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Self-knowledge, capacity and sensitivity

Prerequisites to authentic leadership by school principals

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Abstract

Purpose – The article proposes three prerequisites to authentic leadership by school principals: self-knowledge, a capacity for moral reasoning, and sensitivity to the orientations of others.

Design/methodology/approach – A conceptual framework, based on research on the valuation processes of school principals and their strategic responses to ethical dilemmas, is used as a practice grounded approach to describing authentic leadership and the acquisition of moral literacy by school leaders.

Findings – Four motivational bases for administrative decision making are described: self-interest/personal preferences, rational consensus, rational consequences, and trans-rational ethics/principles. The achievement of self-knowledge, capacity and sensitivity to others can be best achieved in professional settings through strategies of personal reflective practice, and sustained dialogue on moral issues and the ethical dilemmas of educational practice.

Practical implications – Principals need the capacity to discriminate actual intentions, within themselves and among others. This is not moral relativism, nor is it value absolutism. It is critical thinking and moral literacy.

Originality/value – Several resources are provided as tools for principals and scholars to use in support of developing these capacities within themselves and amongst others.

Keywords Leadership, Schools, Professional ethics, Leadership development

Paper type Research paper

Authentic leadership is a metaphor for professionally effective, ethically sound, and consciously reflective practices in educational administration. This is leadership that is knowledge-based, values informed, and skillfully executed. Leadership by definition refers to practices that extend beyond the usual procedural context of organizational management. Authentic leadership implies a genuine kind of leadership – a hopeful, open-ended, visionary and creative response to social circumstances, as opposed to the more traditional dualistic portrayal of management and leadership practices characteristic of now obsolete and superseded research literature on effective principal practices (Begley, 2001). Moreover, in recent years management has been negatively portrayed as mechanistic, relatively shortsighted, and a precedent focused enterprise. An integrated image of leadership and management that is more in keeping with current times is a values-informed leadership – a form of leadership that acknowledges and accommodates, in an integrative way, the legitimate needs of individuals, groups, organizations, communities and cultures – not just the

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organizational perspectives that are the usual focus of most leadership literature. It is a perspective that has in recent years been explored by several other scholars, including Taylor (1991), Duignan and Bhindi (1997) and Starratt (2004). The innovative dimension being proposed here is the adoption and application of a values and valuation process perspective to educational leadership to make the objectives of administration more understandable, compelling and achievable. It is in this context authentic leadership is proposed as the outcome of self-knowledge, sensitivity to the orientations of others, and a technical sophistication that leads to a synergy of leadership action (Begley, 2001, 2003).

Another important point needs to be made at the outset. In order to lead effectively, individuals in any leadership role need to understand human nature and the motivations of individuals in particular. In the practical professional context of educational administration, school leaders need more than just the normative ideology of ethics, as relevant as that may be to some educational situations. They require frameworks and ways of thinking that will encompass the full range of human motivations and valuation processes encountered in school settings. To do this one must think in terms of values and valuation processes where ethics are one category or component within a broader spectrum of value types. Furthermore, as will be argued, a full appreciation of ethics should include more than just a concern for the high ground of ethics-motivated action. The study of ethics should be as much about the life-long personal struggle to be ethical, about failures to be ethical, the inconsistencies of ethical postures, the masquerading of self-interest and personal preference as ethical action, and the dilemmas which occur in everyday and professional life when one ethic trumps another.

Six organizational propositions

To initiate and frame this discussion on the relevance of values and valuation processes to the theory and practice of educational leadership, I begin by tabling six propositions about organizations (Begley, 1999). Four of these relate to the nature of organizations, and two to the field of educational administration:

(1) *Proposition 1* states that organizations are essentially social constructions, not necessarily perceived by all individuals in the ways intended by organizational leaders and managers, or those with vested interests in that organization.

(2) *Proposition 2* states that the social constructions we call organizations are driven, animated, or operated by people, often a small number of people whose interests the organization serves.

(3) *Proposition 3* states that as interesting as it may be to analyze and describe the values manifested by organizations, inevitably the organizational meta-values of growth, profit, maintenance and survival will prevail, often at the expense of individuals who become pawns or are treated as expendable resources. Although education is usually portrayed as attending to a special set of purposes – aesthetic, economic and ideological (Hodgkinson, 1991), the corporatization of education in recent years has diminished even that institution to the prevailing economic norm. The phrase, "follow the money", now seems to have become as apropos to education as it is to the corporate world.

(4) *Proposition 4* states that people and their well-being ought to be treated as ends not merely as organizational resources – the latter being an inclination probably initiated in western societies by the industrial revolution when labor and identity began to be traded for wages on a large scale. The pattern continues today despite ubiquitous rhetoric about the importance of collaboration and concerns for the development of moral or good organizations.

(5) *Proposition 5* states that as wonderful as the advances of science may be, particularly in the area of mind-brain studies (e.g. Wilson, 1998; Evers, 1999) they only explain the how, not the why of human enterprise, and will never be capable of 100 percent prediction of human intentions or action.

(6) And, finally *proposition 6* states that our transcending agenda as theorists, researchers and practitioners ought to be the following: to promote reflection on personally held values by individuals; followed then by promoting a sensitivity to the value orientations of others, individuals and groups; and thirdly encouraging a sustained dialogue among all as the only hope of reconciling certain tragically persistent values conflicts and breakdowns in communication between and within our societies. Otherwise we are doomed to keep repeating the mistakes of our past over and over again. These propositions establish the parameters for the discussion that follows.

Alternative approaches to the study of values and ethics

Within the last decade, a surge of scholarly interest in the study of valuation processes and ethics in leadership situations has occurred. One of the best illustrations of this phenomenon is the establishment in North America during 1996 of the University Council for Educational Administration (UCEA) Program Center called the *Center for the Study of Leadership and Ethics*[1]. Now based at The Pennsylvania State University in the US, this loosely coupled but highly collegial group of international scholars has conducted a considerable amount of research and theory development on ethical leadership practices and valuation processes in general. Their sustained collaboration over ten years also reveals several of the challenges associated with having a group of international scholars engaged in research on moral literacy and educational administration. One is the challenge of understanding the various perspectives that exist on the subject. Another is agreeing on vocabulary. Even with all the associates communicating in the same English language, agreeing on syntax is something that has literally required years of deliberation. The relationship between the terms "values" and "ethics", for example, is one area where there has been much debate. Scholars come to a conversation about values with perspectives reflecting the quite distinct social contexts of countries like Australia, Canada, Hong Kong, Sweden and the US. These scholars also approach the study of valuation processes and ethics from a variety of foundational perspectives. Starratt's (1994) work is grounded in philosophy, whereas Stefkovich (Stefkovich and Shapiro, 2003) adopts a legal perspective. Gross and Shapiro (2004) adopt a social justice orientation in their work. Langlois' (2004) orientations are applied ethics and moral theory. Begley's (2004) orientations focus on the cognitive processes of administrators engaged in problem solving. Other seminal sources on the subject, from which many of these more recent perspectives derive, include: Hodgkinson's (1978, 1991, 1996) extensive writings on the philosophy of administration; Evers' (1999) Australian pragmatist discourse on brain

theory, coherence, and the formation of ethical knowledge (Evers and Lakomski, 1991); and Willower's (1994, 1999) Deweyian naturalistic notions of valuation processes and reflective practice[2].

These circumstances recently led Langlois and Begley (2005) to confront the challenge of mapping out existing theory and research on the subject in an effort to develop more clarity on what is out there, what we already know and can agree on, and where the gaps in the knowledge base are. In effect, the requirements of self-knowledge, capacity and sensitivity espoused by this article for school leaders are being applied equally as standards for the work of academic scholars and researchers. What has emerged is the meta-ethical analysis of existing models and theories of moral leadership portrayed in Figure 1.

Mapping out existing models and theories of moral leadership

Anyone who has spent any time trying to review the values literature will know how difficult it is to do this. However, there are some discernable patterns. Some theories, particularly those grounded in philosophy tend to focus on motivations, basic intentions or the meanings associated with values. Other theories promote particular moral orders – that is, urging the adoption of the right values. When it comes to research, for example on the values of administrators or teachers, the tendency is towards describing the values manifested. To illustrate the latter, consider how transformational leaders (Leithwood *et al.*, 1999) might be said to manifest values of

Grounding → Analysis Levels ↓	THEORY AND EPISTEMOLOGY	QUAL/QUAN/ DESCRIPTIVE RESEARCH	PRACTICE AND SOCIAL RELEVANCE
MICRO-ETHICAL (individual)	- Starratt (1994) - Hodgkinson (1978) - Maxcy, (2001) - Langlois (2004) - Begley (1996) - Richmon (2004)	- Langlois (2004) - Begley (1988) - Gross and Shapiro (2004) - Coombs (2004) - Roche (1999) - Richmon (2004)	- Langlois (1999) - Begley and Johansson (1998) - A. Walker (2003) - Sergiovanni (1992) - Barth (1990)
MESO-ETHICAL (group, organization)	- Beck (1999) - Foster (1999) - Willower (1999) - Richmon (2004) - Nash (1996) - Noddings (1984) - Beckner (2004)	-Leonard (1999) - Zaretsky (2004) - Johannson-Fua (2003) - Sun (2004) - Griggs (2004) - Grogan (1999) - Stefkovich and Shapiro (2003)	- Beck and Murphy (1994) - Soltis and Zubay (2005)
MACRO-ETHICAL (society, government)	- Evers and Lakomski(1991) - Strike, Haller and Soltis (1988) - Frankena (1973)	- Johansson (2003) - Norberg (2004) - Walker and Shakotko (1999)	- Johansson and Bredeson (1995)
MEGA-ETHICAL (cross-cultural questions)	Walker and Dimmock (1999)	- Walker and Dimmock (1999) - Wang (2002) - Lapointe Godin and Langlois (2005)	- Walker and Dimmock (1999)

Source: Langlois and Begley (2005)

Figure 1.
Mapping out existing literature and research on moral leadership

collaboration, or a commitment to democratic processes. We may not know for sure why these administrators hold these values, but we know they do because they tell us so, or we see those values reflected in their actions.

The first step in mapping out existing work was to set some limits on the range of literature and frameworks to be mapped out. After some deliberation the following parameters were agreed upon:

- the focus of inquiry is educational leadership;
- the unit of analysis is the leader as a moral subject;
- the objective is to explore the tensions, contradictions and complexities of leadership; and
- the work is grounded in an interdisciplinary and problem-based approach to inquiry.

The outcomes of this exercise are reminiscent of an earlier syntactic mapping of values frameworks published by Begley (1996a), but the new appendix is updated in terms of the research and theory development of the past decade and considerably more sophisticated conceptually. Begley's (1996b) earlier efforts to map existing theory and research led to the adoption of a linguistic metaphor in three parts (semantics, phonetics, and syntax). Using a linguistic metaphor seemed, at that time, appropriate since anthropologists and socio-linguists regularly analyze language to derive insights into a culture's roles, norms, taboos, values, and worldviews. On this naturalistic basis a metaphor based on language was used as a way of bringing additional coherence to the subject of values in educational leadership. It allowed the classification of various literature under three categories: theories and frameworks which are defining and metaphysical (semantic), those that are descriptive (phonetic), and those that are context specific or applied (syntactic).

The more recent work by Langlois and Begley (2005) is a significant improvement over the original mapping exercise carried out in 1996. It is essentially a two-sided matrix. One side of the matrix portrays three levels of grounding for the existing literature and research. These are theory and epistemology, descriptive research, and practice or social relevance. The second side of the matrix outlines four levels of analysis reflected in the literature ranging from the micro-ethical (focused on the individual) level through to the mega-ethical (cross-cultural, global, transcendental) level.

Using this matrix it is possible to place in context most of the existing models and research and literature related to valuation processes and ethics and moral literacy. A quick examination of the matrix will reveal that some scholars work predominantly within one domain, some in two, and a few across three levels. The appendix includes representative examples of scholarly work to illustrate the utility of the framework. It is not a comprehensive mapping of all scholarly work. However, it is nevertheless apparent that the ethical conceptions which underlie the research models used by many scholars are increasingly becoming hybrids or integrated versions of more foundationally bounded approaches – perhaps indicating that progress has been made in the field towards consensus on at least some fronts. Indeed, Langlois and Begley (2005) assert that this mapping framework is not intended to promote one particular approach to research and scholarship on moral literacy in educational administration

over another. The objective is to literally map out, in an integrative way, what is available in terms of theory and frameworks for inquiry.

Relationship of valuation processes to authentic leadership

There are essentially three ways in which valuation processes relate to leadership. The first is as an influence on the cognitive processes of individuals and groups of individuals. Understanding how values reflect underlying human motivations and shape subsequent attitudes, speech and actions is essential knowledge for any person in a leadership role. Leaders should know their own values and ethical predispositions, as well as be sensitive to the value orientations of others. The second way in which valuation processes relate to leadership practices is as a guide to action, particularly as supports to resolving ethical dilemmas. Ethics are highly relevant to school leadership as rubrics, benchmarks, socially justified standards of practice, and templates for moral action. The third way in which valuation processes relate to leadership is as a strategic tool that leaders can employ to build consensus among the members of a group towards the achievement of shared organizational objectives. In this sense leaders literally use ethics as a leadership tool in support of actions taken. However, as will be argued, these actions may or may not be ethical.

Authentic leadership is therefore grounded in the understanding or interpretation of observed or experienced valuation processes, as well as, in ethical decision-making processes. As a starting point, this implies the appropriateness of a focus on the perceptions of the individual in a school leadership role, or as a participant in the educational enterprise, and how the individual construes his or her role and environment. Thus, organizational theories, the policy arena, and other macro perspectives are relevant as elements of the context in which a school leader works, but are not a primary locus of concern. Furthermore, as has been noted, valuation processes involve more than ethics. A focus on ethics, as worthy as it is, will not necessarily accommodate the full range of human behavior. This is because ethics are culturally derived and therefore not always an appropriate basis for decision making in many administrative situations, particularly those occurring in culturally diverse contexts.

Research on principal valuation processes (Begley and Johansson, 1998) and problem solving processes (Leithwood and Steinbach, 1995) demonstrates that administrators tend to employ ethics as a guide to action at certain times; in situations of high stakes urgency, when consensus is impossible, when responding to unprecedented situations, and for certain hot-button social issues which tend to quickly escalate debate to a point where people seek refuge within an ethical posture. This illustrates the first way in which values relate to leadership – as an influence on the cognitive processes of individuals and groups of individuals. Ethics may be consciously or unconsciously employed in such situations. A typical application for ethics is as a personal guide to action, particularly as supports to resolving ethical dilemmas. However, there are more strategic and collective applications for ethics. One of the most common in a school or school district setting is using an ethic as a focus for building consensus around a shared social objective. These more collective and strategic applications of ethics may be the more common manifestation of this value type in the administration of schools and school districts, as well as in the corporate

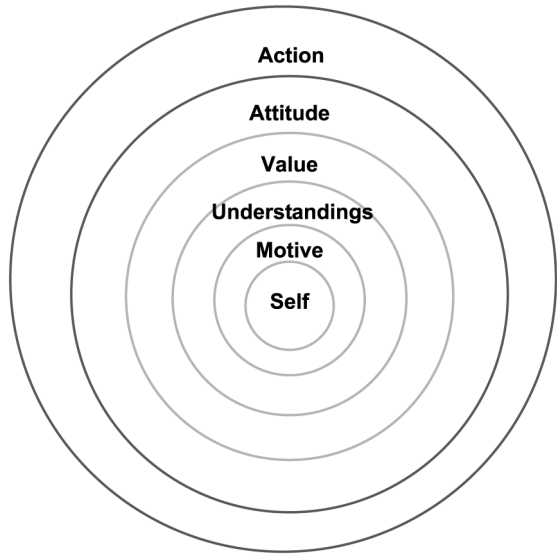
sector. However, this has yet to be confirmed empirically by any systematic research beyond that conducted by Langlois (2004).

The valuation processes of individuals

I have elsewhere (Begley, 2001, 2004) published descriptions of the conceptual framework that serves as a foundation for the preceding assertions and the discussion of complications and pathologies associated with authentic leadership that follows. However, for the sake of those new to the literature and application of values and ethics perspectives to leadership situations, it may be useful to review these key concepts.

In order to understand the relationship between motivation and values, and between values and administrative action, it is helpful to conceptually situate values within the context of one person's being using a simple onion figure. Figure 2 (Begley, 2003) is an adaptation of a graphic originally proposed by Hodgkinson (1978, 1991, 1996).

Beginning from the outside, the first ring represents the observable actions and speech of the individual. Leaders and people in general intuitively rely on the clues provided by the actions and attitudes of others to derive predictive insights into the nature of the values others hold. This is a generally sound strategy, but it has the same limits to its reliability in day-to-day life as it does in a research context. Political leaders, principals, teachers, parents and children regularly demonstrate through their speech and actions that their observable actions may or may not be accurate indicators of their underlying values. Individuals often articulate or posture certain values while actually being committed to quite different values. In both the research and the leadership context, the implication is clear. Validity and reliability of interpretation is best enhanced by sustained periods of observation and multiple measures.



Source: Begley (2004)

Figure 2.
Values syntax

The next ring or layer of the figure represents attitudes. Attitudes can be thought of as the membrane between values and the observable actions or speech of an individual, or the permeable boundary of personality that acts as the interface between the psychological and physical world. They are the predisposition to act specifically as a result of values or value systems acquired previously and elsewhere (Begley, 2001). For example, educators' attitudes towards students encountered in their professional setting may change when they become parents with young children of their own. Conversely, when we look across a career, we can see that the values of an individual in one role as a teacher, principal, or professor readily spill over as attitudes into other social roles. The strength of this extended influence can be residual in nature, a significant spillover of effect, or intrude to such an extent that it overrides or neutralizes the influence of a second value or value system. Hodgkinson (1991) also suggests that attitudes can often be detected in the body language of posture, gait, or unconscious muscular tensions. They are outward and visible signs of inner and invisible inclinations.

The next layer represents the actual values held or manifested by an individual. For example, an individual might prefer a glass of beer to a glass of Shiraz. Another might prefer a chat with friends in the staff lounge to reading the newspaper, working independently over working in a group, or a monarchial system of government over a republican system. A principal might gravitate towards relatively controlled approaches to delegating authority over more open styles of distributed leadership. A teacher might prefer computer-mediated instruction to workbook exercises, or instruction individualized to students' needs as opposed to a teacher-centered curriculum. The important thing to keep in mind is that identifying these values is one thing, while knowing why they are held is quite another. Making that latter judgment requires going deeper into the onion.

Between the values layer and motivational base layer of the figure is a category that can be labeled "available knowledge" or "understandings." The kinds of knowledge referenced here are acquired through life experiences, professional training, and reflection, and provide a linkage and context between the motivational bases and the specific values adopted by the individual. The contention here is that, as a result of experience, training and/or reflection, an individual responds to basic motivations by adopting particular value positions that will support the fulfillment of that basic motivation in a specific way. These responses are manifested through actions or speech selected by the individual to achieve the valued objective. People vary of course in terms of the skills and sophistication they can bring to bear on achieving their objectives. This is generally applicable to all aspects of human enterprise. Consider how an experienced school administrator, consensually motivated as a professional to achieve a complex set of educational objectives, might employ a carefully orchestrated collaborative school improvement project to achieve those educational objectives. By contrast, a less experienced administrator, with the same desire to build consensus among the faulty, but responding to different knowledge or the absence thereof, might decide a memo is all that is required to achieve the same objective.

The motivational base layer of the onion figure provides the key to understanding the nature and function of values as influences on leadership. This is the motivating force dimension behind the adoption of a particular value which, working out through the layers of the figure, shapes attitudes and potentially influences subsequent actions.

Hodgkinson (1978, 1991, 1996) proposes that there are four basic motivational bases. These are: personal preference or self-interest; an inclination towards consensus; an inclination towards or concern for consequences; and an inclination towards trans-rational ethics or principles. These four motivational bases are relatively broad and arbitrary distinctions. In application, individuals can manifest a predisposition towards one motivational base over another, or adopt more than one motivational base when responding to a given situation. Research, conducted in several countries, on the valuation processes of school administrators (Begley and Johansson, 1998) suggests that the normative motivational bases for administrative decision-making are the rational domains of consequences and consensus. Self-interest is infrequently acknowledged as a motivation, predictably because professional activity is publicly accountable. Ethics and principles tend to be employed relatively infrequently as motivational influences on the cognitive processing of individuals. Leaders do, however, increasingly employ ethics as strategic supports to a collective leadership process. The distinction being made here is between processes where leaders use ethics for strategic purposes as opposed to being ethical.

The final layer at the center of the figure is the self – the biological self as well as the existential or transcendent self. It is included in the figure primarily as a conceptual placeholder.

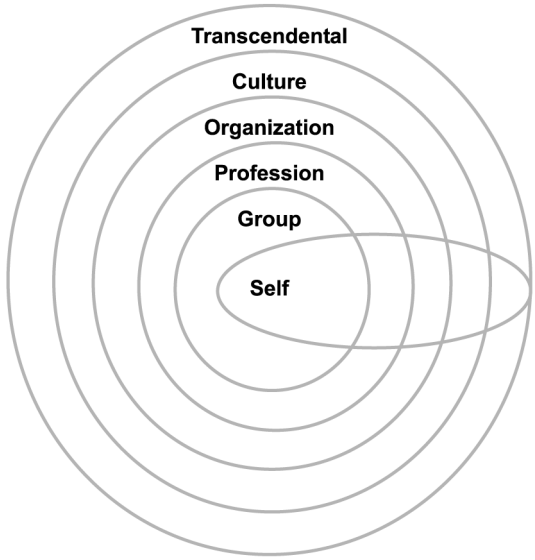
Arenas of leadership: sources of influence, values and conflicts

In recent decades, school leaders have learned how important it is to lead and manage with proper reference to the broader environmental context of their community. The influences on leadership and education in general can be thought of as coming from multiple social sources. Some of these influences can take on the status of values when they are perceived as conceptions of the desirable with motivating force (Hodgkinson, 1991). Unfortunately, our personal values as well of those of the profession, organization, community and society are not necessarily consistent or compatible with each other. As a result these influences and values derived from the various arenas of our environment can generate inconsistencies and conflicts. A second onion figure (see Figure 3) is used to illustrate these distinctions. These are the interactive environments within which valuation processes and administration occur. They are also the source of personal, professional and social values, as well as the source of many of the conflicts people encounter in life.

Within the figure, the individual is represented within the center ring and extending through all the rings. His or her character is the outcome of many transient influences as well as relatively more enduring values acquired from multiple arenas.

The second ring from the center represents the arena of groups, and other collective entities including family, peers, friends and acquaintances. The third ring, profession, represents a more formal arena of administration that is closely related to the second ring, but is given special emphasis here because of its relevance to the professional context that is the focus of this article.

The fourth ring represents the arena traditionally of most concern to academics and practitioners in the field of educational administration, the organization. Much of the literature of educational administration and most of the corporate literature are grounded within the organizational perspective, adopting it as a primary reference point for administrative activity.



Source: Begley (2004)

Figure 3.
Arenas of influence

Moving further outwards in the figure, one encounters the arenas representing the greater community, society, and culture. Within recent decades, school administrators have learned that it is necessary to pay a lot more attention to the community as a relevant administrative arena and source of influence on school leadership (Leithwood *et al.*, 1992). The increasing diversity of our societies and a general trend towards globalization has highlighted society and culture as relevant arenas of administrative activity.

A final, seventh ring is included to accommodate notions of the transcendental – God, faith, spirituality, even extra-sensory perception. Spirituality is of considerable importance to many individuals, and has begun to attract the attention of more scholars as an important influence on educational leadership (e.g. Dalia, 2005). Even administrators who do not subscribe to a spiritual dimension as a source of influence on their own daily lives are well advised to keep this arena in mind, if only because others associated with their professional role do. A leader who wants to understand the motivations of those they are supposed to lead will be sensitive to all potentially significant categories of influence.

Complications, pathologies and resources

Having made the case for authentic leadership through the adoption of a values perspective on problem solving and decision making processes, and outlined the conceptual framework underpinning these assertions, the balance of the article is devoted to the consideration of several specific complications and pathologies that emerge as implications. Also presented are several resources developed for schools principals to use in support of authentic leadership practices.

Misusing values research

Preceding sections of this paper outline why practitioners and academics are well advised to consider values as important influences on leadership practices. There are clearly positive or constructive applications for such knowledge. Leithwood and Steinbach (1995), when discussing the cognitive processing of principals, suggest that an awareness of self, combined with a heightened awareness of the value orientations manifested by others, is characteristic of expert problem solvers. However, unconsidered to this point is the potential for the misuse of such knowledge. Procedural action taken in pursuit of an end, organizational or otherwise, and informed by values analysis processes, may be motivated by amoral, manipulative, or instrumental purposes. Whereas there is literature which addresses the "darker side" of charismatic leadership (Yukl, 1994), perhaps there is need to also look more carefully at the ethical implications of using information about personal values collected from individuals. For example, does knowing that a beginning teacher is inclined to be compliant in the face of an argument grounded in collegial consensus set the stage for manipulation? Does the acquisition of the skills of a political spin-doctor by an administrator, for example the posturing of ethics as a veil to obscure actions or decisions actually motivated by organizational priorities or self interest, constitute misuse of that skill? Does the identification, through research, of particular values conducive or facilitative of organizational learning or transformational leadership create the potential for culturally discriminatory hiring practices? These are questions requiring more attention and dialogue. One way of promoting such dialogue is asking some good questions.

Given that the adoption of a values perspective can at least potentially lead to a clarified vision of what constitutes good leadership, and recognizing the potential for the misuse of that knowledge once acquired, it is reasonable to consider what questions should be asked to assess the merits of theories, particular practices or organizational models common to the field. I outline below five critical questions that I often use with graduate students in the analysis and assessment of theories, frameworks, models, and/or meta-organizers. These questions become the basis and stimulus for critical thinking and dialogue. Upon examining them it will be apparent the extent to which they are derived from the conceptual framework outlined earlier in this article. The five critical questions are:

(1) Which perspectives are represented in the theory, model or practice? Are they those of the individual, the group, the profession, the organization, and/or the community?

(2) Is there a gap or inconsistency between the values implied or articulated by the theory, model or practice and the actual values to which there is commitment? Is there a hidden or veiled agenda (e.g. an economic agenda masquerading as a pedagogical agenda).

(3) Do these perspectives perpetuate the myth of value consistency within individuals, and across groups and organizations? What variations and conflicts among values are apparent? Are these values portrayed as static, slowly evolving or highly dynamic in nature?

(4) How are ethics employed within the theory, model or practice? Are they utilized as unassailable castles to justify or protect self-interest and prevent rational

argument? Are they used as veils that obscure baser motivations? Are they employed as a compass for navigating the swamp of administrative problem solving? Are the ethics appropriate to the particular social or cultural context to which they are applied?

(5) If the matter at hand involves research on values or ethics, are the special problems associated with the description of internal psychological processes, attribution of meaning to the actions of others, and the context-stripped environment of third party research perspectives accommodated?

Using ethics versus being ethical

Research findings (e.g. Begley and Johansson, 1998) confirm that the relevance of principles or ethics to a given administrative situation seems to be prompted in the minds of school administrators by particular circumstances. These circumstances include: situations where an ethical posture is socially appropriate (e.g. the role of the arts); situations where consensus is perceived as difficult or impossible to achieve (e.g. an issue involving ethnic bias); or situations when high stakes and urgency require decisive action (e.g. student safety). There is also some evidence to suggest that school leaders use ethics in strategic applications as ways to develop group consensus, and a basis for promoting compliance with minimum need for evidence (Langlois, 2004). These are all examples of ethically sound – meaning socially justifiable applications of ethics to situations. However, one has only to survey the newspaper or work in an organization or live in a community for a few years to readily detect situations where ethics based postures can be unethical and socially unjust. For example, ethical postures may be unethical when:

- a cultural ethic is imposed on others;
- an ethic is used to justify otherwise reprehensible action;
- an ethical posture veils a less defensible value; and
- an ethic is used to trump a basic human right.

The implication is that using ethics is not always ethical. Such is the nature of ethics when they are adopted as guides to action. Trans-rational values (Hodgkinson, 1978, 1991, 1996) of any sort, and ethics and principles in particular, are rather vulnerable to multiple interpretations in application from one social context to another. For example, when unexamined values are applied in arbitrary ways justified in the name of democratic process, they can be anything but democratic. The essential, and often absent, component that would make adherence to a value genuinely democratic is dialogue. For these reasons unexamined ethics or values accepted at face value without prior deliberation of meaning represent a particular category of social or collective values of a trans-rational nature that may not be consistent with democratic leadership process. Getting back to the central premise of this article, it is apparent that in order to cultivate the ability to distinguish the difference between using ethics and being ethical, we need the capacity to discriminate actual intentions within ourselves and among others. This is not moral relativism, nor is it value absolutism, it is critical thinking and moral literacy.

Cross-cultural issues

Distinctive, unique, or minority-based social conditions may be obscured, veiled, or blurred by the perspectives and language adopted to describe social processes. In many respects this is a natural outcome and limitation of language as a means of assigning meaning to concepts and events, or the bounded rationality that occurs when models and frameworks are applied to complex social situations. It is also an outcome of general human inclinations to generalize the specifics of one context to the point that they become automated as a cognitive schema or a set of abstract principles (Begley, 1996). Similarly, a number of scholars, notably Allan Walker and Clive Dimmock, believe the field of educational administration has developed along ethnocentric lines, dominated by Western perspectives emanating mostly from the United States and United Kingdom (Dimmock and Walker, 1998; Walker and Dimmock, 1999; Walker, 2003). The consequences are a risk that the generalized experiences of one country may be inappropriately assumed to be instructive to practices in radically different contexts. As societies become more globalized, and as the exchange of information among international scholars becomes more widespread, the implications become more urgent. Many administrators are discovering that some of their society's most cherished ethical foundations, sometimes must be carefully re-examined in terms of how they are interpreted and their appropriateness to social circumstances. As our communities and societies become more diversified, school administrators must become more sophisticated in their leadership, and more sensitive to the value orientations of others. For their part, researchers must move beyond their traditional orientation towards generalization and description to consider the deeper matters of intent and motivational base. Once again, what emerges as the critical implication is the need for dialogue and negotiation of meaning among stakeholders in professional educational settings.

Prescriptive applications of ethics as guides to problem solving

As appealing and practical as theories, models, frameworks and procedural guides may be to people working in professional settings, they must be employed as initial organizers, not as prescriptions or recipes. The complexity of social and administrative situations makes it attractive for school leaders to employ processes to aid their interpretation and structuring of situations, but this must be done in socially and culturally sensitive ways. For example, Shapiro and Stefkovich (2001) espouse the application of a multi-ethical analytical approach to the interpretation of ethical dilemmas. The key ethical orientations suggested by these scholars include the ethic of justice, the ethic of critique, the ethic of care, and a hybrid multi-dimensional model, the ethic of profession. Strike (Strike *et al.*, 1988; Strike, 2003) is well known for his work grounded in the ethic of justice with its familiar dualistic tension between maximizing benefits and respecting individual rights. Bates (1980) and Giroux and Purpel (1983) are good arch-types for an ethic of critique orientation. Nodding's (1984) writing is a good representation of the ethic of care orientation. And finally, Starratt (2003), and Shapiro and Stefkovich (2001) are proponents of a multi-dimensional model that subsumes the ethics care, critique and justice into one ethic of profession.

Although Shapiro and Stefkovich propose the use of multiple ethical lenses as a basis for responding to the dilemmas of school leadership, they stop short of proposing any particular sequence for applying those ethics. Their research suggests that

individuals vary in their preferred ethical postures and are thus satisfied with espousing that administrators adopt a multi-ethical analysis of problems and situations. For example, a school principal responding to an ethical dilemma might prefer, in the sense of a personal inclination that is the outcome of their social formation, to gravitate towards the application of an ethic of care perspective. This author, however, contends that in the professional context of school leadership, where the individual is essentially an agent of society and accountable to the community for actions taken in the execution of his or her duties, there is probably an implied sequence for the appropriate application of these classic western ethical lenses. A professionally appropriate sequence for the application of ethical lenses in a school leadership situation might be: ethic of critique, followed by the ethic of care, and then ethic of justice. Beginning with the ethic of critique is necessary in order to name and understand all perspectives applicable to a situation, especially those of minorities and individuals otherwise without voice or representation. To do otherwise is to risk gravitation to the preferred cultural orientations of the leader or the mainstream orientations of a given cultural group. The ethic of care naturally follows next in the sequence as a way to keep the focus of the process on people rather than on organizations or policies. Using the ethic of care, one can also assess the capacity and responsibility of stakeholders to a situation in a humane way. Finally, once the ethics of critique and care have been used to carefully interpret a situation, the ethic of justice can be applied as a basis for deciding on the actual actions that will maximize benefits for all while respecting the rights of individual. I am not suggesting a dogmatic adherence to a prescriptive sequence of application for these ethics of Western philosophy. In all cases, the sequencing and application of ethical perspectives needs to be very fluid and dynamic as an initial organizer, not a recipe, and as a stimulus for reflection, not a prescription. However, the application of any lens to a situation, including ethics, begins the process of highlighting some information as relevant and diminishing or veiling the relevance of other information. School leaders accountable to their communities must take care to interpret situations in a sensitive way. Most school administrators do not consciously adopt ethical perspectives as specific guides to problem solving and the few that do often use just one posture (justice, care or critique) as some sort of absolute moral rubric.

Accountability and the press for ritualized rationality

It has been argued that ethics represent a particular category of social/collective values of a trans-rational nature. Furthermore, the press for accountability in educational decision-making generates an effect on how and when principals will employ ethics as guides to their professional decision-making. Because ethics are often interpreted in culturally exclusive ways, and do not necessarily require empirical evidence to justify their adoption, they can be a very troublesome category of values to employ as guides to action in our increasingly culturally diverse schools and communities. As a practical consequence, school administrators naturally gravitate in their decision-making towards values grounded in rational consequences and consensus as guides to action when that is possible. In fact, even when a situation evokes an ethical or personal preference response on the part of the principal, there is some evidence to suggest that what gets articulated to the stakeholders will be usually grounded in the rhetoric of rational consequences or consensus. As democratic, and professional and socially

accountable as this may appear on the surface, there is such a pronounced inclination towards these rationalized processes that one could describe it as ritualized rationality. This ritualized rationality amounts to a meta-value of school leadership practice.

A school administrator has to be very careful about accepting staff consensus as the sole basis for justifying actions and decisions. For instance, consensus may reflect what is good for the staff but not necessarily serve the best interests of students. Ritualized rationality can also occur when a leader has a strong personal preference or a personal stake in the outcomes of a situation that is not necessarily grounded in professional consequences or consensus. In these cases, a leader with strong personal preferences may seek an argument to support a decision favorable to their preferences using something that looks like a rational decision. The irony is that even when a situation evokes an ethical as opposed to personal preference response on the part of the school leader, what usually gets articulated to the stakeholders will still be grounded in the rhetoric of rational consequences or consensus. Finally, many school leaders, and indeed perhaps most professionals, routinely and rather simplistically base their valuation processes on relatively narrow professional standards, policies, or school district standards rather than the broader expectations of school, district and community.

The way to ensure that consensus and consequence oriented decisions remain genuinely democratic as well ethical and educationally justifiable, and not merely ritualized, is through the incorporation of a component of values informed deliberation into decision-making processes. In an effort to help school leaders develop their capacity to make ethically sound yet professionally effective decisions, the author has developed several versions of a value audit guide to be used as a resource in support of their ethical decision-making processes (see appendix). Originally based on a series of value audit questions proposed by Hodgkinson (1991), this resource document has gone through several evolutions and refinements as a result of being used with a succession of groups of school leaders in several countries over several years. An examination of the version included here in the appendix will reveal that it incorporates all the key concepts discussed in this article, including: a sequenced application of the ethics of critique, care and justice; a bias towards careful interpretation before moving to action; the four motivational bases of valuation by individuals; and the seven arenas of administrative action.

Conclusion

It is not enough for school leaders to merely emulate the values of other principals currently viewed as experts. Leaders in schools must become reflective and authentic in their leadership practices. There is no reliable catalogue of correct values that school leaders can adopt as some sort of silver bullet solution for the dilemmas of administration. School leadership situations are much too context-bound to permit this kind of quick fix. School leaders need to be reflective practitioners. The first step towards achieving this state is, predictably enough, to engage in personal reflection (Coombs, 2004). The adoption of a values perspective on school leadership can transform this rather idealistic advice into something specific enough for school administrators to act upon. Several resources are provided in this article as supports to this process. However, once a degree of improved self-knowledge has been achieved through personal reflection, administrators must then take the next step towards

authentic leadership. That is, they must strive to develop sensitivity to the values orientations of others in order to give meaning to the actions of the students, teachers, parents and community members with whom they interact. This is both a personal quest for the leaders as well as a collective one for the organizational unit for which the leader is responsible. Personal reflection processes are not enough. The authentic leader needs to work strategically to engage the school community in a collective and on-going dialogue on the dilemmas of professional practice and the social problems of the community. Authentic leadership occurs when understanding the value orientations of others provides leaders and the professionals and the community members to whom they are accountable with information on how they might best influence the practices of others towards the achievement of broadly justifiable social objectives.

Notes

1. The UCEA Center for the Study of Leadership and Ethics was renamed the Willower Center for the Study of Leadership and Ethics during 2005 in honor of Donald J. Willower, an early advocate of the study of valuation processes in school leadership situations and active associate of the center since its inception, who passed away in 2000. For detailed information on the activities, publications, research associates and institutional affiliations of the Willower Center, please visit the center website: www.ed.psu.edu/UCEACSLE/
2. For a more detailed discussion of the contributions of these scholars to the field, see Begley (1999).

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Appendix. Mapping out existing literature and research on moral leadership

These questions may be helpful as guides, to be used by individuals or groups, interested in analyzing and responding ethically to critical incidents or dilemmas of practice encountered in school leadership situations:

(1) *Step 1*: interpretation of the problem (ethic of critique):
   - Who are the stakeholders? Are any unrecognized or without voice?
   - What arenas of practice (self, profession, organization, community, culture) are relevant?
   - Does the conflict exist within an arena or between two or more? (e.g. personal vs organizational).
   - Can the values in conflict be named?
   - How much turbulence are the values in conflict creating? (Degree of risk for structural damage to people, organizations, or community).

(2) *Step 2*: towards a humane response (ethic of care):
   - What motivations and degrees of commitment are apparent among the stake holders? Four levels of motivation:
     - Concerned with self, personal preference, habitual, comfort (sub-rational values grounded in preference).
     - Concerned with desired outcomes, avoidance of undesirable (rational values grounded in consequences).

  - Concerned with perceptions of others, consultation, expert opinion (rational values grounded in consensus).
  - Concerned with ethical postures, first principles, will or faith (trans-rational, no need for rational justification).
- Is the conflict interpersonal (among individuals) or intrapersonal (within an individual)?
- What are the human needs, as opposed to organizational or philosophical standards?

(3) *Step 3*: ethical action (ethic of justice):

- What actions or response would maximize benefits for all stakeholders?
- What actions or response would respect individual rights?
- Are desired "ends" or purposes interfering with the selection of a "means" or solution?
- If an ethical dilemma exists (a choice between equally unsatisfactory alternatives), how will you resolve it? (avoidance, suspended morality, creative insubordination, taking a moral stand) (Langlois and Begley, 2005).

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