part of my own personal growth experience. I have learned a lot and I have discovered that folks coming out telling you the not-so-good stuff actually kind of helps you if you are open to it." Moreover, state oversight provided concrete resources, including a reading program and two vice principals but no loss of staff. This principal's motivation had passed the fear to appreciation of a variety of sources of support.

Accountable to the public

The public was another source of accountability for principals, but the one least well explained by existing typologies. The three principals who explicitly ascribed to accountability to parents and the community were clear about their primary source of accountability but used different metaphors to explain their reasoning for choosing parents and community as their most important accountability source.

These principals were very clear that they were most accountable to their clients. Principal C8's motivation was connected to how her school was viewed as a result of scores on state assessments. Despite having good test scores, she still reported feeling pressure from the community to do better:

I think we have to factor that that's how we're judged [...] And I think that no matter what we do in each of the other domains that is what the public looks to. Test scores just happen to be just one of those very objective measures of achievement [...] Well, I think that in our community, there is high expectations and I think that's good and I think that's an important motivator. So, I think particularly when test scores come out [...] I think, if you look from a state perspective, our test scores are fine [...] from our community's perspective, we need to show improvement.

The perceptions of her parents shaped the reality for the principal.

Although Principal C3 worked in a public school, he made numerous parallels to his work and the world of business. He described his interest in responding to parents as a personal desire to perform well for his customers:

I believe that the parents are our customers and the product that we are producing is the product that they expect to move on and do well at the next level. So my parents are my customers and in any good business, I feel the most accountable to them. I would say if I look at schools as a business, which I can in many respects, I want customer satisfaction and I would put them at the top of any list.

He explained how his perspective is based upon the direct feedback he receives from the parents. Regardless of the other sources of pressure, if his parents were happy about their experiences while attending the school, then he was satisfied with his performance. Like the principals who felt accountable to their own conscience, this principal used his commitment to his parents as a way to manage the pressures of the job:

They are the customer [...] and the product is the key. We are sending the product to the parents and eventually the product will be a usable product obviously in the United States [...] But I can sleep well at night knowing that the parents will say to me, "This is a good school." And if I could ask them why, they will tell me some of the things I want to hear [...] "My kids are having a great experience," [...] That is where I get the most rewards.

While the formal mechanisms linking this school were the same as those in all the other schools in this sample (all public), he conceptualized his accountability in market terms.

Another participant described his incentive as a result of his direct connection to the community. Unlike Principal D4 who was also a member of his school community and put pressure on himself to perform, Principal C9 felt directly accountable to the people he lived and interacted with daily. Furthermore, as a resident with children in the school he felt the added weight of making sure that he provided to other parents what he wanted for his own:

[...] they are the stakeholders in the community. I'm a public servant and they are my boss [...] They're sending me their children to make a difference in their lives. And I'm speaking also, not just as a principal, but I'm also a parent [...] two of my children attend this school [...] And I feel, because of that I have to make decisions based on how my parents, and of course what I think, is best. But I feel most accountable to them.

As with the previous principal, the formal mechanisms lining this one to the community were typical of those in most public schools. However, unlike the previous principal, he interpreted this accountability in more political terms because he was required to give them a positive account of his performance by providing them with a quality education for their children.

Parental support had an instrumental aspect. Principals recognized that whatever the reality, once parents lost confidence in a school, their job would be very difficult:

I think because what it can do in terms of public perception and while the perception does not always coincide with reality of what goes on a school. Nevertheless, the public's perception is the reality and if their sense is that the school is a non-achieving school, the youngsters are not doing well as evidenced by low test scores on state test; that school then lives in purgatory (A1).

His words summarized the focus for principals who worried about losing parental approval. Loss of that approval could create substantial challenges. However, the specific mechanism linking principals to parents and the community was ambiguous. The relationship could be seen in either market or political terms and at least one principal did each.

Factors associated with primary accountability

This section explores how principals' conceptions of accountability varied depending on their school's achievement, its status with regard to NCLB, and its SES. The clearest pattern here was that principals who led high achieving schools most typically had an internal sense of accountability.

Although we did not set out to test a relationship between school achievement and principal accountability, the evidence suggests that principals in high achieving schools are more likely to have an internal sense of accountability. The achievement level used to select principals controlled for the socioeconomic background of the students in the school. Thus, a schools' achievement level might be moderate in absolute terms but still higher than that of demographically comparable schools. In total, 11 of the 13 principals from high achieving schools chose an internal accountability first. The other two principals from high achieving selected accountability to the central office, an external accountability (Table II). One of these principals had had a close relationship with an earlier superintendent but then had to deal with a succession of superintendents who did not support him. Just over two-thirds of the principals who chose an internal accountability (self or teachers) were principals of high achieving schools.

Almost twice as many principals who chose accountability to self-worked in high-achieving schools as low-achieving schools. In contrast, most principals who chose external accountabilities first worked in low-achieving schools, including all of those who focussed first on accountability to NCLB and the public.

It is hard from these interviews to tell whether the principal's internal accountability contributed to high student achievement or previously existing achievement increased the principal's internal accountability. However, there are indications that the schools where principals feel internalized accountability and achievement is high are also those where teachers and administrators now work together. According to one, "We've been successful on state standardized tests. We've been successful in involvement for the community and again, that's just us working together for the same common goal to get kids at involved" (Principal D5).

The pattern with schools "INI" status with NCLB was less clear. The schools that were INI were evenly split; half had principals with an internal sense of accountability and half had principals with an external sense of accountability, including three whose first accountability was to NCLB. These schools had been "INI" for different periods of time, including three (two principals), four (two principals), five (three principals), and seven or more (one principal) years, suggesting that simply getting the external label did not motivate a faculty to improve to the level that would allow a school to change status. Moreover, six of these principals had been in the school longer than it had been in "needs improvement" status, and the other two had been there for four years, so none of them were in the early stages of turning their schools around. In total,

	Achievement		Needs improvement status		Socioeconomic status	
	Low	High	No	Yes	Low	High

Table II.
Number of principals selecting primary source of accountability in demographic groups

Self	5	9	10	4	8	6
Educators	0	2	2	0	0	2
NCLB	3	0	0	3	2	1
Public	3	0	2	1	0	3
Superintendent/central office	1	2	3	0	0	3

17 principals were from schools that were not INI – i.e., had met proficiency targets for the past year or that were in warning status because they had only been in “need of improvement status” for one year. In total, 12 of these chose internal accountabilities first, including ten who selected themselves as their primary accountability.

Finally, we explored the relationship between SES and primary accountability. The one clear pattern was that most principals from low SES schools – eight of ten – reported that their primary accountability is to themselves. For instance, Principal B4 stated, “I think accountability is multilayered and I think that all of us are ultimately accountable to ourselves.” In contrast, principals in the 15 high SES schools identified greater variation in their conceptions. Internal accountability was strong for just over half (eight principals) who were driven to respond to themselves or their teachers while the other seven reacted to a variety of external sources of accountability.

Discussion

This discussion summarizes our major findings and then suggests conceptual, methodological, policy, and practice preparation implications.

Major findings

This interview study of principals from rich and poor schools and schools that varied in their student achievement suggest two important findings that deserve greater exploration. The most important finding from this research is that in spite of decades of increasing centralization of accountability for educational processes and outcomes, principals still felt accountable to themselves first. Being accountable to oneself meant that these principals had a moral code that guided their work. Clearly, one element of that code was the idea of personal integrity. Their decisions were grounded in a personal ethic of right and wrong and they could live with the decisions they made and the actions they took. Another element was that the principal supported the well-being of students. Well-being was defined broadly, including more than whether students were learning the formal curriculum or doing well on state tests, or other indicators covered by formal accountability measures. Principals were very concerned with the general welfare of their students, that their charges were safe, treated justly, and having a positive experience in school.

These principals were not immune to increasing external accountabilities. They talked about demands made by state and national testing regimes, the school district hierarchy, and the public among others, and they worked actively to address these accountabilities. However, many principals felt so many accountabilities and experienced them as either poorly aligned or conflicting that they needed guidance in reconciling these demands. Our finding that so many principals felt accountable to themselves first does not suggest that most principals felt substantial autonomy from external accountability. Rather, their personal code provided a way to reconcile the cross-pressures of conflicting external accountabilities. In contrast to principal agent theory which emphasizes the power of external accountability, these principals provide evidence for Begley’s (2006) view that ethics especially guide action in the face of high stakes pressures that are contradictory and contentious.

These interviews also give another view of the policy-based accountabilities principals face. Certainly, a few were especially worried about NCLB and state and federal accountability policies. In fact, when asked to elaborate on one accountability issue, many of them discussed challenges related to student assessment (Mayer, 2011).

Yet, other issues arose as well. The use of customer metaphors, and reports that

parents want their “kids to have a great experience” indicate that parents and the community often bring demands different from those generated by centralized governmental performance metrics. Similarly, changes in superintendent, and actions by higher levels’ of authority to discontinue a program or remove a person ensured that some principals attended primarily to their accountability to higher levels in the district. In sum, in spite of growing state and federal pressures, principals actually juggled many more external accountabilities than those stemming from policy. The quantity and divergence of these accountabilities is what encouraged many of them to develop their own moral responses.

The second finding is the association between internalized accountability and student achievement. Almost all the principals in high achieving schools – 11 of 13 – said their first accountability was internal (nine to themselves and two to their teachers). There are indications that these schools have especially collegial working relations among adults. However, while research on school effectiveness and professional learning communities both suggest that principals’ sense of accountability can contribute to student learning, our design does not throw much light on whether internal accountability contributed to student learning or student learning contributed to internal accountability.

Implications

These findings suggest conceptual, methodological, policy, and practical issues. The conceptual issue is that better ways of theorizing accountability are needed. Researchers rely heavily on principal agent theory which is especially useful for calculating the relative influence of the two parties in an influence relationship and guiding strategies a source of authority can use to increase influence, assuming a rational response from the agent. However, it does not help as much to identify how one agent deals with several sources of influence. Moreover, this economic approach to calculation does not adapt easily to moral accountability where the agent internalizes obligation. What is needed is a way to understand the personal judgments principals make to balance to conflicting accountabilities and the personal decisions principals make about what is the right thing, sometimes in the face of these accountabilities.

Two lines of theorizing will help address this problem. One works from the outside in by developing typologies of accountability. These have the advantage of identifying the several sources of accountability, but they mix sources and mechanisms of influence in ways that can be confusing and inconsistent. They are not comprehensive, nor do they help predict how agents make decisions among influences from several sources or integrate external and internal accountability. Finally, discussion in the academic disciplines may suggest greater differences between these types than is actually experienced by principals and others in the field. These principals all worked under the same formal arrangements but some used the language of political accountability – “I’m a public servant” – while others talked about economic accountability – “they are the customers” – to describe similar concerns and pressures coming from parents. The language reflected differences other than the pressures themselves. If accountability theories moving forward are to rest on a solid typology, that typology needs to make differences that are important to those held accountable while being trimmed of unnecessary distinctions.

The other approach is to work from the inside out by examining principals’ values and commitments. These principals’ references to living with themselves and “put[ting] the kids first” suggests that they had committed to do their work in a certain way. The committed person develops a voluntary, psychological bond that provides

identification with the object of commitment (Buchanan, 1974; Firestone and Pennell, 1993). The values these principals espouse – their strong focus on children, “doing the right thing,” and “servant leadership” – comes from such commitments. We need to know how principals form their values and commitments and use them to interpret the multitude of pressures they face and ultimately develop courses of action. The social psychological literature on organizational commitments can help a great deal in this regard. Closer to home, so can the research on ethical school leadership (Furman and Shields, 2005; Starratt, 1991).

Some methodological issues raised are basically measurement problems. For instance, we are still identifying ways to obtain information on multiple accountabilities. Shippo and White (2009) used the critical incident technique, asking principals to describe the multiple accountabilities influencing single decisions. The critical incident approach highlights conflicting accountabilities and provides less opportunity to describe internal accountability. The approach taken here allows internalized accountability more opportunity to appear, but it may encourage respondents to give socially acceptable responses. Other methodological issues reflect the interview method used. The most important is that the sample is limited. In total, 25 middle-school principals in one state is a better sample for understanding perceptions than for identifying broader patterns of distribution or suggesting causal connections.

The policy implication has to do with the limitations of centralizing policies over the last 40 or so years. Recently, this discussion has focussed on NCLB. Although that policy was supposed to set a high bar for all schools, the available literature suggests that its greatest impact – often negative – has been in those that did not meet proficiency targets. These negative effects range from a narrowed curriculum to principals’ loss of efficacy (Hamilton *et al.*, 2007; Daly *et al.*, 2011). This study reinforces the small body of work that suggests that NCLB’s influence is felt much more in some schools than others and points to potential benefits where a variety of external accountability mechanisms do not dominate principals’ perceptions. At the same time, it reinforces an older line of research suggesting that policy is not enough for school improvement. School leaders play a major role by interpreting state and federal policies in ways that influence local interpretation. Even with highly prescriptive policies reinforced by strong mandates, most schools face such a complex environment that principals must help teachers and others sort out what they need to do. Because of this complexity, principals inevitably rely on their personal code to reconcile conflicting accountabilities. They need to have well developed codes and understandings of how to carry out those codes to help teachers and others decide what those policies mean and how to deal with them.

The preservice and inservice implication of this research have to do with attention to ethics and developing a moral compass. These interviews highlight the limits of external accountability on principals’ thinking. While the overall accountability regimes principals face are growing, most principals seem to address the big issues of their work in one of two ways. First, some principals are guided by their own codes of conduct, the feeling that they can “look myself in the mirror and say, okay, I’m doing the best job that I possibly can.” The other – which was especially prominent in this study – is that principals are substantially influenced by external accountabilities, but those accountabilities are so poorly aligned that they provide limited guidance. Some find poorly aligned codes so ambiguous that they have to sort things out for themselves.

Either way principals face important choices about a wide range of problems raised by individual children, threats to valued programs, and how to raise test scores as well

as how to allocate their time among these issues. Where external accountabilities conflict or are secondary motivators, a well-developed ethical sense is imperative (Starratt, 1991; Murphy, 2005). One important task for both preparation programs and continuing professional development is to help principals develop that ethical sense. This means helping principals identify the ethical dilemmas they are likely to face, the alternatives between which they may have to choose and grounds for making those choices. It is important that professional preparation and continuing development programs attend to this issue systematically.

Notes

1. To avoid confusion between principals in principal-agent theory and principals in schools, we refer to the former as sources, as in sources of authority.
2. Each case was labeled according to their placement in one of four quadrants within Table I. Principals in low SES – lower than predicted achievement were identified with the prefix “A” while those who were low SES – higher than predicted achievement were given the prefix “B.” Principals who were high SES – lower than predicted achievement were given the prefix “C” and those who were high SES – higher than predicted achievement were given the prefix “D.”

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Appendix 1. Survey question asking respondents to prioritize accountability sources

Below is a list that represents things to which other principals have said they are held accountable. Please take a moment to review the list and rank the items in order of those things to which you feel Most Accountable (1) and Least Accountable (7)

- District/Central Office
- Parents
- State Testing/Adequate Yearly Progress
- Your Own Conscience
- Board of Education
- Teachers
- Other Principals

Appendix 2. Interview guide

- Subject number: N/A
- School number: N/A
- Number of years as principal of this school: XX
- Total years experience as principal: XX
- Total years of experience as a teacher: XX

I. Values and Beliefs

1. What is your highest priority as a school leader?
2. Who determines that priority? In other words, in what ways do others or other's expectations contribute to the priorities you hold as a school leader?
3. In your opinion, what matters most in schools?
4. Do you think politicians would agree with you? Parents? School board? Teachers?

II. Conceptions of Accountability

5. The following set of questions is focussed on exploring the different ways you feel held accountable as a school principal and what you do in response. (Select the highest rated items (1-2) indicated in the Multiple Accountability Ranking completed by the participant (refer to pre-interview survey).) Probe as needed to make sure that the following question are answered with specific descriptions.
- What does it mean to be held accountable (whatever the answer was)?
*PROBE for "What you feel accountable for?"
 - Why does this source of accountability rank higher than others in your list?
*PROBE for descriptions/examples
 - As a result, how do you respond to this form of accountability?
*PROBE for specific descriptions of behaviors, actions, responses with examples.
 - What happens if you are successful?
*PROBE for descriptions/examples
 - What happens if you are not?
*PROBE for descriptions/examples
 - In what ways does this source of accountability enable you to do things to support student achievement?
*PROBE for descriptions/examples
 - How does this source of accountability prevent you from supporting student achievement?
*PROBE for descriptions/examples
6. Of the possible sources of accountability discussed today or described in the pre-interview survey, are there any sources that conflict in your work as a principal. If so, describe how you interpret the multiple sources of accountability.
*Probe further for explanation/description of source.

III. Leader's conception of and response to problems

In your pre-interview survey, you were asked to rank order six problems in terms of how difficult they are to solve. You identified the following problem as the most difficult: (Cite problem). I would like to ask a series of questions related to how you might choose to solve this problem given the opportunity.

- How will you try to make sense of this problem?
- Sometimes problems can create opportunities, if this problem actually arose, in what terms would you view it?
- Who will you involve in solving this problem?
 - Community?
 - Central Office?
 - Teachers?
 - Students?
- What role does each (named group) play in solving this problem?
- What information will you use in solving the problem?
- How will each (named source of information) be used?
- What would you like to see change as a result of solving this problem?
- What would you hope your school learns as a result of solving a problem like this?

About the authors

Raymond A. Gonzalez is Superintendent in the Wayne New Jersey Public Schools. He received his doctorate from the Rutgers Graduate School of Education in 2011. In the last few years, he has

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served in a variety of administrative capacities – including Principal and Director of Data Analysis – for both urban and suburban New Jersey school districts. In those capacities, he has seen the first hand effects of changing accountability policies in different contexts. He is co-author of “Culture and processes affecting data use in school districts” that appeared in the 2007 NSSE Yearbook.

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William A. Firestone is Professor of Educational Leadership and Policy at the Rutgers Graduate School of Education. He has served as Vice-President of Division L of the American Educational Research Association and is a fellow of that association. His books include *The Ambiguity of Teaching to the Test* and *New Directions for Research in Educational Leadership*. William A. Firestone is the corresponding author and can be contacted at: william.firestone@gse.rutgers.edu

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