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Reflections of Practicing School Principals on Ethical Leadership and Decision-Making: *Confronting Social Injustice*

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Abstract

The study objective was to identify leadership dilemmas of practicing school administrators and their own codes of ethics to inform understandings of ethical decision-making. Ethical decision-making underpins leadership practice, theory, and preparation. Existing models for ethical leadership underplay the importance of social justice ethics in decision-making. The research encompassed a qualitative study based upon the constructivist paradigm. Data were collected in the form of interviews, document analyses, and professional observations with practicing school administrators in public schools. Dilemmas reported were analyzed utilizing ethical leadership theories together with social justice constructs. Results indicate ways practicing school administrators, faculty preparing administrators, and other business or organizational leaders can utilize ethical decision-making and leadership for organizational improvement.

Introduction

Managers and leaders in business, education, medicine, athletics, policing, law, and other professions are seeking to more effectively serve a diverse clientele and be responsive to cultural, linguistic, and other behavioral differences. Using a framework of ethical social justice leadership praxis, this case study reveals the processes and practices of current school administrators in one suburban school district serving approximately 10,000 students in the US. The findings substantiate the theory of social justice leadership and

produce a model of ethical leadership, while evoking a narrative directly from the school principals themselves.

Justice, specifically justice principles and practices shaping education, is an ethic that addresses human freedom and making choices equal to all individuals. The ethic of justice in US education stems from the idea that individuals relinquish some of their own rights for the public interest to serve others and benefit society. As an administrator, it is important to think about this ethic when "judging human behavior and interactions" (Vogel, 2012). Justice also calls for the ethic of *social* justice (Santamaria, 2013). Beyond simplistic views of rights, justice, and a common legal framework, social justice in ethical leadership decision-making means "identifying and undoing oppressive and unjust practices and replacing them with more equitable, culturally appropriate ones" (p. 194). As Dantley and Tillman (2010) state, the leadership needed to attain social justice is active leadership which comprehensively addresses and resolves societal inequities. Furman (2012) defines leadership praxis to mean connecting theory and practice with the leader's own principles and ethics through reflection on action. In other words, to lead ethically using a justice perspective means integrating practice with theory and engaging in intentional reflection (Duignan, 2012). Figure 1 demonstrates the integrated components of leadership praxis for creating ethical learning environments in school communities and other organizations.

Figure 1: **Ethical Leadership Praxis for Social Justice**

The leader integrates personal values and leadership ethics with legally mandated organizational and professional standards which also require a commitment to ethical leadership and inclusiveness. A leadership dilemma occurs when the administrator faces an incident or situation requiring his/her leadership and decision-making abilities and the administrator is unsure of which competing frameworks should be applied to solve the

problem or guide others to solve the problem. An ethical leadership and decision-making approach includes social justice ethics as an essential part of educational justice. Emotion may also be involved as the leader reflects on the present dilemma and how the dilemma relates to his/her own personal code of ethics and values (Yamamoto, Gardiner, & Tenuto, 2014). Researchers (McCabe, 2013; Palestini, 2012; Theoharis, 2007) argue that school leaders' ethical decision-making and leadership abilities require courage and risk-taking in the face of opposition. In the present study, leadership dilemmas and scenarios experienced in practice were analyzed in light of constructs of ethical leadership theory and social justice.

In the US, principles of democracy and inclusiveness guide organizational leaders' decision-making and actions (Gardiner, Howard, Tenuto, & Muzaliwa, 2014; English et al., 2012; Gross & Shapiro, 2013). The research framework incorporates Shapiro and Stefkovich's (2011) multi-dimensional approach, asking questions related to the ethics of justice, critique, and care, additionally moving beyond these ethics to "formulate and examine their own professional codes of ethics in light of individual personal codes of ethics, as well as standards set forth by the profession, and then calls on them to place students at the center of the ethical decision-making process" (p. 27). Ethical leadership is included in educational leadership professional standards, and the research base supporting the standards (Young & Mawhinney, 2012). The ethics and perspectives of those in the community are also taken into account. Role-modeling by organizational leaders in ethical decision-making influences others in the organization (Jordan et al., 2013; Simpson & Wagner, 2008). Our approach to leadership and decision-making builds on this framework by conceptualizing the centrality of social justice to emphasize valuing self, students, faculty, staff, and community members who present cultural, linguistic, and other diversities. Therefore, justice — specifically social justice — is an essential connector for ethical leadership. Ethical leadership and ethical leadership development in schools, university programs, businesses, and other organizations is a critical dimension of building socially just and equitable communities. We maintain that leadership in all public and service professions requires attention to social justice, democratic values, and promotion of, and respect and appreciation for, diversity.

Research Methods

The research design was comprised of a constructivist, interpretive, qualitative case study (Lincoln & Guba, 2013; Marshall & Rossman, 2010; Yin, 2008). From this perspective, the research sought to understand ordinary school leaders' practices and understandings of leadership dilemmas and professional ethics and decision-making. Data were collected in the form of interviews, document analyses, and professional demeanor observations with ten (10) practicing educational administrators with a minimum of three years administrative experience currently overseeing one large suburban school district serving approximately ten thousand students with a diverse student and family population. Selection was equitable for gender, age, ethnicity, across available administrators who met the criteria delineated above. Analysis was conducted utilizing traditional qualitative research methods of coding, categorizing, and thematic analysis.

In this exploratory study, research queries included:

(1) What patterns or themes occur in the ethical dilemmas that arise for contemporary educational administrators in their day-to-day work?

(2) How do ethical dimensions of leadership processes relate to leadership practices and why is this connection important?

(3) What were educational leaders' processes for employing decision-making to attain ethical leadership and resolve conflict?

Participants were practicing school administrators in a large suburban school district with a diverse student and family population. Following University of Idaho IRB approval, sixty to ninety minute face-to-face (F2F) interviews with ten (10) school principals were held in their respective offices. Participants were provided a copy of the interview guide prior to the interview. Interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed with consent. Data were analyzed through the lens of professional educational ethics to assess ethical and culturally proficient leadership. Trustworthiness was established by triangulating multiple sources of information (Lincoln & Guba, 2013; Yin, 2008). Credibility was enhanced through engagement with the participants, peer debriefing, and reflexive discussions with multiple researchers. Reflexive engagement (Ravitch & Riggan, 2012) was a way for the researchers to reflect on their own personal and theoretical stances in relation to the research and to enhance outcome validity.

Each participant engaged in a semi-structured interview. Participants were also asked to provide newsletters, faculty memos, public documents pertaining to ethical principles and leadership. Directed observation was limited to professional interactions of the participant with the researcher, including demeanor and any evident display of professional ethics. Data revealed an area that school administrators felt needed to be addressed more at the school level and in higher education classes was the school or district's policies and procedures for cultural proficiency. Essentially, analysis considered how administrators worked to ensure success for all students regardless of ethnicity and cultural subgroups.

School Administrator Perspectives on Ethical Leadership & Decision-Making

The study found P-12 school administrators considered the ethical dimensions of leadership for enhanced learning and teaching in educational environments to be more critical than ever before. School leaders felt they work in new and emerging ethical situations of cultural and linguistic differences, discrimination, bias, communication challenges, diverse perspectives, legal, and accountability pressures. Findings suggest the ethical dimensions of leadership dilemmas with a focus on the ethic of cultural proficiency arising from administrative practice were sought by practicing administrators to inform leadership preparation programs.

Specific issues identified by school administrators for professional educational ethics preparation — which were supported by the large numbers of ethics concerns filed with the State Department of Education [State Report, Ethics Conference 2013] — included:

- Educators' inappropriate relations with students(including electronic and face-to-face communications);
- Unsupervised special needs students; and
- Equality and adequacy of equal protection for students' rights to a quality education, academic integrity, and the need for improved processes for data-driven teacher evaluations as opposed to subjective interpretations of performance.

Administrators' ethical dilemmas and conflicts were clustered around the following themes:

1. Cultural differences and situations of conflict concerning race, ethnicity, and/or other differences;
2. The need to process and adequately address the resulting behaviors connected with conflicts stemming from these differences; and
3. Decisions made in immediate situations without the benefit of reflection or a model designed to process ethical decision-making.

Each of these themes is exemplified below through the narrative of one of the administrators selected: Middle School Principal Villafuente. Each of these three primary themes on ethical leadership and decision-making were also present in all the administrator narratives and represent a cross-case analysis.

Cultural Differences and Situations of Conflict Concerning Race, Ethnicity, or Other Cross-Cultural Differences

Principal Villafuente explained her leadership praxis and how this could be infused in educational leadership preparation:

> Following set guidelines and state, federal, and district policy is not enough for me as a school principal. I also need to do what is right for the child. Some students need extra tutoring time. Sometimes I need to meet special needs because of socio-economic circumstances, providing support when it is needed such as transport for equity … because of our Hispanic population and the culture of poverty in this district we alter our values to meet their needs and having those principles [of social justice] is really important for the job of school principal.

The administrator speculated while it is possible to learn cultural sensitivity as a new principal, awareness and specific assignments during administrator training could be helpful.

The Need to Process Emotion Connected With Conflict Surrounding These Differences

Many of the dilemmas school principals face in today's educational and societal context in the US are difficult to address on an emotional level and require intentional self-talk and interaction to process the situation. The school principal articulated her process for decision-making as follows:

> I don't make decisions fast. I take time. If I didn't have my yoga, I would be a mess. I have to listen to what my heart, mind, and emotion are telling me and process my emotion, not let it control me. Conflict is challenging. Not everyone has the same values or the same ideas. I use what I learn to know what to do next. I'm not authoritarian so I always meet with staff and take these concerns to them. We use each other's ideas. We work together to change things as needed based on what we have learned through listening to ourselves and our emotion as a guide and then process that emotion in productive ways rather than letting it become a stressor for us. If we don't have the answers for all the dilemmas we face, we have to keep an open mind and remember that being judgmental doesn't help improve students. Our main role as an administrator

is to understand and be aware of the backgrounds of all our students and incorporate the cultural differences in our school so that all are being enriched through education.

From a social justice and ethical leadership perspective, the principal engaged her staff in a form of shared leadership, while also recognizing the value of her own emotion as a signal regarding differences in ethical principles and how the situation could be resolved.

The Role of Reflection for Processing Ethical Decision-Making

The school principal stressed the value of ethics embedded in the policies from the school district and enshrined in US law. While she stated "all societies need that," she continued to elaborate that this simply provides a basic understanding of expectations for equality and justice in schools. The administrator needs to move to the next level: reflecting on the specific dilemma at hand in the school (e.g., a student's pregnancy or incarceration) and how to respond appropriately to provide them with the education they need to graduate:

> Reflecting on the ethical issues for me means making sure I have provided a free and appropriate education for all regardless of behavior, disability, socioeconomic needs — taking ownership of student outcomes including the child who has been earning an "F" in Math since the first grade, having transparency for our families in the SBAC [Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium] which must be confusing for them when English is not spoken at home. Here in our district, the school boards represent the white male population and the same for teachers, administrators, and counselors. We only have one female secondary administrator who is a vice principal. We need more Hispanic principals and in the district office. So to use this example, I do my part by reflecting on how I can make up for this leadership vacuum and be inclusive and be accountable in my leadership and decision-making. Do I bring in more parents into the school? Do I pressure central office with their hiring practices?

The school administrator was able to employ self-reflection as a tool to enhance decision-making. She realized she is not a solitary decision-maker, but rather engages others in the quest for thoughtful school leadership which meshes with her own sense of herself as an ethical leader.

Considerations for Ethical Leadership and Decision-Making

Educational leaders employ decision-making in their day-to-day processes and practices, whether or not the decision-making is conducted with intentionality or follows professional and personal codes of ethics. Specific ethics, such as professionalism, democracy, care, inclusion, due process, justice, and social justice are embedded in the administrator's personal or professional codes of ethics and leadership.

The study revealed everyday practices and perspectives of leaders in a large, diverse suburban school district with a diverse student and family population. By investigating dilemmas of ethical processes and practices surrounding justice and equity in P-12 schools to advance administrator practice and administrator preparation, we confirmed the importance of several, newer dimensions of leadership preparation. The study confirmed prior research and added some new insights, revealing the importance to school administrators of: (1) ethical relationship, including trust and integrity (McCabe, 2013) together with cultural proficiency and understanding. Culture in school learning (Hollins, 2008; 2011; 2012; 2012a) is necessary to build trust and integrity in school administrators'

processes and practices; (2) emotion in leadership is an underutilized vehicle for understanding our own and others' perspectives (Yamamoto, Gardiner, & Tenuto, 2014; Culham, 2013); with (3) reflection and contemplative learning essential for growth as a leader (Burnell & Schnackenberg, 2014). The centrality of school climate and culture in the organization and the need for the leader's awareness and sensitivity to this dimension of leadership was confirmed. The study also showed the need for acceptance of a taboo topic in organizations: the role of emotion in leadership. We refer the reader to a model for the processing of emotion by school leaders reported in another empirical study of school administrator practices (*see* Yamamoto, Gardiner, & Tenuto, 2014). Finally, reflection and contemplative learning, which for some leaders may include spirituality, was a core dimension of ethical leadership. School leaders and other organizational leaders have the capacity to engage in critical thinking and reflection applying or discussing their own ethical leadership and decision-making approaches. Discussion of one's own ethical leadership and decision-making in a collaborative organizational setting could enhance cultural sensitivity and awareness of school processes and practices in student data analysis, school policy and procedures, faculty development, and extra-curricular support.

Using an ethical leadership and decision-making approach supports administrators engaging in reflection and seeking justice through understanding the conflict in values proposed by competing arguments. Ethical leadership includes the value of culturally proficient and social justice sensibilities for equity. Spicer (2009) notes public administrators can engage more self-consciously in a type of practical reasoning that more closely mirrors the adversarial character of legal arguments in the justice system to understand both sides before seeking resolution. We found in our study that ethical decision-making also requires critical reflection and a cultural component for social justice to meet the needs of students and families and move beyond a simplistic justice framework.

Conclusion

This exploratory research supports current trends in leadership development toward reflective practice and ethics engagement, particularly in administrator practice and leadership preparation. The study offers a vision for educational leadership preparation where instructional leaders, instructional coaches, and administrators work with university faculty around ethics and issues of practice. Through the research and engagement with school administrators in this study the goal was for ourselves to develop our competencies as faculty functioning as a team of individuals who are in touch with ethical administrative processes to seek optimum learning outcomes for students. Dissemination of the research in this article may enable others to use the school leader experiences provided for discussion and reflection.

Findings inform educational leadership curriculum and instruction by indicating leadership knowledge, skills, and dispositions for ethical decision-making within positive school cultures (Fiore & Joseph, 2013). The article advances leadership theory, preparation, and practices in education shaped by principles and practices of social justice by reporting practice-based findings on ethical leadership and decision-making. The everyday acts of school principals cannot change education as a whole, but seemingly small and invisible efforts of ordinary public organizational leaders can have an impact and improve their organizations. Rights, justice, and law guide ethical decision-making, but equally important are the contributions of cultural understandings, care, concern, and connectedness

embodied in the ethical leadership and decision-making presented in the paper, and at the heart of every educational and administrative encounter.

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