

School Leaders' Ethical Decision-making Related to Student Cyberbullying: A Multi-
case Study of Two Tennessee School Districts

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DEDICATION

To my husband, Sonny, my children, Donald and Krista, and my parents, John and Joann Murphy: You have encouraged and supported me to pursue excellence in my educational journey over the years. I appreciate your patience as I spent many hours dedicated to this endeavor. I could not have accomplished this goal without your support. I love all of you.

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ABSTRACT

This multi-case study was designed to explore cyberbullying issues and how school leaders handle student issues related to cyberbullying. I explored how ethical decisions related to student cyberbullying are processed within two school districts in Tennessee. Furthermore, understanding how districts implement and interpret Tennessee Bullying and Harassment Policies helps in exploring school leaders' ethical decision-making process regarding student cyberbullying. Shapiro and Stefkovich's (2021) multiple ethical paradigms, care, critique, justice, and the profession, provided a comprehensive framework for analyzing how school leaders process complex 21st-century ethical decisions related to student-centered cyberbullying issues. A multi-case study supports the research questions by purposeful sampling of middle and high school principals, assistant principals, and district leaders in two Tennessee school districts. The findings focused on school leaders' experiences related to the complexities of investigating cyberbullying cases, supporting the students involved, and the district and school leaders providing adequate training to their staff, students, and parents. School leaders' ethical decision-making was influenced by their adherence to their district's bullying and harassment policies and the consistent theme throughout of focus on the student's best interests.

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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

Educational leaders wrestle with difficult decisions daily (Hoy et al., 2006; Mahfouz, 2018; Pijanowski, 2017; Wells, 2013). Research studies document the moral complexities of ethical decisions education leaders face and the approaches used in solving dilemmas (Eyal et al., 2015; Frick et al., 2013). Shapiro and Stefkovich (2021) note Foster's (1986) quote on the seriousness of ethics in education, "Each administrative decision carries with it a restructuring of human life: that is why administration at its heart is the resolution of moral dilemmas" (p. 33). The emphasis on ethical leadership and management viewpoints has promoted the significance of values, morals, and ethics of school leaders' decision-making (Frick, 2009; Pijanowski, 2017; Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2021; Starratt, 1991). School leaders are expected to make ethical decisions and respond to various stressful situations throughout the school year (Frick et al., 2013; Pijanowski, 2017). *Professional Standards for Educational Leaders Standard 2* (PSEL, 2015) highlights the ethical significance of an educational leader's competencies. The importance of educational leaders understanding their personal and professional values related to their ethical decisions has been documented (Langlois et al., 2010; Shapiro and Stefkovich, 2021; Starratt, 1991). The National Policy Board for Educational Administration (2002a) guides educational leaders to work with diverse groups, integrate ideas, cultivate patience and perspective, exercise wisdom, and be sensitive to other cultures. It also requires educational leaders to cultivate personal values that help them to incorporate ethical elements into their decision-making.

School leaders face complex ethical decisions in today's school climate (Cherkowski et al., 2015; Frick et al., 2013; Pijanowski, 2017; Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2021). Likewise, student-related ethical decisions reflect some of the most complex, especially those dealing with today's newest issues concerning technology use in and out of the classroom (Young et al., 2017).

School leaders not only need an understanding of instructional leadership and learning but also must focus on technology leadership and the new policies related to digital citizenship (Baydar, 2022). Within these school digital citizenship policies, school leaders must enforce student-centered initiatives concerning cyberbullying involving “repeated, intentional aggression that occurs via digital channels, such as cell phones or social media platforms” (Young et al., 2017, p. 476). Student psychological issues related to cyberbullying can result in confidence issues, depression, anxiety issues, and sometimes suicide (Desmet et al., 2015). Navigating these complex situations requires principals to not only understand digital citizenship policies but also to understand how to navigate the delicate ethical dilemmas related to 21st-century student-centered cyberbullying issues.

Cyberbullying has arisen at the top of discipline issues in today’s schools (Desmet, 2015; NCES, 2022; Young et al., 2017). Schools across the U.S. have been grappling with this new type of bullying over the past twenty years and continue to report the complexities surrounding student cyberbullying and the investigations involved in their schools (Desmet et al., 2015; Dey, 2015; Hvidston et al., 2013). Hence, school leaders have a distinct responsibility in addressing cyberbullying as it relates to bullying and harassment. The complexities related to unraveling the circumstances of cyberbullying fill a school administrator’s schedule with procedures required by state and district bullying and harassment laws and policies (Young et al., 2017). State laws have tasked these leaders to carry out strict bullying and harassment policies. Hence, principals must uphold the highest ethical standards required not only by the strict state and district policies, but their professional standards and personal values bind them to providing a tapestry of ethical solutions that support and protect all stakeholders, especially the students they serve (Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2021; PSEL, 2015; TILS, 2018).

Background to the Study

Cyberbullying in the United States

NCES Data 2019–20 reflects that one of the most frequently occurring discipline problems reported by public schools is student bullying and cyberbullying. The report stated, "Sixteen percent of public schools reported that cyberbullying occurred among students at least once a week" (NCES, 2022, p. 2). According to Patchin (2022), 45.5% of middle and high school students nationwide reported being the target of cyberbullying. Furthermore, cyberbullying differed according to school characteristics in 2019–20. NCES reported, "Higher percentages of middle schools (33%) and secondary/high schools (29%) than of combined/other schools (10%) and elementary schools (7%) reported cyberbullying among students" (NCES, 2022, p. 6). Economic factors also affected cyberbullying statistics.

Specifically, the percentage of public schools reporting cyberbullying was lower for those where 25 percent or less of the students were eligible for free or reduced-price lunch (13%) than for those where 26 to 50% of the students (17%) and 51 to 75% of the students (19%) were eligible for free or reduced-price lunch. (NCES, 2022, p. 12) Hence, researchers emphasized that cyberbullying affects all public school students, but middle and high schools reported higher instances of student cyberbullying than elementary schools (NCES, 2022).

In the early 1990's when researchers began studying bullying, few states in the United States (US) had anti-bullying laws. Today, every state has a bullying law or policy, even though no federal policy is explicit to bullying (Hinduja and Patchin, 2023). However, other federal laws, such as Title IX, civil rights, and anti-discrimination laws, safeguard individuals who have historically faced harassment and discrimination (Cornell & Limber, 2015). The researchers

further reflect that schools may be in violation of these federal laws when bullying is based on race or ethnicity, color, national origin, religion, disability, or sex, which includes sexual orientation and gender identity. Furthermore, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) provides specific support for students when bullying interferes with their educational environment while receiving a free and appropriate public education (Cornell & Limber, 2015).

Cyberbullying in Tennessee

Tennessee Department of Education (TDOE) Bullying and Harassment District Data Reports (2022) reflect that cyberbullying represented 14% of confirmed cases in 2018-19, 19.3 % in 2019-20, and 27.7% of bullying cases in 2020-21, and 21.2% of confirmed cases in 2021-22. TDOE Civil Rights and Bullying Compliance Reports (2023) provides summary totals of for districts and percentages related to reported, confirmed cases and category information specifying what percentages of cases were traditional bullying and cyberbullying, bullying using an electronic device.

Specifically, school leaders today face complex issues related to student technology use in and out of the school setting (Young et al., 2017). According to state guidelines, special care must be provided to protect students' rights while enforcing state discipline policies and guidelines (TDOE, 2023). To assist school leaders, Tennessee's Department of Education in Compliance with Tenn. Code Ann. § 49-6-4501-4506 (2023) provides a comprehensive policy and procedure for school districts and school leaders to identify, investigate, and address the sensitive and complex issues of bullying and harassment in Tennessee's public schools. School leaders follow strict district policies that are governed by state laws in protecting and providing support for K-12 public school students. Today's school leaders are required to exemplify ethical standards included in the Tennessee Instructional Leadership Standards (TILS, 2018).

Tenn. Code Ann. § 49-6-4501 (1) (2023) states, “a safe and civil environment is necessary for students to learn and achieve high academic standards”. Tennessee has specific laws requiring school districts to implement and enforce policies related to student cyberbullying based on Tenn. Code Ann. §§ 49-6-4501- 4506 (2023). According to Tenn. Code Ann. § 49-6-4503 (2023), Tennessee school districts must adopt a policy prohibiting harassment, intimidation, bullying, or cyberbullying by the school district. The district policy should include a statement of prohibition, definitions, expected student behavior, consequences, investigation, reporting and response procedures, a prohibition of reprisal, a publication of policy, staff responsibility, the discouragement of inappropriate reporting of a student, and a procedure for counselor referral. Furthermore, staff and teachers must receive appropriate bullying and harassment investigation and prevention training, and students and parents must be educated on the policy and issues related to bullying prevention strategies. Additionally, schools must report the incidents to Tennessee’s Department of Education, including the date of reporting, number of incidents, type of cases, and whether cases were not reported within the appropriate time frame. Then, Tennessee’s Department of Education must submit an annual report to the legislative education committees, including the information submitted from the school districts. Specific requirements are noted in the policy regarding a school principal's responsibilities. A principal must investigate the incident when a student reports a threat of physical harm, inform the parent immediately, and report the findings along with disciplinary action to the director of school and chair of the board of education (Tenn. Code Ann. § 49-6-4503, 2023).

Statement of the Problem

Cyberbullying is a complex multi-faceted ethical issue for today’s school leader.

New technologies used in a K-12 learning environment are being developed rapidly. (Young et al., 2017). Furthermore, cyberbullying policies and new digital citizenship policies reflect the complicated issues surrounding the rapid advancement of technology. Hence, principals must stay current on the latest learning and social applications affecting their students (Styron et al., 2016). Researchers reflect that principals' self-efficacy was low when handling cyberbullying as related to knowledge of social media applications and recognizing cyberbullying (Desmet et al., 2015; Purdy et al., 2015). Social media use among younger students evolves so rapidly that even younger educators perceive a digital gap (Styron et al., 2016). Due to the widespread use of technology, schools today have adopted technology initiatives, including laptops for all students (Castile & Harris, 2014). Consequently, researchers document that increased use of laptops and mobile phones for student learning, and personal use of these devices cause principals to face the problem of student dependency and discipline issues, such as cyberbullying (Hester et al., 2014; Green et al., 2017).

School leaders face complex situations related to cyberbullying (Cook et al., 2017; Corcoran & McGuckin, 2014; Desmet et al., 2015; Hester & Fenn, 2014). Principals' monitoring of student cyber activity related to undesirable cyberspace behavior poses difficulty due to the complex investigation process and stresses the need for clear guidance on responding to a disclosure of student cyberbullying (Corcoran & McGuckin, 2014; Hester & Fenn, 2014). Understanding how to sufficiently document the details of the incident and appropriately follow through with support and disciplinary actions is necessary for the school district to guide principals (Corcoran & McGuckin, 2014; Cook et al., 2017). In addition, researchers reflect confusion regarding principal responsibility due to blurred lines between family and school since most cyberbullying happens off campus (Desmet et al., 2015; Hester & Fenn, 2014).

Principals' limited understanding of communication technology and the complicated cyberbullying policies influence their ability to adequately respond to student cyberbullying issues (Green et al., 2017; Purdy et al., 2015) and demanding ethical situations. Shapiro and Stefkovich (2021) further reflect that the rapid advancement of technology data has added to problems affecting the entire school community with technology issues like cyberbullying. "Students' mental, emotional, and physical states can be affected by exposure to the public, diminution of privacy, public shaming, sexting, and cyberbullying can result in loss of confidence, depression, anxiety, and sometimes suicide" (p. 220). Hence, principals must systematically address this sensitive issue using an ethical decision-making process (Shapiro and Stefkovich, 2021). Educational leaders' training and professional educational leaders' standards emphasize ethical behavior and equitable decision-making skills (Langlois & LaPointe, 2010; Pijanowski, 2017). Furthermore, ethics poses a more complex lens for values since they are often culturally exclusive when applied to a diverse society (Begley & Stefkovich, 2007). Principals understanding of cyberbullying technology, complex policies, and the means to process these difficult ethical decisions would help promote principals' self-efficacy in solving these 21st-century discipline issues. Understanding the role of the principal in dealing with cyberbullying that affects student learning yet happens outside of the school on a mobile device represents a complicated ethical situation.

Theoretical Framework

I used Shapiro and Stefkovich's (2021) multiple ethical paradigms as the framework for this research study. Shapiro and Stefkovich's (2021) ethic of the profession, along with Starratt's (1991) ethic of care, critique, and justice, comprise the multiple ethical paradigms used as the lens in my study to examine school leaders' ethical decisions. The ethic of the profession

incorporates Starratt's ethical frames yet goes beyond to incorporate the expectations of an educational leader's profession, community, and student's best interest. This multiple ethical framework provides a comprehensive structure for processing complex 21st-century ethical decisions related to student-centered cyberbullying issues. The ethic of justice asks questions about the rule of law and emphasizes fairness, equity, and justice concepts. It forms the bedrock for legal principles and values. The ethic of critique evaluates or "critiques" the laws and policies included in the ethic of justice. The ethic of care approaches ethical dilemmas as a way for educators to help students in meeting their needs and wishes, which shows a concern for others in decision-making. Finally, Shapiro and Stefkovich (2021) reflect that the ethic of the profession expects leaders to develop and examine their personal values through the lens of their professional codes of ethics and standards set forth by their profession, such as the Professional Standards for Educational Leaders (PSEL, 2015). The PSEL keeps the student as the focus of the ethical decision-making process while considering the community's wishes (Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2021).

The four frames work together to help educational leaders in their decision-making process. Starratt (1991) proposed that the ethics of justice, care, and critique complement each other and are woven together like a tapestry. He explains this by reflecting various themes related to each ethic:

- (a) justice themes – participation, equal access, due process, policy formation & implementation, assessment, rights, responsibilities, resource allocation, (b) critique themes – hierarchy, privilege, power, class distinctions & distortions, definitions, the culture of silence and domination, (c) care themes – quality of life, cultural

enrichment individuality, loyalty, human-potential, human dignity, empowerment, and environment" (p 198).

These themes are compatible and can be combined in a more comprehensive and ethical perspective to make decisions. Shapiro and Stefkovich (2021) agree with Starratt's three ethical frames but believe that another frame, the ethic of the profession, is needed to consider moral characteristics specific to the profession of education. The authors express that the themes to consider for the ethic of the profession are related to professional, personal, and community codes and standards, with the student's best interests being at the center of all decisions.

Researchers describe the use of Shapiro and Stefkovich's (2021) in a school setting.

Furthermore, the research related to principals and student cyberbullying has documented the use of these ethical concepts within school leaders' experiences related to student cyberbullying.

Ethic of Justice

The ethic of justice asks questions related to the rule of law and emphasizes fairness, equity, and justice concepts. Shapiro and Stefkovich (2021) reflect that it serves as a foundation for legal principles and ideals and suggest the concepts for a question that might be asked when considering the ethic of justice is: What law, right, or policy relates to a case, and should it be enforced? Sergiovanni (1992) called for the ethic of justice to establish virtuous schools.

Kohlberg (1981) stated, "Justice is not a rule or set of rules, it is a moral principle, a mode of choosing that is universal, a rule of choosing that we want people to adopt always in all situations" (p. 40). Frick et al. (2013) describe the ethic of justice as a "civic ethic," believing that all persons have the capacity for fairness and "the ability to conceptualize their own good" (p. 213). School leaders' protection of students' rights falls within this ethic, which provides a

lens for interpreting educational policies using equality and equity to provide fair decision-making.

Pennell et al. (2020) reflects that school leaders strive to implement fair and just practices by calling for the least restrictive discipline measures, stating, “it is more important to educate youth about the consequences of their actions; that emphasis must be given to the interests of youth who offend as well as those who are victims” (p.831). School leaders worldwide are required to enforce bullying and harassment policies that provide guidelines for fair and just practices in dealing with student cyberbullying (Cocoran & McGuckin, 2014; Castile & Harris, 2014; Styron et al., 2016). Proper training at the district and school level promotes a clear understanding of the mandated policies to provide practices of equal treatment for all students (Castile & Harris, 2014; Young et al., 2017). School leaders must wrestle with whether restorative practices between the victim and bully should be implemented (Aziz & Amin, 2020).

Ethic of Critique

The ethic of critique examines through a critical lens the laws and policies included in the ethic of justice. Scholars challenge the norm and seek an ethic that reveals inconsistencies, asks difficult questions, and debates challenging issues. It is based on critical theory, which awakens educators to inequities in society and schools. Tough questions are asked regarding areas of difference such as social class, race, gender. A question that might be asked when considering the ethic of justice: Are the laws just?

Cyberbullying occurs among all demographics of students, but statistics note that students with disabilities and other minorities experience cyberbullying at increased levels in middle and high schools (Cook et al., 2017). These situations are classified as harassment and require the intervention of outside services to protect the students involved. In these cases, school

leaders must report these harassment issues to their district and allow the district to take over the investigation (Patchin & Hinduja, 2023; Shariff, 2015). A critical lens is needed in these circumstances to assess how students can be educated to prevent these student classes' social injustice and discrimination (Castile & Harris, 2014; Hester & Finn, 2014). School leaders must determine their values and biases as they deal with and address these sensitive issues. Stakeholders look to school leaders as the moral and ethical modelers for social justice and equality-based leadership (Frick, 2009)

Ethic of Care

Gilligan (1982) contradicted Kohlberg's resolution of moral dilemmas and noted that women turn to care and concern to find answers to moral dilemmas. The ethic of care approaches ethical dilemmas as a way for educators to aid students in meeting their needs, which demonstrate solutions that show a concern for others in decision-making (Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2021). It also asks us to wrestle with loyalty and trust and a person's dignity and worth. School leaders using this moral perspective focus on relationships with stakeholders from a position of unconditional positive regard, deep respect, and empathy (Frick et al., 2013). Furthermore, Noddings (1992) reflects that “caring is the very bedrock of all successful education” (p. 27). Encouraging collaboration between faculty, staff, and students emphasizes a philosophy of care by focusing on relationships and connections with others (Beck, 1994). This ethic asks the staff to reflect on the consequences of their decisions and promotes dialogue between staff and students in resolving complex ethical situations (Shapiro and Stefkovich, 2021).

The ethic of care readily applies to the complex situations related to student cyberbullying. Research studies revealed that secondary school leaders applied care principles to cyberbullying situations involving counseling and other support for the victim and the bully

(Desmet et al., 2015; Pennell et al., 2020). Additionally, Pennell et al. (2020) expressed the need for schools to provide an environment of care and safety for cyberbullying victims to protect the victim from future cyberbullying incidents. Service providers, including counselors, school leaders, and teachers, are important in providing a caring environment for students and are integral to anti-bullying training and student interventions, which create healthy relationships and minimize cyberbullying risks (Cook, 2017). Furthermore, care for the victim includes protection by providing a safe school environment, which could include moving the victim to another class or school (Hvidston et al., 2013). Care for the victim could be impeded by the inaction of the school leader (Hvidston et al., 2013).

Ethic of the Profession

The ethic of the profession (Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2021) expects educational leaders to consider their own personal values in relationship to their professional codes of ethics and standards set forth by their profession, such as Professional Standards for Educational Leaders (PSEL, 2015). It asks them to consider the community's wishes while keeping the student at the core of the ethical decision-making process (Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2021). Additionally, understanding their values is critical to principals' ethical decision-making (Baron, 2016). When making wise choices in ethical decision-making, one's values represent a foundational aspect of the decisions or choices the leader will make. Approaching a situation from a perspective of positive, moral values will ground the leader in making choices that will be in a more equitable manner. Educational leaders' training and professional educational leaders' standards emphasize ethical behavior and equitable decision-making skills (Langlois & LaPointe, 2010; Pijanowski, 2017). The self-reflective principles and understanding of one's values enhance a leader's ability to process complex ethical dilemmas through a non-judgmental lens with the opportunity to

explore multiple choices from various contexts (Brown & Ryan, 2003, Langer & Moldoveanu, 2000). Furthermore, ethics poses a more complex lens for values since they are often culturally exclusive when applied to a diverse society (Begley & Stefkovich, 2007). Therefore, educational leaders need to reflect on their deeply held values to understand the motivational basis (Frick, 2009) for their values.

Cyberbullying situations within a school setting require principals to rely heavily on the professional codes expected of them and their own values to sort through these complex student issues (Desmet et al., 2015; Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2021; Young et al., 2017). District policies provide a detailed guide for principals to follow and responsibly enforce the discipline and support procedures while ensuring all staff acts in the student's best interest. The complexity of student cyberbullying often places a strain on principals and staff due to the functionality of the applications used, which allow students to hide various aspects of the investigation, including the identity of the bully (Desmet et al., 2015; Shariff, 2015; Young et al., 2017). Furthermore, investigations take an extensive amount of the school leaders' time due to the detailed and comprehensive guidelines outlined in the bullying and harassment policies (Hinduja and Patchin, 2023; TDOE, 2023).

Theoretical Framework Overview Summary

In conclusion, Shapiro and Stefkovich's (2021) multiple ethical paradigms enhance this study's purpose by emphasizing principals' processes in their ethical decision-making regarding student cyberbullying. The ethic of justice promotes a principal's fairness when evaluating the situation related to cyberbullying discipline measures for students involved in cyberbullying. Critiquing the policies and evaluating the process in detail supports using the critique frame. Furthermore, emphasizing student care of the victim and perpetrator(s) creates an atmosphere of

student and stakeholder trust (Young et al., 2017) and promotes the ethic of care. Finally, the ethic of the profession combines Starratt's (1991) three ethics while emphasizing the principal's professional and personal ethics in promoting the student's best interest and leaning on additional stakeholder support such as parents, staff, and district.

School leaders striving to make ethical decisions within educational settings require ethical codes unique to the professions to complete the tapestry and enhance a leader's decision-making. Educational leaders use these four ethical frames to enhance their decision-making process and comprehensively assess complex ethical dilemmas. Looking at school leaders' cyberbullying experiences through Shapiro and Stefkovich's (2021) multiple ethical paradigms including their ethic of the profession and Starratt's (1991) ethics of care, critique, and justice provided a comprehensive lens to reflect on their experiences related to student cyberbullying. School leaders should exhibit the highest moral engagement level while following the policies and procedures outlined in their district (Langlois and Lapointe, 2013; Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2021; StopBullying.gov, 2018). Stakeholders trust school leaders to model ethical behavior and demonstrate practical wisdom in leading and caring for staff and students within their school (Frick et al., 2013).

Theoretical Framework Research Studies

Research focusing on ethical leadership has been conducted by other researchers in the context of school leadership and principal preparation programs. Shapiro and Stefkovich's framework has been applied to at least five other studies (Ballangrud et al., 2022; Eyal et al., 2011; Frick et al., 2013; Gardiner & Tenuto, 2015; McGee & Mansfield, 2014). In a Norwegian context, Ballangrud et al.'s (2022) article examined how principals deal with ethical dilemmas while leading professional learning communities. Using Shapiro and Stefkovich's (2021) ethical

frames, the article emphasized that discussions between leaders at the school and district levels and between leaders and teachers in the professional learning communities can help in developing leaders' ethical thinking and decision-making. Researchers Eyal et al. (2011) examined the scope in which multiple ethical considerations can be considered at the same time. They sought to determine the overall values that often come into play when principals have to choose between ethical solutions. Frick et al.'s (2013) study was part of a larger research agenda that examined elementary and secondary principals' perspectives on expressing the student's best interests. Professional moral reasoning includes principals' perception of the "morally unique aspects of their work" and meanings concerning their ethical and professional practice (Frick et al, 2013, p. 208). The study focuses on elementary principals' ethical decision-making involving the administration and supervision of special education programs through the lens of the ethic of profession. Another study identified school administrators' leadership ethical dilemmas to understand their ethical decision-making regarding social justice issues (Gardiner & Tenuto, 2015). The fifth study, McGee and Mansfield (2014) aimed to demonstrate and describe seasoned educational leaders' ethical conflict through Shapiro and Stefkovich's (2021) multidimensional theoretical lens. The research also used the "critical incident technique" (Flanagan, 1954) to express educational administrators' ethical conflict perceptions.

Purpose Statement

Research on principals' ethical decision-making related to cyberbullying issues is evolving (Koole et al., 2021; Young et al., 2017). Therefore, this study is designed to explore principals' responses to these complex ethical issues. The purpose of this study is threefold: a) to explore how school leaders in Tennessee process ethical decisions related to cyber-bullying; b) to explore the differences in school leaders' ethical decision-making processes in various districts;

and c) to explore how districts interpret and implement Tennessee cyberbullying policies within various districts.

Research Questions

I used three research questions to guide this study:

1. How do Tennessee school leaders process ethical decisions related to student cyberbullying issues?
2. What are the differences in school leaders' ethical decision-making processes in various districts?
3. How do districts interpret and implement cyberbullying policies within the various districts?

Significance of Study

Numerous researchers (Koole et al., 2021; Styron et al., 2016; Young et al., 2017) have established that cyberbullying's effects on students' social-emotional well-being permeate the fabric of the school environment. Digital devices, including laptops and mobile phones with various applications, wrap themselves around the student in the learning environment and their social relationships. Students spend 7.4 hours per day between school and at home on these digital devices (Rideout & Robb, 2019). Koole et al. (2021) inferred that principals need to navigate the policies related to student cyberbullying and understand the relationship between where the digital devices stop, and the student begins.

Students' identities have become increasingly tied to their perceptions of interactions on social sites and applications (Young et al., 2017). Navigating this new social dilemma creates difficult ethical situations tied to students' harmful use of digital devices related to cyberbullying. Richardson et al. (2016) reveal the need for today's principal to be a technology leader to

effectively implement instructional learning and social practices related to digital devices. Moreover, professional development and principal preparation related to digital and social learning would benefit school stakeholders and build principal efficacy to prevent principal turnover and attrition (Styron et al., 2016). By studying principals' ethical decision making in cyberbullying issues, I will add to the existing literature on principals' experiences related to cyberbullying and school district's understanding and implementation of state cyberbullying policies.

Delimitations

This study had three delimitations. One of the delimitations of this study was that school leaders face many moral dilemmas as part of their role. This study only focused on the ethical dilemma related to student cyberbullying. Another delimitation was that the study focused on school leaders in two districts and did not obtain teachers or other staff perceptions and experiences related to student cyberbullying in those districts. The final delimitation in this study was that only public school leaders were included in this study. Charter schools in the two districts studied were not included in this study.

Definitions

Key terms were included throughout the study related to student cyberbullying. The State of Tennessee's Department of Education Bullying and Harassment site (January 18, 2024) provides the basis for following definitions regarding bullying, harassment, and cyberbullying.

- Bullying - unwanted, repeated, aggressive behavior that involves a power imbalance involving physical strength, embarrassing information, or intent to control or harm others (TDOE, 2024).

- Harassment - pervasive or persistent conduct affecting a protected class of students under the federal civil rights laws that limits their ability to participate or benefit from school opportunities (TDOE, 2024).
- Cyberbullying - bullying that takes place using electronic technology-based communication tools such as social media sites, text messages, and chat on cell phones, computer, and tablets (TDOE, 2024).

Tenn. Code Ann. § 49-6-4502 (3)(A) -(B) (2023) provides the following definitions related to bullying, harassment, and cyberbullying which clarify State of Tennessee’s law regarding harassment, intimidation, or bullying. These definitions are also included in Tennessee’s state and district policies and apply to acts that occur on or off school property.

(3) “Harassment, intimidation or bullying” means any act that substantially interferes with a student's educational benefits, opportunities, or performance; and:

(A) If the act takes place on school grounds, at any school-sponsored activity, on school-provided equipment or transportation or at any official school bus stop, the act has the effect of:

- (i) Physically harming a student or damaging a student's property;
- (ii) Knowingly placing a student or students in reasonable fear of physical harm to the student or damage to the student's property;
- (iii) Causing emotional distress to a student or students; or
- (iv) Creating a hostile educational environment; or

(B) If the act takes place off school property or outside of a school-sponsored activity, it is directed specifically at a student or students and has the effect of creating a hostile educational environment or otherwise creating a substantial

disruption to the education environment or learning process (Tenn. Code Ann. § 49-6-4502(3)(A) -(B), 2023).

Organization of the Study

This dissertation contains five chapters. In Chapter 1, the background of the study, statement of the problem, significance of the study, purpose of the study, research questions, theoretical framework, definitions, limitations, and delimitations were discussed. In Chapter 2, I presented a systematic literature review of principals and cyberbullying. Chapter 3 focused on the methodology of my study, which included the rationale of the research method, context, sites, participants, instrumentation, data collection, data analysis, trustworthiness, and personal bias. Next, Chapter 4 revealed the findings of the study. Finally, Chapter 5 summarized the findings of the study, proposed a conceptual model, described implications for researchers, and suggested future research.

CHAPTER 2

**A SYSTEMATIC REVIEW OF CYBERBULLYING AND K-12 EDUCATIONAL
LEADERS**

Research on principals' ethical decision-making related to cyberbullying issues is evolving (Koole et al., 2021; Young et al., 2017). Student-related decisions reflect some of the most complex, especially those dealing with today's newest issues concerning technology use in and out of the classroom. One of the most complicated student-related issues that principals navigate is cyberbullying. NCES Data 2019–20 reflects that one of the most frequently occurring discipline problems reported by public schools is student bullying and cyberbullying. The report stated, "Sixteen percent of public schools reported cyberbullying occurring among students at least once a week" (NCES, 2022, p.12). Not only does a principal need training in essential instructional leadership and learning, but they must also receive special training on technology leadership and the new policies related to student cyberbullying prevention and reporting (Cook et al., 2017; Corcoran & McGuckin, 2014; Styron et al., 2016). Due to the serious student psychological issues related to cyberbullying, inappropriate texting and sharing of photos, confidence issues, depression, anxiety issues, and sometimes suicide, principals need training and must utilize partnerships with various school and community stakeholders.

Therefore, this systematic review aimed to understand how principals navigate issues related to cyberbullying. Using the research questions guiding this study, I developed a single overarching search question to guide my systematic literature review. The systematic search question guiding this literature review is: What do researchers in the last twelve years say about principals' practices related to cyberbullying?

Systematic Literature Review Methods

Research material included in this study focused on educational leaders dealing with cyberbullying in a school setting. In the review, I included scholarly peer-reviewed articles and books from 2012-2023 and seminal works on educational leaders' decision-making concerning

cyberbullying. This study included educational leaders and principals working in urban, suburban, and rural areas, serving students from diverse racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic neighborhoods in various countries. There were no restrictions on studies that included school leaders regarding gender, race, ethnicity, age, socioeconomic status, or sexual orientation.

To ensure that the research material met scholarly standards, I included searches using computerized research databases. First, I used Education Resources Information Clearinghouse (ERIC) which represents a comprehensive digital library of education research and information sponsored by the Institute of Education Science (IES) of the U.S. Department of Education and is recommended by top research methods publishers (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Galvan & Galvan, 2017). Abstracts from peer-reviewed publications published between 2012 to 2023 were searched to reflect the most current research using this database. The following search criteria yielded fifty-two studies (ten duplicate): (a) AB=*Principals* or *School leaders* or *administrators* AND AB= *Cyberbullying* (b) (c) AB=*Principals* or *School leaders* or *administrators* AND AB= *decision making* or *decision-making* or *decision-making process* or *decision-making process* AND *cyberbullying** (d) (e) Select a field =*educational administration* or *educational leadership* or *school administration* AND Select a field = *cyberbullying**. After searching ERIC, I used SCOPUS, a research database published by Elsevier, to search for studies not contained in the previous ERIC searches. The following search terms yielded twenty-nine (five duplicate) studies and were used in SCOPUS: *Educational administrator OR school principal AND cyberbullying*. Google Scholar, another highly used research tool, surfaced ten additional (one duplicate) studies. Finally, I reviewed reference sections of studies which yielded two seminal works that were referenced in several articles, and two books published by reputable authors, including high-quality research, were also included in the review. Technical reports, dissertations, and

online presentations were excluded from the review because of a lack of a peer-review process. The result of all these searches provided seventy-six unique listings. After an inspection of the studies, I removed fifty-five studies whose abstracts did not include references to principals and cyberbullying in a school setting.

I imported the remaining twenty-four sources that met the identified criteria into Covidence (2023), an abstract screening tool. Studies were then screened using key terms and labels containing the words cyberbullying, principals, educational leaders, and decisions to select the abstracts to include in the systematic review. An abstract screening process using Covidence ensured the quality and criteria of the literature chosen for review. An initial screening of all the studies' abstracts included labeling the key terms and marking the abstracts as yes, no, or maybe. Hence, I marked seventeen studies as yes, six studies as no, and one study as maybe. Additional screening of the contents of the studies was performed to determine if the studies met the research question criteria. Furthermore, I screened each study to eliminate and identify that the literature met the inclusion and exclusion criteria. Keywords and labels, including *principals*, *cyberbullying*, *school leaders*, and *administrators*, were chosen to assist the screening process and represent the literature review's emphasis on principals' ethical decision-making process related to student cyberbullying in a school setting. After an extensive screening process, I eliminated seven of twenty-four studies due to the abstracts not meeting the literature review criteria of principals and cyberbullying and inclusion/exclusion criteria listed above. Seventeen studies qualified according to the inclusion criteria. A visual representation of this process is included in Figure 1.

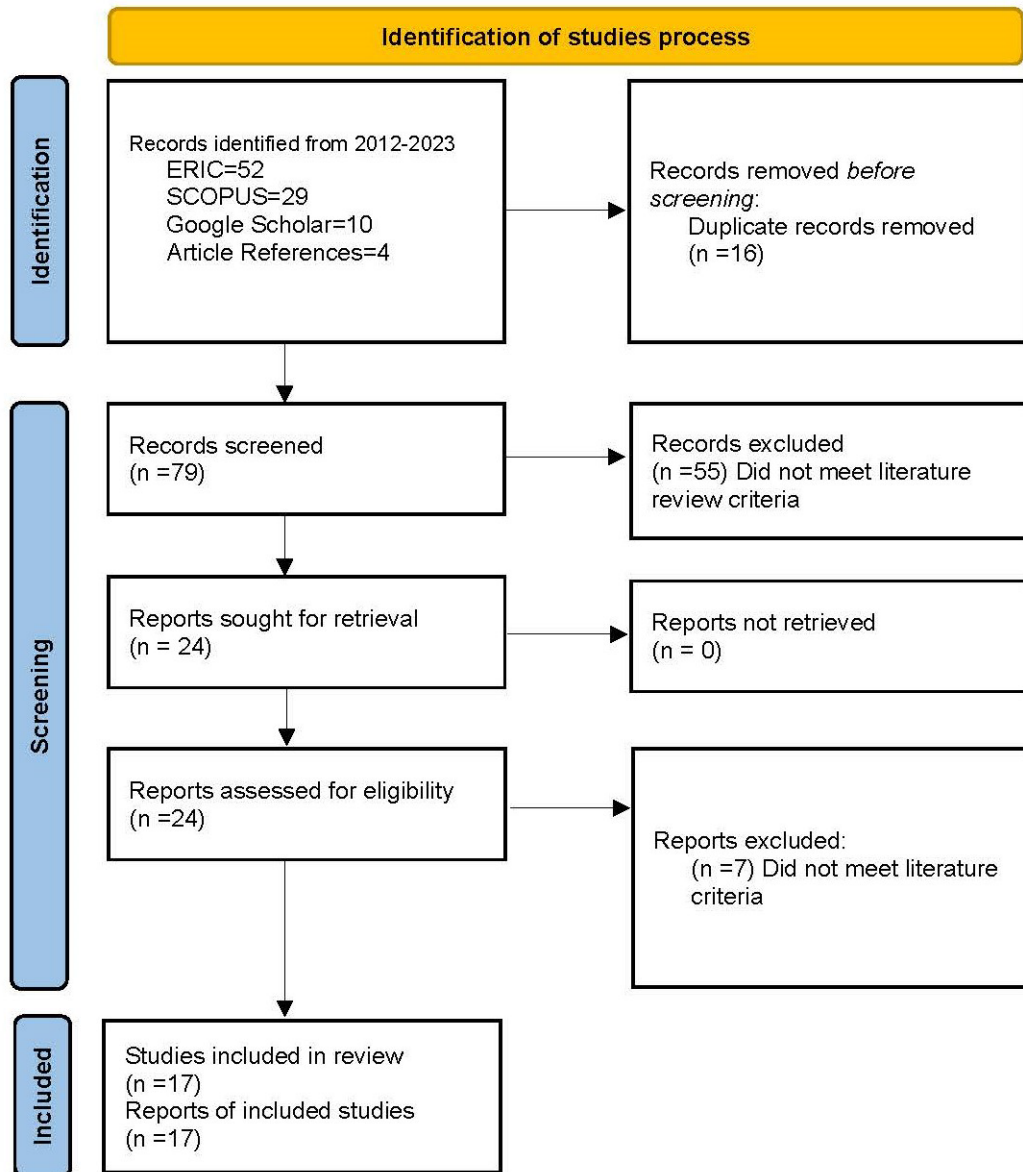


Figure 1

Research Process Diagram (Prisma, 2020)

Descriptives

After gathering information from each of the articles and books in the final list, I created an Author Inclusion Table 1 (AIT), which provides the following information for each article and book in tabular format: (a) author(s), (b) year of publication, (c) research method (i.e., literature review, quantitative, qualitative, mixed-method), (d) research design (i.e., survey, interview, observation, database analysis, narrative), (e) sample size, (f) setting (i.e., elementary, middle school/junior high, high school, university), (g) study subject as defined by the author(s), and (h) country. I included one literature review, five quantitative, seven qualitative, and four mixed-methods studies in the research study systematic review. Studies represented research of public schools at all levels: elementary, middle, high school, and university principal preparation programs. Several studies reflected research emphases on principals' experiences dealing with cyberbullying, the effectiveness of anti-bullying programs, and principal preparedness in dealing with cyberbullying. Principals chosen for these studies represented eleven international K-12 studies, five US K-12 studies, and one U.S. principal preparation programs.

Systematic Literature Review Themes

The systematic review of fifteen peer-reviewed research studies and two peer-reviewed books by reputable authors including high-quality research, revealed three themes and twelve sub-themes related to principals and cyberbullying in a K-12 school setting. Table 2 reflects the themes and sub-themes discussed in this review. All research studies were included in this systematic review's themes and sub-themes.

Principals and Cyberbullying: Technology Issues

After reviewing the research articles and books addressing principals and cyberbullying related to technology issues, three sub-themes surfaced: (a) understanding technology, (b)

Table 1*Author Inclusion Table with Descriptives*

	Author/Year	M	R	Participants	Setting	Subject	Country
1	Castile, H. & Harris, S. (2014)	Ql	I	8 Principals	MS, HS	Principals Cyberbullying Experiences	U.S.
2	Cook, E. et al. (2017)	Qn	S	124 Service Providers (36) Principals	E, MS, HS	Students and individuals with disabilities – cyberbullying and bullying	U.S.
3	Corcoran, L. & McGuckin, C. (2014)	X	I, S	45 Principals	MS, HS	Principals Addressing Cyberbullying	Ireland
4	Cunningham, C. et al. (2016)	Ql	I	103 Teachers (19) focus groups	MS	Effectiveness of Antibullying Programs	Canada
5	Desmet, A. et al. (2015)	Qn	S	451 teachers, principals	MS, HS	Administrators Handling of Student Cyberbullying	Belgium
6	Dey, A. (2023)	L R	A	44 Scholarly articles		Detection and Prevention	Canada
7	Green, V et al. (2017)	Qn	S	888 – Teachers, principals	MS, HS	Student Cyberbullying - Administration Responsibility	New Zealand
8	Hester, W. & Fenn, W. (2014)	Ql	I	58 principals, teachers, legal experts, parents	E, MS, HS	Perceptions handling of cyberbullying	U.S.
9	Hinduja, W. & Patchin, A. (2023)	Ql, Qn, S	A, I, S	Students, teachers, documents	E, MS, HS	Book - Definitions, Policies, Prevention, Training	U.S.
10	Hvidston, D. et al. (2013)	Ql	A	8 legal cases	MS, HS	Principals' actions involving cyberbullying	U.S.
11	Mattioni, L. et al. (2016)	Qn	I	210 principals and teachers	E, MS, HS	Principals' and teachers perceptions of cyberbullying	New Zealand
12	Koole, M. et al. (2021)	Ql	I	9 admin, 3 focus groups	E, MS, HS	Reasons for cyberbullying and prevention	Canada
13	Pennell, D. et al. (2020)	Ql	I	3 leaders, 1 parent, 3 gr (Students, teachers)	E, MS, HS	Cyberbullying prevention	Australia
14	Purdy, N. & McGuckin, C. (2015)	X	I, S	2 groups, 143 surveys	E, MS, HS	Cyberbullying in schools and the law	Ireland
15	Shariff, S. (2015)	X	A, I, S	Principals, students, teachers, legal docs	E, MS, HS	Book – Sexting and Cyberbullying	Canada
16	Styron et al. (2016)	Qn	S	120 graduate students	U	Teacher and Principal preparedness to address cyberbullying	U.S.
17	Young, R. et al. (2017)	Ql	I	21 Principals 15 District admin	E, MS, HS	Administrators' Perceptions of cyberbullying and barriers to prevention	U.S.

R = research design (S = survey, I = interview, O = Observation, A = Database Analysis); M = research method (LR -Literature Review, Qn = quantitative; Ql = qualitative, X = Mixed Method) Setting (E = elementary, MS = middle school or junior high, HS = high school, U=University, NA = Not Applicable)

Table 2*Themes and Supporting Studies*

Themes: Principals and Student Cyberbullying	Supporting Studies
1.1 Cyberbullying and Technology Issues: Principals' Understanding Technology	1,5,6,7,8,9,15,16,17
1.2 Cyberbullying and Technology Issues: Principals' Technology Leadership Training	1,2,3,4,7,9,11,14,15,16
1.3 Cyberbullying and Technology Issues: Social Bullying Networks	1,2,6,9,14
2.1 Cyberbullying and Policies: Importance of Laws and Policies	9,10,15,17
2.2 Cyberbullying and Policies: Understanding Policies and Definitions	2,3,5,6,7,8,9,15
2.3 Cyberbullying and Policies: Need for Revised Policies	2,5,8,10,13,14,15,17
2.4 Cyberbullying and Policies: Policy Training	2,3,10,11,12,16
3.1 Cyberbullying and Stakeholder Education: Digital Citizenship	1,2,8,9,10,12,13,14,16,17
3.2 Cyberbullying and Stakeholder Education: Anti-bullying	1,2,3,13,14,16,17
3.3 Cyberbullying and Stakeholder Education: Parent and Community Partnerships	2,3,8,10,11,12,17
3.4 Cyberbullying and Stakeholder Education: Parent Responsibility	2,3,5,6,8,10,14,16,17
3.5 Cyberbullying and Stakeholder Education: Student Support	5,6,7,9,10,14,17

principal technology leadership training, and (c) social bullying networks. Sub-themes focused on the complex and rapidly changing technologies students use in cyberbullying-related cases. School leaders face multiple challenges related to how students use their electronic devices to bully students within their schools.

Understanding Technology

New technologies used in a K-12 learning environment are being developed rapidly (Young et al., 2017). Hence, principals must stay current on the latest learning and social applications affecting their students (Styron et al. 2016). Researchers reflect that school leaders' self-efficacy related to knowledge of social media applications and confidence in recognizing cyberbullying was low (Desmet et al., 2015; Purdy & McGuckin, 2015).

Furthermore, social media use among younger students evolves so rapidly that even younger educators perceive a digital gap. Due to the widespread use of technology, schools today have adopted technology initiatives that include school laptops for all students (Castile & Harris, 2016). Laptops and mobile phones for student learning and personal use of these devices, principals face the problem of student dependency and discipline issues, like cyberbullying (Hester & Fenn, 2014; Green et al., 2017). Applications used on school laptops and students' personal mobile devices provide access to advanced social media tools which provide sophisticated ways for students to communicate and connect with each other (Desmet et al., 2015). These applications also allow students to create tangled networks and social circles that complicate the ability of educators to unravel cyberbullying situations (Hinduja & Patchin, 2023).

Today's laptops and mobile devices use technologically advanced applications for various purposes. Students have access to laptops provided by their schools and mobile devices provided

by their parents (Desmet et al., 2015; Hinduja & Patchin, 2023). Commonly used applications such as Instagram, Snapchat, TikTok, and even Google applications used in the learning environment provide students with clever ways to hide their identity by creating aliases or using someone else's identity to bully a student (Dey, 2023; Young et al., 2017). Furthermore, the ability to delete pictures and texts is built into the key features of some of these applications, such as Snapchat and Instagram (Hinduja & Patchin, 2023; Shariff, 2015). These features make the school leader's job as an investigator even more ethically complicated due to the ability of the bully to hide their identity and delete important information (Dey, 2023; Hinduja & Patchin, 2023; Shariff, 2015). Often, school leaders must bring in outside services, such as cellphone providers and even law enforcement, to help with the investigative process due to the complexity of the issues created by technology applications (Dey, 2023; Shariff, 2015).

Principal Technology Leadership Training

Providing principals with training on communication technology would influence their ability to adequately respond to cyberbullying issues and help bridge the digital gap (Green et al., 2017; Purdy et al., 2015; Styron et al., 2016). Additionally, due to the intricacies of the new technology, further training on how students navigate the subsystems would further benefit principals' understanding of students' use of social media (Mattioni et al., 2016). Principals and school staff need more comprehensive professional development and cyberbullying resources before they can be adequately equipped to educate their students on cyberbullying prevention (Corcoran & McGuckin, 2014; Green et al., 2017). Researchers document the need for principals technology training to help students understand the need for online safety to prevent cyberbullying (Corcoran & McGuckin, 2014; Hinduja & Patchin 2023).

Principal training would reduce ambivalence about technology and promote better stakeholder trust (Castile & Harris, 2016; Cook et al., 2017). Cunningham et al. (2016) documented that teachers were troubled when principals failed to provide support related to threats made by parents and students involving issues related to cyberbullying. Therefore, principals need technology training to better support their teachers when dealing with student cyberbullying (Corcoran & McGuckin, 2014; Styron et al., 2016). Specifically, researchers note that principals would benefit from online safety technology training to help their staff and teachers understand the safety issues related to cyberbullying (Hinduja & Patchin, 2023; Shariff, 2015).

Social Bullying Networks

Cyberbullying, similar to traditional bullying, can be a group dynamic process including offenders, accomplices and supporters, witnesses or bystanders, and helpers (Koole et al., 2021). School leaders' ethical decision-making becomes more complex due to not only this circle of perpetrators and the victim but also the complexity of the technology and social field (Dey, 2023). Social bullying networks enhance the occurrence of repeated cyberbullying without the victim being present (Hinduja & Patchin, 2023). Additionally, The lack of face-to-face interaction limits the students involved in the bullying network feelings of empathy, thus encouraging more aggression, which could escalate cyberbullying (Dey, 2023; Koole et al., 2021). Bullying networks can increase the severity of student cyberbullying and complicate the investigative process (Hinduja & Patchin 2023; Shariff, 2015).

Social media technology enhances the creation of cyberbullying networks (Koole et al., 2021). Students' use of technology to socialize with groups of students promotes greater occurrences of social bullying (Hinduja & Patchin, 2023). Furthermore, victims of cyberbullying

are prone to more social bullying attacks due to being “tethered” to their mobile devices and other technology applications (Koole et al., 2021). Victims' willingness to report the bullying incident could be influenced by the number of students in the social bullying networks and their impact on a student's self-esteem (Hinduja & Patchin, 2023 Pennell et al., 2020).

Principals and Cyberbullying: Laws and Policies

The second theme developed from the systematic review is how principals need to understand the policies, procedures, and legal issues related to cyberbullying. Four sub-themes developed from this review that relate to principals' understanding of cyberbullying policies and procedures: (a) importance of laws and policies (b) understanding policies and definitions (c) need for new or revised policies, and (d) policy training. These studies reflect the complexities of cyberbullying laws and policies related to student issues encountered by today's school leaders.

Importance of Laws and Policies

The rapid pace of technology development for computers, cell phones and tablets has created a new type of bullying, cyberbullying, which is more complex and difficult to detect (Hvidston et al., 2013; Young et al., 2017). Hence, school districts across the United States have implemented strict anti-bullying and harassment policies, which help school leaders deal with the complex issue of cyberbullying (Hvidston et al., 2013; Hinduja & Patchin, 2023, 2016; Young et al., 2017). Young et al. (2017), noted that electronic harassment was mentioned in forty-eight state antibullying laws, and fourteen state laws mentioned school responsibility for off campus incidents. The requirement of school districts and their schools to deal with bullying, cyberbullying, and harassment is mandated in these states, but significant variation exists as to the scope of the mandates or policies (Shariff, 2015; Hinduja & Patchin, 2023). Furthermore,

some states even specify criminal sanctions such as fines and jail time for cyberbullying (Hvidston et al., 2013).

Based on state cyberbullying definitions, most types of cyberbullying do not require legal intervention (Hvidston, 2015; Hinduja & Patchin, 2023; Shariff, 2015). What makes it difficult for school districts and leaders is that cyberbullying behaviors vary significantly from progressive teasing to tormenting behaviors, even involving sexual harassment and serious discrimination issues (Shariff, 2015). The Supreme Court in *Tinker v. Des Moines Independent Community School Districts* (1969) affirmed the need for these policies by stating that when student speech or conduct adversely impacts other students and materially disrupts the learning process, schools may regulate it (Hinduja & Patchin, 2023).

Understanding Policies and Definitions

Principal monitoring of student cyber activity related to undesirable cyberspace behavior poses difficulty and stresses the need for clear guidance on responding to a disclosure of student cyberbullying (Corcoran & McGuckin, 2014; Hester & Fenn, 2014). Understanding how to document the details of the incident sufficiently and how to follow through with support and disciplinary actions appropriately is necessary to guide principals (Corcoran & McGuckin, 2014; Cook et al., 2017). Studies showed confusion regarding principal responsibility due to blurred lines between family and school since most cyberbullying happens off campus (Desmet et al., 2015; Hester & Fenn, 2014). In fact, school staff may be more concentrated on addressing cyberbullying issues and student victimization when they occur instead of prevention (Green et al., 2017). School leaders need their district's guidance in ethically investigating and handling the complex and challenging discipline issue of student-related cyberbullying (Cook et al., 2017; Corcoran & McGuckin, 2014; Shariff, 2015;). Furthermore, school leaders face many challenges

when responding to the disclosure of student cyberbullying (Corcoran & McGuckin, 2014; Hester & Fenn, 2014).

Several researchers noted the need for more precise definitions related to student cyberbullying (Dey, 2023; Young et al., 2017). Most state's bullying and harassment definitions clearly define aggressive behavior, power imbalance, and repetition, yet cyberbullying does not necessarily include all three of these (Hinduja & Patchin, 2023). The bully's technical ability in a digital atmosphere complicates the issue by keeping the victim in the web of bullying even when the bully is not present in the online application (Cocoran & McGuckin, 2014). Researchers (Cocoran & McGuckin, 2014) further note that social media applications used to bully students allow the bully to stalk the victim in ways never thought of before the digital era. Physical bullying and harassment require the presence of both the bully and the victim. Now, bullying can take place continuously and harass the victim as long as the information remains present on the digital application (Cocoran & McGuckin, 2014). This also poses a problem because the technology in the hands of a bully can magnify the situation far beyond bullying in a traditional sense by keeping their victim captive on a continuous basis in and out of the school setting (Dey, 2023; Hinduja & Patchin, 2023;). Due to this complexity, school leaders face ethical issues related to bullying that are much more difficult to define and deal with in a school setting (Dey, 2023; Hinduja & Patchin, 2023).

Need for New or Revised Policies

Several researchers noted the need for updated or clearer cyberbullying policies (Desmet et al., 2015; Hester & Fenn, 2014; Pennell et al., 20; Purdy & McGuckin, 2015; Young et al., 2017). In fact, one-third of educators knew there was no anti-cyberbullying policy at their school (Desmet et al., 2015). Purdy and McGuckin (2015) study reflected educational leaders' desire to

have updated policies regarding cyberbullying. New technology demands and capabilities require school leaders verify the relevance and applicability of their existing technology usage policies and procedures (Hester & Fenn, 2014). However, the lack of clear evidence on the effectiveness of technology use and digital citizenship policies inhibits principals from adequately proposing new policies (Young et al., 2017)

Furthermore, Hester & Fenn (2014) noted a need for a close review of harassment policies related to cyberbullying and their relationship to state and federal harassment laws. Cyberbullying compared to traditional bullying is a relatively new issue for school leaders. Hence, information and resources related to cyberbullying of students with disabilities is not as prevalent compared to traditional bullying (Cook et al., 2017). Shariff (2015) notes the need for new policies related to sexual harassment issues. Implicit cyberbullying harassment policies promote increased school intervention, which helps deter cyberbullying harassment issues (Hvidston et al., 2013).

Policy Training

Cyberbullying's complexities require purposeful and targeted training for school leaders and staff (Corcoran et al., 2014; Koole et al., 2016; Mattioni et al., 2016; Styron, 2016). Within Mattioni's (2016) study, results show that 75% of principals and 71% of teachers expressed a need for more training. Furthermore, the perceptions and attitudes of the school's staff can affect the school's climate which ultimately affects the occurrence of cyberbullying within the school (Mattioni et al., 2016.) Educating principals and staff on the issues related to cyberbullying and providing them with resources on the subject of cyberbullying helps educators better prepare their students to identify and prevent cyberbullying (Corcoran et al., 2014; Koole et al., 2021).

School leaders' experiences related to complex cyberbullying situations reflect ethically challenging decisions that must be made to adequately handle the delicate student issue (Hvidston et al., 2013). Training to curtail minimizing or ignoring cyberbullying activity and reporting of inappropriate handling of cyberbullying situations promotes school leaders' efficacy (Cook et al., 2017; Koole et al., 2021; Styron et al., 2016). Hvidston et al. (2013) note school leaders need to understand the legal issues surrounding cyberbullying and training to avoid unnecessary liability issues. Furthermore, Styron et al. (2017) emphasized the need for principal preparation programs to add required courses related to technology and modules addressing cyberbullying. Additionally, studies noted the need for training to curtail minimizing or ignoring cyberbullying activity and reporting or inappropriate handling of cyberbullying situations (Cook et al., 2017; Koole et al., 2021; Styron et al., 2016).

Principals and Cyberbullying: Education, Partnership, and Student Support

The final theme discussed in this review, principals' school education, partnership, and student support related to cyberbullying, revealed five sub-themes: (a) digital education and citizenship, (b) anti-bullying emphasis, (c) parent and community partnerships, (d) parent responsibility, and (e) student support. Student cyberbullying policies require school leaders to develop comprehensive preventative measures to counter cyberbullying in and out of the school setting. Furthermore, cyberbullying policies document the need for student support of the victim and bully, which requires a whole school approach to this complicated issue.

Digital Education and Citizenship

Researchers have reflected that K-12 students must be taught to responsibly understand and use the Internet (Castile & Harris 2014; Cook et al., 2017; Hester & Fenn, 2014; Young et al., 2017). School leaders' actions regarding cyberbullying prevention and intervention consisted

of prevention policies, including digital citizenship and internet safety lessons (Pennell et al., 2020; Styron et al., 2016). Researchers have noted some schools monitor students' internet activity on school laptops during school hours and prohibit access to social networking sites to promote internet safety (Hester & Fenn, 2014; Hvidston et al, 2013; Young et al., 2017). However, despite schools' emphasis on internet safety and digital citizenship, lack of parental monitoring inhibits students' internet safety at home (Hinduja & Patchin, 2023; Koole et al., 2016, Young et al., 2017)

Furthermore, cyberbullying digital education consists of various approaches such as school assemblies, curriculum, and whole-school programs (Pennell et al., 2020; Purdy et al., 2015). "Schools may want to consider employing social media technologies, such as internet forums, social networking sites (e.g., Facebook), blogs, and microblogs (i.e., Twitter), as internet platforms to deliver messages especially created for preventing cyberbullying" (Mattioni et al., 2016, p. 15). The consensus among researchers indicated the need for more studies to determine how digital citizenship policies and internet safety programs affect cyberbullying cases (Pennell et al., 2020; Styron et al., 2017).

Anti-bullying Emphasis

In contrast, some studies stated that cyberbullying has much less to do with technology and more with student relationships (Pennell et al., 2020; Young et al., 2017). Combinations of anti-bullying school prevention and intervention methods were most effective in most studies (Pennell et al., 2020; Purdy & McGuckin, 2015; Styron et al., 2016; Young et al., 2017). One study suggested that student feedback was important in designing and implementing anti-bullying prevention strategies (Pennell et al., 2020). Furthermore, Castile & Harris (2014) suggested that schools should include anti-bullying prevention programs within the school day,

and sympathy training should be included within the program. The design of these programs should include cyberbullying detection by students and parents and its consequences (Hester & Fenn, 2014).

Administrative lack of education and support was noted in two studies (Cook et al., 2017; Corcoran et al., 2014). Researchers have suggested that schools should be responsible for implementing cyberbullying educational programs (Castile & Harris, 2014; Cook et al., 2017; Corcoran & McGuckin, 2014; Young et al., 2017). Primarily, school districts should provide “a formal education program for students that includes cyberbullying awareness, proper use of technology, online etiquette, proper conduct, coping with cyberbullying, seeking help, and reporting problems” (Hester & Fenn, 2014, p. 66).

Parent and Community Partnerships

Researchers stressed the importance of community partnerships, partnership development, and more robust communication among all stakeholders (Hester & Fenn, 2014; Hvidston et al., 2013; Mattioni et al., 2016; Young et al., 2017). Mattioni et al. (2016) reflected that interventions must also emphasize partnerships by establishing a “whole-school approach” that includes parents (p. 15). Cook et al.’s (2017) noted that parents of children with disabilities seem inadequately informed concerning their children's Internet usage, especially cyberbullying experiences than traditional bullying experiences, suggesting additional information is needed on cyberbullying and Internet safety related to students with disabilities.

Cyberbullying intervention programs should be structured to increase awareness about cyberbullying dangers and the related consequences for both the victim and the bully. (Corcoran & McGuckin, 2014; Hester & Fenn, 2014; Hvidston et al., 2013). One study by Koole et al. (2021) noted blurred lines of responsibility requiring community partnership:

Adult participants alluded to the ambiguation of jurisdictional boundaries as problematic. In our analysis, it is because of our world's complex, post-digital nature that patterns of relations are disrupted, thereby blurring boundaries of traditionally delineated responsibility. Solutions are required that enable professionals to address behavioral enactments that span multiple contexts, supporting intervention strategies that holistically engage communities (p. 487).

Green et al. (2017) note the importance of all school staff emphasizing an approach to involve students and the community in cyberbullying intervention programs.

Parent Responsibility

Several researchers noted the importance of parent responsibility involving monitoring and supervision due to a load of unstructured online activity taking place at home (Hester & Fenn, 2014; Hvidston et al., 2013; Styron et al., 2016; Young et al., 2017). Hester and Fenn (2014) suggested that cell phones should be the focal point of monitoring, including call logs, text messaging, internet activity, and social networking applications. Moreover, focus group interviews in Purdy and McGuckin's (2015) study revealed principals' frustration concerning parents who bought and allowed their children to use cell phones and other Internet-capable devices unsupervised. Furthermore, when cyberbullying incidents happened outside of the school, some teachers expressed that parents expect the school to deal with the cyberbullying issue, yet often made the situation more dire by trying to intervene using social media (Purdy & McGuckin, 2015).

Principals' monitoring of student cyber activity related to undesirable cyberspace behavior poses difficulty and stresses the need for clear guidance on responding to a disclosure of student cyberbullying (Corcoran & McGuckin, 2014; Hester & Fenn, 2014). Understanding

how to sufficiently document the details of the incident and appropriately follow through with support and disciplinary actions is necessary to guide principals (Corcoran & McGuckin, 2014; Cook et al., 2017). In addition, researchers have expressed confusion regarding principal responsibility due to blurred lines between family and school since most cyberbullying happens off campus (Desmet et al., 2015; Hester & Fenn, 2014).

Koole et al. (2021) noted blurred lines of responsibility requiring community partnership including parents and community leaders. Researchers (Koole et al., 2021; Styron et al., 2016) have noted that school leaders' roles in handling cyberbullying situations are complex due to the bullying occurring off campus. The digital, off campus, location of cyberbullying requires parents to monitor their children's online activity at home (Hester et al., 2014; Hvidston et al., 2013; Styron et al., 2016; Young et al., 2017). Frustrations and additional ethical considerations arise when school leaders deal with situations out of their control, such as parents allowing students to use internet-capable devices unsupervised (Purdy & McGuckin, 2015). Additionally, parents expect schools to deal with cyberbullying incidents that occur outside of the school (Purdy & McGuckin, 2015). Often, students' cyberbullying experiences are unnoticed by their parents (Dey, 2023). Hence, digital naivety in adults related to cyberbullying results in a lack of trust between school leaders and some parents (Cook et al., 2017; Corcoran & McGuckin, 2014).

Student Support

Complexities arising from the nature of cyberbullying pose difficult decisions for school leaders as they support their students at school (Desmet et al., 2015; Dey, 2023; Young et al., 2017). Students of cyberbullying often experience mental, emotional, and physical issues from exposure to the public, diminution of privacy, public shaming, and sexting, which can result in loss of confidence, depression, anxiety, and sometimes suicide (Hinduja & Patchin, 2023).

School leaders must provide students with the necessary safety, possibly separating the students in classrooms or moving to another school (Desmet et al., 2015; Young et al., 2017).

Additionally, support for the victim and bully requires the school leaders to identify appropriate counseling and restorative services (Hvidston et al., 2013; Young et al., 2017). Discipline of the bully requires careful consideration of the details of the cyberbullying case and the appropriate application of the discipline policy (Hvidston et al., 2013). Often, the hidden nature of the cyberbullying case makes it difficult for the school leader to adequately support the victim and the bully (Dey, 2023). Furthermore, due to the complicated nature of the technology, it can be difficult to identify the bully which can make it difficult to appropriately support the victim and discipline and restore the bully (Hinduja & Patchin, 2023; Hvidston et al., 2013). Principals limited understanding of communication technology, bullying networks, definitions, and responsibility related to the complicated cyberbullying policies influence their ability to adequately respond to student cyberbullying issues (Green et al., 2017; Purdy & McGuckin, 2015) and adequately respond to these demanding ethical situations.

Summary of Chapter 2

Throughout this systematic literature review, I synthesized and analyzed the research on principals' practices related to cyberbullying in a school setting. I discussed the methods I used for the systematic literature review, and the studies included in the review represented some of the empirical research from peer-reviewed journals over the past twelve years regarding principals' practices related to cyberbullying. I then developed the following themes: (a) principals and cyberbullying: technology issues, (b) principals and cyberbullying: policies and laws, and (c) principals and cyberbullying: education, partnerships, and support. I further discussed these themes through several subthemes.

CHAPTER 3
METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this qualitative multi-case study was to understand the perceptions and experiences of school leaders in two Tennessee districts and their ethical decisions related to student cyberbullying. Additionally, I wanted to explore how the two Tennessee districts, in this case, interpret and implement the cyberbullying policies within their districts. Using the multi-case study design, I used a cross-case analysis to reveal the similarities and differences between the two Tennessee districts. In Chapter 3, I explained my research methodology, which includes my research design, context of the study, participant selection, instrumentation, data collection, data analysis, validity and trustworthiness, and my role as a researcher.

Research Design: Multi-Case Qualitative Study

My multi-case study research investigates school leaders' decision-making processes related to student cyberbullying through the lens of Shapiro and Stefkovich's multiple ethical paradigms by building on Starratt's (1991) ethical frames, justice, care, and critique, while adding their unique frame, the ethic of profession. The addition of Shapiro and Stefkovich's (2021) ethic of the profession provides a unique way to evaluate school leaders' decision-making processes in the field of education as it posits school leaders' personal values with their professional ethics to consider their students' best interests. The qualitative case study design provides descriptive participant responses and answers the research question most appropriate for this study. Merriam & Tisdell (2016) describe a case study as, "one that meets the same criteria as other qualitative studies, which include a search for meaning and understanding of the phenomenon within its real-life context, the researcher as the primary conductor of data collection, an investigative approach, and a rich description of the data analyzed" (p. 37). Case studies delineate from other qualitative studies by being bounded and focusing on a unit rather than a topic (Cresswell & Cresswell, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Stake (2005) expresses

that researchers should use case studies “not as a methodological choice, but as a choice of what is to be studied” (p. 443). This perspective promotes fully focusing on the case or unit of study. Stake (1995) further defines a case as “the study of the particularity and complexity of a single case, something to understand its activity within important circumstances” (p. 2).

I chose to explore two Tennessee districts that promoted the use of a multi-case study design. Stake’s (1995) multi-case study design allowed a more comprehensive understanding of the study by assessing the differences and similarities between cases and analyzing the data within and across cases. In multi-case study design research, Stake (2005) suggests that “the single case is of interest because it belongs to a particular collection of cases” (p. 4). Hence, the individual districts in my study share common characteristics and are “categorically bound together” (Stake, 2005, p. 4). Stake (2006) further recommends that the group in a multi-case study should be called a quintain, which is “an object or phenomenon or condition to be studied—a target, not a bulls-eye” (p. 6). The quintain is studied by using the multi-case design to understand the single cases, their complexity and uniqueness, to ultimately understand what is similar or different about the cases, thus better understanding the quintain (Stake, 2005). By using Stake’s (2005) multi-case study design, my goal is to enhance the understanding of school leaders' processes in their ethical decision-making related to student cyberbullying and further the research on this topic. A visual representation of this study's multi-case design is represented in Figure 2.

Context for the Study

Based on 2022-2023 Tennessee Department of Education data (2023), there are 147 school districts with a total of 1700 public schools. The Tennessee Department of Education,

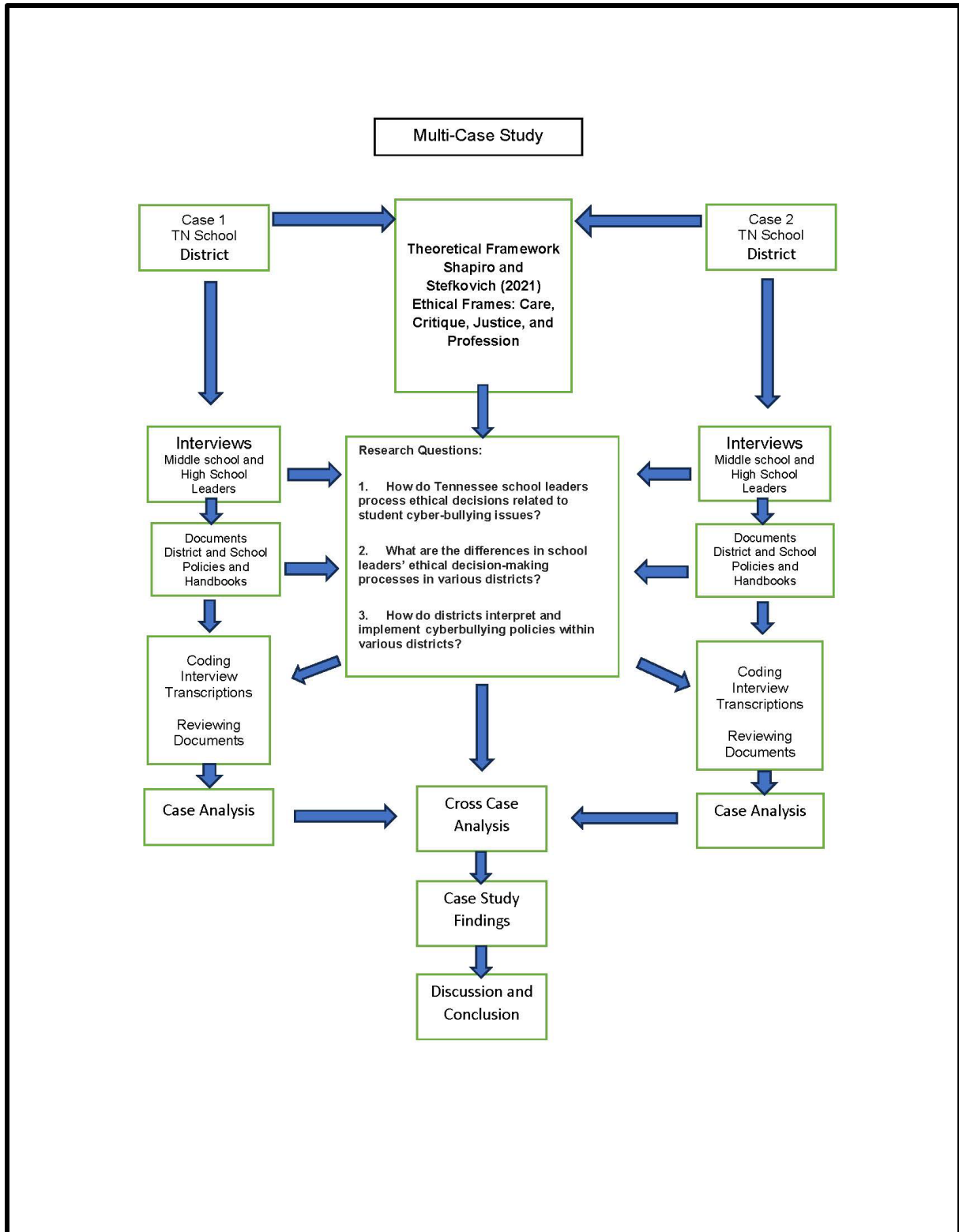


Figure 2

Multi-Case Research Design

with cyberbullying incidents. In 2013, Tennessee's passage of Chapter 992 of the Public Acts of 2012 (PC 992) established additional requirements for Tenn. Code Ann. §49-6-1016 for local education agencies (LEAs) to address bullying and harassment. These additions required LEAs to provide school staff training on bullying and harassment policies and inform students and parents concerning this issue. LEAs are also required to report bullying and harassment incidents to the state each year. Furthermore, principals of middle and high schools are required to investigate harassment, intimidation, bullying, or cyber-bullying when a student reports to any principal, teacher, or guidance counselor and reports to the director of schools and the chair of the local board of education.

Based on LEA reporting, Tennessee Bullying and Compliance Reports reflect that cyberbullying confirmed cases increased from 14% in 2018-19 to 27.7% of confirmed bullying cases in 2020-2021 and 21.1% in 2021-2022 (TDOE, 2023). Additionally, LEA data reflect particular districts with higher proportions of cyberbullying incidents for the school year 2021-2022 (most recent complete data set).

Sites

For this multi-case study, I researched middle and high school sites in two Tennessee public school districts based on Tennessee's 2021-2022 Bullying and Harassment Data Reports. Two district-approved sites that reflect the most confirmed cyberbullying cases were selected within two large Tennessee school districts. Both of these districts are located within large metropolitan areas within Tennessee and comprise schools in rural, suburban, and urban locales. Demographics of the two school districts, including student numbers, middle and high school numbers, race, economically disadvantaged, students with disabilities, and locales, are represented in Table 3.

Table 3*District One and District Two Demographics*

	District 1	District 2
Students	58873	77479
White	67%	25%
Black, Hispanic/Native American	29%	71%
Economically Disadvantaged	21%	35%
Students with Disabilities	14%	12%
Schools	93	153
Middle and High	34	48
Urban	51%	85%
Suburban	31%	5%
Rural	18%	10%

The administrative design of the districts is governed by a school board and supervised by the district superintendent. Each district has multiple departments overseeing various educational aspects of the district. Hence, each district has a department that oversees the implementation and interpretation of their district's Bullying, Cyberbullying, and Harassment policies and the required reporting to the State of Tennessee. Additionally, each district's schools are locally supervised by an administrative team of principals, including at least one principal and assistant principal. District high schools, based on size, have a lead principal and multiple assistant principals to ensure the management of the school.

Participants

Participants were chosen through purposeful sampling (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). Purposeful sampling or selection requires clearly defined case participant criteria (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). I explored school leaders' ethical decision-making processes related to student cyberbullying for this study's case criteria. Using the participant criteria, I identified secondary school leaders from two large Tennessee school districts who have served as assistant or lead principals for at least one year and experienced cyberbullying within their schools. All nineteen school leaders interviewed had served at least two years with 85% serving at least seven years. Furthermore, each district's leaders responsible for the oversight of the district's bullying, cyberbullying and harassment training and reported were identified. Participants' roles, pseudonym, setting, years of experience, and number of students are listed for each district in Table 4, District One, and Table 5, District 2.

After receiving permission from the district, emails were sent to the district's principals and district leader, asking them to participate in the interviews (Appendix A & B). School leaders were chosen until data saturation was reached (Charmaz, 2006). Upon selection, school

leaders were emailed a consent form approved by the University of Tennessee's Institutional Review Board (Appendix C).

Instrumentation

School leaders were asked to reflect on their ethical decision-making processes related to student cyberbullying in their school. During interviews, semi-structured questions were asked regarding their own experiences and perceptions of how they have processed their school's ethical dilemma(s) related to student cyberbullying. The interviews occurred via ZOOM using a face-to-face semi-structured format to validate the research question (Edmondson & Irby, 2008). Furthermore, the semi-structured interview format allowed for further exploration of school leaders' perceptions (Seidman, 2019) by asking additional questions during the actual participant interview. The semi-structured interview format provided a list of questions, which allowed for more probing and flexibility during the interview process (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The semi-structured interview was validated using face validity (Edmondson & Irby, 2008) by asking three faculty experts and five non-participating principals to validate the instrument.

Protocol Pilot

To create my interview protocols for principals and district leaders, I first reviewed my study's research questions to ensure the research goals were included in the protocol questions. Secondly, I reflected on Shapiro and Stefkovich's (2021) ethical framework to develop questions specifically with my study's theoretical framework in mind. Additionally, questions were semi-constructed to allow for give and take between the interviewer and the interviewee (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). During the first phase of the interview protocol pilot, I submitted ten semi-structured principal interview questions and seven semi-structured district leader interview questions based on my research questions and Shapiro and Stefkovich's ethical framework to

Table 4*District 1: School Leaders and District Leader*

Role	Pseudonym	Setting	Experience	Students
P	Carl	HS	10	1038
P	Mary	MS	15	1131
AP	Barry	MS	2	581
P	Kim	MS	9	581
AP	Mike	HS	2	1283
P	Allison	HS	9	1283
P	Tammy	HS	10	2048
P	Susan	MS	9	869
P	Lisa	MS	8	493
P	Nancy	HS	10	1400
P	Tom	MS	11	1197
P	Greg	MS	10	447
DL	Joyce	E, MS, HS	13	58873

Role (P=Principal, AP= Assistant Principal, DL= District Leader); Setting (MS = middle school, HS = high school) Experience (Number of Years)

Table 5*District 2: School Leaders and District Leader*

Role	Pseudonym	Setting	Experience	Students
AP	Doug	MS	7	678
AP	Frank	MS	3	441
P	Regina	MS	9	551
P	Will	HS	7	1975
P	Tricia	MS	8	417
P	Sheila	HS	16	712
P	Victor	MS	9	441
DL	Donna	E, MS, HS	2	77479

Role (P=Principal, AP= Assistant Principal, DL= District Leader); Setting (MS = middle school, HS = high school) Experience (Number of Years)

three qualitative faculty experts in educational leadership and policy studies. The experts provided me with insight on how to further clarify my questions by providing more concise language to promote better understanding when posing questions to the interviewees. The suggestions also helped me craft the questions in a more open fashion to allow for more opportunities to expand on topics during the interview and create an atmosphere of trust (Seidman, 2019).

After receiving advice from the qualitative experts, I revised the principal protocol to eleven questions, kept the district leaders' protocol to seven questions, and solicited five principals and one district leader using convenience sampling in the southeastern United States. The principal interviews were approximately 45-60 minutes in length. All interviews were recorded and transcribed to provide an opportunity for me to review the comments and make appropriate changes to the protocol based on interviewee responses to the protocol questions and their suggestions solicited after the interview. Three principals suggested that I define cyberbullying to clarify the difference between traditional bullying and cyberbullying. The experiences of the principals and district leaders, combined with the comments from the qualitative experts, provided a comprehensive test of my interview protocols. The final protocols used in my study consisted of eleven principal questions and seven district leader questions (Appendix D).

District Applications

District applications were completed and submitted to districts that met the criteria of the study and must have cyberbullying numbers reflected in the state's bullying and harassment reports for 2021-22 in the top six districts. After applications were submitted two districts approved my application request to conduct the research study to include principals, assistant

principals, the district leader responsible for cyberbullying training, implementation and reporting, and corresponding district and school documents related to bullying, cyberbullying, and harassment. Within the district approval letters specific guidelines were given as to how many contacts could be made to principals and the inclusion of the approval notice or letter within the email solicitations sent to principals, assistant principals, and district leaders.

Data Collection

After the University of Tennessee Institutional Review Board's (IRB) approval and the school district's research review committee's approval, emails with an IRB-approved consent form and ZOOM link were sent to all school leaders who volunteered to participate in the study. I also sent the consent form and Zoom link to the district leader responsible for the oversight of bullying, cyberbullying and harassment. Seidman (2019) recommends recording the interviews to "preserve the words of the participants" (p. 123). Interviews were then recorded and transcribed. Participants responded to questions about their experiences related to student cyberbullying. Interviews lasted approximately 45 to 60 minutes, with additional follow-up interviews, if needed, for clarification. Hence, a recording of the actual participant interview via ZOOM provided a way to return to the actual words spoken during the interview process. Transcriptions of the interviews were also provided via the ZOOM service.

Additionally, various district and state documents, including policies, training documents, student handbooks, and district and state bullying reporting documents, were collected. The documents collected for each district were student handbooks for each school, district bullying and harassment policy, digital citizenship policy, electronic device use policy, discipline policy, and the district's bullying and harassment training presentation for principals. Furthermore, Tennessee Department of Education documents were analyzed to validate the district leaders'

references to the State of Tennessee's Bullying and Harassment Policy and the *Tennessee Bullying and Harassment: An Educator's Guide* (TDOE, 2012). Due to each district's confidentiality requirement, I referred to all district documents by this study's district number within each documents title.

Data Analysis

The software application NVivo (2023) was used to analyze the data. Utilizing NVivo's tools, interview transcriptions were analyzed using conventional content analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005) through a three-step process. During the first step, I coded all data using open coding to establish primary codes by looking for patterns across transcripts (Maxwell, 2013). Next, I clustered codes to find pattern relationships and find initial themes (Shank, 2002). Step three utilized the a priori codes in the first two steps to analyze justice, care, critique and profession through Shapiro and Stefkovich's (2021) ethical frameworks. This etic perspective uses theories and concepts to analyze phenomena (Merriam & Tindell, 2016).

Using Stake's (2006) multiple case study analysis recommendations, comparisons were made to establish similarities and differences between the perceptions of those in various districts, types of schools, and experiences. Furthermore, to provide a rich descriptive case study analysis (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016), documents related to the cyberbullying processes, various district, and state documents, including policies, training documents, student handbooks, and district and state bullying reporting documents were analyzed (Bowen, 2009). I studied the quintain and used the multi-case design to analyze the single cases, their complexity and uniqueness. I then used the themes developed to analyze and understand what is similar or different about the cases, thus better understanding the quintain (Stake, 2006).

Interview Data Analysis

Semi-structured interviews of principals, assistant principals, and district leaders were conducted via ZOOM and transcribed verbatim using ZOOM's transcription tool. All transcribed interviews were uploaded into NVivo qualitative data analysis software to code the transcripts and analyze themes related to Shapiro and Stefkovich's (2021) ethical frames. First, I divided the transcripts into individual cases by moving the transcripts for each district's principals, assistant principals, and district leaders into a separate case folder for individual case analysis (Stake, 2005). I then coded each case separately in three steps. During the first step, I coded all data using open coding to establish primary codes by looking for patterns across transcripts (Maxwell, 2013). NVivo software allowed this process to go more smoothly since I could easily move between transcripts to identify similar patterns.

Next, I clustered codes to find pattern relationships and initial themes (Shank, 2002). NVivo software provided the means to group the codes and find the relationship and the themes within the cases. Step three utilized the a priori codes in the first two steps to analyze justice, care, critique, and the profession through Shapiro and Stefkovich's (2021) ethical framework. Using Stake's (2006) multiple case study analysis recommendations, comparisons were made between the cases to establish similarities and differences between the perceptions of those in various districts, types of schools, and experiences. Similar themes within each case were then used to create common themes to reflect Shapiro and Stefkovich's (2021) ethical framework within the case (Stake, 2006). Furthermore, during the cross-case analysis I discussed the similarities between the cases and emphasized the differences as related to the themes.

Document Data Analysis

Multiple district documents were used to validate the data collected from the interviews

with principals, assistant principals, and district leaders. Bowen (2009) references document analysis as a means of triangulation of data during the case study. I analyzed the documents to determine the purpose of the document, the author of the document, and the type of document such as policy or presentation. Similar to the interview analysis, I developed codes and themes based on Shapiro and Stefkovich's (2021) ethical frames. The documents collected for each district were student handbooks for each school, district bullying and harassment policy, digital citizenship policy, electronic device use policy, discipline policy, and bullying and harassment district training presentation for principals. Furthermore, Tennessee Department of Education documents were analyzed to validate the district leaders' references to the State of Tennessee's Bullying and Harassment Policy and the *Tennessee Bullying and Harassment: An Educator's Guide* (TDOE, 2012).

Trustworthiness

I used Lincoln and Guba's (1985) four criteria, credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability to achieve trustworthiness in my multi-case research study. I achieved credibility through triangulation and member checking. Validation of data and integrity of the research was documented. I used triangulation by collecting data from multiple people and document analysis to collaborate information (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Data triangulation occurred by applying Stake's (2006) multi-case study analysis. The themes from the interview and document analysis were validated by cross-referencing the interview transcripts with the documents referred to by the school and district leaders. I also used member checking to achieve credibility. Peer review and member checking ensured the trustworthiness of the collected data. Member-checking consisted of participants reviewing the findings for accuracy (Seidman, 2019). All participants were sent an informed consent form to date and sign. ZOOM recordings were

transcribed verbatim and used to provide rich descriptions and exact words of the participants.

Secondly, I used transferability to achieve trustworthiness in my multi-case study. This study's research design allowed for a rich and thick description of the findings. The multi-case design used in this research could be applied to another similar study using other sites or districts to further the research related to school leaders' ethical decisions concerning student cyberbullying. Next, I used dependability by soliciting faculty to review my semi-structured interview protocol and a group of school leaders to pilot it. The two school districts used in my study also reviewed and approved my research design. Furthermore, my dissertation chair reviewed my codes and themes to ensure dependability. Finally, confirmability was achieved by reflexivity or determining researcher bias to assess if my own opinions and experiences influenced the research results (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). I used a research journal to control bias and inconsistencies in writing memos and notes during the research process (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Role of the Researcher

Currently, I am the Dean of Student Success at Carson Newman University and a former principal of an online school. My keen interest in ethical decision-making relates to my administrator role and responsibilities within that role. Decision-making is a vital part of a leader's role in running an organization and essential in running a school. Although the school I administered is a non-traditional school, there are similarities in decisions made as an administrator. As a researcher, I need to state my biases, values, and personal background that influence my interpretations (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). I realize that I have my own opinions and views regarding an educational leader's ethical decision-making processes because I was a school administrator. To prevent my bias as an administrator from affecting my research, I had

audit trails of how I collected, analyzed, and recorded data. A researcher must have a well-defined system of gathering qualitative or quantitative data. I used multi-case study approach for the study. Purposeful sampling was used to promote a quality selection of participants.

Interviews were constructed to meet recommended qualitative interviewing standards (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Seidman, 2019). Educational leaders interviewed reviewed their transcripts for errors.

Furthermore, I used a research journal to control bias and inconsistencies in writing memos and notes during the research process (Creswell & Cresswell, 2018). As I wrote down notes, it made me aware of biased ideas or reflections concerning the study. It helped clarify and realize viewpoints, unrelated or too assuming. The journal promoted mindfulness during the study. Documentation of the Institutional Review Board (IRB) steps were documented in the journal. The nature of the multi-case study approach promoted triangulation which was used to control the bias.

Summary of Chapter 3

Through this multi-case study, I documented the experiences and perspectives of educational leaders on their ethical decisions related to student cyberbullying. I specifically focused on how educational leaders process ethical decisions related to student cyberbullying and how the district implements policies within their school districts. I included participants who were school leaders from two Tennessee school districts in middle and high school settings. The data collection consisted of a multi-case study design of qualitative document analysis and online semi-structured interviews. Using ZOOM as the interview platform, I provided a transcription of the recorded interviews. Through peer review, triangulation, and member checking I achieved internal validity. Using similar questions for each participant, I ensured external validity along

with thorough documentation of the findings. I provided a comprehensive analysis of the interviews and documents through a rich discussion of school leaders' decision-making processes related to student cyberbullying and their perceptions concerning their district's implementation of the cyberbullying policies within their school district. Finally, I documented my position and possible bias as a school administrator with similar roles provided transparency.

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

This multi-case study involved two large Tennessee school districts to understand school leaders' experiences and processes related to student cyberbullying. School and district leaders' interviews and district and state documents were used to analyze and develop this study's findings. Documents included student handbooks for each school, district bullying and harassment policy, digital citizenship policy, electronic device use policy, discipline policy, and the district's bullying and harassment training presentation for principals. Furthermore, Tennessee Department of Education documents were analyzed to validate the district leaders' references to the State of Tennessee's Bullying and Harassment Policy and the *Tennessee Bullying and Harassment: An Educator's Guide* (TDOE, 2012).

I included Two Tennessee districts in this multi-case study. I provided a description of each district, including student population, number of schools, number of middle and high schools, and demographic data, percentages of rural, suburban, and urban students, are provided preceding each case's findings. Additionally, I provided a description of the principal's and assistant principals' roles as related to the cyberbullying investigation and district department descriptions that oversee bullying, cyberbullying, and harassment reporting.

I divided each case study's findings into two themes. The first theme, cyberbullying complexities and student support, represents this study's research questions one and two, which ask how school leaders process ethical decisions related to student cyberbullying in two Tennessee districts and the differences between the districts. The second section of each case's findings represent the second theme, cyberbullying policy interpretation and implementation, and answers research question three: how do the various districts interpret and implement their district's cyberbullying policies? In the concluding section of Chapter 4, I provided an

application of this study's framework, Shapiro and Stefkovich's (2021) ethical paradigms to the findings from this study.

Overview of Themes

Tennessee districts follow a strict, state-required bullying and harassment reporting protocol. As outlined in this study's introduction, districts mandate the adherence to their appropriate handling of all bullying and harassment student-related issues and reporting of the case to the appropriate district department. In considering each student-related case, school leaders act as the lead investigators in their school. School leaders reported complexities related to student cyberbullying cases and the need for enhanced student support. After coding and analyzing this study's interviews and documents, I developed two main themes for this study's findings. Theme one, cyberbullying complexities and student support, related to research questions one and two, and had five subthemes related to school leaders' student cyberbullying ethical decision-making: complex technology used in cyberbullying, complex cyberbullying experiences, complex cyberbullying definitions, complex responsibility related to cyberbullying, support for both the cyberbullying victim and bully.

Theme two, related to research questions three, represents the findings involving two large Tennessee school districts to understand school leaders' experiences and processes related to student cyberbullying and district interpretation and implementation of state policy. Findings from understanding district and school leaders' experiences and district documents related to the interpretation and implementation of State of Tennessee Bullying and Harassment policies uncovered four main themes for both districts: district and state support, district training, student training and parent training.

Case One: District One

Context for District One

Case One represented a large Tennessee school district. The district's student population is 58873 and is comprised of 93 schools including 34 middle and high schools. Of the 93 schools in the district, 18% are rural, 31% are suburban, and 51% are urban. The demographics of the district are as follows: 29% of the students are Black, Hispanic/Native American and 67% are White. Within the district, 21% of the students are economically disadvantaged, and 14% are students with disabilities. Principals within each district are tasked with overseeing the implementation of the district bullying, cyberbullying, and harassment policy. This policy includes the investigation and reporting process, student support, and staff, student, and parent training. Assistant principals are tasked with primary investigation responsibilities and enforcing the discipline procedures. The district department for Case One, the Department of School Culture, provides principal training and school leader support regarding investigation and reporting processes. The district is also responsible for collecting all bullying, cyberbullying, and harassment case data and reporting the required information to the Tennessee Department of Education's Civil Rights Department. District One, Case One, had five subthemes related to cyberbullying complexities and student support based on school leaders' perceptions and experiences related to student cyberbullying. The subthemes are: complex technology used in cyberbullying, complex cyberbullying experiences, complex cyberbullying definitions, complex responsibility related to cyberbullying, support for both the cyberbullying victim and bully. Theme Two for District One had four subthemes: district and state support, district training, student training and parent training.

Theme One: Cyberbullying Complexities and Student Support

Complex Technology Used in Cyberbullying

School leaders from District One noted that students use various applications such as Snapchat, TikTok, Google Docs, Instant, Messaging, WhatsApp, and Instagram. Some of these apps complicated the investigation process regarding student-related cyberbullying due to the student's ability to use the application to hide their identity and erase conversations. District electronic usage policies reflect the complicated nature of student technology by regulating the use of personal electronic devices during school hours. *District One Internet Safety Policy* (January 15, 2024) states that it will regulate and promote, "appropriate online behavior, interaction with others while using social networking websites or chat rooms, and awareness of the impact and consequences of cyber-bullying" (p. 1). School leaders reflected that bullying using electronic devices involves several layers of complexity in the investigative process due to the inaccessibility of the evidence.

When asked about his experiences related to student cyberbullying, Carl reveals this complexity by stating, "I don't think anything measures like dealing with any type of cyberbullying situation because it's so muddy and murky." Kim stated, "That's one of the things that makes them so challenging is because it's like managing another universe in a different galaxy where you're like., I think I can see it..." One principal, Lisa, noted that students use fake accounts and even use another student's device to bully. She commented, "They can create fake profiles and then delete it... they can use other people's devices." Allison also notices students creating fake accounts. She reflected, "We are having a hard time proving where it originates, where people have created alternative accounts or accounts, where we can't prove who created

that account.” Lisa further expressed her frustration: “It’s the hide-the-ball aspect of cyberbullying where you’re asked to produce hard evidence.”

School leaders spoke about how students know more about using social media and networking technology than school leadership, staff, and parents. Mike commented, “You know, kids are always one step ahead of school technology as we block one website. And then, they find a chat room, open up a Google Doc, and share it with each other.” Lisa expressed that, “Parents don’t know what they don’t know, and so the kids exploit their ignorance of it. They exploit mine, too, because I don’t know Snapchat very well.” Greg stated,

They’re complicated, too, because, unlike Facebook, some of those platforms only stay up for a certain amount of time. So you put something up there, and then it goes away.

And only if the students do a screenshot, then we can start following that process.

Where traditional bullying identifies a bully and a victim, in cyberbullying, the bully is not easily identified. For example, Susan stated,

I thought it was cyberbullying...where they had taken a picture of a girl with a bunch of food and made fun of the amount of food that she was eating, but it turned out someone else had made it. You can, like, take stuff on the Internet and make it look like someone else is posting it.

School leaders noted the complicated nature of today’s social media technology and how students can use the technology to hide their cyberbullying.

Due to the complicated technology and hidden identities, school leaders must also place much weight of evidence on students’ willingness to tell the truth. Lisa stated, “It’ll be very hard for me to pinpoint it unless I have students who are willing to come forward and tell the truth.”

Nancy also reflected this complexity by stating, “It’s almost like a lot of assumptions have to be

made unless the students are outright willing to tell you it was about this person.” Hence, school leaders noted that cyberbullying investigations are more complex than traditional bullying due to today’s complex technology and students’ ability to use the technology to hide their identities.

Complex Cyberbullying Experiences

School leaders disclosed varied experiences involving cyberbullying including issues related to harassment, discrimination, and sexual harassment. District One’s policy and the district’s principal training presentation note that bullying and harassment using an electronic device or application is labeled as cyberbullying. *The District One Harassment, Intimidation and Bullying or Cyberbullying Policy* (January 15, 2024) states, “Cyber-bullying means bullying undertaken through the use of electronic devices. Harassment, intimidation, or bullying means any act that substantially interferes with a student’s educational benefits, opportunities or performance” (p. 1). Additionally, *District One’s Bullying, Harassment and Title IX Administrative Training Presentation* (June, 2023) notes that,

all principals of middle, junior or highs schools or the principal’s designees shall investigate harassment, intimidation, bullying, or cyber-bullying when a student reports to any principal, teacher, or guidance counselor that physical harm or a threat of physical harm to such student's person or property has occurred. (p. 36).

District One’s school leaders commented on the district’s requirement to uphold the district’s policy and the complications created when cyberbullying is also labeled as harassment.

Some school leaders reflected situations where multiple students were involved in a student’s harassment, and others were more one-to-one. However, even when the situation is between a bully and one victim, there are often bystanders who can add to the witnesses or can be involved in spreading the posts of the bully. Mike reflected on a case regarding multiple

students where the victim did not know that he was being bullied initially. He reflected, “We discovered that there was an Instagram hate page for this student where students were taking videos and sharing it to that Instagram page, or they were taking it from that own students Instagram Page and editing it.” Susan also commented, “A student had taken a picture of an LGBT community student and made a comment on the photo making fun of them...but what made it complicated was that she didn't take the picture but reposted it.” Kim told about an LGBT student’s bullying experience. She said,

And he said, “This kid will not stop calling me gay. I love to cheerlead. It is my passion, and this kid will not leave me alone.” We look into it. I'm like, wow, this is just straight up bullying. That kid never wanted to be around them again. He felt unsafe emotionally.

Nancy spoke about a situation involving a special needs student. She reflected,

A student took a video of another student. Both knew this video was being taken, and the young lady in the video was mocking one of our special needs students...she further victimized the special needs students by posting it to a larger platform.

School leaders discussed these complicated cyberbullying harassment situations and the delicate issues surrounding discrimination of students.

Harassment with an electronic device involves an even more complicated process for the school leader. School leaders discussed that training documents reflected that not only are the school leaders tasked with initiating the difficult steps in reporting the situation, but they must also involve the support of outside services such as the police and the Department of Children’s Services (DCS) as well as the Title IX department from their district when the cyberbullying situation is identified as a sexual harassment issue. The *District One Bullying, Harassment and Title IX Administrative Presentation* (June, 2023) stated that the school leaders in coordination

with district, “determine whether the matter should be referred to DCS or law enforcement” (p. 33). School leaders reflected on the sensitive and complicated nature of a harassment issue. Susan stated, “If it's of a sexual nature, we do a DCS referral, and then DCS determines whether or not it needs to be turned over to law enforcement. When we do a DCS referral, we let our security officer know, and he puts it on law enforcement's radar that this DCS referral has been made.” School leaders reflected that these situations involving sexual harassment, students taking underage nude pictures, become sensitive for all students involved.

Complex Cyberbullying Definitions

District One outlines clear definitions in its bullying, cyberbullying, and harassment policy and principal training presentation, yet school leaders reflected that decision-making regarding cyberbullying definitions can be complicated. Although difficult, defining cyberbullying is a critical part of the investigation. School leaders spoke about the definition's reference to the power imbalance related to cyberbullying. Here are some principals' understanding of the definition. Allison stated, “You know there's an imbalance of power between two parties, and usually, that imbalance occurs over some electronic format, and it is one where students are then creating comments, remarks, which is targeted at a particular another student, and it occurs frequently over time.” Lisa commented, “Overarchingly whether it's cyberbullying or in-person bullying, it has to do with a power differential...one person in this interaction exhibiting signs of trying to gain dominance or power over the other, and you can do that emotionally or physically.”

District One Harassment, Intimidation and Bullying or Cyberbullying Policy (January 15, 2024) states, “Cyber-bullying means bullying undertaken through the use of electronic devices. Harassment, intimidation, or bullying means any act that substantially interferes with a student's

educational benefits, opportunities or performance” (p. 1). *District One Bullying, Harassment, and Title IX Administration Training Presentation* (June, 2023) notes the district’s cyberbullying definition as stated in the district’s bullying and harassment policy while further clarifying the definition of bullying. The district’s presentation states,

Bullying behavior is often about having power and control over another person. In bullying there is often a power imbalance between those involved, with power defined as elevated social status, being physically larger, or a group against an individual. Students who bully perceive their target as vulnerable in some way, and often find satisfaction in harming them” (p. 16).

School leaders use the district’s cyberbullying and bullying definitions when determining if the case should be reported as bullying.

School leaders reflected that most bullying and harassment situations had some form of electronic device being used by the bully. District One requires school leaders to document if the harassment and bullying occurred using an electronic device. School leaders also noted the fact that determining if it was cyberbullying based on the policy’s definition is difficult due to the complicated nature of the electronic device. Carl reflected, “If you get to the point where you determine that there's been very clear bullying. It took a lot of work to get there.” Nancy questioned, “So are we going to say bullying that if it happens more than once. or things that have been going on verbally, and then it happens one time over social media...would you classify that as bullying?”

Sometime school leaders feel like situations are classified as bullying or cyberbullying, yet they do not meet the definition. Barry commented, “So I feel like bullying is a big buzzword. And it's often from my experience thus far, it's often mislabeled by parents and the student.”

Nancy further reflected on the Buzzword. She stated, “Sometimes I think we're quick to go to the bullying category just because I feel like that's the new B word bullying.” However, school leaders must investigate all reports of suspected bullying and make sure they meet the district’s definition. Mary confirmed that principals are tasked with verifying if it is truly cyberbullying. She said, “There is a process to the investigation, we will talk to students...talk to this person, and that person will try to decide was it harassment and cyberbullying.” Mike said, “We have to do our due diligence to figure it out. Do we feel that this it is bullying in this case?”

Complex Responsibility Related to Cyberbullying

District One school leaders noted that cyberbullying cases differ from traditional bullying cases due to the complicated issue of how the bullying occurs, which is usually outside the school setting due to the cyber setting. Despite the complexity of cyberbullying occurring off campus, school leaders and the district’s bullying and harassment policy stated they must investigate the situation if cyberbullying is reported and affects the student's learning environment. *District One District One’s Harassment, Intimidation and Bullying or Cyberbullying Policy* (January 15, 2024) states,

Harassment, intimidation, or bullying means any act that substantially interferes with a student’s education benefits, opportunities or performance; and: B) If the act takes place off school property or outside of a school-sponsored activity, it is directed specifically at a student or students and has the effect of creating a hostile education environment or otherwise creating a substantial disruption to the education environment or learning process (p. 1).

School leaders reflected the difficulties in dealing with parents and students as they navigate the responsibilities related to cyberbullying. Tom stated, “I think one of the things that

we deal with when it comes to cyberbullying is, was it at school? Was it during school? Was it on a school device versus did it happen at home?” Furthermore, Greg reflected, “The boundaries and the jurisdiction of school gets kind of tricky. For example, if a student posts something on social media during the weekend, the expectation is that the school does something about it.”

Susan also commented,

If it happens outside of school, but it interferes with the day-to-day education, business of education, then they could have consequences, and we have to address it at school, and that that's a little hard for parents because they think, “Oh, they didn't do it at school. So why are you dealing with it?”

Nancy said,

If someone makes a post while it's 9 p.m.... in their own home. The student says, “I have a right to do that. I'm in my own home.” I will tell the students. You're right. You do. But once that impacts the school day. Now it's a school violation.

School leaders noted that the parent’s versus school leader’s responsibility was a difficult cyberbullying issue that complicated the investigation process.

Support for both the Cyberbullying Victim and Bully

District One school leaders emphasized the safety and support of the victims as the top priority in providing student support. If a cyberbullying situation is reported by the victim, a bystander or a parent, the situation is taken seriously and must be entered into the school’s Aspen portal to begin the process of confirming and investigating the case within 48 hours. *District One Harassment, Intimidation and Bullying or Cyberbullying Policy* (January 15, 2024) states,

Students who feel they are being harassed, bullied or intimidated may report this concern to any teacher or school administrator or the office of the Superintendent.... All school

employees are required to report alleged violations of this policy to the principal or the principal's designee for investigation and appropriate action. Once a report is received, the principal or his or her designee must initiate an investigation within forty-eight (48) hours for student well-being unless the need for additional time is appropriately documented (p.2).

Tammy said, "Any threat that a student makes, whether toward an individual student or the school in general, whether it's something where we think might be like a student joking around... we do a threat assessment every single time." Mike further reflected, "We encourage all of our students to come in and share any kind of concern, and they know that they're going to be supported through that process."

Additionally, school leaders reported that parents or students often come to them without a bully name due to the hidden nature of cyberbullying, yet the school leader is required to report and support the victim. Kim shared,

But they didn't have a name. They didn't have any specific behaviors. They didn't have any information. We were kind of stuck between this rock and a hard place, because they said, "Our kid is talking about self-harm because you are not keeping him safe." But here at school we couldn't see it.

Many times, the victim would need to be moved from their current class and sometimes even transferred to a different school for comfort and safety from the cyberbullying situation. Mary reflected, "We would try to find pathways to either bring peace or peaceful separation with the students involved." Allison said, "And no matter what, we're always coming up with a particular safety plan." Tammy stated, "We won't put them in the same class. We'll try to have them with a different teacher." School leaders even mentioned a restraining order against the

bully to keep the victim safe inside their school. Kim stated, “We've also had where one student will have an order of protection against another student.”

School leaders deal with unraveling hidden lives that students want to keep undercover. District One principals often find themselves wrestling with how to best support the students yet keep their identity and secrets safe. Furthermore, the inclusion of law enforcement often complicates the investigation process but does not remove the liability of the school to create a safety plan. Susan said, “We're having to create a safety plan. But we also can't really talk too much because there's an investigation going on. And so you really have to work in tandem with the police.” *District One's Bullying, Harassment, and Title IX Administration Training Presentation* (June, 2023) notes that if the cyberbullying is designated as sexual harassment then, “the school leaders must notify the district's law enforcement officer and initiate an investigation that does not interfere with law enforcement” (p. 45).

In addition to the victim's safety, District One's school leaders provide support through counseling for the victim. School leaders noted that often students who have experienced cyberbullying deal with increased anxiety and low self-confidence which can affect their interaction with students and teachers and their academic performance. Each school has professional counselors who are experienced in dealing with distressed students and provide them with support through cyberbullying situations. Carl mentioned that his school has school counselors and counselors from a professional counseling center that provide services and support for their students. Kim reflected that, “Whenever I have a situation where I know a kid is gonna experience, or I think a kid might experience some emotional turmoil, I have a school counselor with me.” Principals talked about working with a team of counselors to help restore

the victim. Mike mentioned, “We have to create a plan in place for the victims. We work with all kinds of different people. So that's the restorative team, our counseling department.”

District One school leaders also talked about providing restorative counseling services for the bully through their school counselors or outside counselors. The district’s discipline policy outlines the consequences of student cyberbullying which considers them a level 4 behavior and C,D, or E intervention response. The *District One Discipline Policy* (January 15, 2024) states,

Level C: administrator may assign an alternate learning location within the school for up to three (3) days OR one (1) to four (4) days of out of school suspension; Level D: administrator may assign five (5) to ten (10) days of out of school suspension; and Level E: administrator may assign eleven (11) to forty-five (45) days of out of school suspension” (pp. 3-5).

School leaders stated that they must deal with the appropriate discipline response, but they also strive to care for the bully by recommending counseling services. Greg commented,

Everyone involved has access to or is referred to the school counselor... We also utilize a restorative learning process... so we could get the bully to recognize their behaviors and bring to attention how that is impacting the other student or the school environment.

District One’s Discipline Policy also states that “upon a student reentering the school Level C recommends restorative practices, and level D and E require restorative practices” (pp. 4-5).

School leaders’ comments noted care for their students as a priority.

Theme Two: District Implementation and Interpretation

District and State Support

District One supports school leaders and their students in processing bullying and harassment cases by first recognizing the need for a robustly staffed department that supports

school culture. This department guides and trains school leaders on navigating the state bullying and harassment policy which details the appropriate procedure for documenting, investigating, supporting students, and training on all things related to bullying and harassment. District One's leader stated that her department not only follows the district's policy and state's requirements but also uses the State of Tennessee's guide, *Bullying and Harassment: An Educator's Guide for Addressing Bullying and Harassment Complaints in Tennessee* (TDOE, 2012). The district leader reflected that the State of Tennessee provides general guidance in following the State's policy on Bullying and Harassment within the guide but does not provide additional training on supporting school leaders in processing types of bullying cases, such as cases related to students with special needs. Joyce commented, "I haven't found really good guidance on additional supports and implementation structures. I have nationally gone to ... a legal conference for special education where they have talked about bullying and harassment not specific to Tennessee."

The district leader also reflected the State policy mainly addresses bullying in its most extreme form. It does not talk about students having conflict or being mean to each other. At the time of this study, District One was implementing a policy to help further define a lesser level of bullying, peer conflict, to help school leaders deal with students and the discipline issue related to the "middle ground" of bullying. *District One Bullying, Harassment, and Title IX Administration Presentation* (June, 2023) states,

Peer Conflict is not considered bullying when individuals with no perceived imbalance of power have an argument, disagreement or fight. Examples may include, not liking someone, isolated expressions of unpleasant thoughts or feelings regarding others, single

act of telling a joke about someone, accidentally bumping into someone, or incidents of exclusion.

Joyce stated,

It was either bullying or not bullying...there was no middle ground. There wasn't anything that said these kids are just not getting along. So we went back and put in a peer conflict discipline code. A child can develop that mindset, that they are a victim when they are really not. They're just part of being engaged in a disagreement.

District processes include defining bullying and making sure the principal understands how the district interprets bullying. Joyce commented that principals understanding how to identify cyberbullying situations is critical in beginning the investigation process and adhering to the state guidelines. She said, "And we really talk a lot about the difference between in the initial section rude, mean and bullying. Do you know what rude is? Do you know what mean is? And do you know what bullying is?... and use those as part of our process to identify whether it actually is bullying."

School leaders in District One also commented that there is also some confusion with students and parents related to defining bullying. Kim commented on confusion among students and the importance of making sure the situation meets the cyberbullying definition since the investigative process is so lengthy.

So we've had to do a lot of education for kids around the definition... Yes, it's hurtful.

But does it meet the definition? ... the steps that we have to go to for something that we suspect is legitimate bullying versus something that might be fixable within the relationship with a restorative interventionist or a counselor or a supportive service.

Greg reflected on the need to educate staff, students, and parents about the correct definition of bullying. He said, “We wanna teach students and definitely parents the differences...a lot of times we find that rude behavior or mean behavior is being coined as bullying.”

District One’s bullying and harassment policy clearly states the guidelines of how to address bullying and harassment within their district as directed by district policy. The district implemented a special software system that school leaders, staff, teachers, and parents can use to report incidents of bullying which are then documented by the district. Joyce discussed that the software application takes the school leaders through the district required process which includes the 2016 timeline update of 48 hours to report the incident into the district system. *District One’s District One Harassment, Intimidation and Bullying or Cyberbullying Policy* (January 15, 2024) states, “Once a report is received, the principal or his or her designee must initiate an investigation within forty-eight (48) hours for student well-being unless the need for additional time is appropriately documented” (p. 3). Joyce commented,

So it's a double-edged sword because it means that our documentation is pretty accurate in the timing and following of compliance laws. But we're holding ourselves to this, where there is no room for fudging anything because it's timestamped when they started their investigation...they all have to be done within those 48 hours.

The district leader reflected that she is responsible for making sure the schools are in compliance with district policy.

School leaders commented on the thoroughness of the reporting process in the software application but expressed frustration over the strict 48-hour timeline required since cyberbullying incidents are often reported at the end of a school day on Friday yet must be documented by Sunday evening. Mary, a middle school principal, commented, “The more important thing is that

you address it within 24 to 48 hours ...there are laws in place that these investigations need to be started.” Another middle school assistant principal, Barry, reflected that he had a timeline issue and the district questioned him about the situation requesting that he document his reason for waiting beyond the required 48 hour window. He commented, “I got in a little bit of an issue last year where one was put in the Thursday before Good Friday, and it was put in at 3:40pm. I didn’t know about it, or look till Monday or till Tuesday.” Joyce also commented on this type of situation when cyberbullying occurs on a Friday but is not reported until Monday. She said, “I’m on them all the time to say you have until Sunday afternoon. If it’s a Friday, you have till Sunday.” District leaders support the principals in documenting and following this process by explaining how to document the reasons why they were not able to report it within 48 hours to make sure they are in district compliance. For example, if the principal started the process on Friday but did not put it into the computer until Monday morning.

Part of the district process is notifying the parent immediately and providing them with information concerning the availability of counseling and support services. District principal training documents detail the process. *District One Bullying, Harassment and Title IX Administrative Training Presentation* (June, 2023) documents that school leaders, “shall immediately inform the parent or legal guardian of student involved and inform them of the availability of counseling and support services” (p. 37). Furthermore, *District One Bullying, Harassment and Title IX Administrative Training Presentation* (June, 2023) documents that after notifying the parent, the principal continues the investigation process, which includes several steps that include: “the complaint intake, evidence gathering and evaluation, and the report” (p. 45). The training documents reflected that appropriate steps and procedures should be taken to protect and support the student.

District Training

The district leader emphasized the inclusion of the district processes within the principal training presentation, *District One Bullying, Harassment and Title IX Administrative Presentation* (June, 2023), required at the beginning of each school year. The analysis of the district's training presentation documented this finding. The principals also mentioned the required training and how it has been helpful in the understanding of the district procedures and policies. Mary discussed, "So we'll do morning or summer principal meetings, and they'll go through all these policies... we always go through the policies." Principals commented on training from school culture and Title IX. Kim reflected, "We receive yearly training on policy regarding bullying, harassment .and Title IX... and they're quite lengthy." Allison commented on trainings from the office of school culture related to bullying and harassment, Title IX, and law enforcement, related to sexual harassment. She said,

So we receive that training yearly so annually at our principals institute that occurs at the beginning of each school year. That's usually given by the law department from Knox County schools, and then the appropriate title IX and we also have an office of school culture."

District policies and procedures mentioned in the training documents and the districts harassment policy emphasize the determination of whether the cyberbullying incident should be referred to the appropriate district coordinator. The *District One Harassment Policy* (January 15, 2024) states,

Victims of harassment shall report these conditions to the immediate supervisor of the offending person (or to the teacher or counselor), the building level administrator, the Director of Human Resources, or the Office of the Superintendent. The first person in the

supervisory chain shall also report these conditions to Title IX, Title VI, 504 and ADA Coordinator. Confidentiality shall be maintained, and no reprisals or retaliation shall occur as a result of good faith reporting of charges of harassment (p. 1).

A case might be referred to the Title VI department if it involves a discrimination case based on gender, race, or 504 if based on disability.

Furthermore, the district instructs principals on who to interview, how to interview the parties and witnesses, how to document the interview, inclusion of witnesses, review of discipline files or prior investigation or complaints, and how to collect evidence such as web pages, and cellphone records. Training documents and presentations include Tenn. Code Ann. § 49-6-4503 (2023) verbatim and the district board policy on harassment, intimidation and bullying or cyberbullying also include the clear references to Tenn. Code Ann. § 49-6-4503 (2023) ensuring clarity for compliance by district and school leaders.

The district's policy clearly states the requirement of respecting the rights of the victim. Parents and the victim are made aware that they have a right for the victim to remain anonymous. The *District One Harassment, Intimidation and Bullying or Cyberbullying Policy* (January 15, 2024) states, "Students may report anonymously, and anonymous reports will be treated with the same level of urgency as all other reports" (p. 3). However, the obligation to investigate the case remains, yet anonymity could limit the principal's ability to adequately handle the cyberbullying issue. School leaders mentioned the issue of supporting the victim or bystander who reported the cyberbullying incident and protecting their confidentiality. Mike reflected on protecting the students in this way,

Any student can come in and share, you know any kind of concern, and they know that they're going to be supported through that process. And they're going to remain

confidential. We're not going to share their information. They're not going to be called the snitch when they return back to class.

Nancy also noted that the students' anonymity is extremely important.

We never put the students in the same office. When we're getting statements that way, they feel free that they can share what they want. We let them know that their statement is never shared. And if we discuss that we leave their name out, we protect their identity.

District training as reflected in the district's administrative training presentation promotes supporting and protecting the student as a priority.

According to *District One Harassment, Intimidation and Bullying or Cyberbullying Policy* (January 15, 2024), principals are required to train their staff on district requirements and guidelines. Mary commented, "I take the district's PowerPoint, which is usually incredibly lengthy, and has a whole lot of stuff on it, and I will narrow it down to the parts that really deal with what we're talking about." Allison also uses the district's presentation to train her staff. She stated, "There's a presentation that the district has that they train principals on, and then they make that available to us. And then we use that with our staff members." Tom takes the district's bullying and harassment presentation and added additional slides to relate to his school and staff. The district leader mentioned that principals are asked to share the district presentation with the staff and teachers. Lisa reflected, "So the principals get it first, and then I pay that forward to the teachers."

Student Training and Prevention

As part of the District One's prevention and student training program related to cyberbullying, all students are required to participate in a digital citizenship program and digitally sign that they have read and understand the district's digital citizenship requirements.

District One Internet Safety Policy (January 15, 2024) states, “Students will receive instruction in the safe and responsible use of the Internet as a part of any instruction using devices that provide access to the Internet” (p. 1). Principals discussed the internet safety and digital citizenship lessons at their schools. Lisa mentioned,

We actually do a digital literacy lesson. This is school wide. So there are different lessons per grade level on how to be digitally responsible. This is a requirement actually for our district that we have to do a digital citizenship and responsibility lesson with our students every year.

School Leaders also commented on the lessons they provide their students in addition to their digital citizenship training. Mary commented that her teachers provide advisory lessons on cyberbullying and social emotional learning.

So there will always be portions of bullying and cyberbullying within those advisory lessons, and then we try to extend that beyond by first building a culture safety and family within each home room, each advisory class. But also, then we'll extend those lessons to go into the more social emotional aspects of just life in general communication.

Tammy also commented on going over the student handbook with the students' counselors discuss bullying and harassment in the student's advisory lessons. Additionally, Barry commented, “We do let them know at the beginning of the year that there are suspendable offenses...like harassment based on race or bullying based on race. We say you gotta be very mindful, and your words can get you suspended.”

The majority District One's school leaders emphasized responsible student communication.

Parent Training

District One's leader responsible for bullying and harassment was asked about parent training. Joyce said, "So typically they put out the bullying and harassment policies and different things on their website." The district also includes a link to the parent portion of the bullying and harassment training to help parents clearly understand the definition of bullying, harassment, and cyberbullying in their district. Joyce emphasized the importance of making sure that the definition of bullying is clearly stated to comply with the State of Tennessee policy mandating the timely and accurate reporting of bullying and harassment. Joyce discussed the need for more documents that helped districts train parents in bullying, cyberbullying, and harassment. She commented, "If the State could give us something that we could put out to parents because they have put the responsibility back on us. And the problem is that it's not necessarily a school-based issue, only it's a societal issue."

School leaders in the district mentioned the need for further parent training from the district to help clarify bullying and cyberbullying. They also expressed the need for more parent training on how to help their students stay safe on the internet. Carl commented,

What we end up dealing with more often is the perceptions of parents. Frankly, we should probably do a better job of educating them early on, because the training that I talked about earlier definitely applies to all staff and all students.

Greg also felt like parents need more training on the definition of bullying. "We wanna teach students and definitely parents the differences. A lot of times we find that rude behavior or mean behavior is being coined as bullying."

Some school leaders discussed providing workshops on bullying for parents. Barry commented, "Our guidance counselor, set up a bullying 101 and a mental health workshop for

parents from 5 to 7 in our auditorium.” Tammy reflected, “In the spring and we have a parent grade level meeting that we will start the night with. So there's 4 separate meetings... and they do talk about it briefly there. Then we also have the information online.”

School leaders reflected that training happens in one-on-one meeting with the parent of the bully or victim. Allison shared that,

When I am dealing with these investigations, I also encourage parents...get on your kids social media. Look at it. You know you need to be keeping tabs on this. This is a great conversation for you all to have at home tonight, and also navigate this process with us. Susan reflected, “We have those individual conversations with parents and we kind of go over with them like what the definition of bullying is on those one-on-one cases.” Barry said that he reinforces with parents in one-on-one meetings, “You need to know who their friends are. You need to know what they're doing and saying on social media.”

School leaders in District One encouraged parents to monitor their children and take responsibility for their social media habits.

Case Two: District Two

Context for District Two

Case Two represented a large Tennessee school district. The district’s student population is 77,479 and is comprised of 153 schools including 48 middle and high schools. Of the 153 schools in the district, 10% are rural, 5% are suburban, and 85% are urban. The demographics of the district are as follows: 71% of the students are Black, Hispanic/Native American and 25% are White. Within the district, 35% of the students are economically disadvantaged, and 12% are students with disabilities. Principals within District Two are tasked with overseeing the implementation of the district bullying, cyberbullying, and harassment policy. This policy

includes the investigation and reporting process, student support, and staff, student, and parent training. Assistant principals in District Two are also tasked with primary investigation responsibilities and enforcing the discipline procedures. The district department for District Two, Title IX, provides principal training for bullying, cyberbullying, and harassment and school leader support regarding harassment investigations and reporting processes. All District Two bullying and cyberbullying cases not involving harassment issues are handled by the district's Discipline Department. The district's Title IX Department is also responsible for collecting all bullying, cyberbullying, and harassment case data and reporting the required information to the Tennessee Department of Education's Civil Rights Department. District Two, Case Two, five subthemes related to cyberbullying complexities and student support based on school leaders' perceptions and experiences related to student cyberbullying. The subthemes are: complex technology used in cyberbullying, complex cyberbullying experiences, complex cyberbullying definitions, complex responsibility related to cyberbullying, support for both the cyberbullying victim and the bully. Theme Two for District Two had four subthemes: district and state support, district training, student training and parent training.

Theme One: Cyberbullying Complexities and Student Support

Complex Technology Used in Cyberbullying

District electronic usage policies reflect the complicated nature of students' technology by regulating the use of personal electronic devices during school hours. *District Two School Use of Electronic Devices Policy* (January 15, 2024) states, "A student may possess a cellular telephone or other personal technology on school property and may use such technology during lunch and transition times. Use of personal technology during instructional periods is generally prohibited" (p. 1).

School leaders from District Two described the complexities related to students' use of various electronic devices such as school-issued laptops, cell phones, and the social media applications used on these devices. For example, Regina stated,

And now we're in this era where every student has a school-provided laptop, which means that although we have security at school, when they go home, you know they can access their household Internet and be able to get on any site that they choose.

Doug conferred, "I think it's one of our biggest problems. Sometimes they get on another student's phone and log in to whatever social media platform to do some of that exchange or do it from another person's account or have multiple accounts." Will said, "Cyberbullying is hard to monitor because we don't monitor their social media...one of the barriers with cyberbullying is that a lot of kids don't use their real name as the username." Tricia reflected, "Students make fake accounts and bully others through those fake accounts. We've even had to contact the actual social media platforms during the investigation so that we can conduct just a fair and valid investigation." Frank said, "To really go through a phone and different apps and really find out everything that we need to find out... a lot of those things we're not able to do, depending on the way that the phone is set up or the way the apps are set up." Victor stated, "If a student has an emotional need or a social need. They want to take that out in a negative way. There's nothing you can proactively do to stop it while they have access to those applications." Additionally, Regina said, "Saying something online about someone else, they don't realize that once you put that out there, it's going to millions of people."

One specific application, Snapchat, was mentioned by several principals as being quite difficult during the investigation process. Will said, "The feature about Snapchat...they will

disappear within 24 hours. So, a lot of times kids will post something, and then by the time it gets to us, it is no longer there.” Victor commented,

Snapchat was a problem in the fact that they thought that it just disappeared forever. So they were anonymous. So, every time they would snap with their friends, then they would snap with other people. There were some fights that got started. The frustrating thing about it was that the victims themselves didn't know how to empower themselves to stop the cyberbullying cause.

Frank said, “They've taking videos of one another. And then, after the relationship changes, they start sharing different things... sharing them across different platforms or frame groups. So, all those things kind of make the things more complex.”

Hence, District Two's school leaders reflected on the complexities of the technology and the problems the technology can cause in the investigation.

Complex Cyberbullying Experiences

District Two school leaders commented on their complicated experiences related to cyberbullying and shared some of their stories and frustrations. One prevalent frustration among several school leaders was the extensive amount of time and workforce it takes to investigate cyberbullying. Tricia reflected, “The investigation of cyberbullying consumes a lot of your time, a lot of school time.” Doug also reflected, “It can take days straight off your plate, and waiting for families, then spending the intentional time with them and hearing them out.” Sheila noted that the investigation is very involved. She stated, “In that system is 14 pages, and we click into it, and we put in the information of who brought it to our attention, what the incident was...and then, behind the scenes, we're having conversations where we're meeting with the student.” Frank further expressed, “The fact is that it's so much manpower that has to go into trying to

figure out.” Will said, “It is a lot for us to carry as administrators and people in the building to navigate and to be helping supervise and gather data or evidence.” District Two bullying and harassment policies and training presentations also noted the detailed reporting process for school leaders. *District Two’s Reporting and Investigating Bullying, Cyber Bullying, Harassment, Discrimination, Intimidation, and Hazing Policy* (January 15, 2024) states, “The principal/designee at each school shall be responsible for investigating and resolving complaints. 20 Once a report is received, the principal/designee shall initiate an investigation within forty-eight (48) 21 hours of receipt of the report” (p.1).

Other cyberbullying experiences involved several schools, multiple students within a school, and the complex issue related to sexual harassment. One principal noted that some experiences involved students and administrators from other schools. Regina said,

A student shared a video of a student doing something inappropriate. And they just showed it to a couple of friends at school. Well, those friends have friends at other schools. So now we're dealing with administrators at another school, trying to make sure those consequences are equal.

Sheila reflected,” A child put some information on social media about a kid...then two other children came back to the school with that information and started taunting the kid.” Victor shared, “You would have a lot of people taking photos of one another...putting them on social media kind of editing the photos or drawing on the photos, and then sharing with their friends or sharing on their feeds or sending direct messages.”

Additionally, sexual harassment is a very delicate Title IX cyberbullying situation for today’s school leader. Tricia said,” Some scholars, and students posted a picture of a naked person and put the face of one of the current students on it. We had to get DCS involved.”

Furthermore, *District Two Reporting and Investigating Bullying, Cyber Bullying, Harassment, Discrimination, Intimidation, and Hazing Policy* (January 15, 2024) states, “When there is a finding of harassment and/or discrimination involving a protected class, the principal/designee must submit the completed investigation packet to the appropriate Civil Rights Coordinator (listed on page 2) within 24 hours upon the investigation’s conclusion” (p. 4).

Complex Cyberbullying Definitions

District Two school leaders expressed the complex nature of cyberbullying and the interpretation of the definition of bullying given the tangled situations can be difficult to discern. Students often do not understand the consequences of their actions and often school leaders must discern intentions of the bully to understand if it truly meets the definition of bullying. *District Two Student Discrimination, Harassment, Bullying, Cyberbullying, and Intimidation Policy* (January 15, 2024) states,

Bullying/Intimidation/Harassment” is an act that substantially interferes with a student’s educational 17 benefits, opportunities, or performance, and the act has the effect of: 1. Physically harming a student or damaging a student’s property; 2. Knowingly placing a student in reasonable fear of physical harm to the student or damage to 21 the student’s property; 3. Causing emotional distress to a student; or 4. Creating a hostile educational environment (p. 1).

Some school leaders commented on students immaturity using social media and the meaning or motive gets misinterpreted. Victor said, “In the hands of these students that have not yet fully developed their social skills...it's gonna create a problem and disparity between the two students.” Will said, “Many of the issues in high school start with social media. Somebody

posted something indirectly, or somebody posted something directly, and it's misinterpreted. I say 90 to 95% of high school drama begins on some social media platform.”

School leaders stated that all cyberbullying must be taken seriously and reported to the district. Sheila expressed, “When you hear the word bullying, you go, Oh, my! Because it can be serious, you have to submit it... my rule of thumb is I don't make that decision. I let the district make that decision.” Sometimes students report bullying, yet after investigating, it doesn't truly meet the definition according to the district policy. Will said, “A kid will openly report that something's going on and that being bullied, and then, when you investigate, you find out, both sides are saying something or doing something to each other.” District Two's school leaders reflected that it is sometimes difficult to determine if the students are involved in cyberbullying or just being mean to each other.

Complex Responsibility Related to Cyberbullying

District Two school leaders talked about dealing with cyberbullying situations that infiltrate their school yet occur outside of their school. Regina commented, "Although we have the security at school when they go home, they can access their household Internet and be able to get on any site that they choose...it's really something that we have had to stay ahead of the curve.” Doug talked about how students hide behind their technology at home to make threats to other students and parents don't know about it. He commented,

When students are home, and when students are on their devices, the things that they'll say, the threats that they'll make, the claims that they'll make, the way that they will speak to one another is just not very well supervised by parents.

District Two's bullying and harassment policy and training presentation also reflected the requirement of school leaders to investigate occurrences of cyberbullying even if they happen

outside of the school yet affect a student's learning environment during school hours. *District Two Student Discrimination, Harassment, Bullying, Cyberbullying, and Intimidation Policy* (January 15, 2024) states,

If the act takes place off of school property or outside of a school-sponsored activity, this policy is in effect if the conduct is directed specifically at a student and has the effect of creating a hostile educational environment or otherwise creating a substantial disruption to the education environment or learning process (p. 1).

School leaders also expressed their desire for parents to oversee their children's cell phone and social media usage. Frank talked about parents' responsibility for their students' cell phones. He said, "When you give them a phone, it is like giving them a car; you are sharing responsibility." Sheila also expressed the need for parents to oversee their children's cell phone activity to curtail unwanted social media interactions such as cyberbullying. Sheila expressed,

And so, if I'm in this building, and it is reported to me, I am going to follow it to the letter of the law, because that's what I'm responsible for. I tell my parents that I don't police social media or cell phones. So, Mom, if you're paying for that phone, then you might want to police it.

District Two's school leaders commented on the need for parents to oversee their children's cell phone and internet use at home.

Support for both the Cyberbullying Victim and Bully

District Two school leaders focus on the safety and support of their students who have been involved in cyberbullying situations. Overall school leaders reflected on the need to provide options and opportunities for a safe school environment. One of the options school leaders noted was stay away agreements. Will tells students, "If any time you feel unsafe, or if any time you

see something that you deemed unsafe, please let me know.” He further noted that sometimes students of cyberbullying need a stay away agreement. He would inform the teacher not to put the students together. Doug commented, “We have discussions and safety plans with the victim and their family. I tell them if anything is said to you, if you're addressed in any way, you need to notify us immediately.” Sheila also expressed the need to separate the students. She stated, “That is when I'll start looking at their schedules to make sure that they do not have the same classes or lunch schedule.” Doug also commented, “When interviewing students, they need to ensure the student’s safety.”

School leaders are responsible for referring cyberbullying victims to counseling. *District Two’s Student Discrimination, Harassment, Bullying, Cyberbullying, and Intimidation Policy* (January 15, 2024) states, “Students involved in an act of discrimination, harassment, intimidation, bullying, or cyber-bullying shall be referred to the appropriate school counselor by the principal/designee when deemed necessary” (p. 2). School leaders in District Two reflected that cyberbullying victim and bully support involved school counselors and outside service organizations providing emotional and academic support to students involved in cyberbullying situations. Regina stated, “I think now we're seeing that it's also again around this cyberbullying, social media Internet stuff that we're having to support them socially and emotionally.” Victor talked about collaborative referrals for the victim and the offender, which go through the school counselor and the counseling district department to set up counseling within the district or outside of the district. He said “Because what always happens is if a student is behaving in this way, they need something. They're missing something right? They're trying to get validation through whatever it is that they're doing.” Tricia shared, “We submit what we call in metro schools a collaborative referral, meaning that we are recommending that this student receive

some type of social work support.” She also commented on asking the victim to tell her some things that will help them have a better experience at school.

School leaders reflected on the complexity of supporting cyberbullying victims. Frank suggested that supporting the student is sometimes complex. He said, “Sometimes they can get into moral things. If I if I share this information, is it something that the student may not want to be sharing with the parent, or sharing with other people?” Regina also expressed complexity when trying to support students across schools,

It really caused kind of a school-wide pandemic, trying to deal with the different levels of students that were affected, different schools that were affected. How do we protect students when a kid at another school can easily go online and just start talking badly about another student? I mean, it's not bullying within our own building. It's someone else's kid that is bullying our kid.

School leaders reflected that cyberbullying causes complex issues that involve multiple schools and multiple school leaders.

School leaders and the district’s bullying and harassment policy also noted that the district process provides the primary means for student support since it focuses on protecting the victim by first notifying their parents. This parent notification, in turn, will allow the parent to then begin providing support to their child. *District Two Student Discrimination, Harassment, Bullying, Cyberbullying, and Intimidation Policy* (January 15, 2024) states,

The principal/designee shall immediately notify the parent(s)/guardian(s) when a student is involved in an act of discrimination, harassment, intimidation, bullying, or cyber-bullying. The principal/designee shall provide information on district counseling and support services (p. 2).

Tricia noted that the school has multiple support levels available for the victim and the bully. She said, “So we have social workers. We have the stars counselor. We have our restorative practice assistance.” Regina commented, “Cyberbullying can seriously affect another student's mental being, their ability to progress in their classes academically. But then also, they're just well-being at a school.”

School leaders in District Two reflected on the difficult task of providing support for all students involved, including not only the victim but all students involved in the bullying directly or indirectly. Regina said, “And so now, we're bringing in social workers, counselors and trying to not only assist the students who are directly involved, but their peers also, who are also being affected by the emotions of the other students that were involved.” Due to the complex nature of technology, supporting the students involved in cyberbullying can involve several students needing support.

School leaders also commented on the problematic issue of documenting and deciding on the consequences for student bullying. Based on the situation, a district leader overseeing discipline becomes involved in the decision-making regarding student discipline. Frank said, “At a certain point, you know, we lose control of the situation. When it is a zero-tolerance offense, we have very little control on the school level, how to deal with it on their part, or the adjudication of it.” Regina reflected, “How do we document and fairly distribute those consequences?” Will further commented, “I said, if it is determined bullying, we'll follow the discipline matrix to determine the fairness of the consequence and support needed.”

Another way school leaders expressed support for all the students is by expressing necessity of contacting all involved students' parents so the parent can become involved and provide their child the support they need. Regina said, “We contact all the families, whether they

are a victim, a witness, or the aggressor. We wanna make sure that families know so that they can support at home.” Multi-tiered student support was also discussed, providing student support through a home visit, social worker, or collaborative referral. Regina reflected,

Sometimes it's just that they need to check in daily, or there's something behaviorally going on that's more serious that we need to spend a little bit more time kind of figuring out psychologically what's going on to prevent a cyberbullying type of situation.

Victor said, “We bring that to the table of our multi-tiered system support meetings...so we can try to figure out how we can connect with the student to get them what it is that they need, or what is that they're missing.”

Restorative practices were mentioned as a possibility but were not usually implemented in a cyberbullying situation due to safety concerns with the victim. However, some school leaders mentioned restorative practices between the victim and the bully. Tricia commented, “We've even had restorative circles with the offender and the victim.” She further reflected, “I don't think people understand the emotional impact of cyberbullying... because now it can be shared with millions of people, and it can have a lasting impact on your future because it's just out there.” School leaders discussed having reset centers and peace centers for students involved in conflict. They said that victims and bullies do not often involve restorative conversation. Sheila suggested, “But if they wanna make peace, they have the peace center where they can go and make peace. Because I do try to tell them we're in this world together, and we have to learn how to get along.” However, restorative practices are required for the bully. Will also mentioned the schools reset program to allow students to isolate yet continue with their academics which “helps them self-reflect on their behavior.”

District Two’s discipline policies and procedures provide districts with a detailed list of infractions and discipline options for school leaders based on the severity of the issue. The district’s discipline policy documents that cyberbullying offenses fall within levels C, D, and E, which give leaders choices when analyzing the discipline procedure and support used to give fair and equal justice to the bully. Listed in the districtwide student handbook, *District Two Discipline Tables* (District Two, January 15, 2024) state,

Using technology, including, but not limited to email, cell phones, voicemails, texts, photos, video messages, instant messaging, defamatory websites, social networking sites, online personal polling sites or journals to bully another student (p.1).

These offenses are listed as C, D, and E level offenses which require different levels of suspension based on the severity of the offense.

School leaders in District Two reflected their desire for fairness yet just enforcement of the discipline procedures and support services to provide for the best interests of the student committing the bullying. Frank said, “I feel like we need to really educate these students on the consequences of what some of these actions are gonna lead to. I tell them once you start doing this, then you become the aggressor, and if it turns into cyberbullying, there's zero tolerance.” Regina said, “I think the other thing that they don't realize, again, because the world is so open, they don't really think there are going to be any consequences associated with cyberbullying.”

Theme Two: District Implementation and Interpretation

District and State Support

Students in District Two are supported by the district's Title IX Department regarding bullying and harassment cases. The district leader responsible for overseeing the Title IX Department and reporting bullying and harassment cases to the State of Tennessee handles

mostly bullying and harassment cases that deal specifically with Title IX, discrimination issues, to make sure the students are protected, and the school leaders handle these cases in the appropriate manner. Bullying or cyberbullying cases not related to Title IX issues are handled by the district's discipline department. Specific guidelines are expected of the district's school leadership in following State and District guidelines to remain in compliance with the State of Tennessee Bullying and Harassment policies ultimately protecting district leadership, school leadership staff, and most importantly the student involved. The Title IX district leader and district school leaders reflected on how the district implements the State of Tennessee Bullying and Harassment policy and the emphasis on support for the stakeholders involved in bullying, cyberbullying, or harassment.

District Two's leader outlined the district's Title IX responsibilities and the division of those responsibilities in dealing with bullying, cyberbullying, and harassment student related issues. She reflected that the division of responsibilities for the District's Title IX and bullying, harassment, and cyberbullying reported incidents are divided into two quadrants, North & Schools of Innovation and South & Specialty Schools. Donna stated,

We review the bullying cases. However, we really only handle those with any potential for protected class status ... just to make sure that it's handled correctly. Otherwise it goes to the discipline team, the Discipline Compliance Officer assigns it to the appropriate school level administrator for investigation. In a lot of reported bullying cases, it's more of a true discipline matter.

The discipline team's responsibility in handling bullying, cyberbullying, and harassment cases is not related to discrimination issues. They work with school leaders to ensure that the proper procedures are followed to protect the students.

Furthermore, District Two's procedures, noted in the review of the district's bullying and harassment policy, are in place to provide support for the school leaders by establishing investigative support through designated district school coordinator and trained school administrators, who guide the process. The *District Two Reporting and Investigating Bullying, Cyberbullying, Harassment, Discrimination, Intimidation and Hazing Policy* (January 15, 2024) states,

The district coordinator or designee will conduct and document confidential, initial interviews of the complainant, alleged perpetrator(s), and any witnesses involved as needed. All interviews should be conducted individually. The district coordinator/designee will review all relevant background information. When appropriate, the district coordinator/designee will report the incident to the proper department or outside agency. The district coordinator/designee will determine whether the allegation constitutes a violation of the Policy promptly, but should not be later than 30 school days after receipt of notice of potential noncompliance with the Policy (p. 5).

Donna further commented concerning the coordinator/investigator that,

It's investigated at the school level. There we have trained investigators, but technically they're more like administrators. They're more like a support for it to be done at the school level because they have the closest relationship with what's going on. We're there more to provide support and guidance, to make sure that the policy and the process are followed.

District Two's investigators who support school leaders have been specifically trained to deal with bullying, cyberbullying and harassment situations based on Tennessee State regulations to ensure best practices for staff and student support. Beyond the district support, three school

leaders, the principal, assistant principal, and dean of students are trained to deal with bullying, cyberbullying, and harassment student-related issues. Donna stated, “Typically, we recommend that it'd be no more than 3 people... we recommend no more than 3, because at that point it sort of gets out of hand.”

Regarding the process school leaders need to follow related to cyberbullying, district leader, Donna, referred to the district's board policy which outlines the State's requirements related to student bullying, cyberbullying and harassment. District compliance begins by the school leader initiating the process in the district's online portal with a detailed form that documents the case to the district leader. Afterwards, the district leader decides on the type of case, bullying, cyberbullying, harassment and refers it to the appropriate department based on Title IX or discipline issues. School leaders interviewed felt very supported using this process by allowing the district to determine which direction the investigation needs to go. Sheila commented, “Now my rule of thumb is we're gonna let the district tell us based on the evidence that we submit and the evidence and the documents that we can gather. We're gonna submit it all and let the district make that decision.” Frank stated, “Depending on the severity of the infraction, we'll reach out to the title nine main office to see what the next procedures are gonna be.”

District policies addressing sexual harassment issues related to student cyberbullying were also mentioned by the district leader. *District Two Student Discrimination, Harassment, Bullying, Cyberbullying, and Intimidation Policy* (January 15, 2024) states, “If the bullying, intimidation, or harassment is based on sex the procedures set forth in policy ... should be followed and the Title IX coordinator notified within 24 hours” (p. 1). The inclusion of law enforcement and other agencies such as the Department of Children's Services (DCS) become

involved in the investigation when these complex and delicate situations occur. School leaders reflected on the sensitive nature of these issues and how their investigation is turned over to the outside agencies to deal with the nature of the allegations and appropriately address the legal issues involved before addressing them and further investigating at the school level. However, during these investigations the process of student support for the victim continues. Will said,

Once a referral has been flagged as sexual harassment, we will have to reach out to the district let them know the details. We'll gather the evidence and then they will determine if it's sexual harassment, or any type of harassment based on religion or creed... because if it is deemed a harassment case, we cannot give out any consequence until the investigation is over with.

Frank also reflected on situations regarding sexual harassment and district support. "If it's something sexual, or anything like that, we call the district in discipline to figure out which way we need to go."

District Training

District Two's policies enforced and supported by the Title IX district leadership and Discipline Department follow the district board policy and outline the steps required by school leaders in processing this difficult ethical cyberbullying student situations. School leaders and district leaders are trained using McGrath's Bullying and Harassment training which is required by the district to be completed and certified by the district. The McGrath training compliments a district training required each year for school leaders where the Title IX district leader uses a guided PowerPoint presentation to go over specific guidelines to prioritize and direct the bullying, cyberbullying, and harassment investigative and student support process. Will said, "And if it turns out the student is being bullied, we go through the McGrath procedures and get

everybody involved. Get witness statements and collect as much evidence as possible.” Doug talked about his McGrath training that helps him support students in the investigation process.

Student Training and Prevention

School leaders interviewed from District Two discussed the need for student training and the district’s policies, guidelines, and resources regarding student training. Reflected in their district's documentation, district two has a policy addressing appropriate student guidance regarding use of social communication electronic devices during school hours. *District Two Use of Personal Communication Devices and Electronic Device Policy* (January 15, 2024) states,

Middle School: A student may possess a cellular telephone or other personal technology on school property. Use of such technology will be at the discretion of the building administrator. High School: A student may possess a cellular telephone or other personal technology on school property and may use such technology during lunch and transition times. Use of personal technology during instructional periods is general prohibited (p.1).

Several leaders reported that cell phones are prohibited from being used on their campuses.

These leaders believe that the cell phone prohibition school policy deters cyberbullying in their school and allows them to adequately manage the situation at school. Victor commented, “When I took over as principal, I just decided that we are not gonna do cell phones.” District policy gives discretion to the school to establish their own policy regarding electron device use during school hours. The general district rule is that students are not allowed to use their electronic social communication devices, such as cell phones or personal tablets, during class time unless it is part of a classroom activity. Tricia commented that she believes the district should set a mandate that students “shouldn't even be able to bring cell phones to school.”

School leaders further commented on student training provided by teachers in classrooms and school assemblies guiding students through appropriate social, emotional behaviors related to treatment of others including bullying and cyberbullying prevention. One principal, Doug, reflected how his school assemblies included instruction on how to report bullying.

We talked to them about behavioral expectations, social emotional supports during the school when something's going on who they can go to...also trying to train our students to speak up like if they see someone other else being mistreated...and notify an adult, too, because some students may be fearful and not want to do that.

Will also talked about covering safety and support of students during grade level meetings per quarter addressing how to treat on another and provide a safe environment. He says to students,

Your parents send you here to be safe, and it's our job to make sure you're safe. Then I make sure I make myself clear. If any time you feel unsafe, or if any time you see something that you deemed unsafe, please let me know.

Regina talked about how her School Resource Officer (SRO) provides relationship training with students. “So we've invited our SRO’s to have those conversations ... to help students just from a different lens.” Furthermore, the district leader, Donna, was asked about training provided by the districts for students. She said, “We would like to provide auxiliary services, and hopefully we will get to that one day, but that that tends to be handled more at the school level.”

Parent Training

District Two’s school leaders discussed parent training provided through various workshops, and communication tools. Doug commented on a parent resource stating, “It sends out weekly texts to families with some information about the school. There is stuff about grades and attendance and bullying.” Will commented on the district sending information to the parents

regarding expectations for students related to bullying, cyberbullying, and harassment. He stated, “It's school level administrators informing their community of expectations and things of the district.” Sheila reflected on the importance of helping parents understand bullying and cyberbullying through appropriate training. She said,

There should be a component where parents are required to take training on certain sessions because their children are in school. We're held accountable for a lot of things. And I just think, sometimes we need to bring our parents along, and make them be accountable in knowing the law as it relates to their child being in school.”

Victor thinks that the district provides adequate workshops for parents on issues like bullying that help parents understand their importance. He stated,

There are lots of parent summits that the district does. They'll have an event in the fall, and typically in the spring...making sure every parent knows that their kids are known and talks about problems and possible solutions. They also have virtual events that connect that way.

School leaders reflected that parent trainings are provided through their school and district, but additional training needs to be provided to help parents further understand cyberbullying.

Cross-Case Findings Using Ethical Framework

This multi-case study's findings reflected the complexity of student-related cyberbullying issues and support of students involved in these difficult dilemmas. Furthermore, the study's findings revealed the interpretation and implementation of district policies. Through a cross-case findings analysis of both districts, I interpreted the findings through the lens of Shapiro and Stefkovich's (2021) ethical frames; justice, care, critique, and the profession.

Ethic of Justice

The ethic of justice is how principals make ethical decisions according to what is fair and just for all parties involved. Students' rights and district policies must be considered when applying this ethic. The ethic of justice is reflected in the findings related to complex technology, definitions, and harassment experiences. Both districts' school leaders discussed that issues related to student cyberbullying require school leaders to provide ethical leadership and moral engagement in solving this complex problem.

The ethic of justice was reflected as school leaders reflected on the complicated nature of their experiences related to ethical decisions regarding student cyberbullying. Due to the sophistication of today's technology, students are able to utilize social media applications and even learning tools to hide behind and create hidden identities and create tangled communications within their victims that are hard to identify and address. Lisa stated, "They can create fake profiles and then delete it... they can use other people's devices." Both districts' school leaders reflected being perplexed by the everchanging and developing world of new technology that students have access to and are able to use in divisive ways. Kim stated, "That's one of the things that makes them so challenging is because it's like managing another universe in a different galaxy where you're like, I think I can see it..." Furthermore, the complicated nature of the technology inhibits the identification of the bully, and the extent of the issue can be difficult to ascertain and process, and therefore difficult to appropriately support the victim and discipline and restore the bully. Using the ethic of justice school leaders analyzed the technology dilemma and promoted fairness in dealing with the bully and victim in the application of appropriate support and discipline.

The ethic of justice applies to principals' decisions related to complex definitions. Both districts discussed the differences in definitions concerning traditional bullying versus cyberbullying. Oftentimes school leaders were faced with deciding whether the student situation met the cyberbullying definition containing a power imbalance and repetitive aggression or just a student being immature. Mike said, “We have to do our due diligence to figure it out. Do we feel that this is bullying at this case?” School leaders discussed the need to make sure they were applying the cyberbullying definition in a fair manner.

The ethic of justice applies to principals’ decisions related to complex harassment experiences. Both districts discussed the seriousness of a student being involved in a sexual harassment cyberbullying issue. Additional resources, including law enforcement and district Title IX department personnel, must conduct the investigation along with the school leaders to ensure appropriate legal compliance. School leaders expressed how students do not understand the consequences related to their immature actions. Regina commented, “They don't really think there are going to be any consequences associated with cyberbullying, you know. They don't realize that once you put that out there, it's going to millions of people.” The ethic of justice helps school leaders ensure that students’ rights are protected in harassment situations.

Ethic of Care

The ethic of care is how principals provide support and care for the students involved in cyberbullying, the bully, and the victim. School leaders in District One and District Two mentioned several layers of support or multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS) for victims and offenders. These support systems were used for bullying prevention and intervention, by providing student support through home visits, social worker, or collaborative referral. Regina reflected,

Sometimes it's just that they need to check in daily, or there's something behaviorally going on that's more serious that we need to spend a little bit more time kind of figuring out psychologically what's going on to prevent a cyberbullying type of situation.

Victor said, “We bring that to the table of our multi-tiered system support meetings...so we can try to figure out how we can connect with the student to get them what it is that they need, or what is that they're missing.” School leaders used the ethic of care to process decisions related to caring for the victim and bully through providing multiple layers of support.

Furthermore, school leaders in District One and District Two discussed the importance of safety for the victims. Both districts’ school leaders emphasized all student's need for safety within their building and some safety plan for the cyberbullying victim. Some principals in District Two noted that some of their students look for safety at school since they do not feel safe at home. Two noted that some of their students look for safety at school since they do not feel safe in their community. Will reflected,

We deal with a lot of stuff at my school. A lot of stuff starts in the neighborhood or in their community, and then they bring it to school, and what I found to be true ... school is a safe place to hash out disagreements. If a physical altercation does occur people know someone's going to break it up in comparisons to happening in the community, it can lead to some type of fatality, or even something of that nature.”

Hence, school leaders use the ethic of care to make decisions on how to provide a safe place for their students to resolve conflict.

District One’s school leaders did not focus on restorative practices between the bully and victim but focused on services tailored to the needs of the victim or the bully. District Two was similar in that it focused on providing the needed support services for both. However, restorative

practices were mentioned by school leaders from District Two as a possibility in cyberbullying between the victim and the bully in situations where all parties agreed. Sheila suggested, “But if they wanna make peace, they have the peace center where they can go and make peace. Because I do try to tell them, we're in this world together, and we have to learn how to get along.”

District Two findings noted that school leaders are more open to discussing peacemaking between the students, if possible. According to the district’s cyberbullying principal training presentation, District One discourages any restoration between the bully and the victim. *District One Bullying, Harassment and Title IX Administrative Training Presentation* (June, 2023) states, “bullying is not resolved with restorative mediation/circles. Mediation may further victimize or traumatize a child who has been bullied” (p. 41).

Student training and prevention are taught in both districts in various venues such as assemblies, classroom, and online courses. The ethic of care is represented in both district’s emphasis on student cyberbullying prevention training. District One’s leader and school leaders talked about student training related to bullying and harassment prevention at the school level through various assemblies, handbook discussions, and digital citizenship course. District Two’s district leader and school leaders emphasized how students relate to each other through social emotional learning. They also talked about student training and prevention through assemblies and other leaders such as school resource officers. District Two did not mention the digital citizenship course as a means for cyberbullying prevention, yet District One requires the completion of a digital citizenship course for all middle school and high school students. Lisa mentioned,

We actually do a digital literacy lesson. This is school wide. So there are different lessons per grade level on how to be digitally responsible. This is a requirement actually for our

district that we have to do a digital citizenship and responsibility lesson with our students every year.

District One's school leaders feel the digital citizenship course is an integral part of cyberbullying prevention for their students.

Ethic of Critique

The ethic of critique focuses on school leaders' analysis of policies and definitions through a critical lens. School leaders in Districts One and Two talked about the complexity of cyberbullying definition versus traditional bullying. Mike said, "We have to do our due diligence to figure it out. Do we feel that this is bullying in this case?" District One focused more on the complicated nature of the bullying definition and its job in deciphering whether it is true bullying or just meanness. District Two discussed the reliance more on the district level to determine if the case is a true bullying case after submitting the initial report to the district in their online reporting system. *District Two Reporting and Investigating Bullying, Cyberbullying, Harassment, Discrimination, Intimidation and Hazing* (January 15, 2024) states, "The investigation begins when notice of a potential violation ... has been received by the appropriate district coordinator" (p. 4). This protocol was confirmed by the district leader, who stressed that principals and assistant principals were trained as lead investigators but must rely on district interpretation and guidance before proceeding with the investigation.

Furthermore, bullying and harassment issues fall under the Title IX department in District Two and the School Culture Department in District One. All Tennessee districts are required to issue board policies related to student bullying, cyberbullying, and harassment detailing the state's specific guidelines related to the policy. Looking through the ethic of critique lens, findings reflected that District One's leader and school leaders spoke of the comprehensive

processes related to the investigation and reporting of cyberbullying cases. Mary, a middle school principal, commented, “The more important thing is that you address it within 24 to 48 hours ...there are laws in place that these investigations need to be started.” The 48 hours timeline requirement was mentioned as a policy critique due to the issue of the window sometimes falling over a weekend or a holiday, yet the district spoke about specific guidance on how school leaders can appropriately and document the start of the investigation to navigate a possible state issue. Joyce commented,

So it's a double-edged sword because it means that our documentation is pretty accurate in the timing and following of compliance laws. But we're holding ourselves to this, where there is no room for fudging anything because it's timestamped when they started their investigation...they all have to be done within those 48 hours.

District Two did not concentrate on this timeline issue but did reflect on the detailed processes required to investigate and adequately document the cyberbullying issue. Tricia reflected, “The investigation of cyberbullying consumes a lot of your time, a lot of school time.” Doug also reflected, “It can take days straight off your plate, and waiting for families, then spending the intentional time with them and hearing them out.” District Two school leaders commented on how cyberbullying increases the length of the investigation process due to the hidden nature of the technology.

Both districts also commented on the delicate nature of harassment issues involving Title VI and Section 504 discrimination and those of a sexual nature, Title IX, requiring outside resources such as law enforcement and DCS. District One Principal, Susan, stated, “If it's of a sexual nature, we do a DCS referral, and then DCS determines whether or not it needs to be turned over to law enforcement. When we do a DCS referral, we let our security officer know,

and he puts it on law enforcement's radar that this DCS referral has been made." District Two Principal, Will, said,

Once a referral has been flagged as sexual harassment, we will have to reach out to the district let them know the details. We'll gather the evidence and then they will determine if it's sexual harassment, or any type of harassment based on religion or creed... because if it is deemed a harassment case, we cannot give out any consequence until the investigation is over with.

Both districts' school leaders reflected harassment issues can be complex.

District bullying, cyberbullying, and harassment policies mandate parent training on these issues by school districts. The ethic of critique applies to the findings that school leaders parent training needed the most support from the district due to the occurrence of cyberbullying occurring outside of the school environment yet affecting the students. Parent responsibility was emphasized several times by school leaders and the need for parents and students to understand the definitions of bullying and cyberbullying and how they can prevent it within their homes. District One's leader, Joyce, commented that parent resources related to bullying and harassment are provided on their district's website, but expressed the need for more state resources related to parent training. She commented, "If the State could give us something that we could put out to parents because they have put the responsibility back on us. And the problem is that it's not necessarily a school-based issue, only it's a societal issue."

District Two's leader, Donna, and school leaders said that parent training and resources were offered by the district to parents on various topics, some related to bullying prevention. However, both district leaders and school leaders expressed the need for more parent training and resources to help parents understand the definition of bullying and cyberbullying and how to

prevent it within their own homes. Both district leaders and school leaders expressed the need for parents to be more involved in their children's interactions on social media and monitoring of their cellphones. Sheila said, "I don't police cell phones. So, Mom, if you're paying for that phone, then you might want to police it." School leaders reflected on the parent training that is offered and suggested additional training to help parents better understand the complicated issues related to student cyberbullying.

Ethic of the Profession

School leaders in District One and District Two commented on the complicated issue of responsibility related to the location of the student cyberbullying. The ethic of the profession frame suggests that school leaders apply their professional and personal values along with input from the community to make complex decisions. District and state policies document the requirement of school leaders to investigate, report, and support student and parents involved in student cyberbullying issues. School leaders noted that often parents are confused on the school's responsibility to report an issue that has occurred at home yet affects the student's learning. Both districts' school leaders reflected on their personal and professional values when discussing this issue. They determined that they must adhere to the district's policies and procedures and their professional ethics in solving the complex cyberbullying issue related to school versus parent responsibility. Carl expressed,

You know, personal values... I think you always have to work through those anytime you have a disciplinary situation, no matter what you're dealing with. But you always have to go back to what's our policy? What's our procedure? And just follow that.

School leaders are trained to handle the process of notifying parents and supporting the students involved in the complex issue of cyberbullying.

Both districts provide the school policy and a dedicated department and resources to professionally help guide school leaders in implementing the specific procedures. However, there are differences in the structure of the departments responsible for the implementation of and reporting of bullying, cyberbullying, and harassment cases to the State of Tennessee. District One's School Culture Department with a staff of approximately twenty-one helps guide school leaders in enforcing the district's policies and providing them with resources and training to support their staff and students in relations to social emotional learning and the overall promotion of a positive school culture in relationship to the prevention of cyberbullying situations. Contrary to District One's emphasis on School Culture, District Two's Title IX Department specifically focuses on discrimination and harassment issues while leaving the more discipline related bullying and cyberbullying issues to be handled by their Discipline Department. The ethic of profession relates to the resources provided by the district's dedicated departments and the differences in the departments structures which are based on the needs of the district.

Summary of Chapter 4

Through this multi-case study analysis of two Tennessee districts school and district leaders' interviews and district documents, I developed themes related to this study's research questions and theoretical framework, Shapiro and Stefkovich's (2021) ethical frames: justice, care, critique, and the profession. Theme one related to the district's ethical complexities and student support, and theme two, the implementation and interpretation of each district's cyberbullying policies. I shared the cross-case findings through the lens of Shapiro and Stefkovich's (2021) ethical frames.

CHAPTER 5
SUMMARY OF STUDY, DISCUSSION OF THE FINDINGS, IMPLICATIONS, AND
FUTURE RESEARCH

Summary of the Study

As reflected in this study's literature review, multiple studies related to school leaders and cyberbullying focused on prevention and training related to cyberbullying prevention (Pennell et al., 2020; Purdy & McGuckin, 2015; Styron et al., 2016; Young et al., 2017). However, few studies spoke about the ethical dilemmas and decisions faced by today's school leaders in relation to cyberbullying. Due to the dynamic nature of technology and the complexity of the features students use to communicate, school leaders struggle to investigate student cyberbullying (Green et al., 2017; Mattioni et al., 2017; Purdy & McGuckin, 2015). Furthermore, understanding how to sufficiently document the details of the incident and appropriately follow through with support and disciplinary actions is necessary for the school district to guide principals (Corcoran & McGuckin, 2014; Cook et al., 2017). Confusion regarding principal responsibility is unique to cyberbullying due to blurred lines between family and school since most cyberbullying happens off campus (Desmet et al., 2015; Hester & Finn, 2014).

Through this study, I explored school leaders' responses to these complex ethical issues. The purpose of this study is threefold: a) to explore how school leaders in Tennessee process ethical decisions related to cyber-bullying; b) to explore the differences in school leaders' ethical decision-making processes in various districts; and c) to explore how districts interpret and implement Tennessee cyberbullying policies within various districts.

I used Shapiro and Stefkovich's (2021) ethical paradigms as a framework to analyze the findings and provide the basis for the discussion of how school leaders process their ethical decisions related to student cyberbullying and view the implementation of the district's bullying and harassment policies. I discussed how the findings apply to the research questions and themes using the concepts of Shapiro and Stefkovich's (2021) interpretation of the ethical frames of

justice, care, critique, and profession, I developed my own model using this study's themes to view and discuss how school leaders process ethical decisions related to student cyberbullying. Finally, I concluded this chapter with this multi-case study's limitations, implications, recommendations for future study, and concluding thoughts.

Overview of School Leaders' Cyberbullying Ethical Decision-making Model

This multi-case study design provided a comprehensive method to investigate school leaders' decisions on student cyberbullying. I conducted a systematic review of the literature, which provided a scholarly basis for creating a conceptual model of school leaders' ethical decision-making related to student cyberbullying. Shapiro and Stefkovich's (2021) ethical paradigms framework established the foundation for the model using concepts from the ethical frames of justice, care, critique, and profession. Additionally, the findings of this multi-case study were used to develop themes based on school leaders' ethical decision-making related to student cyberbullying. Throughout this study, nineteen school leaders and two district leaders were interviewed, and documents were analyzed to compile a rich and descriptive list of themes based on the findings. Based on the research results, school leaders reflected on the following complex issues most in applying ethical decision-making during the investigative process related to studying cyberbullying: adherence to policies, definitions, technology, harassment experiences, responsibility, and student support. Additionally, school leaders' district training led to staff, students, and parents training, which is an integral part of the district process and is foundational to the school leaders' ethical decision-making process related to student cyberbullying.

Shapiro and Stefkovich's (2021) tapestry of ethical frameworks using Starratt's (1991) ethic of justice, care, and critique connected with their ethic of profession provided a lens to view

these complex student situations. School leaders and district leaders interviewed talked about various ethical complexities related to student cyberbullying. Using the ethical paradigms framework (Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2021), I examined this study's district and school leaders' perspectives and the district documents used to ethically consider their students' best interests related to student cyberbullying. After consolidating the findings based on this study's research questions, I developed a School Leaders' Cyberbullying Ethical Decision-Making Model, Figure 3. In this discussion section for this chapter, I applied this model by reflecting on the districts' school leaders' decision-making processes related to student cyberbullying. I identified eight ethical concepts that school leaders consider when dealing with student cyberbullying: fairness to students, students' rights, clarification of policies, care for the victim and bully, safety for the victim, school leaders' personal values, and school leaders' professional values. Furthermore, schools leaders use these ethical concepts to process their ethical decisions through this study's seven cyberbullying issues, complex policies, complex technology, complex definitions, complex experiences, complex responsibility, complex support, and complex training. Additionally, I discussed these seven themes using the lens of this study's framework, Shapiro and Stefkovich's Ethical Paradigms (2021).

Discussion of Themes and Theoretical Framework

Ethical decision-making related to student cyberbullying is a multi-faceted, complicated issue for today's school leaders. Tennessee's school leaders must follow a comprehensive state and district bullying, cyberbullying, and harassment policy. Furthermore, each Tennessee school district is instructed by the State of Tennessee to implement the policy within their district (Tenn. Code Ann. § 49-6-4503, 2023). Hence, this multi-case study's purpose and research questions explored Tennessee school leaders' experiences with student cyberbullying, the ethical decisions



Figure 3

School Leaders' Cyberbullying Ethical Decision-making Model

surrounding this complicated issue, and their districts' implementation and interpretation of the cyberbullying policies. Findings for research questions one and two were based on the experiences and perspectives of two large school district's middle and high school principals and assistant principals and the districts' policies that support those experiences. Findings for research question three included the perceptions of each district's middle and high school principals, assistant principals, and district leader's experiences and perspectives responsible for implementing the Tennessee Bullying and Harassment policy for their school district and the district's policies and supporting documents. This study's research questions related to the finding for this study are as follows:

1. How do Tennessee school leaders process ethical decisions related to student cyberbullying issues?
2. What are the differences in school leaders' ethical decision-making processes in various districts?
3. How do districts interpret and implement cyberbullying policies within the various districts?

This discussion section reflects the synopsis of the multi-case analysis of data collected for the research. It includes a discussion concerning the relationship between the themes and this study's theoretical framework, Shapiro and Stefkovich's (2021) ethical frames: justice, care, critique, and the profession. The themes discussed are: complex policies, complex technology, complex definitions, complex experiences, complex responsibility, complex support, and complex training.

Complex Policies: Ethic of Justice, Care, Critique, and the Profession

The ethics of justice, care, critique, and the profession were exhibited in this study's

findings regarding interpreting and implementing state and district bullying, cyberbullying, and harassment policies. School leaders and district leaders in this study reflected on their experiences dealing with student-related cyberbullying, the district's interpretation, and implementation of Tennessee's Bullying and Harassment policy, and the ethical decision-making processes they used to determine how to support the student's best interests. The ethics of justice, care, critique, and profession are applied to school leaders' decisions about state and district bullying and harassment policies. Tenn. Code Ann. § 49-6-4503 mandates that school districts within Tennessee follow specific guidelines in addressing cyberbullying and related harassment issues. Hence, the Tennessee Department of Education requires school districts to develop a policy for bullying and harassment, including guidelines, programs, and resources based on the Tenn. Code Ann. § 49-6-4503 and TDOE guidelines. The two cases, or districts, studied provided a snapshot of how large districts in Tennessee implement and interpret the state's policy and guidelines and how their policies and processes support their students.

Within state policy and, ultimately, district policies, particular emphasis is placed on the school leader's implementation of the policies and procedures. The district leaders in both cases' districts applied the ethic of justice by reflecting on the importance of adhering to the state's policies and procedures and their support of the school leadership. Furthermore, the ethic of justice applies to the findings from District One and District Two interviews, documents, and digital resources. This study's findings reflected the seriousness and emphasized the importance of adhering to bullying and harassment policies, reporting, and timelines.

School leaders in District One and District Two spoke about the importance of following the district investigative processes, especially as it relates to supporting the students involved in the cyberbullying issue. The ethic of care supports school leaders following the district process

and how the process supports the best interests of their students (Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2021). Research studies and bullying prevention organizations stress the importance of specific procedures concerning cyberbullying to protect school leaders and students (Hinduja & Patchin, 2023; Hvidston et al., 2013). The school districts involved in this study have provided detailed policies to protect the students and legally protect their school leaders and staff.

School and district leaders commented on the state and district bullying and harassment policies. Several school leaders commented on the strict 48-hour reporting timeline for bullying and cyberbullying cases and the 24-hour timeline required for cyberbullying cases involving sexual harassment as required by the district's bullying and harassment policy. The ethic of critique can be applied in reflecting on the school leaders' critique of the district policy regarding the strict 48 timelines related to student bullying and cyberbullying and the 24-hour timeline related to sexual harassment. Tenn. Code Ann. § 49-6-4503 (2023) documents the specific timeline required for leaders to initiate the cyberbullying case report to the district. School leaders discussed their frustration related to reporting a cyberbullying case that occurred Friday afternoon by Sunday evening to meet the 48-hour timeline.

The ethic of the profession was represented in the findings by noting school leaders' discussions related to their personal and professional values. Based on school leaders' responses, they often want to input their values or opinions in conversations with the students involved in cyberbullying or parents. However, ethically and professionally, they conveyed weighing their values with their professional ethic to ensure they implemented the specific policies outlined in the district's guidelines. Shapiro and Stefkovich's (2021) ethic of profession applies to school leaders weighing their personal and professional ethics to analyze and process complicated decisions such as student cyberbullying.

Complex Technology: Ethic of Justice and Care

The ethic of justice and care was evident in comments made by school leaders regarding the complex technology students use to cyberbully. District leaders in this study noted the complicated issues related to technology when dealing with cyberbullying issues. Today's social media applications allow the bully to hide their identity from their victim and school leaders. Detailed state bullying and harassment laws emphasize protecting the cyberbullying victim from the bully's power (Hinduja & Patchin, 2023; Hvidston et al., 2013; Tennessee Code Annotated 49-6-4503, 2021). Traditional bullying, as well as cyberbullying definitions, document that there is the issue of the bully exerting power over the victim repetitively and aggressively. Tennessee state and district policies have established strict guidelines on the importance of safety and confidentiality to protect the victim from bullying.

Looking through this study's ethical lens of justice and care, school leaders' discussions focused on the issue of the power imbalance between the bully and the victim and the complicated investigation process. The research literature notes that technology complicates the investigation process because students can use fake accounts and hide their identities (Hinduja & Patchin, 2023). School leaders in both districts spoke about students hiding their identities using fake accounts. This not only made the investigation process longer and more complex, but the bully's hidden identity caused additional anxiety for the victim due to the inability to resolve the issue in an expedient manner or even at all. Often, school leaders relied on witnesses or bystanders to come forward with evidence to reveal the hidden identity of the bully. School leaders were tasked with processing cyberbullying situations in a fair and just manner. However, the complexity of hidden identities and tangled clues often make it difficult to correctly identify the bully and provide appropriate discipline and support (Hvidston et al., 2013; Shariff, 2015).

Despite these complexities, school leaders used the ethic of justice and care to provide fair and ethical decisions related to disciplining the bully and protecting the victim.

Complex Definitions: Ethic of Justice, Critique, and the Profession

The ethics of justice, critique, and the profession were evident in comments made by school leaders regarding the complex definitions of cyberbullying. School leaders spoke about the importance of abiding by or adhering to their district's bullying and harassment policy and upholding the professional ethics required as school leaders in enforcing the policy within their schools. The State of Tennessee, like all other states except Montana, has created specific and strict bullying and harassment policies for its school districts (Hinduja & Patchin, 2023; TDOE, 2023). School leaders discussed the requirements to thoroughly investigate all reports of bullying and harassment and determine if the reported incidents meet the policy's definition of bullying and harassment. The State of Tennessee's definition of "bullying undertaken through the use of electronic devices" coincides with Patchin and Hinduja's (2023) "willful reported harm inflicted through the use of computers, cellphones, or other electronic devices." Most definitions are based on the widely agreed-upon definition of traditional bullying since they are correlated with a majority of cyberbullying being an extension of traditional bullying within the school setting. School and district leaders emphasized the importance of the district's definition of bullying, as reflected in their district's policies, in determining whether the reported case could be considered a documented confirmed case. Adherence to the state and district definition and determination of student cyberbullying directed the disciplinary and support actions of school leaders. Hence, affirming that school leaders' understanding of the cyberbullying definitions by state law influenced their application of the ethic of justice and profession in their ethical decision-making

related to their students' best interests (Corcoran & McGuckin, 2014; Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2021).

The “murky” issue of student cyberbullying and the advancing technology that allows expanded access to the victim and increased harm caused by the bully’s use of the technology’s tools caused the principal to apply the ethic of critique to examine the need for a more expanded definition for this complicated issue. School leaders talked about the need for clearer definitions regarding cyberbullying due to the complexities surrounding cyberbullying due to the bully’s use of technology towards the victim in ways that differ from traditional bullying. Within cyberbullying research, the studies document that most definitions are based on the widely agreed-upon definition of traditional bullying since they are correlated with a majority of cyberbullying being an extension of traditional bullying within the school setting (Desmet, 2015; Hvidston, 2015; Young et al., 2017). Some researchers have adopted similar definitions but not identical to traditional bullying. Hinduja and Patchin (2023) omitted the power imbalance portion of the traditional bullying definition in defining cyberbullying. Perpetrators using digital technology do not necessarily make it repetitive or focus on a less powerful victim. As represented in the findings, principals reflected that a single post can be shared multiple times by other individuals. Sometimes, assessing the traditional definition of bullying, intent to harm, repetition, and power cannot be easily identified in a digital environment. Sometimes, power imbalances appear through technological expertise, hidden identity, or anonymity (Hinduja & Patchin, 2023; Shariff, 2015).

Complex Experiences: Ethic of Justice, Care, and the Profession

The ethics of justice, care, and the profession were evident in comments made by school leaders regarding the complex cyberbullying harassment experiences. Often, cyberbullying cases

report the issue of discrimination, such as LGBTQ students and students with disabilities. State and district policies provide comprehensive protections for these students based on federal laws, Title IX, Title VI, and students with disabilities, Section 504. Each district's documents noted that if a cyberbullying incident involves a protected class of students, the case is determined as harassment and is referred to the appropriate department within the district. Several school leaders noted the complexities related to the investigations of cyberbullying involving discrimination and sexual harassment. Due to the complexities of these cyberbullying cases and the mandated requirements of state laws, outside agencies, such as DHS and law enforcement, take over the investigation (Hinduja & Patchin, 2023; Hvdiston et al., 2013; Shariff, 2015). Ethical complications arise for the school leaders and the victim due to the delicate nature of cyberbullying harassment. School leaders using the ethic of care helps them recognize the additional victim care and support required in student-related cyberbullying cases. Shariff (2015) reveals that online harassment may cause more substance abuse and depression than traditional harassment, especially sexual harassment, which may contribute to cyberbullying through the proliferation of sexual images by the bully exploiting the victim.

District leaders and school leaders spoke about the complicated nature of the investigation for the bully when a cyberbullying harassment issue is identified, such as sexual harassment, and law enforcement becomes involved in the process. Both districts discussed the delicate nature of such issues as the consequences for bullying can be severe based on state laws, yet most students are not aware of the severe consequences. Shariff (2015) argues that policies created to address legal issues related to cyberbullying and harassment, such as sexual harassment, have not kept up with youth culture in the twenty-first century by trying to apply adult laws to situations that involve youth. Like district leaders and principals in this study,

research indicates that many times, students, as well as parents, do not fully understand the implications of cyberbullying and the definition of cyberbullying according to state and district laws and policies (Hinduja & Patchin, 2023; Hvidston et al., 2013; Shariff, 2015). School leader's ethical process in dealing with sexual harassment cases causes them to rely heavily on the district leaders to professionally apply the district policy and coordinate with outside services to provide appropriate justice and support to the bully. Hence, the ethics of justice, care, and the profession were applied in making the difficult decisions related to the complex cyberbullying harassment issues.

Complex Responsibility: Ethic of Justice, Care, and the Profession

The ethics of justice, care, and the profession were evident in comments made by school leaders regarding the complex responsibility issue related to student cyberbullying. School leaders' experiences also revealed that most of the cyberbullying situations occurred outside of the school day yet affected the victim's school learning environment. The ethic of justice applies to school leaders' understanding of state and district policies, which require the school leader to document and investigate cyberbullying cases if the student's learning environment is affected. Victims of cyberbullying experience increased anxiety versus traditional bullying since the bullying extends beyond school due to the perpetrator's ability to digitally bully the victim at home (Hinduja & Patchin, 2023; Shariff, 2015). School leaders applied the ethic of critique by discussing this complicated issue related to cyberbullying and how it differs from traditional bullying cases, which usually occur on their campus during the school day. Cyberbullying literature documents this complexity, noting confusion regarding principal responsibility due to blurred lines between family and school since most cyberbullying happens off campus (Desmet et al., 2015; Hester & Fenn, 2014).

Furthermore, school leaders applied the ethic of care as they addressed the complicated responsibility of cyberbullying occurrences. Findings from this study indicated that school leaders' duties to care for and support the victim and bully required an extensive amount of time related to providing for their safety, counseling, and restoration. Researchers also noted that due to the increased emphasis on cyberbullying off campus, school staff may be more inclined to focus on student care and support by addressing cyberbullying issues as they occur rather than focusing on prevention (Green et al., 2017).

Another important issue school leaders addressed was the importance of the parent's involvement and responsibility in preventing their students from becoming involved as victims or bullies of cyberbullying. Parents' involvement in the prevention of student cyberbullying and involvement in the investigation of student cyberbullying was mentioned in several studies (Corcoran & McGuckin, 2014; Hester & Fenn, 2014; Hvidston et al., 2013; Young et al., 2017). Applying the ethic of the profession, school leaders' perspectives indicated a whole school approach involving staff, students, parents, and the community. Young et al. (2017) noted that "according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), promoting school-home partnerships protects and improves child health and development "(p. 483). Hence, school leaders can promote parent engagement by initiating best practice discussions for monitoring their children's technology use and encouraging appropriate online behaviors (Young et al., 2017).

Complex Support: Ethic of Care, Critique and Justice

The ethics of care, critique, and justice were evident in comments made by school leaders regarding the complex issue related to supporting the cyberbullying victim and bully. School leaders noted that care and support for students represented a high priority when investigating

and processing the complex ethical issues related to student cyberbullying. The literature suggests that complexities arising from the nature of cyberbullying pose difficult decisions for school leaders as they support their students (Desmet et al., 2015; Dey, 2023; Young et al., 2017). Shapiro and Stefkovich (2021) discuss that “students' mental, emotional, and physical states can be affected by exposure to the public, diminution of privacy, public shaming, sexting, and cyberbullying can result in loss of confidence, depression, anxiety, and sometimes suicide” (p. 220). Most of the principals’ comments concerning support were about a victim’s safety. However, they also discussed the need to care for the student through their careful investigative process and in school and outside counseling services. Additionally, studies document appropriate care by providing a multi-tiered support system for the victim and the bully (Hinduja & Patchin, 2023). School leaders further discussed that they must provide students with necessary safety, possibly separating the students in classrooms or moving to another school (Desmet et al., 2015; Young et al., 2017).

The ethic of critique provides a lens for school leaders to process appropriate support for the cyberbullying bully. A restorative versus punitive approach for the bully is encouraged in several studies (Aziz & Amin, 2022; Dey, 2023; Hvidston et al., 2013). School leaders in both districts discussed the need to support the bully through restorative services after appropriate discipline procedures were accessed. In discussing the bully, several school leaders reflected on students’ lack of understanding regarding the consequences of cyberbullying and how the discipline and possible legal penalization could affect their academic and professional careers for years to come. The literature confirmed the need for more excellent training for parents and students concerning the detrimental consequences of cyberbullying for the bully and the victim (Desmet et al., 2015; Dey, 2023; Young et al., 2017). By following the district discipline

procedures, school leaders commented on the clear processes and support from their district. However, they often struggled with applying justice or fairness in applying the discipline procedure due to the complicated nature of cyberbullying and sometimes unclear motives of the bully due to the immaturity of the students involved.

Complex Training: Ethic of the Profession

The ethic of the profession was evident in comments made by school leaders regarding the comprehensive training required by their school district for administrators, students, and parents. School and district leaders emphasized comprehensive training provided through the district and in conjunction with McGrath's Bullying and Harassment training module. The literature states that cyberbullying's complexities require purposeful and targeted training for school leaders and staff (Corcoran & McGuckin, 2014; Koole et al., 2016; Mattioni et al., 2016; Styron, 2016). Mattioni's (2016) study results show that 75 % of principals and 71 % of teachers expressed a need for training. School leaders' ethical decisions related to cyberbullying heavily rely on the appropriate application of their district policy. Studies document that principals and staff need better cyberbullying professional development and resources about to adequately educate their students (Corcoran & McGuckin., 2014; Koole et al., 2021). Mattioni et al. (2016) also suggest that school climate can positively or negatively affect cyberbullying and is heavily influenced by the perceptions, attitudes, and understanding of school staff. Additionally, researchers noted the need for training to curtail minimizing or ignoring cyberbullying activity and reporting inappropriate handling of cyberbullying situations (Cook et al., 2017; Koole et al., 2021; Styron et al., 2016).

District leaders mentioned a detailed guide, *Bullying and Harassment: An Educator's Guide for Addressing Bullying and Harassment Complaints in Tennessee* (2012), as a resource to

help implement the policy within the school districts. The guide was analyzed and part of this study. It includes specific forms and the complete investigation procedure. District leaders mentioned that this guide provides guidance for school leaders and their staff to comprehensively cover the required policy on bullying and harassment and provide adequate reporting guidelines.

Preventative care, a necessary student support, was also mentioned extensively in the interviews. District and school leaders discussed bullying and harassment training related to prevention and consequences. They were presented in various forms and venues: school assemblies, classroom discussions involving the student handbook, and handouts. School and district websites confirmed bullying and harassment policies in the board policies and student handbooks. Studies document the need for students to be taught to responsibly understand and use the internet (Castile & Harris, 2014; Cook et al., 2017; Hester & Fenn, 2014; Young et al., 2017). Furthermore, Castile and Harris (2014) suggested that schools should include anti-bullying prevention programs within the school day. School leaders in District One also mentioned their districts' requirement for middle and high school students to take a digital citizenship course to prevent cyberbullying. Studies revealed that schools' actions regarding cyberbullying prevention and intervention consisted of prevention policies, including digital citizenship and internet safety lessons (Pennell et al., 2020; Styron et al., 2017). Furthermore, cyberbullying digital education consists of various approaches such as school assemblies, curriculum, and whole-school programs (Pennell et al., 2020; Purdy & McGuckin, 2015). The literature suggests that schools may want to deliver cyberbullying prevention messages using social networking sites, such as Facebook, internet forums, and blogs. (Styron et al., 2016).

This study's findings suggest that school leaders and district leaders have a chance to deliberately involve parents in discussions concerning technology supervision best practices and

parent partnerships to foster safe and respectful online behaviors. Parents' involvement in the prevention of student cyberbullying and involvement in the investigation of student cyberbullying was mentioned in several studies (Corcoran & McGuckin, 2014; Hester et al., 2014; Hvidston et al., 2013; Young et al., 2017). School leaders discussed the need for more parent involvement in student's at home use of cell phones and other electronic devices.

Summary of the Discussion

The emphasis on the student's best interest through the interweaving of Starratt's (1991) three ethical frames and Shapiro and Stefkovich's (2021) ethic of profession was reflected in this multi-case study's discussion. The districts' bullying, cyberbullying, harassment policies, student handbooks, and resources as well as the interviews with school and district leaders provided rich and descriptive findings. I analyzed school and district leaders' perceptions and experiences through Shapiro and Stefkovich's (2021) framework to help create a model of ethical decision-making related to student cyberbullying. Cyberbullying, as reflected in this study, creates an ethical dilemma for many school leaders due to comprehensive state policies weighed against the complicated issues addressed regarding technology, definitions, experiences, responsibility, and student support. Additionally, the district policies establish specific training requirements that require school leaders and their stakeholders' involvement in a community-wide effort to prevent cyberbullying on and off school grounds. Based on this study's findings school leaders use the ethical decision-making processes from this study's theoretical framework, Shapiro and Stefkovich's (2021) ethical paradigms, to help solve the complex issues or moral dilemmas related to student cyberbullying.

Limitations

Several limitations were identified during this study. One of the limitations of this study was that only Tennessee school leaders from two districts were involved in this study. Due to the multi-case research design, only two districts were chosen to meet the criteria of this study and provide a rich description of the school leaders' experiences. Furthermore, only school leaders who volunteered to participate in the study were included. Another limitation was that only district leaders from the department overseeing bullying, harassment, and cyberbullying from two Tennessee districts were included in this study.

Implications for Research, Practice, and Policy

School leaders are expected to represent the highest ethical standing of their profession. The findings from this study have implications for principals and assistant principals serving in public, charter, and private school leadership. Cyberbullying is a societal issue that affects school leaders' school culture and climate due to the ever-changing technology in today's school environment. School leaders are required to continuously educate themselves on the intricacies of not only educational technology but also the new social applications that permeate their students' lives. This study posits that school leaders should implement continuing education requirements for themselves and their staff to adequately stay abreast of the latest educational and social technology to lead in today's educational arena effectively. Ethical investigations and decisions related to student cyberbullying require a technology leader.

Another implication from this study is that school leaders need to develop good relationships with their student's parents further to engage them in actively monitoring and preventing cyberbullying at home and in their community. School leaders in this study expressed concern about parents' lack of understanding surrounding the definitions and consequences of

student cyberbullying. District leaders also expressed the need for additional parent training materials from the State of Tennessee to help reinforce parent training and prevent student cyberbullying. Furthermore, directed marketing at the district level could reinforce principals' desire to educate and partner with parents and other community stakeholders to prevent cyberbullying.

The findings from this study show how the school principals and assistant principals shape and direct the moral climate of their schools. School leaders' ethical decision-making related to student cyberbullying reveals the principals as the moral engagers of their staff, students, and school community. Due to the frequency of cyberbullying within their school environment, school leaders must stay current on state and district policies related to bullying and harassment, discipline procedures, and student support services. Principal preparation programs (PPP) based on PSEL (2015) standards train school leaders to understand the ethical requirements of their profession and the implications of their decisions. This study will help faculty within a PPP understand the complexities of principals' ethical decisions regarding student cyberbullying. Class discussions around the ethical implications of cyberbullying dilemmas could help prepare principals to tackle this complicated issue.

School districts and state Departments could also benefit from this study's findings. Understanding how district leaders and school leaders perceive policies related to bullying, cyberbullying, and harassment could help state leaders provide additional materials and training related to this complex topic. Additionally, looking at how districts implement the State prevention and training guidelines could help Tennessee Department of Education leaders identify gaps in documentation and guidance for district and school leaders.

Recommendations for Future Research

School leaders in this study discussed their growing concern about cyberbullying and its detrimental effects on their students. They also expressed a desire to know more about the everchanging technology these students use to communicate with each other. A qualitative study could be conducted to ascertain principals' understanding of students' social media applications and how they use them. Another possible study would be a quantitative or mixed methods study to understand school leaders' steps used to investigate bullying, harassment, and cyberbullying in compliance with state and district policies. Studies concerning school counselors' perceptions of cyberbullying and their experiences dealing with victims and bullies could help school leaders understand how to serve their students better and deal with these difficult situations.

Research studies have noted that school leaders need to be technology leaders best to serve their stakeholders in a twenty-first-century school environment (Richardson, 2016). His exploratory mixed-methods study begins with a survey and then qualitative interviews to ascertain school leaders' perceptions of the importance of being a technology leader in their schools. This study's findings suggest that school leaders and district leaders have a chance to deliberately involve parents in discussions concerning technology supervision best practices and parent partnerships to foster safe and respectful online behaviors. Future research studies related to principals and parent partnerships would benefit districts in preparing anti-bullying community partnership programs development and principals' professional development.

Other studies on principals' techniques and methods to investigate cyberbullying incidents would help prepare principals. Many students are hesitant to report incidents of cyberbullying. Therefore, conducting research exploring principal processes investigating the delicate student cyberbullying issues would benefit state and federal law enforcement,

educational policymakers, and district leaders. Finally, understanding principals' processes related to student cyberbullying would help faculty at university principal preparation programs develop relevant curricula and materials to assist principals in encountering the complex twenty-first-century ethical issues related to student cyberbullying. The consensus among researchers indicated the need for more studies to determine how digital citizenship policies and internet safety programs affect cyberbullying cases (Pennell et al., 2020; Styron et al., 2017). Styron et al. (2017) emphasized the need for dedicated technology and cyberbullying training for principals within their principal preparation programs.

Findings from this study included insights into how two Tennessee districts interpreted and implemented State of Tennessee Bullying and Harassment policies according to Tenn. Code Ann. § 49-6-4503 (2023). School and district leaders discussed how their district implemented the policy through training and resources for all stakeholders. Additional studies could be conducted to understand school and district leaders' experiences related to their connection with state resources and departments in implementing the bullying and harassment policy. Another multi-case study mainly examines various district documents used to implement Tennessee's bullying and harassment policy, which would benefit the State of Tennessee and school districts in evaluating the content and effectiveness of their district communication. Furthermore, an ethical lens could be applied specifically to the handling of discipline issues related to bullying and cyberbullying issues by surveying school leaders and parents of students involved in cyberbullying. Finally, due to the increased use of technology in schools and related discipline issues, principal preparation programs could benefit from additional research on school leaders' ethical decision-making related to cyberbullying.

Concluding Thoughts

Through this study, I explored school and district leaders' perceptions related to the ethical decisions they make concerning student cyberbullying. School leaders face stressors throughout their school day and beyond that require them to rely on ethical principles and professional and personal values to make decisions. Due to the complexities of technology, extensive investigative process, comprehensive support, and discipline issues, cyberbullying decisions require a principal to be trained to process ethical dilemmas and technology leadership. Furthermore, students' use of technology to promote discriminatory cyberbullying or harassment poses a more serious issue since legal ramifications could come into play and further complicate the investigation and discipline process. Policymakers and state and district leaders should continue to examine policies and practices related to bullying, cyberbullying, and harassment to make sure policies, district, and State reflect the most current research due to the everchanging technology and complications that arise from the use of technology to bully in today's schools. Prevention of cyberbullying through emphasis on student and parent training must be a top priority for state officials who provide district resources and policy guidelines. These prevention strategies and guidelines will help shape the school's attitude. Hence, culture and environment promote a healthier, respectful, and safe climate for staff and student flourishing. Ultimately, school leaders act as the moral engagers for their staff and students. By using Shapiro and Stefkovich's (2021) ethics of care, critique, justice, and profession to promote the best interest of their students, today's school leaders can more effectively tackle the complex issues they face daily. Finally, studies understanding how principals process complex decisions, like cyberbullying, will provide insight for state and district leaders, policymakers, and principal preparation programs to find ways to better support and train today's school leaders.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A

Dear {Participant},

I hope this email finds you well. Your school district shared your name with me so that I may contact you for a research interview for a study on middle and high school principals' ethical decision-making processes related to student cyberbullying. I am collecting data from middle and high school principals who have dealt with student cyberbullying issues in their schools.

I am emailing to ask if you would be willing to have a virtual conversation about the processes you use and your experiences related to student cyberbullying in your school. In the interview, I will ask you to discuss your experiences and the district procedures and processes for dealing with student cyberbullying issues. I expect the interview will take approximately 45-60 minutes and will be scheduled at your convenience over the next several weeks. Finally, please know that your responses are completely confidential; neither individuals nor schools will ever be identified in the study results.

If you agree to participate in the study, then I will send you a consent form so you will have more information about the study. Please reply to this email letting me know if you are willing to participate, and we can schedule an interview. Thank you in advance for your consideration. I truly appreciate how valuable your time is right now.

Sincerely,

Jeana Partin | Ph.D. Candidate
Graduate Research Assistant
Educational Administration
Educational Leadership and Policy Studies
University of Tennessee - Knoxville

IRB NUMBER: UTK IRB-23-07668-XP
IRB APPROVAL DATE: 07/26/2023

Appendix B

Dear {Participant},

I hope this email finds you well. Your school district shared your name with me so that I may contact you for a research interview for a study on middle and high school principals' ethical decision-making processes related to student cyberbullying. I am collecting data from your district's middle and high principals who have dealt with student cyberbullying issues in their school. As part of this study I am also collecting data from the district's leader responsible for overseeing bullying, cyberbullying and harassment issues.

I am emailing to ask if you would be willing to have a virtual conversation about the processes you use and your experiences related to student cyberbullying in your district. In the interview I will ask you to discuss your experiences and the district procedures and processes used to help school principals processes related to student cyberbullying issues. I expect the interview will take approximately 45-60 minutes and will be scheduled at your convenience over the next several weeks. Finally, please know that your responses are completely confidential; neither individuals nor schools will ever be identified in the study results.

If you agree to participate in the study, then I will send you a consent form so you will have more information about the study. Please reply to this email letting me know if you are willing to participate, and we can schedule an interview. Thank you in advance for your consideration. I truly appreciate how valuable your time is right now.

Sincerely,

Jeana Partin | Ph.D. Candidate
Graduate Research Assistant
Educational Administration
Educational Leadership and Policy Studies
University of Tennessee - Knoxville

IRB NUMBER: UTK IRB-23-07668-XP
IRB APPROVAL DATE: 07/26/2023

Appendix C

Consent for Research Participation

Research Study Title: School Leaders' Ethical Decision-making Processes Related to Student Cyberbullying

Researcher(s): Jeana Partin, and Dr. Sonya Hayes, University of Tennessee, Knoxville, Educational Leadership and Policy Studies Department

Why am I being asked to be in this research study?

We are asking you to be in this research study because you are a middle school or high school leader or district leader overseeing cyberbullying policies.

What is this research study about?

The purpose of this study is threefold: a) to explore how school leaders in Tennessee process ethical decisions related to cyberbullying; b) to explore the differences in school leaders' ethical decision-making processes in various districts; and c) to explore how districts interpret and implement Tennessee cyberbullying policies within various districts.

How long will I be in the research study?

If you agree to be in the study, your participation will include 2 virtual interviews over the course of seven months. The first interview will last no more than 60 minutes, and the 2nd interview will last no longer than 30 minutes.

What will happen if I say "Yes, I want to be in this research study"?

If you agree to be in this study, we will ask you to electronically sign this informed consent form. We will then ask you to participate in a one-on-one interview with one of the researchers via ZOOM. This interview will last no more than 60 minutes. We will schedule a follow-up 2nd interview after our initial data collection to clarify any information or follow-up on additional information, and this interview will last no longer than 30 minutes.

What happens if I say "No, I do not want to be in this research study"?

Being in this study is up to you. You can say no now or leave the study later. Either way, your decision not to participate won't affect your relationship with the University of Tennessee.

What happens if I say "Yes" but change my mind later?

Even if you decide to be in the study now, you can change your mind and stop at any time.

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If you decide to stop before the study is completed, please email Dr. Sonya Hayes at shayes22@utk.edu informing her of your intention to withdraw from the study. Any data collected prior to your withdrawal will be destroyed.

Are there any possible risks to me?

It is possible that someone could find out you were in this study or see your study information, but we believe this risk is small because of the procedures we use to protect your information. These procedures are described later in this form.

Are there any benefits to being in this research study?

We do not expect you to benefit from being in this study. Your participation may help us to learn more about the experiences of graduate students for professional learning and growth. We hope the knowledge gained from this study will benefit others in the future.

Who can see or use the information collected for this research study?

We will protect the confidentiality of your information by securing all data on a secure server at the University. We will redact any identifiable information from the transcripts and assign a pseudonym to you as a participant. The only individuals who will have access to the data will be Dr. Sonya Hayes and Jeana Partin. All identifiable data will be kept in a secured, locked cabinet and destroyed after five years.

If information from this study is published or presented at scientific meetings, your name and other personal information will not be used.

We will make every effort to prevent anyone who is not on the research team from knowing that you gave us information or what information came from you. Although it is unlikely, there are times when others may need to see the information we collect about you. These include:

- People at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville who oversee research to make sure it is conducted properly.
- Government agencies (such as the Office for Human Research Protections in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services), and others responsible for watching over the safety, effectiveness, and conduct of the research.
- If a law or court requires us to share the information, we would have to follow that law or final court ruling.

What will happen to my information after this study is over?

We will keep your information to use for *future research and publications*. Your name and other information that can directly identify you will be kept secure and stored separately from your research data collected as part of the study

We will not share your research data with other researchers.

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What else do I need to know?

If we learn about any new information that may change your mind about being in the study, we will tell you. If that happens, you may be asked to sign a new consent form.

Who can answer my questions about this research study?

If you have questions or concerns about this study, or have experienced a research related problem or injury, contact the Principal Investigator, Dr. Sonya Hayes, shayes22@utk.edu

For questions or concerns about your rights or to speak with someone other than the research team about the study, please contact:

Institutional Review Board
The University of Tennessee, Knoxville
Phone: 865-974-7697
Email: utkirb@utk.edu

STATEMENT OF CONSENT

I have read this form and the research study has been explained to me. I have been given the chance to ask questions and my questions have been answered. If I have more questions, I have been told who to contact. By signing this document, I am agreeing to be in this study. I will receive a copy of this document after I sign it.

_____	_____	_____
Name of Adult Participant	Signature of Adult Participant	Date

I also understand that individual interviews will be conducted via Zoom, and these interviews will be recorded via audio and video recordings. I also understand that only the researchers will have access to these recordings. By signing this document, I agree to both audio and video recordings of my interview(s).

_____	_____	_____
Name of Adult Participant	Signature of Adult Participant	Date

Researcher Signature (to be completed at time of informed consent)

I have explained the study to the participant and answered all of his/her questions. I believe that he/she understands the information described in this consent form and freely consents to be in the study.

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Name of Research Team Member

Signature of Research Team Member

Date

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Appendix D

Table 1

Semi-structured interview protocol for principals

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1. Can you please tell me about yourself and your school?
 2. How often have you encountered student cyberbullying in your school?
 3. Can you tell me about your experience dealing with student cyberbullying?
 4. How do your personal and professional values influence your decisions when dealing with cyberbullying?
 5. What types of procedures do you use to deal with student cyberbullying?
 6. How do you feel about the current cyberbullying policies and required procedures?
 7. What types of procedures are used to protect the students?
 8. What type of training do you receive regarding the implementation of policies?
 9. What types of cyberbullying training do you offer your staff, students and parents?
 10. How could training be improved?
 11. Is there anything else you would like to share with me?
-

Table 2

Semi-structured interview protocol for district's risk management director

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1. Can you please tell me about yourself and your district?
 2. Can you explain the process for interpreting and implementing the state's Bullying & Harassment policy?
 3. What specific measures does your district use to address cyberbullying?
 4. How do you train principals on the cyberbullying policies?
 5. What type of training do you receive regarding the implementation of policies?
 6. How could training be improved?
 7. Is there anything else you would like to share?
-

IRB NUMBER: UTK IRB-23-07668-XP
IRB APPROVAL DATE: 07/26/2023

VITA

Jeana Partin was born in Meridian, Mississippi, and moved to Knoxville, Tennessee, in 1987 to continue her education at the University of Tennessee, where she received a Bachelor of Music degree in 1989 and a Master of Music degree in 1994. She worked as a Controller and Operations Manager for eight years at an Israeli-owned music editing company, Waves. In 2003, she helped establish the Carter Elementary PTO as a non-profit and served for two years in an officer position. At Carter Elementary, she started Creating Dreams Fine Arts School and helped raise funds through grants and gifts to scholarship students who could not afford to pay for lessons. Soon after, she decided to homeschool her children and continued to lead church choirs, homeschool co-ops, and serve on non-profit boards. During her children's high school years, she became involved with a Classical Christian curriculum company, Classical Conversations, and began teaching high school students. She became a support manager and area representative for the company. After her children graduated from high school, she started a Classical Christian online school, Cumberland Christian Academy, for K-12 homeschool students. In 2020, she began pursuing a Doctorate in Educational leadership while working as a graduate assistant and continuing as Principal of Cumberland Christian Academy. In January 2023, she resigned from her position as Principal of Cumberland Christian Academy and transitioned to Board Chair. In January 2024, she began a career in higher education as Carson-Newman University's Dean of Student Success and completed her Doctorate in Educational Leadership from the University of Tennessee during the spring of 2024.