

School Psychology Leadership in Ethics and Professional Practice



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School psychology presents as a widely heterogeneous field. Upon completing a proscribed plan of study for certification of school psychology, there are a myriad of directions that one may pursue. These include working as school psychologists in public schools, private schools, and government settings or working as university trainers, engaging in higher education instruction and ongoing research (Fagan & Wise, 2007).

While the directions taken by school psychologists may vary with regard to occupational ends, there is also tremendous diversity within the various occupations. For example, a school psychologist in the public schools may be focusing on direct intervention with problematic behavior, spending the majority of their time in consultation with teachers and parents to help youth with varied challenges, spending time with individual evaluations to meet mandated eligibility guidelines, or working primarily within special education administrative frameworks (such as chairing IEP Team Meetings) (Fagan & Wise, 2007).

Within each of these specializations, there exists even further diversity. For example, for the school psychologist who primarily engages in assessment, they may follow a fixed framework for how the assessment is to be conducted, prescribed from an immediate supervisor. Another school psychologist who spends the same percentage of time within this framework may have more professional autonomy, carefully selecting each technique based on the referral concern. For the school psychologist who primarily engages in counseling, they may restrict their focus to counseling mandated in IEPs, focused on working with the student toward their

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individualized goals. The one with more professional autonomy may have some latitude to provide services for broader concerns, such as counseling students with anxiety or depression, regardless of whether or not they are identified with educational disabilities.

A common thread that unites all of these frameworks relates to the importance of following professional standards. Professional standards are a set of procedures and guidelines that may dictate or guide professional practice (National Association of School Psychologists, 2019). Some standards may present as a series of best practice guidelines, while others identify minimum mandates required for continuing practice and certification. For example, the National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) mandates adherence to their ethical principles in order for an individual to maintain their national certification (National Association of School Psychologists, 2020).

One topic that has not engendered a lot of study in the professional literature is the relationship of leadership to ethics. This chapter aims to identify how leadership skills and ethical and professional practice present a symbiotic relationship. That is, the nurturance of ethical and professional practice skills leads to a strengthening of leadership, while at the same time, the development of leadership skills leads to a fortification of ethical and professional practice skills. This chapter will briefly review some of the research behind leadership and ethics in school psychology. However, the focus will primarily be on how these two frameworks are intricately related. Finally, a case study will highlight how a school psychologist with stronger leadership skills may be more equipped with solving ethical dilemmas than one whose leadership skills are not as well developed.

1 Review of Leadership Skills

While much has been written on the subject of leadership, the role of leadership in the field of school psychology is more spartan (Augustyniak et al., 2016). Because leadership is the focus of this text, it will only be summarized briefly here. The focus of leadership here is distributive leadership. The literature has indicated that distributive leadership is stretching out of leadership among many individuals, rather than from a single, autonomous person (Harris, 2004; Spillane et al., 2004).

Such a framework has been evolving in schools. Rather than a hierarchical top-down framework where leaders cascade from a single point on down (think of a superintendent who oversees multiple administrators, who in turn oversees multiple staff), distributive leadership has several leaders within the institution, leading to a decentralized process (Harris, 2004).

School psychologists are in prime positions to assume roles of leadership if their working paradigms are conducive to this end. A school psychologist who is split among several buildings, completing evaluations in compliance with federal and state special education guidelines, will find themselves challenged to take on positions of leadership as their roles may relate more to legal compliance. However, for

the school psychologist who is working in a single building with manageable evaluation and counseling caseloads, they are in unique positions where leadership opportunities are significant. School psychologists are the only individuals in schools with unique skillsets not shared by any other professional. This includes assessment, academic intervention, social-emotional intervention, consultation, research, and expertise in special education law.

While this is discussed elsewhere in this text, it is important to highlight the types of leadership styles present. Transactional leadership relates itself to setting agreements and goals between those who provide direction and those who receive direction. Transformational leaders, on the other hand, work with others to create solutions to difficult problems; they are flexible within their approach and adapt to changing demands (Augustyniak et al., 2016; Bass et al., 2003).

Before leadership skills emerge, one should also consider one's competence to engage fully within their roles. Although there is little information in the literature about the interaction of leadership and competence, it is important to explore the relationship. Benner's (1984) stage model of competence, while used primarily in nursing, also has implications for the field of school psychology (Harvey & Struzziero, 2002; Jacob et al., 2016).

A review of Benner's (1984) model indicates that there are five stages to competence: novice, advanced-beginner, competent, proficient, and expert. At the novice level, the school psychologist relies on rules, doesn't look ahead, and may be dependent on the supervisor for direction. The advanced-beginner is focused on mastery of technical aspects, may start to observe recurring situations, and may be disconnected from the student as they are focused on the rules. The competent school psychologist is better able to see relationships, can balance skills and empathy, can start to appreciate the long-term effects of their actions, and engages in planning and goal setting. The proficient school psychologist recognizes patterns, no longer relies on rules, and can analyze and respond to small nuances of situations. Finally, the expert school psychologist uses past experiences to generate paradigms. They don't mind rapidly changing situations and see their skills as a transformation of self. Harvey and Struzziero (2002) note that not all school psychologists do not automatically reach this level. Some will remain at the level of competent or proficient for long periods of time. It makes sense, then, that those who have reached the level of "expert" within this field are the most equipped to be transformative leaders.

2 Ethics in School Psychology

The study of ethics in school psychology is relatively young. The first actual code of ethics in psychology was not present until 1953 (Armistead et al., 2011). Armistead et al. (2011) also highlight that it was not until 1974 that the first code of ethics appeared for school psychology in response to some of the ethical and legal issues that ensued.

Ethics in school psychology have continued to be revised and have seen several iterations (Armistead et al., 2011). The current ethical standards are within a framework of four ethical principles. They are as follows:

1. Respect and Dignity for All Persons
2. Professional Competence and Responsibility
3. Honesty and Integrity in Professional Relationships
4. Responsibility to Schools, Family, the Profession, and Society (Armistead et al., 2011; Jacob et al., 2016)

The four principles, or domains, each highlight important characteristics that permeate the profession of school psychology. Respect and Dignity for All Persons is largely about ensuring that all individuals are treated with respect and dignity, regardless of any circumstance (which not only includes their backgrounds but also respects the wishes of various individuals, such as consent for parents to intervene for their children.) Professional competence and responsibility are largely about ensuring that school psychologists have the appropriate skills to engage in the various components of their work. For example, all certified school psychologists have basic skills with cognitive, academic, and social-emotional assessment. However, not all school psychologists have had experience in administering such impairments with very young children, or who might present with a visual impairment. Honesty and Integrity in Professional Relationships relates to guidelines on how school psychologists respectfully work with other professionals. Finally, Responsibility to Schools, Family, the Profession, and Society relates to the conduct of school psychologists as it relates to their professional responsibilities and roles outside of school (such as supervision of graduate students, publications, etc.) (Armistead et al., 2011; National Association of School Psychologists, 2020).

The introduction to the Principles of Professional Ethics reviews the justification for the NASP Principles for Professional Ethics. Specifically, it indicates, “The purpose of the *Principles* is to protect the public and those who receive school psychological services by sensitizing school psychologists to the ethical aspects of their work, education them about appropriate conduct, helping them monitor their own behavior, and providing standards to be used in the resolution of complaints of unethical conduct” (National Association of School Psychologists, 2020, p. 39). As can be seen, the *Principles* are used as guidelines to help identify the expectations of conduct and provide a framework for decision-making for school psychologists.

3 School Psychology Ethics in the Context of Leadership

Although the *Principles* provide an overarching framework for appropriate school psychology conduct, the practice of ethics in school psychology may look different for professionals engaging in the basic practice of school psychology, compared to school psychologists who serve as leaders within their roles. One may see a school

psychology leader who not only follows the *Principles* but rather has a command of them. Knapp et al. (2017) focus on positive ethics. Knapp et al. (2017) contrast a floor approach of ethics to an aspirational approach. A floor approach is exclusively related to following laws and standards in a way that protects the public (e.g., do no harm.) However, aspirational approaches based on positive ethics relate to striving to do the right thing. For example, instead of avoiding engaging in poor practices (e.g., violating confidentiality), striving toward the highest of aspirational positive practices (e.g., creating a therapeutic relationship where a client not only knows the school psychologist will not violate confidentiality but creates an atmosphere of acceptance both within the office and within the school system) represents a more advanced level of practice. The school psychologist who is able to approach the practice from a perspective of positive ethics may be more able to engage in a role of transformative leadership, compared to the school psychologist who only utilizes a floor approach.

As noted earlier in the stage model for competence (Benner, 1984; Harvey & Struzziro, 2002), there are changes that occur as one becomes more competent in their work. Novices and advance-beginners are more rule-governed, whereas proficient and expert school psychologists quickly pick up on patterns and apply these toward quickly, yet systematically engaging in professional decision-making. Those who have achieved proficient and expert levels of competence are the ones who may not only create structures to streamline the mandated components of their work but also help to influence systems-level structures that lead to benefits for school students, parents, staff, and administration.

Taken together, it is truly the expert school psychologist, who espouses positive ethics, who is well-equipped to utilize the *Principles* within a leadership capacity. The expert school psychologist not only is knowledgeable about the *Principles* but knows how to quickly and effectively utilize them in complex situations. Furthermore, by applying the *Principles* beyond the floor approach toward an aspirational approach, expert school psychologists can not only solve complex ethical dilemmas for singular cases but also work within a leadership capacity to help effect systems changes.

So how might the application of the *Principles* look different between school psychology practitioners vs. transformational leaders? Let's look at one of the standards. Standard I.2.4 under the broad principle of privacy and confidentiality indicates "School psychologists discuss and/or release confidential information only for professional purposes and only with persons who have a legitimate need to know. They do so within the strict boundaries of relevant privacy statutes" (National Association of School Psychologists, 2020, p. 44). A new or even a competent-level practitioner may look at this standard and work to maintain due diligence in not releasing confidential information. A school psychology leader may take this standard and provide specific examples to other district school psychologists and provide specific strategies about how to safeguard confidentiality. Another example may be the school psychology leader who reviews the importance of confidentiality with *all building staff* and provides reasons as to why practicing confidentiality is of professional importance and how to avoid common pitfalls with breaking the release

of confidential information (such as sharing this information in the staff room.) Following the minimum standards, one quietly maintains confidential information. Following positive ethics in a way that emphasizes excellence, one applies the standard in a very thoughtful way and explains this to others. This would relate to transformational leadership if others change their practices as a result. In summary, the transformational leader looks beyond simple protection of the public by gaining consent but instead thoughtfully applies the *Principles* in a way that works well not only for individual students but for school systems as well.

4 Case Study Highlighting Transformational Leadership

This case study reviews two school psychologists, Chris and Jamie. Chris is a competent school psychologist. He has been working for 5 years in an elementary school and believes he can do the job well. He listens to his administrators, completes his evaluations on time, works with a couple of students individually, and sits on one or two committees. Jamie is an expert school psychologist who has also been working for 5 years. She is often approached for difficult situations. She is recruited to sit on many committees, given her ability to analyze situations. She has advocated for paperwork reduction and expanding the role of the school psychologist by helping to create a Multi-Tiered System of Support at various tiers for both academics and behaviors.

This case study will review how Chris and Jamie each seek to problem-solve the behaviors of Bobby, a new entrant to the third grade. This is Bobby's fourth school within 2 years. He was retained in first grade. His records indicate that he is showing significant academic delays, but schools have not been able to utilize a Response to Intervention framework with enough fidelity before he moves again. Bobby does well for the first 3 days of school but then begins to show more behavioral difficulties. At first, they are minor, with refusals to do work. Within 2 weeks, he insists on using the iPad and attempts to remove the iPad that led him to start yelling, throwing objects (including the iPad), and spitting at those who come near him. Parents have started calling the principal, who approaches the school psychologist, asking what can be done? The exasperated teacher starts complaining about Bobby in the teacher's lounge, and, before too long, each adult (and most students) become quickly aware of Bobby. When the school psychologist enters the classroom for any reason at all, the students quickly point at Bobby and say, "He's over there!" Bobby's mother is difficult to reach. When she picks him up from being suspended, she pulls him by the arm and says, "You're gonna get me fired again...let's go!"

How Chris Responds to This Situation Chris, a competent school psychologist, attempts to find ways to manage Bobby's behavior. Although other schools have not engaged in evaluation yet, Chris decides to start there to see if he can get some more information about Bobby...preferably before he leaves again. He gets a consent for evaluation signed and does the mandatory social history. Chris learns that Bobby's

father is incarcerated for repeated domestic violence and that Bobby's parents have an eighth-grade education. This helps Chris understand Bobby better, but Chris won't broadcast this publicly to others; after all, Standard I.2.1 says school psychologists "do not seek or store private information about clients that is not needed in the provision of services" (National Association of School Psychologists, 2020, p. 43).

Attempting to help Bobby's behavior, Chris tries to put a behavior plan into place. Chris knows Bobby likes the iPad; after all, he always requests it. He creates a behavioral chart, and he and the teacher agree if he gets all smiley faces in a given day, he can have 10 minutes on the iPad at the end of the day. Bobby is successful on the first day and Chris is relieved that a solution has been found. However, after the first day, not only is Bobby unsuccessful the following day but becomes extremely angered after the first frown face and is more destructive than before.

Chris is able to build a relationship with Bobby as he works better in one-on-one situations. Chris works as a competent school psychologist and is able to get Bobby to complete the evaluation. On the WISC-V, Bobby has a verbal standard score of 89 (23rd percentile), a visual spatial standard score of 92 (30th percentile), a fluid reasoning standard score of 81 (10th percentile), a working memory standard score of 78 (7th percentile), and a processing speed standard score of 77 (6th percentile). His full-scale IQ is an 83 (13th percentile). On the WIAT-III, Bobby receives standard scores in the low 70s in reading and spelling and the low 80s on math and written expression. The BASC-3 has elevations on the aggression, hyperactivity, conduct problems, and depression scales on the teacher scale and elevations on all scales on the parent scales. Chris makes the argument with his director that he qualifies as a student with a learning disability in reading and makes a recommendation for special education services in a self-contained therapeutic setting. While he cannot justify an emotional disturbance because his behavior seems to be in control (after all, he earned the iPad on the first day), he knows this child isn't safe for the classroom, has not responded to a behavior plan, and requires a safe environment that will help with both his learning disability and his behavior problems.

How Jamie Responds to This Situation Jamie looks at this situation and sees multiple layers of problems. First, she knows that Bobby has tremendous behavior concerns that require immediate addressing. Second, she sees systemic problems as well. This student has been alienated by the teachers, students, his mother, and administration. She realizes Bobby has little connection with anyone and the environment is immediately toxic. She knows that she needs to engage on a multi-pronged approach. She begins to work on a systems-level intervention and a classroom intervention. Jamie does suspect a disability and does want to get moving on an individual evaluation as well. She knows she has 60 days to complete the evaluation and that will hopefully be just enough time to put some other levels of support into play before he moves again.

Jamie quickly gathers the social history. She learns that Bobby's father is incarcerated for domestic violence and that Bobby's parents have an eighth-grade

education. Jamie also recognizes as stressed as Bobby's mother is, she is also his biggest expert. She asks him what are things he likes? Bobby's mother smiles and says, "Legos!" Upon further elaboration, Jamie learns that whenever she takes her son to the store, that's all he wants. Jamie did ask his mother about the iPad. Bobby's mother said that whenever he gets ticked off, he goes into another room with their tablet. She knows he should not be on screens for too long, but she needs the break.

Jamie thinks about many of the ethical principles. She thinks about standard I.3.3, specifically school psychologists "take steps to foster a school climate that is supportive, inclusive, safe, accepting, and respectful toward all persons (National Association of School Psychologists, 2020, p. 44). She also thinks about Standard III.3.1 that school psychologists "cooperate with other psychologists and professionals from other disciplines in relationships based on mutual respect. They encourage and support the use of all resources to serve the interests of students" (National Association of School Psychologists, 2020, p. 51). Jamie knows her work is not just with Bobby; it's with the school.

Jamie knows she has much to do. She knows under ethical standard I.2.1 that she must be careful about confidential information (National Association of School Psychologists, 2020). She tells the teacher that Bobby has gone through a lot in his short life. The teacher asks if she can better understand. Jamie says she's not at liberty to share that information, but says, "Your other students are fortunate that they haven't had the same experiences." Bobby's teacher finds Bobby exasperating but, thinking about what he might be dealing with on a daily basis, has a great deal of compassion for him. She tells Jamie, "I understand, but what can I do?" Jamie says she is working on it.

Jamie then asks the principal if there is an adult who can briefly work in Bobby's classroom for a few weeks. Jamie's principal knows resources are scarce but briefly transfers a teaching aide from a classroom for a few weeks. Jamie knows she will take data for a functional behavioral assessment but knows she cannot stay in there all the time. She trains the aide how to record data. Jamie then creates a spot in the classroom where Bobby can go if he gets upset. She lets the aide know that if he is getting angry, to allow Bobby to go into the break space for 8 minutes.

Jamie decides to purchase Lego toys and shows them to Bobby. Bobby is excited and creates something for Jamie. Jamie asks if Bobby would like to go to her room at the end of each day to play with the Lego toys. Bobby seems excited. Jamie lets Bobby know that if he keeps himself and others safe each day, he can have 15 minutes with the Lego toys. He only has to go into his break space if he is upset. Bobby is willing to give it a try.

Jamie realizes she is not done; there is a school climate issue to address. She asks the principal for 15 minutes in the next faculty meeting. She reviews what it means to give students their dignity. She acknowledges that it's hard to work in schools where students have behavioral difficulties. She indicates that it's these students who often have the toughest home lives. They go home without definitive meals, where parents are overworked, or who have significant mental health challenges, which makes parenting a very difficult task. Jamie mentions that gossip in the staff room not only violates the child's right to privacy but actually works to create a

more toxic culture. She suggests that teachers lean on each other for support but in a way that frames the work as important but difficult, rather than engage in child blaming. Jamie looks around the room and sees many heads nodding, except for Mrs. Pringle, the fifth-grade teacher, who is rolling her eyes. Jamie thinks to herself, “Her retirement at the end of this year cannot come quickly enough.” She knows she has helped to change the perspective on Bobby without mentioning his name and hopefully has helped to create a more effective climate.

Jamie does the evaluation. On the WISC-V, Bobby has a verbal standard score of 89 (23rd percentile), a visual spatial standard score of 92 (30th percentile), a fluid reasoning standard score of 81 (10th percentile), a working memory standard score of 78 (7th percentile), and a processing speed standard score of 77 (6th percentile). His full-scale IQ is an 83 (13th percentile). On the WIAT-III, Bobby receives standard scores in the low 70s in reading and spelling and the low 80s on math and written expression. The BASC-3 has elevations on the aggression, hyperactivity, conduct problems, and depression scales on the teacher scale and elevations on all scales on the parent scales. The conclusion is that Bobby has a learning disability. Jamie works to fold in support at school for both his learning concerns as well as his behavioral concerns. The Functional Behavioral Assessment revealed that Jamie is most likely to act out when asked to do any type of academic task, either one he excels at or one where he has difficulty. The Behavior Intervention Plan indicates that Bobby can have time with Lego toys or the iPad in his break space for 5 minutes when he completes an activity. The teacher nearly protested; after all, the other students don’t get to do this. Then the teacher remembered that other students go home to safe environments where their basic needs are met. Bobby still has outbursts. Sometimes they are still very challenging, but they are not as often.

As can be seen from the case study, both school psychologists engaged in the practice of school psychology. Both also used the NASP Principles for Professional Ethics to help guide their decisions. However, it was Jamie’s work applying the ethics toward her system that made her a transformational leader. Others saw her as a place for answers and also placed within her a degree of trust given her skills. Her expertise allowed her to quickly identify the various dimensions that were unique to this case (the toxic climate, Bobby’s home situation, Bobby’s social and emotional challenges, Bobby’s learning challenges, and Bobby’s strengths) and to coordinate a multi-pronged approach utilizing a systems application of the *Principles*. School psychologists who are experts within their field and have a strong knowledge and ability to apply the *Principles* are well suited to be transformational leaders within school systems.

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