

Roosevelt University

**Improving the ethical decision-making process of educational leaders: An action
research study**

A Thesis Submitted to
the Faculty of the College of Education
in Candidacy for the Degree of
Doctor of Education
in Educational Leadership and Organizational Change

By

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March 2018

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Acknowledgements

I wish to express my deepest appreciation to Dr. Judith Gouwens for her unwavering support, guidance, and wisdom that I was fortunate to receive throughout this research project. Dr. Gouwens' encouragement and reflective advice helped me to stay on course and complete a research study that was meaningful and one that impacted my own leadership practice and decision making as well as the educational leaders I oversee. I am forever grateful.

I would also like to acknowledge and thank my committee members Dr. Kenneth King and Dr. Janice Mulqueeny for never giving up on me. I would not have been able to complete this project without your continued support and the time you have spent to review and provide valuable guidance on my research. Thank you.

Finally, I would like to acknowledge the work and writings of authors Joan Poliner Shapiro and Jacqueline A. Stefkovich. Their book, *Ethical Leadership and Decision Making in Education (2016)*, was instrumental in assisting my principals and me in examining ethical frameworks through the real-life discussion of our own ethical dilemmas as well as the ones presented by the authors in the book. It allowed us to link together theory with practice in a reflective manner to improve our ability as educational leaders in making ethically sound decisions.

Dedication

I dedicate this work to my wife of 30 years who has never stopped supporting me as an educational leader and the ethical decisions I have faced. Your unconditional love during the hardest of days fills me up and enables me to face each morning. I also dedicate my work to my children, Brandon, Sarah, and Michael. Each of you has inspired me in your own special way to be a better father, a better husband, and a better leader. The educational experiences we shared, resolved, and celebrated together have enabled me to see the impact of the decisions I make through the eyes of my own children. Thank you.

Abstract

Improving the ethical decision making process of educational leaders:
An action research study

The purpose of this action research study was to link together theory and educational leaders' practice to give form to and improve their ability to make ethically sound decisions. The questions that guided the study included:

1. How can I, as a superintendent, lead the principals I work with to use all four ethical paradigms in their own decision making?
2. What current interactions and thinking patterns constitute each principal's own ethical framework for the decision-making process?
3. How do the four ethical paradigms interact with each other during each principal's decision-making process?
4. How can the understanding of this interaction with the four ethical paradigms during the decision-making process produce better decisions?

The study, which drew on transcripts of book study sessions with principals and the principals' written reflections on those sessions, found that a collaborative book study could serve as a vehicle for principals' reflection on their own decision-making; that through self- and collaborative analysis of principals' decision-making, principals could and did change the ethical frames they used to make decisions; and that changing the ethical frameworks principals used in their decision-making improved their practice. In addition, the superintendent himself benefitted from meeting with the principals on a regular basis outside administrative meetings, building trust with the principals and improving his own practice.

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Chapter One

Improving the ethical decision-making process of educational leaders: An action research study

Regarding Sarah Brown

Sarah Brown is currently starting her third year as a 1st grade teacher at Long Creek Elementary. Sarah has been very energetic and innovative as she completed her first two years as a 1st grade teacher. She received high ratings from me as her principal on her yearly evaluations. Sarah was developing some wonderful skills and was well on her way to becoming an excellent teacher at Long Creek Elementary.

As I began my third year as principal, I noticed during the back- to -school night at Long Creek that Sarah looked a little different for some reason, but I couldn't quite put my finger on it. Two weeks later Gail Sutherland, the 1st grade teacher working with Sarah as a mentor, revealed to me her great concern for Sarah Brown's health and her performance on the 1st grade team. She believed that Sarah had an eating disorder, much like her daughter had, and is drastically losing weight. In addition, Gail reluctantly shares with me that Sarah was not following through on her commitments to the team. Both Gail and her other teammate, Patty, have had to take over the planning for the science lessons that Sarah was responsible for doing for the team. She has not been attending team meetings regularly and was constantly being seen on the computer writing e-mails to her boyfriend. I suggested to Gail that she and Patty talk to Sarah regarding their concerns about her responsibility to the team and to see me if this pattern continued with Sarah.

The following week, I received a phone call from one of Sarah Brown's student's parents. Mrs. Peterson volunteered a great deal of time at Long Creek and is often in charge of PTO events and functions. After some hesitation, she shares how concerned she is with the limited amount of work her Jimmy is bringing home and the length of time it takes Miss Brown to return graded tests and homework. I suggested to Mrs. Peterson that she express her concern to Miss Brown so that she is aware of them and if her concerns are not addressed, to give me a call back. By the end of the week I had received several phone calls from parents concerned about Miss Brown's follow through and commitment to her work. One parent even mentioned that Miss Brown never returned her call. This was unlike Sarah.

Now a bit concerned, I visited Miss Brown's classroom several times early the next week. Sarah appeared to be engaging students in her instruction, but seemed a bit unorganized and a little confused with where she was going with her lesson. During one visit, students were working at their desks on a science experiment while Miss Brown was in front of her computer reading e-mail. She immediately logged out and began circulating through the classroom when she noticed I was in the classroom. Out of the three visits I made to her classroom, students spent the majority of their time doing worksheets at their seats. This was unlike the Sarah Brown I had observed the last two years. I also noticed that Sarah had lost a great deal of weight and looked extremely thin.

Both Gail Sutherland and Patty Robertson, Sarah's 1st grade teammates, have now met with me several times voicing their concern for Sarah's health and her performance at school. They both report to me that they are concerned about Miss

Brown's ability to teach and that something needed to be done. Her students were not getting the proper education.

It now became clear to me that it was time to meet with Sarah and discuss my concerns regarding her less than adequate performance. I decided to discuss this with her during her semester evaluation conference that was coming up. I was very concerned about the impact this meeting may have on Sarah's emotional state and health. For the past two years I knew that Sarah had demonstrated the ability to be an excellent and enthusiastic teacher.

I met with her for her evaluation conference and discussed my concerns regarding her performance this year. Sarah acknowledged my concerns and promised that she would do better in keeping up with her teaching and her responsibility to her teammates. She also reassured me that she would be responsive to parental concerns and make every effort to return parent phone calls. She said that she is going through some very difficult times personally, but that things are looking up.

For the next month or so, things seemed to improve. But toward the end of the year, it was clear to me that Sarah was not making the progress I had hoped for. I continued to get phone calls from several parents expressing concerns about Miss Brown's teaching. Sarah was not addressing their concerns. After meeting with Gail and Patty, Sarah's teammates, they reported that Sarah had stepped up her team effort somewhat the last few months, but still was not putting forth the effort that she had demonstrated in the past.

I now need to make a decision before I meet with Sarah for her year-end evaluation. Sarah demonstrated during her first two years that she could be an excellent

and dedicated teacher, but was going through a very difficult time, struggling with an eating disorder. Sarah was in her third year and would be granted tenure at the end of next year. She had been honest with me and acknowledged her difficulties, promising to improve. I know that if Sarah wasn't struggling with her eating disorder, she would have been a highly valued teacher. Advice I received from a fellow principal was, "When in doubt, throw them out." Releasing Sarah would be devastating to her, yet I know, deep down that her teaching had been less than adequate this year, with limited improvement. I also take very seriously the role and responsibility of the principal to hire and maintain highly qualified teachers. Still, Sarah had demonstrated that she could be a great teacher.

I scheduled a meeting with Sarah on Friday morning to review her year-end evaluation and discuss her employment status for next year. On Thursday, Sarah Brown's mom calls and asks me to participate in an intervention for Sarah in an effort to address her eating disorder. She also requested that Sarah be released from work for the next three weeks so that she can enter a treatment program. The intervention would occur Friday night. I said that I would get back to her on my decision first thing Friday morning.

It is now Friday morning. As the principal of Long Creek Elementary School, I needed to make a decision regarding Sarah Brown.

The story Regarding Sarah Brown is one of many true-to-life stories most any principal could recount with vivid detail and color. These are the stories and moral dilemmas that keep us tossing and turning at night, preoccupying our thoughts as we wrestle with our own conscience. Many remain in our memory banks indefinitely. The faces may change and the settings may differ, but central to many decisions made by

building principals is the impact the resolutions of these dilemmas will have on the well-being of others. As William Foster (1986) writes, “Each administrative decision carries with it a restructuring of human life: that is why administration at its heart is the resolution of moral dilemmas” (p. 33). Concurring with Foster’s insight, the resolution of moral dilemmas is central to the inner working of any administrator, yet these impasses also provide us the mental challenge and what some may call “the rush” that for many, keep us coming back for more.

How do we resolve moral dilemmas as principals and educational leaders? How does one approach the unique and often times complex situations that accompanies each dilemma we face? What ethical framework or perspectives do we use to construct our own resolutions as we face these dilemmas? As I pondered the fate of Sarah Brown that one Friday morning, I struggled deeply with the duty and responsibility that comes with the job of principal that seemed to clash with a strong tenet of my leadership style, that of caring for my staff. How can one instruct the mind while taking note of his heart? In her article, *Principals Who Care: A Personal Reflection*, Joanne Rooney (2003) writes of this very paradox. She states that, “Schools that care have principals who care passionately for students, for their teachers, and for the right for every student to learn.” (p. 78). She goes on to assert that principals and educational leaders have to lead with their hearts, but still make the hard decisions about hiring and firing teachers. Even though my job requires me to address the professional performance of Sarah Brown, I cannot ignore Sarah Brown’s desperate need for care and fair treatment. I cannot separate the human experience from a person’s capacity to perform. How can we as leaders fuse the multiple perspectives each of us brings to a moral dilemma to make better decisions?

The Current Context of Ethical Leadership

Over the past decade, actions of corporate CEOs, religious leaders, lawmakers, and even presidents have been called into question regarding the ethical implications of their conduct. More recently in the media have been reports of sports heroes and pop singers being arrested and charged with assault, drug possession, rape, child endangerment and other crimes against humanity. School leaders have not gone unscathed. Headlines of test tampering, racial inequities, financial mismanagement and staff misconduct are regularly reported by the news media. Zero tolerance policies under attack and the need to keep students safe at school also came to the forefront of the media following a series of tragic school shootings. School leaders have to balance the educational rights of one student against the safety and security of all students. Sexual orientation and the right to not be discriminated against have recently made headlines in the mainstream media. Maintaining equal access to school activities, clubs, sports, and even school facilities is gaining ground as the next moral dilemma that school leaders will need to address.

As enrollment in schools across the country become more diverse in race, religion, and socioeconomics, our laws and policies embracing tolerance, advocacy, and inclusion have become increasingly common. While we are becoming a more diverse society, forming new and what I believe to be stronger horizons, our moral fabric continues to unravel at the seams. School administrators are now coming under increased pressure to be the stewards of society's morals. Hackman, Schmitt-Oliver, and Tracy(2002) advocate that "Superintendents and principals are the school system's most visible leaders and, therefore, must be exemplars of moral leadership (p. 156) . The call

and necessity for moral leadership has never been so great in a cultural context of diverse needs, sliding values, and compromised ethics.

Standards and ethical codes have been crafted and employed to maintain accountability and raise our moral consciousness as poor performance, dishonest gain, and failed safe guards are uncovered and exposed. The field of education has greatly been affected by the standards movement. From state curriculum standards and assessments, to certification and staff development, standards have become a predominate avenue for change. Standards for educational leaders have also emerged and have begun to reshape the development and training of aspiring leaders in the field of educational administration. The most influential of these standards has been the 1996 publication of the Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLLC) standards for school leaders by the Council of Chief State School Officers.

The goal of the ISLLC standards are to establish common leadership beliefs and performance standards for school leaders (Officers, 1996) . The ISLLC standards have begun to be a prominent driving force in improving leadership training, certification, goal setting, and evaluation. A modest update of the 1996 standards occurred in 2008 based on the research at the time. In 2015 the National Policy Board for Educational Administration published a new version of the ISLLC standards called Professional Standards for Educational Leaders. Currently, 35 states have adopted these standards as a framework for all educational leader programs. The Consortium believed that the standards approach “provided the best avenue to allow diverse stakeholders to drive improvement efforts along a variety of fronts – licensure, program approval and candidate assessment” (Officers, 1996, p. 7). The six standards initially created by the

Council of Chief State School Officers focus on three elements of leadership that include knowledge, disposition, and performance. Five of the six standards address the areas of a leader's role that include vision, culture and instruction, management, community collaboration, and political and social influence. One standard, standard number five, addresses solely the need of an educational leader to "act with integrity, fairness, and in an ethical manner" (Officers, 1996, p. 18). The devotion of one of the six standards to addressing the ethical role of the leader has, in my belief, significantly raised the level of awareness for today's educational leader to act in an ethical manner as they carry out the duties and responsibilities of their position.

Though somewhat new to the educational context, the ability of principals to lead and conduct themselves in an ethical manner is beginning to emerge as a prime characteristic in the development of strong learning communities. Starratt (2004) insists that moral leadership extends beyond the daily dilemmas of the leader's choices in running a school. He believes that:

The work of educational leadership should be work that is simultaneously intellectual and moral; an activity characterized by a blend of human, professional, and civic concerns; a work of cultivating an environment of learning that is humanly fulfilling and socially responsible" (p.3).

Because children learn by experience and by emulating role models who act with integrity and fairness, educational leaders should be held to a higher standard due to the responsibility they hold in shaping the minds and hearts of our next generation. An educational leader, as Starratt highlights, should maintain a high intellectual standard as well as a high moral standard.

In today's educational context, the students, parents, and the community at large desire educational leaders who exhibit high standards of ethical and moral behavior, in both their professional and personal lives (Hackman et al., 2002). With this expectation in mind, principals and educational leaders are confronted daily with moral dilemmas that they will be held accountable to by the community and places them in a position of making decisions that greatly impact others. Most often these dilemmas require a concentrated effort to navigate through a number of possible resolutions to arrive at one that is just, fair, and considerate of those involved. Steering through the tension and discord is no small task and requires a leader to have a firm grip on their own moral compass and a clear perspective in which to forecast the effects and consequences of their decisions.

Necessity for Studying Ethical Leadership

“In the 21st century, as society becomes even more demographically diverse, educational administrators will, more than ever, need to be able to develop, foster, and lead tolerant and democratic schools”(Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2016, p. 4). Because our society continues to evolve at a rapid pace into a more diverse form, the schools, as past history has demonstrated, will be called upon to address these changing needs. Today, educational leaders must face dilemmas that would seem to be unimaginable ten to fifteen years ago. Today's school leader must be prepared to make decisions regarding drug and weapon possession at school, internet pornography, gang recruitment, child abuse and endangerment, student shootings, and now, even the threat of terrorism.

On the more proactive side of educational administration, it is becoming more common for schools to provide for students basic life essentials in an effort to prepare

them for learning. From supplying proper clothing and food for those less fortunate, to providing medical, emotional, and social assistance to those in need, public schools freely accept all children that step through their doors each morning. They do incredible and compassionate work that often goes unnoticed and seldom rewarded. Whether it is acting out of response or prevention, today's educational leader must understand their own process of ethical reasoning for it is at the core of their thinking and daily decision-making process. "A fundamental purpose of schools is to prepare students to become fully contributing members of society" (Hackman et al., 2002, p. 156). As public employees, administrators and teachers have a responsibility that goes beyond other citizens. They must not only understand their own expectations for making the "right" decisions, but also reflect and model public values and the public's sense of "right."

Administrators are leaders who must make decisions. The formation of ethical conceptions and frameworks we use to approach these decisions are vital to the value judgments we make. Rebore (1998) presents three reasons to use ethical frameworks in our thinking as we approach important decisions. First, decisions on significant issues should be based on our own core values so that ethical analysis can assist the educational leader in better understanding his or her core beliefs. Second, there is a disciplined manner of thinking when ethics are utilized. Third, Rebore suggests that approaching a decision from an ethical analysis framework allows for "a unique kind of response to leadership issues" (p. 15). Thus, using ethical frameworks requires the self-reflection of the educational leader on his or her own values as well as imposes a disciplined yet distinct look at each individual problem.

An educational administrator seeking ethical leadership must look inward as well as outward. We must not only foster the morality of others, but also seek to examine, reflect, and advance our learning and construction of our own ethical perspective and framework. How and in what manner each of us approaches moral issues is dependent upon our own values and beliefs and their interplay with society's values and convictions. This study hopes to examine the ethical perspective of one group of educational leaders and how the framework that is under construction and ever evolving can be crafted to better address the ethical dilemmas they are face with in this current age of educational leadership.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to describe and explain how the engagement of ethical paradigms and frameworks in the real-life decision making process of a principal can improve the principal's decisions. It is a study that hoped to link together theory and practice in a reflective manner to give form to and improve the ability of an administrator to make ethically sound decisions. Because ethical decision making is an interaction between one's own personal values and inner thoughts with expectations found in society, it made sense to study this process in a reflective manner in hopes of improving not only one's own moral judgment, but also fostering a better moral perspective in others. The first task was to fully understand each educational leader's own interaction with four prominent ethical paradigms in the moral dilemmas they face at work and second, to use this understanding to foster higher levels of ethical behavior in them and others. As an educational leader, they are held accountable for actions and must be able to explain the moral reasoning underlying each of their decisions. "Educational leaders

have a moral responsibility to establish an ethical school environment in which education can take place ethically”(Starratt, 1991p. 4). Of even greater importance for the educational leader, as pointed out by Starratt, is to ensure that the educational system considers the viewpoints of all members and keeps no one at a distance, but gives value and voice to the many faces that enter our schools each day.

Theory that Guides the Study

The theory that guided this study was Action Research. Stringer (2014) notes that “action research is a systematic approach to investigation that enables people to find effective solutions to problems they confront in everyday life” (p. 1). He goes on to state that action research seeks to utilize cycles of investigation and reflection that are designed to expose effective solutions to problems and issues that may increase a person’s effectiveness. In contrast to quantitative research that seeks to make generalizations from the manipulation of variables, action research builds an awareness and understanding in a social context that enriches professional and community practices so that the well-being and interest of those involved will be enhanced. Through the use of action research educational leaders who participated in the qualitative study gained a better understanding of their own ethical framework and how they can improve their decision making by enhancing and improving their ethical framework. This framework was then be used by the educational leaders to more effectively solve problems they were confronted with daily in their school community.

Paul and Elder (2003) suggest that the proper role of ethical reasoning is to acknowledge acts that improve the well-being of others and to be critical of those that diminish the well-being of others. They maintain that because there is a predisposition in

human nature toward egotism, prejudice, self-justification, and self-deception, these tendencies can be contested through the “systematic cultivation of fair-mindedness, honesty, integrity, self-knowledge, and deep concern for the welfare of others” (p. 2). In other words, maintaining an ethical perspective involves addressing ethical issues using some kind of a system or framework on a continual basis to overcome our own as well as society’s self-centered nature. Using action research as the guiding theory in this study assisted the educational leaders in examining and reflecting on their own framework and effectiveness of their decision making that led to an increased cultivation of the honesty, fair mindedness, and a deep concern for others Paul and Elder claim is necessary for ethical reasoning.

There are a number of ethical paradigms that can frame a school leader’s decisions or even a school’s culture. Staratt (2004) refers to a model of three ethical paradigms that comprise an ethical school: caring, justice, and critique. Though this model is somewhat dated, it is used as a starting point for many current leadership texts. Shapiro and Stefkovich (2016) also contend that “by using different paradigms, educators should become aware of the perspective or perspectives they tend to use most often when solving ethical issues” (p. 7). It may be natural to lean toward one paradigm or another when making decisions. All three authors contend that in an effort to go beyond our own perspectives and understanding, we must approach moral dilemmas through a multiple paradigm framework. Shapiro and Stefkovich (2016) present a multiple paradigm model that considers the three ethical paradigms of care, justice, critique, plus a fourth ethical paradigm of profession.

This multi-paradigm approach to ethical reasoning considers moral perspectives that seek to enhance our ability as leaders to see outside our own interest and limited perspective to the interest of others. The ultimate aim of ethical reasoning is to put ourselves in the place of others and recognize how what we do or decide will affect us. Shapiro and Stefkovich's four-paradigm model enables the leader to view their moral dilemma through a series of ethical lenses to gain an enhanced view of the ethical issues involved. This is an exceptional model that encourages leaders to "think more broadly and go beyond 'self' in an attempt to understand others" (Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2016, p. 7). A brief review of the four ethical paradigms follows in Chapter 2 and an explanation of how these four ethical paradigms interact with each other within the mental framework of the educational leader. This action research study sought to engage educational leaders with these four paradigms in an effort to improve and enhance their own ethical decision making process.

Research Questions

The primary question guiding this study is how can I, as a school superintendent, lead the principals I work with to use all four ethical paradigms in their own decision making? Secondary questions that also guided the study included the following: What current interactions and thinking patterns constitute each administrators own framework for the decision-making process? How do the four ethical paradigms interact with each other during each administrator's decision-making process? How can the understanding of this interaction with the four ethical paradigms during the decision-making process produce a better decision?

The results of the action research generated an improved ethical framework from which multiple ethical paradigms were used to make more effective and responsible decisions. The lens a leader chooses to look through when examining a problem or dilemma is certainly one perspective. Rather than seeing each perspective as a separate lens which to view a problem, is the leader instead holding multiple lenses that can be manipulated to overlap and even superimpose each other, producing a single line of sight? Does this “line of sight” change its colors over time or evolve based on the leader’s experiences, learning or situation? This study examined the extent of each distinct lens or perspective found in the leader’s mental framework and helped to construct a better looking glass for viewing ethical decisions.

Definitions

Ethics	The thinking through and reflection on moral values and their practice.
Values	General term used to describe ideals that guide our lives and principles we use to measure ourselves and others (Weston, 2002).
Morals	A specific group of values or personal beliefs that are used to determine right from wrong in the daily living out of our lives(Strike, 2007).
Paradigm	A philosophical and theoretical framework of a scientific school or discipline within which theories, laws, and generalizations and the experiments performed in support