Bridging accountability obligations, professional values and (perceived) student needs with integrity

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to explore the tensions between external accountability obligations, educator's professional values, and student needs. Strategic, cognitive, and moral dimensions of this tension are captured with the central category of integrity.

Design/methodology/approach – This is a mixed methods study that compares five exceptionally high performing middle schools with four exceptionally low performing middle schools in the state of California (USA), controlling for demographics, school context factors, and below average performance range.

Findings – It is found that schools under similar circumstances differ on the degree of integrity. Schools with high integrity have a good balance between values and reality, are more cohesive and more open to dissent. In each case, integrity was associated with an expansion of agency that combined moral earnestness with prudent strategizing and actively constructing interpretive frames that maintained a school's sense of self-worth. Integrity develops or survives with a good dose of educational leaders' personal strength, but also depends on leaders' insistence to fully exhaust the moral horizon of an institution which obligates educators to balance equity, system efficiency, child-centeredness and professionalism with prudence.

Research limitations/implications – This is a case study of nine schools in one state. Explanatory relationships can be explored, but not generalized.

Practical implications – The research has implications for leadership. It demonstrates the power of integrity as a key virtue of leadership under accountability pressures. It shows the different ways integrity can be forged in schools and the different ways it can be missed with consequences for school life.

Social implications – The paper stresses the point that it is quite conceivable that ideological zeal, Machiavellian strategizing, or eager system conformism may produce more forceful agency than integrity. But as everyday responses they are not as realistic, ethical or productive as the striving for integrity.

Originality/value – The practitioner literature often points to integrity as a desirable quality when dealing with tensions of the sort addressed in this paper, but little systematic theoretical thinking and empirical exploration of this concept exists. The paper makes an advance in both areas.

Keywords United States of America, Schools, Management accountability, Ethics, Integration, Leadership, Organizational culture

Paper type Research paper

Integrity is an emotionally charged word. [...] Nevertheless, a breach of the system is precisely the terminology that applies to those situations in which the practice of a system so profoundly contradicts its values. [...] The pursuit of integrity requires a comparison of our present activities to our goals, the welcoming of dissatisfaction, and the painful removal of layers of obsolete and potentially harmful practice before new layers of successful pedagogy can take hold. [...] Integrity must also be at the heart of the accountability system (Reeves, 2000, pp. 61-2).

The author wishes to thank Tina Trujillo for her earlier contribution to this research, as well as the anonymous reviewers whose comments were very helpful in improving the manuscript.
Tensions among demands issuing from government and administration, professional values, and student needs are probably typical in public school systems all over the world. For the USA, Reeves, an outspoken and well-known school reform advocate, characterizes the present experience of this tension in vivid terms: as a breach between a system’s practices and values in the wake of powerful external accountability demands, a dissonance between educators’ goals and practices, a quest to benefit, and not harm, the recipients of teachers’ services, accompanied by feelings of “welcoming dissatisfaction” and painful learning. For Reeves, writing for an audience of USA-American school practitioners, the intensity of the situation requires “integrity,” an emotionally charged quality or state of being that makes the dissonances productive for good educational practice. While the shape of these dissonances may depend on uniquely national constellations, the striving for integrity may be a more widely shared quest.

For the USA, the introduction of powerful high-stakes test-driven accountability systems into the arena of American public schools has activated (or reactivated, as it may be) a uniquely American force field. Fault lines with a long historical tradition around first principles and values and a central conflict between policy intent and educational realities on the ground make bridging accountability demands with professional values and student needs a challenging undertaking for educators. In this paper, I describe what forces may constitute this constellation and how educators might productively deal with it. I argue that the category of “integrity” is a key concept that aptly captures what might constitute productive agency under these conditions. My arguments draw from history, philosophy, the sociology of school reform, and an empirical study of nine urban middle schools that found themselves on opposite ends of the performance spectrum by the criteria of their state accountability system. I advance my argument in several steps: first, I ask what specific conditions might produce the need for bridging; second, develop the idea of “integrity;” third, report on an empirical study that illustrates the role integrity may play in leadership for school improvement; and finally, discuss the idea of “integrity” in the context of today’s reform challenges.

What needs bridging: a USA-American constellation
Public school educators in the USA commonly see their work as moral and professional (Johnson, 1990). They readily share control over standards, materials, and assessments with external agents (Ingersoll, 2003), but have traditionally reserved for themselves, and given space for, some independent judgment about appropriate pedagogy and the students’ well-being. Society charges public school educators to do what’s best for children, but within the relatively narrow confines of governmental control and normative expectations that “real school” be conducted (Metz, 1978). Educators presumably have first-hand knowledge and experience of what students need and fancy. But they are expected to steer youthful energy toward official school knowledge and inculcate norms and values that lie within the band of societal consensus. Unlike universities that have license, if not charter, to challenge knowledge and disrupt traditions, primary and secondary schools, across many countries, are rarely permitted to veer far off their socializing mission (Gardner, 1999; Graham, 1993). Yet, in an open and pluralist society, educators are free to adhere to competing educational philosophies, scientific theories, and pedagogical preferences (Kliebard, 1987). Traditionally, these pluralist impulses have been accommodated within the institutional order of the democratic state (Fuller, 2003) with more or less ease.
Test-based accountability systems, designed by governments with the expressed purpose of equalizing outcomes and standardizing educators’ work, presumably condense agency, as they force or encourage schools to focus on a narrowed scope of authoritative performance goals (Fuhrman and Elmore, 2004). But even when guidance and pressure – the combination of standards, assessments, performance targets, and sanctions for non-performance – make accountability systems irrefutable for schools and school districts, competing beliefs, convictions, and professional traditions, the stress of contending environmental influences and demands, and the encompassing struggle to engage students in learning, regardless of official goals and preferences, simply do not go away. Quite the opposite, resistant realities of children’s needs, enduring value traditions, and claims to (at least marginal) professional autonomy and agency may make bridging a strenuous undertaking for educators.

**Pluralist values**: historians of the American educational system have shown how a host of grand ideas, foundational values, myths, and interests have traditionally inspired and motivated actors in their struggle for influence. Four of these defining ideas are especially pertinent to the introduction of accountability systems. Already at the founding of the public school system in this country, the idea of education as the “great equalizer” (Cremin, 1961) of the human condition took hold and has remained anchored in the public imagination (Meyer, 2006). Child-centeredness (Proefriedt, 2008), the idea that educational offerings ought to serve the interests and curiosities of the individual child rather than flow from societal prerogatives, has since the times of Dewey been a core concern and value for educators. Social efficiency (Tyack, 1974) has been described as a theme so powerful within the American tradition that some have called it a “cult” (Callahan, 1970). The idea that educators ought to be professionals who derive their occupational status from technical expertise and knowledge of children’s learning has strongly guided the strivings of the occupation (Labaree, 2006; Popkewitz, 1994; Joseph and Burnsford, 2001). It is the subject of historical analysis to describe how these four strands, equalization, child-centeredness, social efficiency, and professionalism, among others, have enlivened history as myths, justifications for underlying interests, or inspirations for true strivings, and how they have been in conflict with each other or synergistically fed on each other. For our purposes, it suffices to recognize that a political project of such magnitude as high-stakes accountability may powerfully activate these foundational values and in redistributing their relative weights may require actors at the receiving end, most notably teachers and principals in schools, to reformulate some workable balance[1].

**Differentiated needs**: in the case of the USA, as elsewhere, working out a balance is made harder as educators face two social-structural trends that run counter to each other. On one hand, accountability systems increase the momentum to standardize educational offerings via curricular alignment, prescriptive programs, pacing guides and the like in order to fulfill accountability system expectations and insure a baseline proficiency for all children. On the other hand, students’ learning needs have become increasingly differentiated socially and individually. Immigration, cultural diversity, as well as discrepancies between the poor and the middle class regarding opportunities and lifestyles have increased social differentiation (Buchmann, 1989; Gilbert, 2008; Lareau, 2003; Neckerman, 2004; Beck et al., 1994). Individualization is indicated by rising special learning needs (Banks and Banks, 2009), for example, by special education assignments. Clamor for personal regard and emotional support has intensified among the student population while teachers’ authority and students’ norms of group cooperation and comportment have become more precarious (Pace and
Hemmings, 2007). As the press for standardization rubs against a resistant reality of social and individual differentiation, inconsistencies between the needs of children and the demands of the system may arise that cannot be bridged with facility, particularly in schools that serve disadvantaged students. An example may be the requirement to give a test in English to large numbers of limited English speakers. These stresses, if they are indeed perceived by educators, in turn may galvanize traditional value conflicts within the American teaching profession (e.g. between child-centeredness and system efficiency).

Accountability systems, via standards, assessments, data and the like, can be powerful technical drivers of school change, but by their very nature, such systems pivot on judgment (Hargreaves, 2004; Mintrop, 2004). How high should equality expectations be, how narrow or wide, complex or simple should content be, what should be the role of the child in the educational endeavor, and what ought to count as potential “harm” and “pain,” to speak with Reeves again, that is, they may entail value conflict, moral dilemma, and emotional intensity. Thus when educators craft local coherence (Honig and Hatch, 2004) or make sense of cognitive dissonances (Coburn, 2006), moral concerns may be accentuated.

*Responses to accountability*: based on the literature on educators’ responses to accountability, one may analytically distinguish three patterns: resistance, alignment, and coherence (Mintrop and Sunderman, 2009; Supovitz, 2009; Leithwood et al., 2002; Louis et al., 2005). In real life, however, schools may craft responses that contain elements of all three. Thus patterns will overlap.

Educators may develop resistance (Hursh, 2003; McNeil, 2000; Mintrop, 2004; Valenzuela, 2005; Achinstein and Ogawa, 2006) as a result of their evaluation of system pressures in light of their own standards of good teaching and care for students. Overemphasis on control, narrow learning goals, and disregard for students’ social needs may generate attempts to devise subversive strategies (McNeil, 2000) or may result in exit (Achinstein and Ogawa, 2006). Resistance to accountability demands is probably not widespread (Hursh, 2003) as it may imperil one’s job and organizational survival.

Alignment seems to be a wide-spread response pattern (Jacob, 2005; Hamilton et al., 2005). When schools align to the accountability system, they internally reorder goals, programs, and data with system elements. They focus on the system goals, deemphasize non-tested subjects, carefully orient instruction to test items that recur on state tests, select standards-based materials, use the system’s performance information to monitor teachers, focus on remedial learning needs, and so on (Herman, 2004; Koretz, 2008). Schools responding with alignment ration time and energy to optimize measured results (Booher-Jennings, 2005). Alignment is a technical or strategic response that excludes moral concerns from the conversation (Anagnostopoulos, 2006; Anagnostopoulos and Rutledge, 2007).

When schools, in response to system demands, pull together around goals, develop a sense of shared responsibility for high performance, and establish consistency between external accountability and a school’s internal accountability culture, they have established coherence (Elmore, 2004; Carnoy et al., 2003). Coherence may be programmatic or normative. Coherence comes about more easily in organizations that have sufficient internal capacity to answer to external pressures. Lower capacity schools under performance pressures situated in lower SES environments may find it harder to develop coherence and tend to opt for alignment strategies (Diamond and
Spillane, 2004). The concept of integrity, developed in this paper, is meant to be an elaboration of the coherence pattern and may be especially salient for schools situated in disadvantaged communities at the lower end of the performance spectrum. As schools claim their space for internal action, interrogate accountability demands within the existing spectrum of pluralist values, and maintain sensitivity for countervailing student needs, while perhaps using the impetus of accountability systems to leverage desirable improvements, they strive toward integrity.

The concept of integrity
Integrity is a moral quality of social life that inheres cognitive effort, but also binds and mobilizes positive emotions (Turiel, 2005). Common sense notions of integrity conjure honesty, sticking to one's principles, courage in the face of challenges, and wholeness in the face of fragmentation, conflict, or fragility. Integrity is at the core of relational trust (Louis 2007; Bryk and Schneider, 2002). Integrity in schools, according to Bryk and Schneider, hinges upon a reliable consistency between word and deed around core educational values.

In a nutshell, for the purpose of this study we say that educators as individuals or collectives have integrity when they strive for agency in pursuit of valued internal purposes; establish coherence or consistency among values, word, and deed; acknowledge compromise, rupture, and conflict with honesty and truthfulness; evaluate action in light of perceived client needs; and address institutional role obligations in the face of multiple values and moral demands of the institution.

The philosophical and psychological literature on (personal) integrity seems to agree that integrity has a moral and integrative dimension. A person with integrity affirms one's core values and commitments within a normative frame while integrating, giving unity, coherence, or identity, to the manifold and conflicting demands placed on the self (McFall, 1987; Ramsay, 1997). But there is disagreement as to the "moral texture" of integrity. Carter (1996) gives a "tightly" textured version. Persons have integrity when they have developed a sense of right and wrong, discerned a course of action, and avowed to stay true to principles even when the environment does not reward the conduct. Integrity always involves risk. An individual in complete harmony with self and their social environment cannot develop integrity. In the words of McFall (1987), "Where there is no possibility of its loss, integrity cannot exist" (p. 9). For Carter, there are standards of the morally right. These standards may not always be apparent, but one may gain access to them through reflecting with sincerity, earnestness, and commitment.

Opposite to Carter's morally stringent concept of integrity is Steele's social psychological conceptualization. Here integrity is about a sense of moral or adaptive adequacy in the face of environmental forces that threaten individuals' sense of self-worth, for example, as a result of negative judgments, sanctions, and the like. Integrity is restored with images that affirm "the larger self" (Steele, 1988). These images may not necessarily address the specific situation, nor may they be able to actually resolve the material threat. In fact, individuals may "tolerate specific inconsistencies with no attempt at resolution," (p. 268) as long as a broad balance, a workable whole is maintained.

Benjamin's (1990) conception of integrity is at once looser than Carter's, but ethically more substantive than Steele's. For him commitments to a set of values are essential, and these commitments, as for Carter, are coupled with self-reflection, willingness to be
self-critical, and avoidance of self-deception. But his view of modern society as highly differentiated precludes the existence of overarching world views that could support firm and discernible moral standards of the kind Carter has in mind. Given multiple roles we play, situations we negotiate, and diverse people with unique sets of commitments we encounter, value conflicts are rampant and not easily solvable. For Benjamin, it is tolerance of dissent, flexibility, dialogue, and compromise with others that lead to an integrated life and morally superior outcomes, achieved collectively. Though individuals strive for coherence, values and core commitments may change as long as individuals (or groups) can account for the reasons in an intelligent and honest way. Integrity is in opposition to ideological rigidity. This more loosely textured conception of integrity appears to be more applicable to the public school setting where people of many different persuasions and experiences typically interact with each other.

Conceptions differ on the strength of coherence or unity that integrity requires. McFall (1987) describes as integrated those individuals who have developed stable and well-ordered value hierarchies and consistencies among their various unconditional and conditional commitments. Critics of this tight definition point out that the need for stability and order should not be overplayed since a person with integrity always needs to engage ambivalences and inconsistencies in their lives that persistently challenge coherence (Cox et al., 2003). But even with definitions of integration as more tightly textured, integrity is never a coherent unity. Rather it is formed out of component parts that are still recognized as unique qualities in tension with others. One does not have integrity, but strives for it.

We have so far looked at conceptions of integrity at the individual level. But as Montefiori (Montefiore and Vines, 1999, Chapter 1) has pointed out, individuals act in concrete and social situations. They carry out certain tasks in specific social settings that are more or less structurally unified or rife with conflict or contradictions. They occupy certain social roles in specific institutions that provide the normative frame, to them and others, for evaluative standards of integrity. Because educators in their work settings act out a public role that is defined by institutional task structures and values, we are not only concerned with personal integrity, but also with public integrity. Moreover, we are concerned with the behavior of organizations that have specific cultures and adhere to shared core philosophies and programmatic commitments that may be in tension with their environment.

When one moves from the personal to the public realm, conceptions of integrity become more loosely textured for two reasons: first, the media through which much of public life is lived, such as money, power, or bureaucracy, operate to a large degree in impersonal or non-moral ways with which individuals and groups need to compromise in order to function (Paine, 1994; Selznick, 1994); and second, congruence cannot be assumed between personal commitments and the kinds of commitments institutions permit and oblige public officials to express, what Dobel (1999) calls an institution’s “moral horizon.” If institutions “represent inheritances of valued purpose with attendant rules and moral obligations” (Heclo, 2008, p. 38) that result in given, often unequal, distributions of power, wealth, and prestige, then moral horizons of institutions derive from the institution’s multiple core values and the consistency of those values with its practices. The military’s moral horizon does not include pacifism, nor is it restricted to the obligation of killing one’s enemy in times of war. The moral horizon of the educational system as it relates to the specific bridging challenge discussed in this paper is circumscribed by multiple and inconsistent core values activated by the structural disparities that I have discussed above.
Dobel (1999) has developed a model of public integrity for higher echelon officials that nevertheless is applicable to street-level officials, such as school administrators and teachers. It consists of three overlapping domains that together set up a “triangle of judgment” through which officials may move when they make decisions: obligations of office, personal integrity, and prudence. Personal integrity is at the heart of public integrity in liberally constituted societies because institutional structures never abdicate personal responsibility for one’s actions. However, in the public realm, personal integrity is hemmed in by institutional structures and the need to be efficacious in one’s actions to accomplish results.

Offices are grants of power over citizens and come with duties to abide by the rules, norms, and aspirational values of the institution. At the very basic level, this means obeying laws and regulations and striving to act according to foundational and constitutional principles. Institutions prevent people from being harmful to others and encourage them to improve, for example, when new legal norms protect minorities from discrimination or educational authorities press for more equitable educational outcomes. But sometimes it is the other way around, and it is up to individual citizens or office holders to prevent institutions from doing harm and press them to live up to higher standards. Thus obligation of office is not blind obedience, compliance, or abdication of personal responsibility, rather it requires careful weighing of the purposes and consequences of an institutional structure, program, or policy in light of one’s own commitments and the broadest ethical standards. But it is the obligation to take external normative guidance seriously, whether it comes from governmental or professional sources, and not reject it on the grounds that it constrains one’s individual commitments.

Officials are in their offices, principals in their schools, and teachers in their classrooms, in order to achieve results. Given the increasingly impersonal, disintegrative, and amoral functioning of much of institutional life, we should not be surprised, as the philosopher Ok thermo Rorty polemically remarks, that it is “the willful, boastful or sniveling egotists, people of low integration and even lower integrity” (Rorty, 1999, p. 117) who get things done, and not necessarily those who pay homage to integrity. Integrity in the public realm needs to be augmented by prudence, the practical wisdom, skill, and forethought to marshal the forces and means needed to accomplish valued outcomes. Prudence is distinguished from expediency. For the latter, any means are welcome that produce effects in the moment; for the former, the choice of means, with sometimes needed ethical compromises, is oriented toward the longer term and with an outlook on a broader picture. Thus, for the street-level office, integrity is shot through with pragmatic, but prudent, politicking, managing, and strategizing (Honig and Hatch, 2004).

Organizational integrity is a matter of both culture and structure. It is about crafting a coherent whole, both technically and normatively (Elmore, 2004; Newmann et al., 2001), and a conscious ethical response in reference to the institution’s moral horizon, internal core commitments of personnel, and the need to produce results (Fullan, 2003). With Schein (1985), we can presume that organizational integrity centrally hinges on the agency of leaders whose role it is to embody organizational and personal commitments and integrate the organization’s core values with its needs to solve problems of adaptation to its environment. Such leadership, we can presume is at once moral and strategic-managerial.

We are now in a better position to analytically distinguish integrity from other response patterns to accountability discussed above. (In reality, there will probably
always be overlap.) Technical alignment privileges the demands of the system over internal values and student needs as they present themselves to teachers. Coupled with authoritatively established consensus, alignment may preclude moral-ethical considerations and suppress internal values and student needs that run counter to “what works” in terms of measured performance. Integrity moves beyond coherence, though the two of them are related. Coherence by itself implies unity, an active forging of productive congruence and consensus between external demands and internal programs and orientations. Integrity stresses the precariousness of this congruence and the ethical struggle to bridge what may be in conflict with each other. After careful weighing of external obligations in light of internal values and observed needs, integrity may entail elements of resistance, but resistance within the bounds of ensuring the viability and survival of the organization. For, the organization is the means for actors’ collective agency.

**Operationalizing integrity**

Integrity in schools is at base about finding a good balance between external demands that emanate from district and state administrations, educators’ pluralist educational values, and differentiated student needs. Good balance does not mean equal weights, but assigning weights according to a rank order of normative importance. Schools with high integrity have found a place in the system, but have retained something of their own. They have given external demands their rightful place, as weighted against internal values and perceived student needs. They have done so without (self-) deception, but with sincerity, honesty, dialogue and tolerance for dissent. They act out of respect for the institution and for self. While the concrete bridging “solutions” may differ and may privilege some values over others, schools with high integrity may craft these solutions in reference to the moral horizon of the American educational system with its spectrum of relevant values. This means that even when their solution veers toward “efficiency,” administrative rationality, and standardization, for example, they keep child-centered concerns and uniquely professional responsibilities in the conversation, or vice versa. Being open to dissent makes it more likely that these concerns are at the table and inform the school’s collective tinkering with solutions. Integrity is a pragmatic aspiration that de-emphasizes ideological wars, but encourages ethical and complex problem solving (Campbell, 2008).

Integrity is reflected in concrete beliefs, norms, and practices at the organizational level. For this study, integrity is indicated by the shared belief that a good balance is struck at a given school among external demands, professional values, and student needs. Good balance in substance is cultivated in organizations with certain, more formal, characteristics: weighing tensions is reflected in open communication, toleration of dissent, and learning; external obligations are reflected in the school having raised expectations in response to the demands of the accountability system; coherence is indicated by norms of shared responsibility and pulling together around common goals. Principals play an essential role in bridging the organization to the external environment (Goldring and Rallis, 1993), particularly in response to accountability (Rutledge, 2010). Leadership that furthers integrity presumably creates a sense of normative and programmatic coherence in conjunction with toleration of dissent. Thus, leadership may range from managerial or instructional to moral emphases (Hodgkinson, 1991; Fullan, 2003; Louis et al., 2010; Sergiovanni, 1992; Goldring and Rallis, 1993). Lastly, schools that exhibit this pattern of integrity may relate more positively or negatively to the accountability system (Mintrop and Trujillo,
A more positive response would be indicated by schools’ perceptions of meaningfulness of the system, the latter by perceptions of pressure (Mintrop, 2004). I explore this basic pattern of organizational integrity with quantitative survey (and test) data.

Integrity necessitates the perspective of actors who craft coherence, make sense of dissonances, and struggle through accountability judgments, value tensions, and structural disparities with moral effort. This actor perspective is captured in qualitative interviews primarily with school leaders (principals, assistant principals, and teacher leaders) and those receiving the leaders’ messages. Questions and interpretive codes revolve around the triangle of judgment: what personal core commitments do leaders have, how do they interpret accountability demands, and how do they strategize so that valued outcomes are achieved and the organization survives. I ask how leaders frame accountability demands in light of the moral horizon of the institution, how they remain sensitive to student needs that run counter to external demands, and how they make sure voices are heard that can articulate varied values and perceptions. I query how leaders make the organization “whole” (i.e. maintain an internal locus of control and sense of worth while avoiding self-deception), and what strategies they use to make it through the system in one piece (i.e. avoid sanctions and corrective actions). I examine how they strive for unifying goals and aspirations while accommodating dissent and self-examination; and lastly how they instill courage in the face of risk.

The California accountability context
Across the USA, accountability systems differ widely. Some are bare bones, others are fairly elaborate (Mintrop and Trujillo, 2005). Measuring student performance through regular testing, providing performance information, setting simple quantitative goals that force schools on a continuous improvement path, and the threat of sanctions for low performers, from corrective action all the way to the dissolution of the school, are the main drivers in the bare bones version. More elaborate systems add to this a catalogue of state learning standards, cognitively ambitious state assessments, instructional materials aligned with state assessments, and resources for professional development and school intervention around mandated instructional programs. In the bare bones version, schools are left alone in figuring out how to meet their performance targets. In the more elaborate systems, schools are potentially more regulated; and what teachers do in their classrooms may be subject to central instructional management. The bare bones version may move schools through the sheer might of goals and sanctions; the more elaborate version may work through a more subtle multi-pronged systemic approach that combines incentives with controls.

The California accountability system, my place of study, is of the elaborate kind. At the time of this study, the state had a fairly well-aligned system in place. State standards were aligned with the California Standards Tests which were the weightiest components in the formula with which the state computed each school’s academic performance index (API) annually (CDE, 2006). Each year, schools received a new API growth target that was calculated as 5 percent of the difference between a school’s present API and the state goal of 800. (In addition to the state index API, the federal Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) performance target, not particularly well aligned with API, was making inroads into the schools when we collected data.) Textbook publishers, ever mindful of the state’s market power, adapted their materials explicitly to state standards. The state adopted a small number of English language, arts, math,
and remedial literacy programs that schools were required to use. Monies were allocated for professional development explicitly tied to state-adopted curricula. Additional funds, quite generous compared to other states (Mintrop and Trujillo, 2005), were given to schools in the lowest performing brackets through, so called, High Priority Schools Grants. As to sanctions, California followed the procedures laid out in the federal No Child Left Behind legislation that stipulates five program improvement stages at which end a persistently low-performing school ceases to exist. Thus, in California, many schools, especially in poor urban and rural districts (Kim and Sunderman, 2005), have experienced strong accountability pressures, have wrestled with labels of low performance and failure, and become subject to the regulatory reach of districts all the way into the classroom.

The study
The data for the study were collected from nine middle schools, urban in character, that found themselves in the bottom half of the state’s performance distribution. Within this band, five schools were rather high performing and four rather low performing. But all nine were as similar as possible with respect to social background and internal capacity so that the relationship among salient variables surrounding the challenge to integrity could be studied “controlling” for extraneous factors. The study employs a structured multiple-cases design that allows for quantitative and qualitative cross-case comparisons (Yin, 2003; Miles and Huberman, 1994). The bulk of the data were collected in the 2004-2005 school year.

Cases
Table I shows characteristics of the nine schools on which this paper is based. The schools were overall similar demographically. Two schools (I and C) had relatively lower proportions of African-American and Hispanic students, but a high proportion of Hmong students. To explore school context conditions with finer grain size, we went beyond state-reported data and inquired about student and teacher perceptions of family background and support for education[2]. Some schools, it appears from this data, are more challenged in the area of parental support and poverty, while others more in the area of language and possession of cultural goods, but for the analysis conducted in this paper, schools overall are reasonably well matched. Similarly, higher capacity schools might be able to exert more forceful agency in bridging tensions than

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<td>26</td>
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Table I
Demographic characteristics of the nine selected cases, 2004-2005

Notes: *1 = not a high school graduate, 5 = graduate school; parental education is subject to the inaccuracies of self-reported data

Source: California Department of Education (2006)
lower capacity schools. Survey data that capture internal teacher capacity as indicated by school-wide percentages and averages, respectively, of total years of teaching, degree completed, full certification, and subjective sense of preparedness, show that the schools were well matched with regard to internal teacher capacity, though some differences exist on degrees completed[3]. In sum, the cases exhibit fairly similar conditions across the nine schools with respect to individual teacher capacity and socioeconomic environment.

**Instruments and data**

A number of robust research instruments were developed for the quantitative component of this study. All instruments were repeatedly field tested. Factor and scale reliabilities were in most instances high and in a few instances acceptable. Some survey items and scales were validated in previous studies, conducted by the authors and other researchers in the field; some were specifically developed for this study. Here I briefly describe the properties of the instruments and the ways they were administered. For a more in-depth discussion and detailed data collection and analysis procedures, refer to the CRESST technical report (Mintrop and Trujillo, 2007b). The teacher questionnaire consisted of over 180 individual response items designed to collect information on teachers’ perceptions of accountability, school goals, leadership, organizational strength, motivation, efficacy, school program, and change strategy as well as teacher background data. Items and scales come from a variety of sources (CCSR, 2003; Mintrop, 2004; McLaughlin and Talbert, 1993; SRI International, Policy Studies Associates and CPRE, 2003). The questionnaire was administered to all teachers in the nine schools; 317 teachers responded in total. Overall response rate was 83 percent, ranging from 67 percent for School I up to 94 percent for School E.

The analysis in this paper concentrates on a set of relevant variables related to the organizational-cultural base pattern of integrity, leadership emphases, and responses to the accountability system.

For the qualitative component, a total of 157 interviews were conducted, between 17 and 20 interviews per school. We interviewed school leaders and classroom teachers, at least one counselor per school, and the person responsible for administering special programs for disadvantaged children. Interviews were conducted in two phases. Interspersed between the two phases were classroom observations which allowed us a view of school practices independent from teacher testimony. In the first interview phase (up to ten interviews per school) we asked about goals, values, organizational culture, leadership, and accountability. In the second interview phase, we focused on the instructional program, perceived student needs, and teachers’ own learning, often in reference to observed lessons. The principals were interviewed in both phases.

The purpose of the interviews was to increase data richness around the quantitative survey items and scales. Thus, the coding of the 157 interviews followed the variables of the quantitative component of the study. Broad descriptors were coded, such as principal leadership, instructional program, response to accountability, school change process, performance management, professional development, and the role of district. Data analysis for this paper focuses on material related to the first four. More fine-grained codes were developed that homed in on matters of integrity. Material coded with constructive/defensive approach to accountability, fairness, goal setting, goal integrity, meaningfulness of accountability, morale/commitment, pulling together, pressure, realism, responsibility/obligation, reputation/image help illuminate educators’ interpretations of system demands. Material coded with academic press,
care, engagement, expectations, student discipline, connections to student lives, curriculum differentiation, English language learners (in the California context), “bubble kids”/expediency, teaching to the test, adaptation/fidelity of instructional program, extra-curricular activities help illuminate educators’ educational philosophies, interpretations of student needs, and strategies to answer to these needs. Educators’ own values in light of external demands and student needs, their propensity to adopt expedient, prudent, or value-concordant or discordant strategies are illuminated by both sets of codes.

Initially a small set of interviews were double coded by two coders. Discrepancies between the two coders were discussed until agreements could be established. The bulk of the interviews was coded by one coder. For the data analysis for this paper, interviews with principals, other administrators, and teachers with special leadership functions were reread in their entirety (about 20) by the second coder, and the consistency of codes was re-examined. Based on these 20 or so interviews, the initial coding turned out to cover the key material needed for this analysis. Rereading of all other interviews was restricted to the material coded with the above listed codes.

The interview protocols did contain prompts for “balance,” but did not contain explicit prompts for the “moral horizon of the institution”, nor was the material explicitly coded in this regard. However, respondents, particularly principals, tended to frame the rendering of good balance or imbalance among accountability demands, internal values, and perceived student needs in terms of broader institutional values (most notably equalization, professionalism, child-centeredness, and effectiveness – not necessarily using the exact terms). Following Miles and Huberman (1994), data were grouped into “case dynamics matrices” (p. 148ff) with categories derived from the conceptualization of the study and the quantitative patterns. For this paper, the material is used to compose short vignettes that illustrate the quantitatively established patterns.

Classroom observation data consisting of 270 lesson segments in English Language Arts serve a very limited purpose in this paper. With a focus on three dimensions listed in Table II, they enter the case narrative to countercheck claims that respondents make regarding their schools’ concern for instructional quality.

Thus, this mixed-methods case study design uses quantitative data for descriptive and correlational analyses to understand the nine cases in comparison. Utilizing a sequential explanatory strategy (Creswell, 2003), I build on quantitative analyses with qualitative inquiries. The quantitative data reveal associations among factors, but we cannot infer directionality without qualitative data that illuminate what makes these associations come to life (Miles and Huberman, 1994; Green et al., 2006).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table II. Variables</th>
<th>Good balance of external demands, teachers’ values, and student needs</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Organizational integrity</td>
<td>Good balance of external demands, teachers’ values, and student needs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Open communication and toleration of dissent; learning orientation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Shared responsibility for performance; collegiality; pulling together</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leadership strength</td>
<td>Moral, instructional, supportive, managerial</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceptions of accountability system</td>
<td>Guidance, validity, fairness, pressure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Measured performance</td>
<td>API scores</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Observed instructional quality</td>
<td>Positive tone, pro-active instructional formats, cognitive complexity</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Findings
Findings are presented in two steps. I first examine and display descriptive and correlational data to explore integrity-related organizational characteristics and identify schools with different patterns that I compare in more detail through qualitative data in case vignettes that, for this paper, interpret the actions of school leaders.

Quantitative data
When teachers across the nine schools were asked how system demands, student needs, and teacher values ought to be balanced normatively, they gave the highest importance ratings to student needs. Teacher values, according to mean responses across all nine schools, should count for less than student needs, but more than system demands. When asked about the reality of these weights in their schools, system demands were factually perceived as dominant. Thus there is an imbalance. Factually, teacher values were seen as less important than student needs, roughly as it should be normatively. Two schools, B and C, stand out with particularly high (factual) importance ratings for student needs. That is, in these two schools teachers on the whole perceive their schools factually to attach more importance to student needs (and to lesser degree to teacher values) than in the other seven schools. One school (E) is especially conspicuous, according to teachers’ perceptions, in unduly disregarding student needs, unduly in light of normative expectations (“should” ratings). In two schools (D and H), the discrepancy between the system’s legitimacy (“should”) and the reality of the system’s perceived dominance is particularly conspicuous (Table III)[4].

Among the nine schools, the two schools (B and C) with the highest perceived regard for student needs also stand out with an overall organizational-cultural pattern that points in the direction of relatively strong integrity compared to two other schools, notably schools E and H that point in the opposite direction. The two schools in which the faculty perceived a better balance among demands, values, and needs were also relatively stronger in accommodating open communication and tolerating dissent while at the same time raising expectations according to accountability demands and forging internal coherence.

Thus, these two schools presumably achieved both moral integrity, here indicated as a balancing of core tensions, as well as more formal integration, here indicated by

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>A</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>C</th>
<th>D</th>
<th>E</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>G</th>
<th>H</th>
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<td>n = 26</td>
<td>n = 28</td>
<td>n = 49</td>
<td>n = 29</td>
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<td>System demands</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Normative</td>
<td>3.00</td>
<td>3.30</td>
<td>3.21</td>
<td>2.62</td>
<td>3.18</td>
<td>3.12</td>
<td>3.11</td>
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<td>2.97</td>
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<tr>
<td>Factual</td>
<td>4.53</td>
<td>4.55</td>
<td>4.23</td>
<td>4.40</td>
<td>4.82</td>
<td>4.81</td>
<td>4.89</td>
<td>4.85</td>
<td>4.79</td>
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<tr>
<td>Student needs</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Normative</td>
<td>4.91</td>
<td>5.00</td>
<td>4.74</td>
<td>4.88</td>
<td>4.82</td>
<td>4.81</td>
<td>4.89</td>
<td>4.85</td>
<td>4.79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Factual</td>
<td>3.56</td>
<td>4.23</td>
<td>4.05</td>
<td>3.07</td>
<td>2.57</td>
<td>3.38</td>
<td>3.46</td>
<td>3.04</td>
<td>3.17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers’ values</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Normative</td>
<td>3.98</td>
<td>3.81</td>
<td>4.03</td>
<td>3.93</td>
<td>3.96</td>
<td>3.96</td>
<td>4.46</td>
<td>4.02</td>
<td>3.48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Factual</td>
<td>2.74</td>
<td>3.35</td>
<td>3.36</td>
<td>2.69</td>
<td>2.46</td>
<td>2.62</td>
<td>3.00</td>
<td>2.73</td>
<td>2.83</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: Five-point Likert scale: How important should these forces be?/How important are these forces in the reality of your school?: “very important” to “not at all important”

Table III.
Teachers’ perceptions of balance of system demands, values, and needs (means)
the poise with which they pull together and at the same time accommodate diverse views or judgments[5]. Across the nine schools, associations among the various organizational-cultural indicators of integrity are strong, allowing us to speak of a consistent pattern[6]. Figure 1 displays the association between good balance as the substantive core of integrity in this study and other integrity-related characteristics that confirm for the nine schools the interweaving of moral and integrative dimensions of integrity postulated by the literature.

Leadership, as predicted, was associated with a more strongly developed pattern of integrity across the nine schools. Figure 2 displays the relationship between good balance and various emphases of leadership. It was not moral leadership alone that seems to have played a role. In the eyes of survey respondents, moral, technical-instructional, supportive, and managerial emphases, in combination, seem to have contributed to a shared sense of good balance, reinforcing the sense that integrity is a multi-dimensional quality that comes about through weighing and clarifying, but also managing, strategizing, technical support, and personal regard. In short, integrity may be facilitated by multi-faceted leadership strength.

Integrity, as the literature states, develops in the tension between an internal state and external challenges. Integrity involves potential loss, risk, and disharmony while striving toward effectiveness, coherence, sense of worth, and moral core commitments. The focal external challenge, relevant for our investigation, is the looming presence of high-stakes accountability systems that in their elaborate forms exert unprecedented control over schools and classrooms while demanding “gap closing” performance.

Figure 1.
Relationships between “good balance” and faculty culture

Notes: Trend lines based on nine cases. Scatter plots not displayed to facilitate readability. Trend lines for open communication, learning orientation, pulling together, raised expectations, shared responsibility.
improvements in short order. How do schools with a strongly developed integrity pattern bridge to the system and how do they fare in the system?

Table V groups the nine schools according to integrity strength displayed in Table IV. In that table, Schools B and C were identified with the strongest patterns while Schools H and E with the weakest ones. As to test performance in the system, no causal connections can be construed from this data. But Table V does illuminate that a strong integrity pattern was not a detriment to test performance. If at all, the two schools with a strong pattern grew relatively well within the two years prior to the time of data collection, compared to the nine schools. (School B, the school with the strongest integrity pattern, was the strongest performer in the nine-school sample.) Table V also shows that schools with a relatively stronger integrity pattern, compared to those with a weaker pattern, had a more positive outlook on the system’s guidance function, fairness, and validity. They found the system more meaningful for their practice while not feeling more pressure. A different way of displaying this relationship is Figure 3, the “bundled” trend lines based on scatter plots of the nine schools that demonstrate the relationship between accountability perceptions and “good balance” perceptions.

The quantitative data alone, as stated above, cannot positively establish integrity because they lack the actor perspective, but the data can indicate a presumed integrity pattern. In sum, the data reveal that integrity strength is indicated by good balance among external demands, teachers’ values, and perceived student needs, embedded in a culture that takes external performance obligations seriously, coheres around
### Table IV.
Integrity-related school culture characteristics (matrix of school means*)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Strong</th>
<th>Mixed</th>
<th>Weak</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>B</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>I</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Good balance of demands, values, and needs</td>
<td>++</td>
<td>++</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Open communication and dissent</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning orientation</td>
<td>++</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Raised expectations</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>++</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pulling together</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>++</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shared responsibility</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>++</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cohesion</td>
<td>++</td>
<td>++</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Observed instructional quality**</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Notes:** *Table III displays a matrix of the nine schools’ mean perceptions of faculty culture. The matrix displays scale means by assigning a zero (suppressed) to school means that fell within 0.1 point of the nine-school mean; one plus (+) or minus (−) to means that fell <1 SD above or below the mean; two pluses (++ or minuses (−−) to means that fell >1 SD above or below the mean; **see Table in Appendix 1 classroom observations (in percent of observed snapshots). “+” and “−”, exceptionally high quality in three dimensions combined.*

### Table V.
Response to accountability by strength of integrity pattern (matrix of school means*)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Strong</th>
<th>Mixed</th>
<th>Weak</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>B</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>I</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>API growth over last two years</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pressure</td>
<td>−−</td>
<td>−−</td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guidance/focus</td>
<td>++</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>++</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Validity</td>
<td>++</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>++</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fairness</td>
<td>++</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>++</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Note:** *See Table III footnotes*

![Figure 3.](image)

**Notes:** Trend lines based on nine cases. Scatter plots not displayed to facilitate readability. Trend lines for open communication, learning orientation, pulling together, raised expectations, shared responsibility
common goals, but at the same time leaves sufficient openness for dissent and learning. This pattern may be facilitated by multi-faceted leadership strength at given schools. Across the nine cases, schools with a relatively stronger integrity pattern tend to connect to the accountability system in a more meaningful way. The integrity pattern is also associated with relatively strong growth on the state’s API within a two-year period of data collection, though other schools with a weaker integrity pattern posted similar growth. Thus, overall the quantitative data would suggest integrity as a rather desirable property of schools. Teachers at the schools seem to think so as well. Satisfaction ratings (not displayed here) are highest in the two high-integrity schools and lowest in one of the low-integrity schools (E). How this pattern actually plays out in schools is illuminated by qualitative data.

Qualitative case vignettes
My main purpose in this section is to show what concrete beliefs, attitudes, and practices attach themselves to the previously established patterns. It makes sense to begin the analysis with the two schools that, relative to the other seven, exhibited the strongest integrity according to the quantitative indicators. These are Schools B and C. For a school with relatively lower integrity characteristics, clearly School E qualifies as Table IV shows. School H, in the same category as School E, could have been chosen, but School D, a borderline case with a somewhat different organizational culture pattern that points to integrity challenges of a different kind than School E (or H for that matter) makes for a more poignant vignette.

School B. On our first visit to School B, we were introduced to one of the senior teachers who had taken on the responsibility for the school’s remedial literacy programs. With tears in his eyes, he recounted how the school’s principal over many years had turned the school around and made it one of the highest performing middle schools in the state for its demographic profile. This deep connection between faculty and leadership resurfaced again and again. For the principal, himself part of the community from which the school drew its students, the accountability system was an extension of his moral mission: opening up opportunities for mainly poor Latino immigrants. In his mind, he was following a moral compass that he himself had experienced in his own middle class upbringing. When legislation passed and the accountability system came into being, his agenda was already well underway; he merely seized on new opportunities. For him, the system finally ended all distractions from achievement and strengthened the hands of those who believed in the possibility of dramatic learning gains for poor children. Over time, he separated from teachers who resisted his vision. He came to rely on a cadre of committed senior teachers and attracted larger numbers of young energetic teachers whose tenure at the school tended to be relatively short. Accountability to the state was framed as a mere extension of strong internal commitments. The school lived and breathed a morality of effectiveness, at the core of which was a leader who had convinced the faculty that the accountability system was a moral imperative, designed to benefit life chances of students of color and immigrants. Thus, little tensions between personal commitments and external obligations surfaced in the interviews with faculty.

Guidance from the system was seen as very helpful in focussing the school’s resources and energy and making instruction evidence based. Directed by its administration, the faculty strove to design an instructional program that would optimize outcomes. But raising test scores was not seen as an end in itself, rather as a sign of a job well done. The school opted for detailed curriculum alignment and

Accountability obligations
prescribed instruction. The majority of below-grade-level students were taught for the majority of their learning time in remedial literacy programs. Social studies and science had been de-departmentalized in this middle school and folded into the teaching of the literacy programs. This was justified on the grounds that arrangements more typical for elementary schools would work better for the kinds of students and learning needs that the school had to address.

But there was unease. Doubts about the adequacy of science and social studies instruction were aired openly in this faculty, but for the time being, a joint commitment had been made to focus on remedial literacy as a deliberate experiment. A number of teachers and the assistant principal, who functioned as the main instructional leader, acknowledged that the remedial instructional programs might fall short on being engaging for students, but this did not prevent them from embarking on an active quest to improve teaching within these programs. Indeed, data from classroom observations demonstrate higher instructional quality in this school than in most of the other schools observed. Moreover, teachers were encouraged to identify gaps in the school's program and offer solutions. For example, English teachers, complaining about a lack of writing skills, identified, procured, and were in the process of trying out a new writing program. Thus, the needs of children were a constant point of reference, but they were reflected within the fairly narrow confines of the standards-aligned programmatic structure. The school was very successful at raising standardized test scores and points on the state's API.

How do actions at School B convey a striving for integrity? The school makes a conscious moral choice in bridging external state and district demands, internal values, and student needs as perceived by the school, and it pursues its decisions with zeal and shared faculty commitment. It strongly values efficiency, utility, and remediation, and interprets those pursuits in the frame of equalizing life chances for poor students and assuming professional responsibility for expanding those chances. Even though, by the criteria of Deweyan child-centered philosophy, the school would surely fall short, child-centeredness as more diffuse institutional inheritance makes itself felt in the seriousness with which faculty and leadership observe student learning needs and teaching quality and the openness with which they voice their doubts about the narrow curriculum and the prescriptive nature of many of their programmatic offerings. The boundaries around this inquiry are circumscribed by the aligned technical structure and the moral and positional authority of the principal, but the potential is there to revisit the present consensus and build new bridges when student needs demand.

School C. Integrity expressed itself differently in School C. Whereas School B could look back to a continuous period of success in the accountability system, School C had been battered by the system as one of the lowest performing schools in the district for repeatedly missing its growth targets. School C's principal was fairly new in administration, but had a solid background in classroom teaching and staff development. When she began her tenure, she realized that most of all, her staff needed a break from being preoccupied with the sanctions-oriented nature of accountability which for the faculty represented mainly negativity and a de-moralizing streak of failure. Good balance of school internal concerns with external demands in this case was established through the frame of professionalism. It meant a deliberate shielding or buffering and rebuilding of faculty coherence through confidence-building and an emphasis on internal professional commitments. The principal made it clear to her staff that accountability should not be taken too seriously; that the system would take
care of itself if teachers would focus on good instruction; and that when respected professionals would voluntarily participate in instructional improvements, improvement in test scores would ensue. The principal confided that she herself was skeptical about the fairness of the accountability system and about the kind of pedagogy the system rewarded, but she valued the equity goals of the system. She made the strategic choice not to disclose her skepticism in public because she was afraid that oppositional dispositions in her faculty would detract from improvement efforts. Instead she maintained with her teachers that the system provided helpful goals and guidance and that looking at performance data was a useful undertakings. Her leadership shored up confidence, hope, and renewed effort. She invited teachers to participate in an open learning community that valued internal preferences and varied opinions. Her faculty followed her lead. At the time of collecting data, the principals’ agenda was in the initial stages. Apprehension was still present, but the “no fear” message had given the school breathing space. The profile of system demands was lowered and internal values and student needs elevated, though the concrete shape of internal commitments were not (yet) clearly spelled out. Apart from implementing a set of instructional strategies that the faculty had collectively adopted, teachers were entrusted, and given the space, to respond individually and flexibly to student needs. The view was widespread that students’ varied needs strained teachers’ capacities, but teachers tried their best to provide good service. What that service might actually look like was not yet a centerpiece of the school’s collective conversation. Lesson observation data suggest that School C had a bigger problem with instructional quality than most of the other nine schools. Still, the principal’s tenure at the school coincided with an upswing on standardized test scores and the API.

How do actions at School C convey a striving for integrity? School C faculty, mainly through its leader, struggles to re-establish a sense of self-worth by referring to a larger collective professional self. External accountability obligations are not disregarded or ignored, but relegated to second place in the school’s value hierarchy. They are present, but no longer overarching. The principal, prudently, strategizes, buffers, and frames the problem of good balance in a way that kindles internal commitments without endangering the school’s external standing. The school pulls together around the principal’s invitation to participate in an open community of professional learners. But this openness leaves much unsaid. Professional values of good teaching and care are invoked, but whether teaching practices actually meet articulated or felt student needs is largely left unexamined in this school.

School E. The contrasting case of a school suffering from a lack of integrity was School E. With two-thirds of this middle school faculty holding Master’s degrees, teachers in School E saw themselves and their faculty as strong and hard working in the interest of students. They were particularly proud of the many enrichment activities (e.g. school band) that they organized for their students, often times well beyond the call of duty. But the school as a whole was fragmented. Observed instructional quality was about average within the nine-school sample, but the school ranged at the bottom of both coherence and openness. The faculty as a whole was skeptical about the meaningfulness of the accountability system and anxious about pressure although the school was one of the higher performing schools in the sample and had managed for the most part to meet its state performance targets.

The principal was a young man on a fast career track, as he pointed out in the interviews, who wanted to switch into district administration sooner rather than later. He was determined to make his school as high performing as he could. He insisted on
the implementation of specific standards-based activities (e.g. posting state standards, implementing specific “research-based “ strategies) and was particularly enamored with the use of new media. He organized his staff in mandatory workshops that he himself conducted. Once he taught a strategy, he wanted to see it in action when he made his frequent rounds through classrooms. He invoked accountability to legitimize his expectations and vigilant monitoring. But his pro-active stance of control and, what he considered, instructional leadership could not rally the faculty around the goals he espoused. Instead teachers responded with muted, but tangible disdain and discredit of both the accountability system and the principal. Teachers voiced that school improvement efforts were centered on the principal and that he staged himself to further his own career, rather than the common good of the school. He tolerated few disagreements with his agenda. But his heavy handedness and confrontation, many teachers felt, served no purpose in improving their teaching or their interaction with students. He, on the other hand, saw himself as a forceful leader and skillful instructional coach who acted in the best interest of children and had the test scores to show for it. At the end of the school year, he did succeed in moving on to a district position.

The role of a researcher is not to take sides or cast judgments on the integrity of an individual or a group of people. But research can compare actual behaviors with defined characteristics associated with a quality such as integrity. In reading through the interviews from School E, one is struck by a remarkable inconsistency between the teachers’ and the principal’s descriptions of the situation. When the leader’s belief in his leadership strength is not in the least confirmed by his followers, the leader has either isolated himself from his followers and squelched open communication or willfully misleads himself in an act of self-deception. Either condition is detrimental to integrity. Career motives by themselves need not detract from integrity. But when they perceptibly overshadow a leader’s moral commitments, potential connection to the commitments of his faculty is lost. No overarching idea, no moral impetus embodied in the leader’s personality, and no process of open and honest conversation about inherent tensions and inconsistencies bridges external obligations with internal values. Rather, as in this case, the school breaks up into two cultural layers, one official, the other unofficial. In the official layer, publicly sanctioned goals and expectations are served and the aligned technical structure operates, in the unofficial one, largely silent on the public stage, teachers preserve personal commitments, sense of self-worth, and their individual notions of what it means to be receptive to student needs.

School D. The fourth school, School D, that I describe now is different from the other three schools in that here the friction between accountability-related values (most notably efficiency) and child-centeredness came across as clear philosophical opposition. School D's faculty had a dim view of the accountability system, a view that preceded the principal’s tenure and was unaffected by her. The principal, a former union leader, had recently been appointed to the school. She considered it her main task to mollify her very outspoken faculty. The faculty saw her leadership as open and supportive, but also less well organized and less involved in instructional affairs. In contrast to the other three cases, the principal at School D did not formulate a narrative that interpreted accountability demands for her faculty. She herself was not sure what to make of the system. Teachers were left to their own sense making. Accountability was seen by many of the staff as incompatible with the school’s philosophy of student-centeredness and professional criteria of good teaching. Indeed, classroom observations reveal a higher quality of instruction particularly in the dimensions of task complexity and active teaching formats, relative to most of the other nine schools.
There were few requirements to work collectively, nor were teachers expected to follow closely any of the state-adopted textbook series or remedial literacy programs. Alignment activities, prevalent in almost all the other schools were largely absent here. For example, running remedial prescriptive programs for below-grade level students and curtailing electives, customary in other schools, were specifically rejected by faculty members. There was ample room for faculty to learn and disagree, if they so chose. Faculty members cooperated with each other informally, but no systematic structures were in place that involved the faculty collectively. Due to declining test scores, the faculty had recently become aware of the pressures and potential threats that could result from the school’s unwillingness to focus on state assessments and its inability to raise the API sufficiently to meet state targets. Apparently, district administrators had sent the message that the school’s abysmal performance on state assessments could not be tolerated much longer. The faculty swayed between the desire to maintain its open curricula and individualistic collegial culture and a sense of doom and surrender. But the school was not organized enough to take a principled collective stance, either in opposition to the accountability system or in bridging accountability obligations with student-centered philosophies and what they perceived to be their students’ needs. As a result the school was unbalanced and beginning to waver and skid. Across the nine schools, the school posted the lowest gains on the state performance index over several years and was one of the lowest performing middle schools in the state for its demographic profile.

For the School D faculty, integrity means to maintain one’s personal and professional commitments in the face of inimical pressures and controls coming from the system that are perceived as a disservice to student needs. It is the only school in the sample that exhibits signs of resistance. Observed instructional quality would seem to give the school a professionally legitimate base from which to justify this resistance, but lack of leadership and collective purpose makes the striving for moral or philosophical integrity an exercise in individualistic defensiveness. In the parlance of integrity theorists, the school lacks integration. Lack of integration deters the school from exercising prudence to insure its survival in the sanctions-driven accountability environment, nor does the school benefit from investigating possible equity deficiencies that a serious consideration of its external obligations, i.e. raising test scores, might have surfaced.

**Conclusion**

It is quite conceivable that ideological zeal, Machiavellian strategizing, or eager system conformism may produce more forceful agency than integrity, either in resisting external demands that have been found wanting or embracing them for desired optimal effect. But as everyday responses they are not as realistic, ethical, or productive as the striving for integrity. Ideological zeal and resistance, as a matter of course, are discouraged and negatively sanctioned in an institution whose function is to socialize children into the established ways of a society. Eager conformism, on the other hand, though perhaps being rewarded by the system, uneasily rubs against the institution’s moral horizon which summons a spectrum of human values that supersede the authority of any one policy, administrative decision, or adopted program. In the American tradition, as in many other liberal and pluralist societies, educators are called upon to reflect on their personal responsibilities and the needs of children as felt by teachers and articulated to them in day-to-day interactions. All four, equalization, child-centeredness, system efficiency, and professionalism are part of the institutional
inheritance from which schools can collectively draw, and are called upon to draw, when they make sense of authoritative system demands, craft coherence with internal goals and operations, and exert the effort to provide morally acceptable service to students. This does not mean that a given school always will.

The case vignettes in conjunction with the quantitative data show schools that strive in different ways to develop or maintain their integrity in the face of incontrovertible accountability demands. For one school, accountability demands, internal commitments, and student needs are largely interpreted through an overarching morality of efficiency and equalization. But an uneasy concern for children’s multiple (subject matter) interests and curiosities, not well served in the aligned structure, remains as an open worry that diminishes teachers’ sense of rightfulness. In another school, integrity is mainly about sense of self-worth and reaffirmation of professionalism in the face of which accountability judgments are relegated to second place. Implicitly, student needs are served best by reaffirmed professionals, though this is not subject to explicit examination. In a third school, integrity is relatively weakly developed. Teachers maintain a defensive posture against the demands of their principal to align to the system, not so much in opposition to the system per se, as in opposition to the moral discredit of their principal’s leadership. But this defensive posture is not public. Being submerged and informal, it derives its strength from teachers’ sense of being closer to students than the external agents imposing on them. In the fourth school, opposition to the system is an articulated philosophical and moral stance and justified on the grounds that neither professional values nor student needs are served well by the system. But this is accompanied by a troublesome denial of external obligations and accountability realities.

The nine schools, selected from a wide performance spectrum within the accountability system, shed light on the tight constraints within which public school educators must strive for integrity. None of the schools can afford to ignore the high-stakes system, and all nine schools but one, which pays for its resistance with dangerously low test score gains, have responded to the new system controls with technical alignment of curricular programs and instructional strategies along the lines of School B’s approach. Across the nine schools, technical alignment and authoritative consensus come as default reactions. But some schools, more than others, go further by striving to maintain their educational integrity within this tight structure of control, most notably one by critically embracing it and one by holding its negative threat at bay. In each case, integrity was associated with an expansion of agency that combined moral earnestness with prudent strategizing and actively constructing interpretive frames that maintained a school’s sense of self-worth.

To be sure, integrity is a fragile quality under these circumstances. Corruption and fragmentation, the opposites to the moral and integrative dimensions of integrity, are definite possibilities, as exhibited by the two described schools, respectively, that function with a compromised moral core (E) or with principled, but fragmented opposition to the system (D). But fragility is at stake in the schools with higher integrity as well. Examination of instruction, unease with the narrowness and tightness of prescriptions, and openness to dissent help School B to remain sensitive to student needs not easily accommodated in the standardized programmatic structure, but system rewards that accrue to schools with the highest test score gains could easily undermine such sensitivities. Reaffirming professional values in the face of negative accountability sanctions may only temporarily remove the threat of fragmentation in School C if scores do not continue to go up, or may become a mere justification of
occupational self-interest, particularly if it is coupled with insufficient attention to actual student needs.

Integrity challenges leaders to take risks, for example, to deliberately make the accountability goals a secondary concern or keep questioning the rightfulness of tight alignment. But the risks may well be worth it. Across the nine schools it appears that integrity may be a more productive response to external accountability demands than conformism or strategic alignment. Integrity is associated with an inner strength around values and external obligations and, to a lesser degree to be sure, around perceived student needs. It is cultivated within a relatively stronger, more open and more coherent, faculty culture and with stronger leadership, attributes that have consistently been identified in the school improvement literature as desirable characteristics of improving schools (Louis, 2007; Bryk et al., 2010; Stoll and Fink, 1996). Across the nine schools, those that bridged accountability obligations, teachers’ goals and values, and their perceptions of student needs with a stronger sense of integrity tended to fare better in the accountability system. They had a more positive outlook on the system, by either embedding accountability demands into explicit concern for student needs or by not privileging accountability obligations at the expense of internal goals and perceptions of needs.

In this study of nine schools, the relationship between integrity and educational quality is inconclusive. Two indicators were investigated, API gains over two years (largely based on standardized test scores) and observed instructional quality. In absolute terms, neither of these indicators seems to be clearly associated with integrity. School B appears to be a prime example of relating integrity to strength in both indicators. But how much of the test score gains can be attributed to the school’s tight alignment pattern and how much to integrity is unclear. The keen observation of student learning and instruction which seems to have benefited instructional quality, however, is more easily attributed to integrity. By contrast, School C exhibited relatively low instructional quality and its API gains were not higher than those of schools with a much weaker integrity pattern. On the other hand, the school’s conscious choice to demote accountability demands to a lower place in its normative order did not result in lost test score growth relative to the other schools in the sample. A longitudinal design may have been able to investigate if a school’s added sense of agency due to better integrity over time contributes to better instructional quality. But this is beyond the scope of the study. School D is another striking case. This school exhibited relatively higher instructional quality, but abysmally low API and API growth. Thus, under these circumstances, any school climate or culture variable can only have an ambiguous relationship to educational quality. And this ambiguity is exactly what makes integrity a compelling concept.

After more than a decade of test-based and sanctions-driven school accountability in the USA, we have accounts of astounding turn-around in schools and painful distortions (Anagnostopoulos, 2006; Au, 2007; Booher-Jennings, 2005; McNeil, 2000; Mintrop, 2004; Skrla and Scheurich, 2003; Reyes et al., 1999). In the literature, we read about schools and districts that are energized and those that are stymied by the system; those that raise expectations as well as those that retrack their “demotes”; those in which content becomes fragmented and those in which it is expanded; those that reinforce care and commitment and those that settle on triage or exclusion. Given this wide spectrum of responses, it stands to reason that non-systemic factors, beliefs, and commitments that develop outside of the logic of the system, substantially influence whether the accountability system produces educationally desirable effects,
and distortions are avoided. One such non-system factor, the nine-school sample suggests, may be the degree to which school leaders and school faculties strive toward collective integrity. Whether integrity develops or survives seems to require a good dose of educational leaders’ personal strength, but may also depend on the profession’s insistence to fully exhaust the moral horizon of an institution which obligates educators to balance equity, system efficiency, child-centeredness, and professionalism with prudence.

Notes
1. The uniqueness of the American constellation becomes apparent when one hypothesizes high-stakes accountability in the context of educational institutions that clearly submerge the needs of children under the authority of the state, the leading role of the teacher, or the reigning fundamentalist ideology, as was the case, for example, in the former east Germany (Mintrop, 1996).

2. See Appendix 1 for a table displaying student and teacher perception data.

3. See Appendix 1 for a table displaying internal capacity measures.

4. These are perception ratings. This does not mean that these perceptions adequately reflect reality. Qualitative data show that School D is programmatically less influenced by system demands than School B, even though perception ratings of system importance are similar. A similar disconnect between perceptions and reality may occur in School C where high ratings indicating high regard for student needs in the reality of schools are coupled with relatively low ratings in instructional quality.

5. School D is an interesting border case. This school lacks this balancing. But here relatively lower balance and lower cohesion is coupled with higher openness. I will discuss this pattern in more detail further down with qualitative data.

6. Figures 1-3 are meant as merely illustrative displays. The trend lines are based on only nine cases or data points. While scatter plots were investigated, they are not shown here. The trend line display has the purpose of demonstrating the “bundle” of extant relationships, not to show a calculated correlation.

7. The tenuous relationship between test score gains and other educational quality indicators has been investigated in a previous article (see Mintrop and Trujillo, 2007a, b).

References


Benjamin, M. (1990), *Splitting the Difference: Compromise and Integrity in Ethics and Politics*, University Press of Kansas, Lawrence, KS.


Callahan, R. (1970), *Education and the Cult of Efficiency: A Study of the Social Forces that have Shaped the Administration of the Public Schools*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, IL.


Further reading

Education Trust (2003), Zap the Gap: Gap Closing Strategies in High-Performing Classrooms, Schools, Districts and Colleges, Education Trust, Washington, DC.


### Appendix 1

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### Table AII. Internal teacher capacity (means)

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<td>Proactive instruction</td>
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<td>Cognitive complexity</td>
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<td>51</td>
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<td>21</td>
<td>12</td>
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## Appendix 2

### Integrity pattern

**Factor loading**

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<th>Good balance</th>
<th>District and state demands</th>
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<td>How important should these forces be?</td>
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<tr>
<td>District and state demands</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student needs</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers’ values and goals</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How important are these forces in reality at your school?</td>
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<tr>
<td>District and state demands</td>
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<tr>
<td>Student needs</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Teachers’ values and goals</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Scores calculated based on differences between like items

### Pulling together

At this school, when it comes to meeting the challenges of reaching our API or AYP targets, administrators and teachers are on the same side 0.799

Facing the pressures of school accountability has brought the faculty together; almost everyone is making a contribution 0.895

The pressures of meeting API or AYP targets have strengthened the hand of those at the school who are interested in good teaching 0.836

Reliability (Cronbach’s $\alpha$) = 0.80

### Shared responsibility for performance

In your judgment, how many teachers at this school help maintain discipline in the entire school? 0.730

Take responsibility for improving the school? 0.875

Set high standards for themselves? 0.886

Are eager to try new ideas? 0.871

Feel responsible to help each other do their best? 0.861

Feel responsible when students in this school fail? 0.715

Reliability (Cronbach’s $\alpha$) = 0.90

### Collegiality

Most of my colleagues share my beliefs and values about what the central mission of the school should be 0.763

There is a great deal of cooperative effort among staff here 0.875

I can count on colleagues here when I feel down about my teaching or my students 0.805

In this school, the faculty discusses major decisions and sees to it that they are carried out 0.760

Reliability (Cronbach’s $\alpha$) = 0.81

### Learning orientation

My job provides me with continuing professional stimulation and growth 0.657

Teachers in this school continually learning and seeking new ideas 0.812

The staff seldom evaluates its programs and activities (values are reversed) 0.603

Teachers at this school respect those colleagues who are expert at their craft 0.804

The most expert teachers in their field are given leadership roles at this school 0.739

Reliability (Cronbach’s $\alpha$) = 0.76

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**Table AIV.**

Teacher survey scales (continued)
Integrity pattern

Open communication
Open discussions about the meaningfulness of the state accountability system and related district policies are encouraged 0.823
Faculty gatherings provide a forum to discuss different perspectives on school improvement 0.880
It is okay to speak up when you disagree with the powers that be 0.862
Teachers are mainly encouraged rather than told to implement new programs or policies 0.792
Reliability (Cronbach's $\alpha$) = 0.86

Leadership
Managerial leadership
The principal sets priorities, makes plans, and sees that they are carried out 0.738
The principal puts pressure on teachers to get results 0.715
In this school, the principal tells us what the district and state expect of us, and we comply 0.856
Reliability (Cronbach's $\alpha$) = 0.64

Supportive leadership
The school administration's behavior toward the staff is supportive and encouraging 0.929
The principal usually consults with staff members before s/he makes decisions that affect teachers 0.904
Staff members are recognized for a job well done 0.905
Reliability (Cronbach's $\alpha$) = 0.90

Moral leadership
The administration at this school places the needs of children ahead of personal and political interests 0.75
Models the kind of school they want to create $r = 0.75$

Instructional leadership
The administration at this school makes clear to the staff their expectations for meeting instructional goals 0.759
Sets high standards for teaching 0.860
Understands how children learn 0.831
Sets high standards for student learning 0.841
Broadly shares leadership responsibility with the faculty 0.684
Carefully tracks student academic progress 0.751
Monitors and evaluates the quality of teaching in a way that is meaningful for teachers 0.800
Allocates resources and other supports according to the school's goals and standards 0.746
Reliability (Cronbach's $\alpha$) = 0.91

Perceptions of accountability system
Guidance/focus
State standards, tests, and performance targets
Provide a focus for my teaching 0.857
Tell us what is important for this school to accomplish 0.883
0.761

(continued)
Integrity pattern

| Have made us concentrate our energy on instruction and student learning | 0.77 |
| Reliability (Cronbach’s α) = 0.77 |

Validity

| The state assessments assess all of the things I find important for students to learn | 0.788 |
| A good teacher has nothing to fear from the state accountability system | 0.775 |
| The state assessments reflect just plain good teaching | 0.843 |
| Reliability (Cronbach’s α) = 0.72 |

Fairness

| For the most part, teachers are unfairly judged by the accountability system (values are reversed) | 0.750 |
| I resent being judged based on school-wide test scores and the performance of other teachers (values are reversed) | 0.679 |
| All schools in California have a fair chance to succeed within the state accountability system | 0.643 |
| The accountability system is stacked against schools located in poor communities (values are reversed) | 0.719 |
| Our students are not behind because of the teachers they have, but because of the conditions in which they have to grow up (values are reversed) | 0.760 |
| Reliability (Cronbach’s α) = 0.75 |

Table AIV.

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