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Including Ethics in the Study of Educational Leadership

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Abstract

This article offers reasons why ethics should be included within leadership preparation and suggestions for infusing it in leadership education classes. The authors argue that a framework of making ethical decisions, overviews of codes of conduct, and examinations of case studies of ethical and unethical behaviors become intentional components of leadership education curricula.

There is vast agreement that ethics is at the heart of a moral society and should be the vision for schools of the 21st century (Apple & Beane, 1995; Beckner, 2004; Friere, 1973; Noddings, 2002; Purpel, 1989; Sergiovanni, 1996; and Starratt, 2004). From as far back as Dewey (1897/1972), the moral purposes of schooling have driven the ethical principles underlying education and leadership today. Challenging our educational workforce to view themselves, their motives, and their character has been a mainstay of teaching and learning organizations. Our society has come to expect that school leaders will make ethical decisions for the common good (Hollenbach, 1989; Starratt, 1991) and that their actions will be driven by a commitment to moral and academic excellence. It would follow, then, that people preparing for school administration careers receive systematic education about ethics related to leadership. Unfortunately, this has not been the case.

According to several authors (Chenowith, Carr, & Ruhl, 2002; Keith-Spiegel, Whitley, Balogh, Perkins, & Wittig, 2003; Klein, 2006), the field of education is lagging behind the medical and human services professions, which demand that candidates take courses in professional ethics. Aspiring leaders receive little to no systematic education about ethical issues, despite passionate pleas for an infusion of ethics and increased moral leadership in our schools (Beckner, 2004; Davis, Darling-Hammond, LaPointe, & Meyerson, 2005; Sergiovanni, 1996; and

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Starratt, 2004). There are, in fact, pockets of skeptics who wonder whether ethics instruction is even within the purview of leadership education. Starratt (1991) elaborates:

> In the field of education, talk of ethics and morality tends to divide between public rhetoric and academic theory. In the public arena, some call for a return to a hypothetical time when people agreed on moral values, when teachers were not ashamed to preach morality in the classroom. Others worry that these proposals are simplistic attempts to impose "fundamentalist" definitions of right and wrong. The public rhetoric tends to frame the debate over morality in education in extreme and sometimes inflammatory imagery, but a more restrained shift has slowly been taking place among researchers and theorists. (p. 185)

The "restrained shift" to which Starratt alludes is marked by the erroneous assumption that *ethics* is synonymous with *values*. There needs to be increased recognition among educators that what is essential about teaching ethics is providing a framework for making ethical decisions –not the presentation of values alone. Teaching prospective leaders this framework is a significant first step in lifting that restraint.

Within the past decade, the literature on educational leadership has, in fact, placed a greater focus on the moral aspects of schooling than ever before (Furman, 2003). From a focus on *how* moral leadership might be practiced (Sergiovanni, 1996; Starratt, 1995, 2004), to the *why*—or moral purposes of leadership (Murphy, 1999), the ethical imperative is clear: school leaders have a special responsibility to all members of their organization to be informed, ethical, and capable moral agents who lead democratic schools (Shapiro, & Stefkovich, 2005). Clearly, the demands of the job of educational leaders have changed so that traditional methods of preparation are no longer adequate to meet today's challenges. The literature points to an expanded interest in ethical leadership practices (Jackson & Kelley, 2002), and a concern with social contexts has provoked greater attention to issues of diversity, race, gender and equity (Rebore, 2001). Several key research studies and scholars cogently back the need for including ethics in the study of educational leadership. In *School Leadership Study: Developing Successful Principals (2005),* Davis, Darling-Hammond, LaPointe, & Meyerson point to the need for educational leadership preparation programs to connect candidates with real-world dilemmas through the process of ethical decision-making. Young, Crow, Orr, Ogawa, & Creighton (2005) resonate with this call, citing that leadership curricula should be integrated, comprising topics that reflect extended periods of deliberation around social justice, interpersonal relations, and moral and ethical leadership (p. 31). As Shapiro and Stefkovich (2005) posit, ethics is a necessary inclusion in the training of prospective educational leaders (p. 20), citing Greenfield to drive home their point:

> A failure to provide the opportunity for school [leaders] to develop such competence constitutes a failure to serve the children we are obligated to serve as public educators. As a profession, educational administration thus has a moral obligation to train prospective administrators to be able to apply the principles, rules, ideals, and virtues associated with the development of ethical schools. (p. 285, as cited in Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2005)

Having a strong inclination toward the need for schools and universities to be rooted in a commitment to build a democratic society (Darling-Hammond, 2005; Purpel, 1991), we assert that a framework for making ethical decisions, overviews of codes of conduct, and examinations of case studies of ethical and unethical behaviors should be an intentional component of every leadership preparation program and leadership course/class.

In this article we ponder some of the reasons why ethics has not become a prominent focus of educational leadership preparation, followed by an elaboration on why it should be. Next, the

process of analyzing and understanding behaviors and teaching *respect* for the perception of others will be discussed. Finally, we offer suggestions and techniques for including ethics instruction in leadership courses and where ethics could be included in such a program. We begin first by taking a look at the meaning of ethics.

What is Ethics?

According to Boston College Professor of Education Robert Starratt (2004), ethics is "a study of the underlying beliefs, assumptions, principles and values that support a moral (in accordance with standards of right conduct) way of life" (p. 5). He expands on this definition by describing ethics as the investigation of norms that are constructed and chosen by members of a pluralistic, democratic society and that are considered pragmatic norms to guide the conduct of people's lives, norms that coincide with fundamental virtues that promote the fullest and deepest humanity of the community. His framework for "building an ethical school" (p. 49) encompasses an ethics triad: the ethic of justice, the ethic of critique, and the ethic of care, and is perhaps the most well-known and comprehensive of all the frameworks to date. Expanding on his framework have been Shapiro & Stefkovich (2005), who include the ethic of profession and the ethic of community to position ethics "in communal processes which are essential to the pursuit of moral purposes in today's schools" (Furman, 2003, p. 7). For the purpose of this body of work, ethics will be defined, examined, and discussed in the same context.

The Importance of Teaching Ethics in Our Classes

Although it might seem to most that teaching ethics in our educational leadership classes would produce little opposition, there are some contrarians with fairly plausible ideas worth pondering. One concern is trying to come to some consensus about "which ethics" to teach. As we appropriately encourage greater diversity, it may become more challenging to discuss universal values. For example, one of the authors of this paper was teaching a seminar on active listening, and part of the presentation emphasized eye contact with the person doing the speaking. After the program, one of the participants (who, it was noticed, had not maintained very good eye contact) came up afterwards to apologize. He explained that he did not mean to be disrespectful, but in his experience and culture (American Indian), it was inappropriate to look straight into the eyes of one in authority. Thus, the same behavior which shows respect for one person can be an indication of disrespect by another.

While care and concern for cultural differences is imperative, there do seem to be some universal character traits and behavioral patterns which have broad application. When graduate students are asked to identify these traits and patterns, they invariably come up with a similar portrait of an ethical model—someone who is honest, fair, and does unjustifiable harm to no one. It would seem that as educators who focus on and are required to emphasize appropriate dispositions in our leadership candidates, we, the faculty, would do well to model and attempt to teach these universal traits.

The sad truth is that many of our students—even some in our graduate leadership preparation programs—have neither been sufficiently exposed, nor required to abide by appropriate standards of conduct. Even if they receive such valuable training in their homes, religious establishments, and communities, it is important that they have the opportunity to learn respect for different viewpoints and perceptions. At the core of an understanding of ethics lie an appreciation for and a willingness to consider the perceptions of others. Some would suggest that by the time our candidates have arrived in our graduate leadership program, their values, perceptions of others, and the way they determine right and wrong are set in concrete. This is a bit severe. Perhaps "hardened clay" is closer to the truth, yet we can apply some heat and soften the clay to make their worldview more malleable.

Political, cultural, religious, and/or societal controversies are not the only barriers to integration of ethics in the study of educational leadership. In some states ethics is a not a required subject for licensure. Jackson & Kelley (2002) report that of the almost 300 universities belonging to the National Council for the Advancement of Teacher Education (NCATE), only 82 have been recognized nationally for their high-quality programs by the Educational Leadership Constituent Council (ELCC). Designer of the six fundamental standards on which the accreditation of university-based leadership preparation programs are based, the ELCC chose ethics as a stand-alone standard and one to which every program should aspire. Despite this, curriculum space constraints, lack of student or professorial interest, and inadequate teaching, learning materials, and funding compromise its integration at the university level.

Additionally, the argument is made that professors should not be involved in teaching ethics when they themselves have had no educational training in the subject. Actually this argument makes sense. What does not make any sense is the failure to provide all current and prospective educators with the tools and techniques to identify ethical behaviors and a framework to assist in analyzing these behaviors for the purpose of making ethical decisions.

Perhaps it was unfair to offer a rebuttal for each of the reasons for not teaching ethics in our classes in the previous paragraphs. However, reference to the unabashed bias of the authors was made in the introduction. In fact, we are unaware of any argument of sufficient power to preclude the intentional inclusion of ethics instruction in educational leadership preparation classes.

According to John Goodlad (in Fullan, 2003), President of the Institute for Educational Inquiry in Seattle, Washington: "Education of deliberate moral intent provides apprenticeship in the understandings, dispositions, and behaviors required for democratic citizenry. *Providing this apprenticeship is a major purpose of our schools*" (pp. x-xi). Gary Pavella (2005), an attorney and educator at the University of Maryland, College Park, suggests that educators are modeling behavior and teaching ethics every time they encounter students.

Some might suggest that it is sufficient that our educational leaders—principals and assistant principals, superintendents and associate superintendents—receive training in ethical principles and practices. The National Policy Board for Educational Administration (2002) provides the following guidance:

> Tomorrow's educational leaders must be able to work with diverse groups and to integrate ideas to solve a continuous flow of problems. This requires patience and perspective, the exercise of judgment and wisdom. It also demands sensitivities to other cultures and highly developed communication skills. It requires personal values that integrate the ethical dimensions of decision-making with those of a more technical variety. (p.3)

Esteemed as the national benchmarks to which school leaders aspire, the Educational Leadership Constituent Council standards guide the conduct and performance of principals, superintendents, curriculum directors, and education supervisors. Of the essential six standards, one—Standard Five—requires that educational leaders "have the knowledge and ability to promote the success of all students by acting with integrity, fairly, and in an ethical manner" (p. 22). We would suggest that this "knowledge and ability to promote the success of all students by acting with integrity, fairly, and in an ethical manner" should not be vested solely in administrators. Unfortunately, on almost a daily basis one can find evidence in newspapers and newscasts of educators at all levels and positions who have engaged in unethical and illegal actions. Attention must be paid and some instruction offered in all of our leadership *and* teacher preparation courses on the significance of and training in ethical decision-making.

Teaching Ethics is Teaching Ethical Decision Making

Providing a framework for making ethical decisions is not about teaching a set of values. Rather, it is about teaching a *process* of analyzing and understanding behaviors and teaching *respect* for the perception of others. Dr. Deni Elliot (2003), Poynter-Jamison Professor of Journalism Ethics at the University of South Florida, suggests that we should start from the belief that the ethical educator (or administrator, businessman/woman, parent, or student) is someone who is self-aware, self-reflective, and self-critical. Self-awareness refers to one working hard to notice the choices that one makes and explain the reasoning behind those choices. To be self-reflective, an individual must be conscious of alternative choices and willing to explain what makes one alternative better than others. Finally, to be self-critical means that the individual understands him/herself to be an evolving moral agent, recognizes mistakes in moral reasoning, and celebrates personal moral growth and development.

In preparing ethical decision makers, it is incumbent upon leadership preparation programs to provide multiple opportunities for prospective administrators to internalize the process of analyzing and understanding behaviors, respecting the perception of others, and progressing from self-awareness to self-reflection, and ultimately, self-critique. We believe that it is through this process that the promise of a morally defensible vision and mission for democratic schools can be realized.

Integrating Ethics in Educational Leadership Programs and Courses

The first step in including ethics instruction in leadership preparation classes is simple, yet vital. Instructors of these courses must make the conscious decision to include ethics as part of the course content. Without the disposition to do this, our vision for ethics as an intentional component in any course is significantly compromised. Once the decision to include ethics in course content has been made, however, the question then becomes, "how can it be implemented?"

To begin, all educators are required to operate under a code of ethics (actually most subscribe to two or three different codes depending on various educational roles), which is intended to guide their professional conduct in the field. Every state has its own code of ethics for its teachers and administrators. The American Federation of Teachers has a *Bill of Rights and Responsibilities for Learning: Standards of Conduct, Standards for Achievement*, while the National Education Association has its *Code of Ethics of the Education Profession*. In every leadership course the state code of ethics and one or more additional codes should be referenced and preferably discussed. This could be accomplished by inviting current school leaders to be interviewed by leadership candidates about their understanding and application of various codes. Aspiring principals need to develop a familiarity with these codes, which should be reiterated frequently. Their applicability needs to be further explored and refined through example, simulation, and critical discourse.

A highly effective and popular avenue for presenting ethical material is through the use of case study methods (Merseth, 1996; Shulman, 1992). Sadly, today's social climate often makes for lively class discussion, as examples of unethical actions in educational settings happen almost daily and, even more disturbingly, are allowed to gain wide notoriety in newspapers and newscasts. Aspiring leaders should be encouraged to choose examples for class discussion. They should be encouraged to reflect on the implications of unethical behavior and what this impropriety costs our children and our society. The purpose for examining case studies is not as much to determine right or wrong (though that might be an outcome), but rather to emphasize the process of developing critical thinking skills, examining issues from a myriad of perspectives, and engaging in reflective discourse about issues that can—and likely will—have an impact on their lives and the lives of their future students.

Several key questions might be employed in using case studies to promote ethical decision-making. They include: (1) What is/are the problem/s or issue/s in the case? (2) Are the individuals morally responsible for potential or caused harm? (3) If harms are (or are likely to be) caused, can those harms be justified? (4) Is there any way to resolve the problem/s that don't involve the breaking of moral rules? (5) How might the moral mistake be corrected or mitigated? and (6) What other actions are morally required or encouraged? While consensus building might occur during the process of examining issues and sharing divergent perspectives and reasoning, the more important outcome is utilization of the process employed to determine the ethical action that should or should not have been taken.

Perhaps as important as anything else done in the classroom, faculty in leadership preparation courses must model the ethical decision-making process outlined above in classroom, other professional and personal activities. In schools, universal principles such as character, caring, flexibility, consistency, integrity, respect, and genuineness are just some of the virtues teachers, parents, students, and communities seek in their leaders. This ability to "walk the talk" validates instructional guidance offered during classes.

In today's era of data-driven outcome assessments, it is critical that leadership candidates' understanding of ethics and its importance in the educative process be authentically evaluated. Quantitative measures, such as surveys, questionnaires and opinionnaires, have been created for evaluating candidates' knowledge and understanding of ethical decision making and codes of ethics. Rebore (2001), for example, offers an "Ethical Orientation Self-Test" in the appendix of *The Ethics of Educational Leadership,* so that students can analyze how well they understand ethical principles as they relate to professional actions (p. 277-279). Another survey, utilized by Bowen (2005) to assess the knowledge base of beginning leadership candidates in a Master's degree program as it pertains to the Code of Ethics for Georgia educators, provided direction for program development, basing ethics as the foundational underpinning of all programs in educational leadership. Qualitative assessments, in comparison, can be more naturalistic providing authentic, visceral, and often compelling examples of ethical decision-making, as reflected in simulation exercises, role-playing, critical discourse, transformative reflection, and journaling.

There are a number of options for integrating ethics into a leadership preparation program. Ethics can be integrated into educational philosophy course(s); organizational behavior course(s); introductory leadership or overview course(s); or topic-specific leadership course(s). For example, an Introductory course in Educational Leadership may focus on the ELCC Standards, which would give students an opportunity to investigate ethics in depth through Standard Five. Additionally, they could connect all the standards (1-6) to Standard Five using ethical leadership as the conceptual umbrella. Another example would be to integrate ethics into a law course(s) or policy course(s). This would appear to be a natural fit for topics that espouse the moral and ethical treatment of individuals. Finally, there are those, including the authors, who believe that a stand-alone ethics course should be a mandatory component of all educational leadership preparation programs.

Conclusion

While students preparing to enter the business, medical, and human services professions are being exposed to increased instruction in ethical decision-making and behavior in their coursework, those in the field of educational leadership precariously lag behind. It is our opinion that each instructor in educational leadership preparation should think deeply about how ethics will be included in the courses he or she teaches so that its inclusion is not left to chance. It is our belief that ethics should be included in the syllabus as an intentional component of the instruction.

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The suggestion is made that various codes of ethics be presented in classes and examples of compliance and non-compliance be discussed. The use of case studies is an excellent tool in teaching the process of analyzing and understanding behaviors, respecting the perceptions of others, and progressing from self-awareness to self-reflection and eventually, self-critique. Finally, educational leadership faculty must serve as role models for those entering the field.

Schools are conceived to be ethical organizations. The daily schedule of school leaders is filled with ethical dilemmas and moral decisions that will have an impact on the lives entrusted to them. It is hoped that the inclusion of this philosophy and the techniques presented here will result in the development of increasing numbers of educational leaders whose practice of ethical decision-making and behavior is so ingrained that even the seed of unethical action receives no sustenance.

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