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# School District Superintendents' Response to Ethical Dilemmas: A Grounded Theory

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SCHOOL DISTRICT SUPERINTENDENTS'  
RESPONSE TO ETHICAL DILEMMAS: A GROUNDED THEORY

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A Dissertation  
Presented to  
the Graduate School of  
Clemson University

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In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Doctor of Philosophy  
Educational Leadership

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by  
Fay Simpson Sprouse

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Presented to:  
Dr. Jackson Flanigan, Committee Chair  
Dr. Mike Campbell  
Dr. Russ Marion  
Dr. Laura Olson

## ABSTRACT

Ethical dilemmas, situations involving a conflict between values or principles, often arise when employees of school districts violate laws or professional codes of behavior. Ethical dilemmas also occur when there are inequities in educational programming, resulting in missed opportunities for students. This qualitative study, conducted with the grounded theory research methodology, analyzed school district superintendents' responses to ethical dilemmas experienced in the course of their professional career. Critical influences on the decision-making process and the ethical frameworks utilized by participants were examined. A "Model of Superintendents' Responses to Ethical Dilemmas" was developed and participants' stories were used to elucidate the model. The tacit knowledge shared by participants in the study can be helpful to practicing and aspiring school district superintendents as they seek to become more attuned to the pressures and barriers that influence the ethical decision-making process and help them to become more aware of their own approach to ethical decision-making.

## DEDICATION

In praise of my Lord:

“I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me.”

Philippians 4:13

In memory of my mother:

Emma Lee Mattison Simpson (“Nanny”)

July 9, 1931 – March 2, 2000

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Thanks to all who have been and continue to be my role models and encouragers. I am grateful to my current and former school board members who provided assistance throughout my program of study. I am so thankful for my fellow superintendents who agreed to be a part of this study, as it would not have been possible without you! To my cohort classmates – I am looking forward to celebrating with you at the finish line. To Julie, the trail blazer in our cohort, thanks for your belief in me and for the times you raised that eyebrow at me.

Last but certainly not least, thanks to my committee members. Each of you provided guidance and motivation that either kept me on track or gave me a jump start when I was running out of energy. Dr. Flanigan, your wisdom will be missed at the university. You and I often shared “war stories,” and I learned so much from our conversations. I sure hope your retirement years bring you great joy. Dr. Marion and Dr. Campbell, I learned so much from each of you and I appreciate all you did to help me realize this goal. Dr. Olson, you broadened my perspective and always challenged my thinking. You were always so willing to assist me, and your vitality was refreshing.

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## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION

*“Ethics and leadership go hand in hand” (Hitt, 1990).*

#### Statement of the Problem

A popular and effective high school principal resigns, citing religious beliefs, when informed students must be allowed to form a Gay/Straight Alliance Club at the school (Woodson & Robinson, 2008). A dynamic and caring elementary principal resigns in the midst of a criminal investigation, the purpose of which is to determine whether a high number of erasure marks on the tests indicates fraud in test score results for the school (Nossiter, 2008). A small community high school is closed because it has become a drain on the district resources, causing a storm of protests from the community and students (Harris, 2007). These three recent events are indicative of complex problems, often referred to as ethical dilemmas, that public school superintendents face on a regular basis. Ethical dilemmas are “messy, complicated and conflict-filled situations that require undesirable choices between competing, highly-prized values that cannot be simultaneously or fully satisfied” (Cuban, 2001, p. 10). By the time these issues come to the school district superintendent’s attention, “the situations are usually extremely complex and any course of action proposed is likely to have far-reaching consequences for members of the greater school community” (Grogan & Smith, 1999, p. 273).

A plethora of challenges exist for school superintendents in postmodern society. Postmodern society is characterized by “complex change related to vast increases in information and technology, and exposure to diverse people and ideas” (Coverston &

Rogers, 2000). Accountability demands, student safety issues, employees who act unethically, technological advances, competition for dwindling resources, eroding support of public education, and cultural diversity are but a few of the challenges which are catalysts for complex ethical dilemmas. Superintendents work within an environment that further complicates the handling of ethical dilemmas.

“Superintendents have a practice rooted in a professional community which is bound up in human relationships governed by standards, rules, duties, and commitments”

(Langlois, 2004, p. 88). How do school district superintendents in South Carolina respond when ethical dilemmas occur? That is the question to be explored in this study.

### Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study will be to analyze school superintendents’ responses to ethical dilemmas experienced in the course of their professional career. Critical influences on the decision-making process, as well as the ethical frameworks superintendents utilize, will be examined in order to develop a theoretical model of the process by which superintendents respond to complex ethical dilemmas. Data gathered from South Carolina superintendents will be used to add to the body of knowledge to strengthen the theory and practice regarding ethical decision-making within the profession. The study will assist practicing and aspiring educational administrators to be sensitive to the ethical dimension of leadership and encourage them to become self-reflective when faced with ethical dilemmas. Administrators who consciously address and systematically process the ethical dimensions of decision-making become more self-aware and clear about the bases for their actions (Cooper, 1998).

### Significance of the Study

Professional standards for school administrative practice, legislative mandates, and school board policies establish expectations of ethical conduct for educational leaders. The Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO), a nonpartisan, nonprofit organization of public school officials in the United States and its territories, adopted “Standards for School Leaders” in 1996 by which many educational leaders are evaluated. Standard number five requires educational leaders to promote student success by “acting with integrity, fairness, and in an ethical manner” (p. 18). One of the key dispositions of the standards is, “The administrator believes in, values, and is committed to bringing ethical principles to the decision-making process” (p. 18). Educational leaders are held accountable for utilizing ethical principles to resolve problems, of which many are ethical dilemmas, yet educational leadership programs of study typically do not require a course in ethics. A review of current research in educational leadership reveals very few empirical studies of ethical decision-making that educational leaders can apply to their professional practice.

The present study is important for practicing and aspiring educational leaders, as it seeks to illuminate the processes that practicing school superintendents utilize in responding to real ethical dilemmas as they strive to make decisions that are ethically responsible. A grounded theory for how practicing school superintendents make decisions in the throes of an ethical dilemma will serve to inform educational leaders and create opportunities for discourse. This study will seek to extend the growing body of research on the ethical leadership of postmodern educational leaders, primarily how

they respond to complex situations which involve conflicts in values and the interests of individuals, groups, and the organization. Cranston, Ehrich, and Kimber (2004) asserted, “given the rapidly changing social, economic, and political context in which schools now operate, the moral and ethical dimensions of leadership continue as important topics for exploration” (p.2).

### Theoretical Framework for the Study

Scholars of leadership have proffered various theories for understanding the ethical dimension of leadership and for understanding the ethical decision-making process. Theories may be characterized as normative, theoretically based or as descriptive, practice based.

Normative theories provide the epistemological foundation for ethical decision-making. Kohlberg’s (1958) theory of cognitive moral development was the groundbreaking social scientific work, establishing the study of ethical decision-making. Kohlberg (1973) described a sequence of stages of moral judgment based on his longitudinal study of almost twenty years. Subsequent research by Kohlberg (1981, 1984) and others (Rest, Narvaez, Thoma, & Bebeau, 2000; Trevino, 1986) has extended the knowledge base of the cognitive and psychological processes inherent in decision-making.

Descriptive theories reveal the cognitive processes of decision-making and the factors that influence the decision-maker. Starratt (1991) was the first to propose the Multidimensional Ethic, which was expanded by Shapiro and Stefkovich (2001) into the Multiple Ethical Paradigm Approach. This theory of ethical decision-making combines

various approaches: the *ethic of care* (Gilligan, 1982; Noddings, 1984, 1992), the *ethic of justice* (Kohlberg, 1981; Strike, Haller, & Soltis, 1998), the *ethic of critique* (Apple, 1988; Shapiro & Purpel, 1993, 1998), and the *ethic of profession* (Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2001). When combined with Turbulence Theory (Gross, 1998), the influence of internal and external emotional involvement is acknowledged. Empirical studies in various fields have shown emotions to be an important part of the decision-making process (Coughlan & Connolly, 2008). A definition and detailed description of each of these theories is included in the literature review in Chapter 2.

Limited empirical studies of educational practitioners' responses to ethical dilemmas have sought to elucidate the complexity of their decision-making processes. Studies of principals' (Dempster, Carter, Freakley, & Parry, 2004; Cranston, Ehrich & Kimber, 2006; Frick, 2008), superintendents' (Grogan & Smith, 1999; Langlois, 2004; Walker & Shakotko, 1999), and community college presidents' (Anderson & Davies, 2000) responses to ethical dilemmas reveal the frequency and complexity of ethical dilemmas and point to the need for more research into the phenomenon.

More research is needed. The passage of No Child Left Behind in 2001, with its intense focus on accountability, and the school choice movement, which has increased competition for limited resources, have generated unique ethical dilemmas for school administrators. Prior empirical research in education and other professional settings has led to the development of various ethical decision-making models (Anderson & Davies, 2000; Cooper, 1998; Cranston, Ehrich, & Kimber, 2003; Langlois, 2004; Starratt, 1991; Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2001). These models are informative but insufficient in



reflecting the current educational milieu and ethical dilemmas being encountered by practicing superintendents in the state of South Carolina.

### Research Questions

The focus of this study is to explore school superintendents' responses to ethical dilemmas they have experienced in the context of their professional career. The theoretical framework and the current body of literature on ethical decision-making provide a foundation for the following guiding questions that will elicit information related to the ethical decision-making process of superintendents:

1. How do school superintendents decide how to respond when faced with an ethical dilemma?
2. What individual attributes (i.e. values, gender, race, years of experience) influence school superintendents' responses to ethical dilemmas?
3. What other factors, variables, or forces influence school superintendents' responses to ethical dilemmas?
4. How do responses to ethical dilemmas affect school superintendents personally and professionally?

### Research Design

A grounded theory approach (see Figure 1) was utilized to describe school superintendents' experiences and to depict the structure, the underlying factors, and the precipitating factors that account for what was experienced (Merriam, 1998). All data gathered was analyzed to identify "categories, patterns, and themes which will facilitate a coherent synthesis of the data" (Gay, 1996, p. 227).

Participants in the study were all practicing, non-interim school superintendents in South Carolina. For purposes of triangulation, individual interviews, focus groups, and a member-check questionnaire provided qualitative data about the decision-making processes school superintendents use when responding to ethical dilemmas. Individual interviews were conducted with eight superintendents. The stratified sample, drawn from a field of 80 of the 85 current South Carolina school district superintendents, excluded four interim superintendents and the researcher. Identified strata, groups of individuals that are similar in a way that may be important to the response, were Caucasian males, Caucasian females, African American males, and African American females. Two focus groups with a total of 12 participants were conducted. One focus group was comprised of seven volunteers from one of South Carolina's regional education consortiums and one was comprised of four randomly selected South Carolina superintendents and one volunteer superintendent.

Data analysis was conducted using Strauss and Corbin's (1990) protocol, beginning with basic description, followed by conceptual ordering and theorizing (Patton, 2002). Open coding, axial coding, and selective coding, using the constant comparative method, resulted in a frame of generic relationships. Categories that emerged during the process were refined and validated and used in the formulation of a grounded theory for ethical decision-making by South Carolina superintendents.

A questionnaire subsequently was sent to all participants to gauge their reactions to a document summarizing the findings and conclusions of the research. The researcher communicated with participants about the findings and conclusions. Responses from this phase of the data collection were summarized and included in the data analysis.

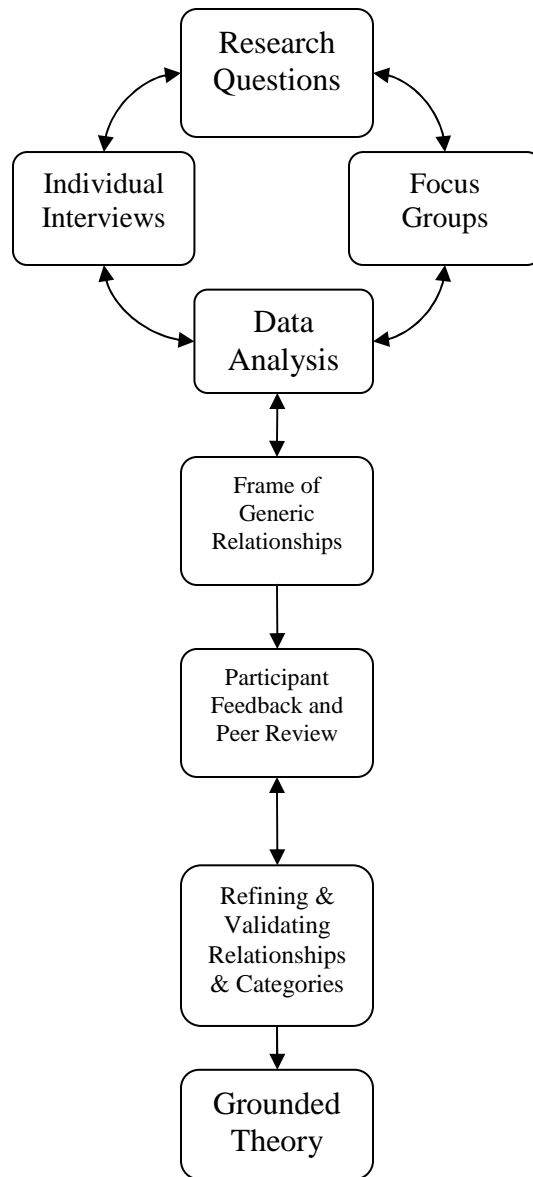


Figure 1: Conceptual Model for Research

### Assumptions

An assumption of the study was that the interview questions were sufficiently comprehensive to elicit the information about school superintendents' experiences with ethical dilemmas. It was also assumed that school superintendents were able to identify

an ethical dilemma, and that they were able to recount their experiences with that dilemma in honest and vivid detail. A final assumption was that the researcher understood and transmitted the phenomenon from the participants' perspectives, avoiding bias through proper data collection and data analysis procedures.

### Limitations of Study

A limitation of the study is its reliability, or replicability, due to the qualitative method that is employed. Merriam (1998) stated:

Because what is being studied in education is assumed to be in flux, multifaceted, and highly contextual, because information gathered is a function of who gives it and how skilled the researcher is at getting it, and because the emergent design of a qualitative case study precludes a priori controls, achieving reliability in the traditional sense is not only fanciful but impossible. (p. 206)

If this particular study were to be replicated within a reasonable time frame, though, it is highly likely that participants would choose the same ethical dilemma to discuss.

Participants were able to vividly describe their ethical dilemmas because of the long-lasting effects for them personally and for the organization.

Another limitation of the qualitative research method is its external validity, or the generalizability of the results. It will be up to the reader to generalize findings to his or her own professional situation. For example, other superintendents, building principals, assistant principals, or those in administrative preparation programs, could benefit from the results of this study and transfer and apply the knowledge to their own ethical dilemmas and decision-making practices.

### Definition of Terms

Ethics – the kinds of values and morals an individual or society finds desirable or appropriate (Northouse, 2004)

Ethical behavior – the process by which people arrive at moral decisions and take action on the basis of those decisions (Kohlberg, 1981)

Ethical decision-making – the process of identifying a problem, generating alternatives, and choosing among them so that the alternatives selected maximize the most important ethical values while also achieving the intended goal (Guy, 1990)

Ethical dilemma – a perplexing situation that involves a conflict between values, beliefs, principles, or ideals; a situation which presents two sides, each rooted in basic, core values (Cranston, Ehrich, & Kimber, 2006; Kidder, 1995; Langlois, 2004)

### Organization of the Study

A review of the related literature is presented in Chapter 2. Models of ethical decision-making, influences on ethical decision-making, and empirical research in the field of educational leadership are summarized. Chapter 3 includes a description of the grounded theory research methodology and data analysis procedures (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, 1998). Details of the research design and data collection are presented. Chapter 4 contains a summary of the findings, presented as a narrative in the grounded theory tradition. Implications of the findings and recommendations for further research are presented in Chapter 5.

## CHAPTER TWO

### LITERATURE REVIEW

*“Values, morals, and ethics are the very stuff of leadership and administrative life”  
(Hodgkinson, 1991, p. 11).*

#### Introduction

The field of ethics is a vast and extensive field within philosophy. Therefore the literature review is confined to works that addressed ethical decision-making (EDM), particularly those relating to EDM in educational leadership. The literature review is organized around three major categories (see Appendix A):

- Models of EDM
- Axiological and other influences on EDM
- Quantitative and qualitative research of EDM in Educational Leadership

A variety of literature that is relevant to EDM exists on normative models, descriptive models, and empirical research in professional fields including business, medicine, and counseling. The literature within the field of educational leadership is sparse, though a number of doctoral students have made it the subject of their research within the past decade. More research needs to be done in the field of educational leadership. The present study will extend the limited knowledge base of EDM for educational leaders, as it seeks to illuminate the processes that practicing school superintendents utilize in responding to real ethical dilemmas as they strive to make decisions that are ethically responsible.

## Models of Ethical Decision-Making

Models of EDM are categorized as either normative/philosophical or descriptive/empirical. Normative/philosophical models are those “which attempt to provide statements about what is right/wrong, what ought/ought not to be done, etc. and are concerned with specifying processes and strategies that should be followed in ethical decision-making” (Miner & Petocz 2003, p. 12). Descriptive/empirical models are “concerned with how people actually make ethical decisions – what steps they take, which moral principles they invoke, and what other factors influence their decisions for ethical decision-making” (p. 12).

### Normative or Philosophical Ethical Decision-Making Models

“The most prominent social scientific theory of ethical judgment remains Kohlberg’s (1969) cognitive moral development theory” (Trevino et al, 2006, p. 955). Kohlberg conducted an investigation of male subjects from middle childhood to adulthood to determine if their responses to hypothetical ethical dilemmas changed as they matured. Kohlberg proposed six stages of moral development through which humans move in a sequential order, with each stage representing more sophisticated reasoning. While in Stages 1 and 2, the preconventional level, individuals make decisions in order to avoid punishment or to seek rewards or a beneficial exchange. Kohlberg’s research led him to conclude that the majority of adults in society reason at Stages 3 and 4, the conventional level, in which individuals make decisions based on the expectations of significant others or to uphold laws and rules (Trevino, 1986). According to Kohlberg, less than 20% of adults reach Stages 5 and 6, the

postconventional level, in which individuals make decisions based on the needs of others within their society or based on respect for the rights and dignity of all humans (Trevino, 1986).

Critics of Kohlberg's theory question the use of hypothetical ethical dilemmas in his research design, positing that knowing the morally right thing to do in a proposed ethical dilemma does not necessarily motivate one to behave accordingly when an actual ethical dilemma is experienced (Krebs & Denton, 2005; Trevino, 1986). "Competence and performance in moral judgment may differ to some degree depending on the problem being addressed, the context, and other factors" (Krebs & Denton, 2005, p. 633). Feminist ethicists questioned Kohlberg's exclusive use of male subjects for his initial research (Gilligan, 1982; Noddings, 1984), while psychologists criticized the rigid stage progression and Kohlberg's use of verbal self-reports as his primary data source (Trevino, Weaver, & Reynolds, 2006).

Rest, Narvaez, Thoma, and Bebeau (2000) used 25 years of data gathered with the Defining Issues Test (DIT) to propose the neo-Kohlbergian approach to ethical decision-making. Rest and colleagues favored the term "developmental schemas" instead of stages, defining schema as a "representation of some prior stimulus phenomenon used to interpret new information" (Rest et al., 2000, p. 389), and they agreed with Kohlberg's assertion that individuals progress from one level to another. The three schemas that Rest and colleagues identified include: the Personal Interest Schema (S23), a combination of Kohlberg's stages 2 and 3, in which the individual's decision-making is egoistic and self-serving; the Maintaining Norms Schema (S4), reflective of Kohlberg's Stage 4, which represents decision-making based on respect for



authority and societal norms in order to maintain law and order in society; and the Postconventional Schema (S56), a combination of Kohlberg's Stages 5 and 6, which represents decision-making based on shared moral ideals that have been honed over the years by communities of citizens or ideals that are favored by postmodern society. Rest and colleagues assert:

We find that the different moral schemas lead to drastic differences in decision-making...For instance S56 favours rights of homosexuals, S4 tends not to; S56 favours abortion rights, S4 does not. In general, S56 tends to endorse political liberal ideology; S4 tends to endorse more conservative political ideology and more religious orthodoxy. (p. 392)

Rest and colleagues acknowledged the limitations of their research, which is highly abstract, in its applicability to ethical dilemmas in specific contexts. They refer to external influences such as due process, informed consent, and confidentiality which come into play when individuals encounter actual ethical dilemmas in the workplace.

Though a background in normative theory is helpful, its use in the study of EDM is limited because normative ethical theory is not designed to explain or predict behavior. "Normative ethical theory represents an ideal that may or may not reflect accurately the processes engaged in by people in actual situations" (Trevino, 1986, p. 604).

#### Descriptive or Empirical Models of EDM in Educational Leadership

Starratt (1991) offered "The Multidimensional Ethic" as a guide for ethical decision-making within an ethical school environment. Three ethical theories--the ethic of critique, the ethic of care, and the ethic of justice--were central to his descriptive

model for ethical decision-making. Starratt believed administrators should contemplate each of the three ethical theories when responding to ethical dilemmas.

The *ethic of critique* is drawn from critical theory in which social justice and human rights are central themes. Starratt's model "forces administrators to confront the moral issues involved when schools disproportionately benefit some groups in society and fail others" (p.190). The No Child Left Behind legislation exemplifies an application of the ethic of critique, in which underachieving students, marginalized in the past, become the center of attention. An historic example is the Jim Crow laws, which were accepted until 1954 when the Supreme Court ruled public school segregation unconstitutional in *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*, 347 U.S. 483 (1954).

The *ethic of justice* calls for educational leaders to consider current laws and policies and how administrators should apply them in responding to ethical dilemmas. An example of the application of the ethic of justice is the South Carolina Teacher Employment Dismissal Act of 1990 (S.C. Code). This act requires educational leaders to adhere to the ethic of justice in responding to misconduct of certified employees.

The third element of Starratt's Multidimensional Ethic is the *ethic of care*, which elicits educational leaders' consideration of social relationships and consequences of their decisions and actions on individuals and the community. "When the ethic of care is valued, school leaders emphasize relationships and connections in the decision-making process, rather than techniques and rules associated with a hierarchical approach" (Stefkovich & O'Brien, 2004, p. 197).

Shapiro and Stefkovich (2001) extended Starratt's descriptive model of EDM to include a fourth ethic, the *ethic of the profession*, in their "Multiple Ethical Paradigm." The ethic of the profession calls for administrators to consider what the profession would expect and what is in the best interest of students. The Multiple Ethical Paradigm approach acknowledges the many factors that converge to influence the ethic of the profession, including personal values, the diversity among students, and community standards. Shapiro and Stefkovich acknowledge the complexity of EDM in today's society, "as dilemmas increasingly involve a variety of student populations, parents, and communities comprising diversity in broad terms that extend well beyond categories of race and ethnicity" (p. 23). Thus, administrators must be self-aware, and "reflect upon concepts such as what they perceive to be right or wrong and good and bad, who they are as professionals and as human beings, how they make decisions, and why they make the decisions they do" (p. 21).

Shapiro and Gross (2008) added another dimension to the Multiple Ethical Paradigm: Turbulence Theory. Turbulence Theory acknowledges the effects of the emotional and environmental contexts in which ethical dilemmas occur. Shapiro and Gross's descriptive model of EDM portrays Turbulence Theory and the Multiple Ethical Paradigms as an integrated system of EDM. Shapiro and Gross identify four levels of turbulence ranging from light turbulence, which represents little or no disruption to the organization, to extreme turbulence, which often results in the unraveling of an institution. An example of extreme turbulence and unraveling is when an entire school reform effort collapses after controversy results in several changes in the leadership of the school district.

Cooper (1998) provided a descriptive model of EDM for students and practitioners of public administration. The model provides a framework for working through ethical dilemmas, consisting of six steps: perceiving the problem as ethical, describing the situation and defining the ethical issue, identifying alternatives, projecting probable consequences, selecting an alternative, and resolving the problem (Cooper, 1998). Cooper acknowledges that many factors influence the decision-making of administrators as they work through the model. For example, limited time, resources, and credible sources of information sometimes preclude administrators from being able to discern fact from fiction in the quest to resolve ethical dilemmas.

The descriptive models proffered by each of these authors provide useful EDM frameworks for educational leaders and for researchers attempting to add to the growing body of research in the field.

#### Axiological and Other Influences on EDM

Coverston and Rogers (1999) sought to explicate the difficulties nurses face with EDM in the postmodern world, a world characterized by a multiplicity of values and belief systems. Issues related to advances in genetic and reproductive technology, decisions pertaining to quality of life versus sustaining life, and questions related to access for all social classes to quality healthcare set the stage for complex ethical dilemmas. Nurses often have no input into the decision-making process, yet they are bound to carry out decisions made by others, even if they experience dissonance among personal values in the performance of their duties. Coverston and Rogers encourage nurses to become familiar with “the language of ethics, as well as the technology and

science that present ethical dilemmas” (p. 9). The authors do not advocate that nurses abandon their own values and beliefs, but instead encourage them to be aware of their own biases, to be open to differing ideas and cultures, and to have open dialog with peers about ethical issues and EDM in their professional practice.

Coughlan and Connolly (2008) conducted a quantitative study of business students at two American universities in which they examined the influences of affective factors and justifications on EDM. Students from undergraduate and MBA programs (N=184) were asked to indicate how they would respond to three hypothetical ethical dilemmas. They were given two choices, one more ethical than the other. Students were also asked to express how they would feel about selecting each of the options, using measures of relief, regret, and satisfaction. Finally, students were asked to rate the reasons, or justifications, for the responses they selected. Study results were as hypothesized, showing a positive correlation between the anticipated emotions of regret or relief and choosing the ethical option for each ethical dilemma. Justifications for the choices made also influenced the participants’ response to the dilemma. Coughlan and Connolly acknowledged the limitations of the use of hypothetical dilemmas for research, and stated “replication with real managers making real choices would be highly desirable” (p. 359). They assert that future research should reflect the influence of emotions on decision-making.

O’Fallon and Butterfield (2005) summarized and critiqued the empirical ethical decision-making literature from 1996-2003 in the field of business. They reviewed 174 studies that examined the direct effects of individual and organizational factors on EDM. The studies included in the review reported 270 findings with regard to individual

factors. “The most consistent findings appear in studies that test for the direct effects of gender, ethical philosophies (i.e. idealism and relativism), cognitive moral development, locus of control, Machiavellianism, and religion” (p. 398). The review revealed mixed findings across categories of educational attainment, work experience, nationality, and age. O’Fallon and Butterfield found significantly fewer studies that examined organizational factors. Of the 82 findings reported, “the most consistent findings were found in the studies testing for the effects of ethical climate/culture, codes of ethics, and rewards and sanctions” (p. 398). Findings were mixed with regard to industry type and organizational size. Fifty-five percent of the studies relied on hypothetical ethical dilemmas, which is considered a weakness as “it is unclear whether one is actually measuring behavior or some other construct such as intent” (p. 404). The authors point out that researchers have begun to use more qualitative methods for their research, such as asking participants how they have responded to ethical dilemmas experienced in their work environment.

Stevenson (2007) conducted a qualitative study to explore how principals of urban, multi-ethnic secondary schools in England seek to promote social justice when their values conflicted with values underpinning national policy initiatives. Educational standards set by the British Department for Education and Skills have led to “increasing emphasis on performance, market success, and efficiency” (p. 770), creating pressure to emphasize “market value over human need” (p. 771). Issues of how to allocate time to best meet students’ needs, issues surrounding the fairness of standardized tests for all ethnic groups, and school choice initiatives have created complex ethical dilemmas for British principals who are committed to social justice. Stevenson concluded that

“‘choice’ policies, driven by the creation of quasi-markets between schools, had the capacity to reflect on to the school the racist attitudes and beliefs prevalent in the local community” (p. 779). Stevenson highlighted the need for national policy initiatives to be aligned with social justice objectives in order to facilitate principals’ efforts to eliminate inequities in their schools.

### Empirical Research of EDM in Educational Leadership

Several research studies have focused on school principals’ EDM. A mixed-methods study of 577 school principals in Australia was conducted by Dempster, Carter, Freakley, and Parry (2004) to examine contextual influences on their EDM. Interviews and a questionnaire provided extensive data from which several findings emerged. The most influential individual factors that guided participants’ EDM were work experience in education, on-the-job leadership, students’ parents, and professional colleagues. Findings related to finance and funding issues revealed problems inherent in the “market-oriented trends on public policy-making” (p. 170), which often cause or contribute to ethical dilemmas experienced by principals. Dempster and colleagues suggested the need for formal and informal support networks for principals to assist them with their EDM. They also suggested an expansion of principals’ professional knowledge base to include instruction in the impact of global trends on Australian schools.

Cranston, Ehrich, and Kimber (2006) conducted a qualitative study of seven heads of independent, religious schools in Australia. The administrators participated in semi-structured in-depth interviews in which they were asked to describe their response

to an ethical dilemma experienced in the course of their professional career.

Participants' responses were used to develop categories and themes as the researchers analyzed the nature and scope of the ethical dilemmas that participants described. A key analytical tool was a model for ethical dilemmas previously developed by the authors in their study of public sector managers (Cranston, Ehrich, & Kimber, 2003). The model represents "the context, forces, and decision-making processes that individuals facing ethical dilemmas are likely to experience" (Cranston, et al., 2003, p. 139). The findings of the study by Cranston, Ehrich, and Kimber (2006) were that ethical dilemmas occur frequently, most are staff or student related issues, and organizational and individual values were most influential in deciding how to respond to the ethical dilemmas experienced.

Frick (2008) employed a phenomenological approach and purposeful sampling to study eleven secondary school principals in Pennsylvania. Frick's purpose was to inform and extend the ethic of the profession (Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2001) by examining ethical dilemmas that occur when principals' personal values are incongruous with organizational/professional values. Participants' narratives reveal intrapersonal anguish regarding situations in which their personal belief about what was in the best interest of the student clashed with the organizations' expectations. The ethical dilemmas for principals occurred when principals had to "weigh out and wrangle with external administrative guidelines, policy, and procedural expectations on the one hand and their own personal values, moral orientations, and beliefs on the other" (Frick, 2008, p. 68). The findings of the study extend descriptive EDM theory, providing further insight into the complexity of EDM for school principals.



Cardno (2007) conducted a qualitative study of two cohorts of educational leaders participating in leadership development programs in New Zealand. Participants were surveyed before and after completing a course on the theory and praxis of dilemma management. The first data set included narratives about the dilemmas the educational leaders encountered in the course of their professional career. Every issue described by the participants involved people or the resources people needed to be effective in their work. Participants reported the challenges in responding to the dilemmas, including reluctance and/or anxiety in addressing the dilemma, the amount of time it takes to attend to the dilemma, and feelings of inadequacy in responding effectively to the dilemma. After the curriculum was taught, participants were asked to comment on the relevance of the course content to the challenges of EDM. Participants evinced a heightened sense of confidence in the praxis of managing dilemmas, reporting that knowledge of the theory of dilemma management reinforces actions taken to address dilemmas. Cardno states, “It is timely to revisit the art of dilemma management which constitutes essential, deep learning for educational leaders” (p. 33).

Few empirical studies have engaged school district superintendents as subjects in the study of EDM. Grogan and Smith (1996) conducted a study of eleven female superintendents in the United States. The researchers’ purpose was to analyze ethical dilemmas the superintendents experienced in the course of their work and to evaluate the effects of organizational influences on the superintendents’ EDM. Grogan and Smith found that most of the dilemmas the participants chose to describe involved staff and students, and the majority of the female superintendents cited the ethic of care as being the key influence in their EDM.

Walker and Shakotko (1996) surveyed 800 Canadian school superintendents and interviewed 52 school superintendents as they researched the ethical challenges and pressures of the professional career. The pressures identified by the participants in this study included conflicting interests as well as economic, political, organizational, ethical and personal concerns. Each of the pressures may be associated with ethical dilemmas. The researchers concluded that the most important influences on participants' EDM were personal values and beliefs, professional and organizational expectations, and personal upbringing.

Langlois (2004) engaged six experienced superintendents in Quebec. Langlois utilized a mixed-methods approach, and her findings led her to develop a decision-making matrix. The matrix provides a visualization of the processes and influences on the superintendents' EDM during actual ethical dilemmas they had experienced in the course of their professional career. Eight stages of EDM were identified by Langlois, through which the superintendents progressed as they utilized the ethics of critique, justice, and caring. Superintendents in the study emphasized their "desire to be consistent with their values and beliefs while remaining authentic in their words and deeds" (p. 86).

### Summary

The review of literature on ethical decision-making reveals an incomplete picture. Researchers and practitioners in the fields of counseling, medicine, and business have a great variety of resources to inform them about EDM within their professions, but educational leaders have few resources to consult. Other research cannot be

generalized to the education profession because of the uniqueness of educational leadership. Greenfield (1996) argued that school superintendents' work differs from administrative work in other fields because of the "uniquely moral character of schools" (p. 61), and Johnson (1996) stated superintendents' capacity to lead relies "on their own moral purpose, their commitment to education, and their courage to stand up for what they believe" (p. 281). Educational leadership is also unique because of the number and type of internal and external stakeholders including students, employees, parents, local citizens, local, state, and federal authorities. Federal and state accountability requirements further distinguish educational leadership from other professions.

Public schools are institutions established, in part, to promote democratic ideals. Mandatory school attendance has placed schools at the center of many ethical debates of the larger society. "Arguments about birth control versus the practice of abstinence, debates about prayer in schools, and controversies about distributing scarce educational resources to haves or have-nots must be faced by principals, superintendents, directors, and supervisors on a daily basis" (McDowelle & Buckner, 2002, p. 72). This immense responsibility weighs heavily on the superintendent, the chief executive officer of the school district, who is professionally responsible for making decisions that are ethically responsible and for responding to ethical dilemmas in a manner that is defensible in a court of law. Responsible, defensible decision-making can help districts avoid costly legal ramifications, and preserve resources for students in the classroom.

The review of the literature makes clear the need for this qualitative, descriptive study. School district superintendents hold a powerful position of influence over the children in their care, on the teachers and other professionals under their supervision,

and their broader school communities. They must address ethical dilemmas regularly, the outcomes of which can affect lives, organizations, and communities in positive or negative ways. “Scholars can do much to advance the field’s understanding of school leadership, organization, and community by conducting descriptive field-based studies of what leadership practices by administrators and others in schools entail on a day-to-day basis” (Greenfield, 2004, p. 190). Data gathered from South Carolina superintendents will be used to produce knowledge to strengthen the theory and practice regarding ethical decision-making within the profession. Superintendents and those who aspire to the profession need to be armed with a vast array of resources designed to assist them in becoming thoughtful, skillful, self-reflective decision-makers.

Chapter 3 will include a description of the participants and a description of the research design and procedures. The grounded theory design of Strauss and Corbin (1990, 1998) is utilized for this study. “Grounded theory emphasizes systematic rigor and thoroughness from initial design, through data collection and analysis, culminating in theory generation” (Patton, 2002, p. 489).

## CHAPTER THREE

### RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

*“To be without method is deplorable, but to depend on method entirely is worse. You must first learn to observe the rules faithfully; afterwards, modify them according to your intelligence and capacity” (Lu Ch’ai in Lichtman, 2010, p. 235).*

#### Purpose of Study

The purpose of this study is to analyze South Carolina school district superintendents’ responses to ethical dilemmas experienced in the course of their professional career. When an ethical dilemma develops, school district superintendents must be skillful in discerning the facts, analyzing possible courses of action and consequences of each, and responding in a way that is ethically defensible. Greenfield (1996) argues that school superintendents’ work differs from administrative work in other fields because of the “uniquely moral character of schools” (p. 61), and Johnson (1996) states that superintendents’ capacity to lead relies “on their own moral purpose, their commitment to education, and their courage to stand up for what they believe” (p. 281).

For the purposes of this study, the researcher proposes that the ethical decision-making of school superintendents is highly influenced by their personal values, but community mores and standards are of equal concern. The researcher also proposes that school superintendents rely primarily on legal standards for guidance in responding to ethical dilemmas.

Four research questions guide this study:

1. How do school superintendents decide how to respond when faced with an ethical dilemma?

2. What individual attributes (i.e. values, gender, race, years of experience) influence school superintendents' responses to ethical dilemmas?
3. What other factors, variables, or forces influence school superintendents' responses to ethical dilemmas?
4. How do responses to ethical dilemmas affect school superintendents personally and professionally?

### Participants

The participants in this study were twenty practicing, non-interim school district superintendents in South Carolina who either agreed to participate when contacted or volunteered to participate in the study when asked. Thirteen of the participating superintendents were male and seven were female. Years of experience as a superintendent ranged from a low of one year to a high of 35 years, with a median of 5.5 years. Half of the participants served districts with more than 4,500 students and half served districts with fewer than 4,500 students.

### Research Design

Marshall and Rossman (1999) emphasize that the research methods used in any study must be “linked epistemologically to the focus of the study and the research questions” (p. 53). A qualitative research method was selected for this study, the purpose of which is to analyze how school district superintendents respond when they experience ethical dilemmas in their professional career.

Qualitative research is “characterized by the search for meaning and understanding...an inductive investigative strategy, and a richly descriptive end product” (Merriam, 2002, p. 6). Another defining feature of the qualitative research tradition is that the researcher is the instrument, introducing the possibility of bias. “Researchers know that they influence the research and results” (Lichtman, 2010, p. 17), so it is imperative that they employ strategies to strengthen the internal validity, reliability, and external validity or generalizability of the research. It is incumbent upon the researcher to reveal possible sources of bias.

The researcher has 26 years experience in serving in the public schools of South Carolina. Sixteen of her 26 years in education have been spent in educational administration, the past eight years as school district superintendent of the small, rural, community where she has lived all of her life. She is of the Christian faith, and is active in the Methodist church. Her interest in studying the phenomenon of ethical decision-making arose from ethical dilemmas experienced in her professional career. The researcher has a firm belief in doing the right thing, regardless of the consequences, which requires fortitude and a willingness to stand alone. The researcher acknowledges the empathy she felt for her peers as they poignantly described ethical dilemmas that had had a profound personal effect on them.

The researcher acknowledges that asking her colleagues to discuss ethical dilemmas they have experienced in their professional role requires a high level of trust and ironclad assurances of confidentiality. Participants selected pseudonyms for the interviews, and the researcher completed all transcriptions. Various strategies were used in the study to address issues of internal validity and reliability. During the data-

gathering phase of the project, the researcher assumed the position of neutrality, not attempting to “prove a particular perspective or manipulate the data to arrive at predisposed truths” (Patton, p. 51). An audit trail (Guba & Lincoln, 1981) was established for the purpose of reliability to account for the methods and procedures used in the study and the decisions that were made. Random sampling was used in order to eliminate selection bias (Krueger & Casey, 2000) and to maximize variation for greater external validity (Merriam, 2002). The researcher addressed the issue of internal validity of the study through triangulation (Merriam, 2002).

Triangulation, the process of using multiple sources of information in order to reduce bias and establish validity of the emerging findings (Merriam, 1998), was achieved in this study through the use of individual interviews, focus group interviews, and available archival evidence pertaining to the ethical dilemmas about which participants spoke in their interviews such as newspaper articles, press releases, and school board meeting minutes. A second method used to control for bias was the use of member checks and peer review, conducted subsequent to data analysis. Member checks allowed participants to provide feedback regarding the researcher’s interpretations of the data, and the researcher incorporated the feedback into the final conclusions. One of the researcher’s committee members reviewed the coding of data and the emergent theory, providing objective feedback and suggestions for refinement of the categories. A third way the researcher sought to reduce bias and to establish validity was to select a research design with systematic rigor and thoroughness (Patton, 2002). Grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1990, 1998) was selected as the research design because, as Glaser (2001) states, “every stage is done systematically so the



reader knows exactly the process by which the published theory was generated” (p. 12).

Strauss and Corbin (1998) contend:

Over the years, we have wrestled with the problem of objectivity and have developed some techniques to increase our awareness and help us control intrusion of bias into analysis while retaining sensitivity to what is being said in the data. (p. 43)

Strauss and Corbin (1990, 1998) developed systematic procedures to assist researchers in depicting the structure, the underlying factors, and the precipitating factors of participants’ experiences. Two procedures--making comparisons and asking questions-- are utilized throughout the data collection and data analysis stage. These procedures enable the researcher to formulate specific concepts, categorize the concepts, and identify a core phenomenon. Strauss and Corbin’s procedures lead to the development of an inductive, substantive theory, generated through the identification of conceptual categories, the properties of the categories, and the relationships among the categories and properties (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The merit of substantive theory is the specificity for the population from which it was derived and its applicability to those who are situated in similar contexts. “A substantive theory has a specificity and hence usefulness to practice often lacking in theories that cover more global concerns” (Merriam, 1998, p. 17).

The most common feature of qualitative research is thick, rich description of social phenomena. Thick, rich description is the manner for ensuring external validity or generalizability of results, providing “an adequate database, that is, enough description and information that readers will be able to determine just how closely their situations

match, and thus whether findings can be transferred” (Merriam, 2002, p. 29). The researcher provided quotations, observations, and excerpts from documents to tell a story and communicate the experiences, feelings, and insight of superintendents as they encountered and responded to ethical dilemmas in their professional career.

In conclusion, this qualitative study was conducted using the grounded theory research design. Grounded theory begins with description, moves to categorizing, and concludes with theorizing. Strategies employed to address issues of internal validity, reliability, and external validity or generalizability included random sampling, triangulation, member checks, an audit trail, and thick, rich description.

### Procedures

South Carolina has 85 school district superintendents. At the time of the study, 81 of the superintendents were full-time and four were interim, serving in a temporary capacity. The four interim superintendents and the researcher, a full-time superintendent in South Carolina, were excluded from the sampling procedure, resulting in a population of 80. A stratified random sampling method was used to select eight superintendents for individual interviews and twelve superintendents for focus groups. Superintendents who participated in individual interviews were excluded from the sampling procedure for focus groups in order to reduce redundancy of data, as the interview questions were designed to elicit information about particular ethical dilemmas participants had experienced. The researcher believed a richer data set could be gathered through conversations with twenty different participants. The diversity of all twenty participants

was important to data analysis as the researcher considered the influence of individual attributes on their response to ethical dilemmas.

Individual interviews were especially valuable in gaining detailed descriptions of particular ethical dilemmas experienced by participants. Focus group interviews were valuable in gaining varying perceptions of decision-making processes through the interplay of participants' discussion as they talked about ethical dilemmas they had experienced and as they shared their ideas with each other about the ethical decision-making process. Two groups were conducted with different people to identify trends, patterns, and variations.

#### *Individual Interviews*

Participants were selected for individual interviews by grouping all 80 superintendents by ethnicity and gender into four strata, and utilizing proportional allocation to determine the sample size for each stratum: Male / Caucasian (4), Male / African American (1), Female / Caucasian (2), Female / African American (1). Stratified random sampling was utilized to increase confidence in making generalizations to particular subgroups (Patton, 2002) and proportional allocation ensured that the sample was representative of the population (Trochim, 2006). Systematic random sampling, a technique designed to ensure that every person in a population of interest (in this case, every superintendent in each stratum) has a chance of being selected (Trochim, 2006), was utilized to identify potential participants and alternates.

Potential participants were identified and contacted via email. A letter of introduction stating the purpose of the study (see Appendix B) and the proposed field interview questions (see Appendix C) were provided via attachment to the email. Follow up emails and telephone calls resulted in interviews with eight superintendents which were conducted in the office of each of the superintendents.

The researcher allotted one hour for each of the individual interviews. After reading and signing a letter of consent to participate in the study and for the interview to be recorded (see Appendix D), the introductory interview script was read (see Appendix B). Participants selected pseudonyms to protect their anonymity and the semi-structured interview protocol (Appendix C) was used to guide the interview. Field notes were made during the interviews, as the researcher noted body language, voice inflections, and environmental details. Following each interview, the researcher transcribed the interviews from the taped recordings. The researcher then searched available databases for archival evidence of the dilemma that was shared by the participant. School board minutes, newspaper articles, and press releases that were available were downloaded for review.

### *Focus Group Interviews*

Twelve superintendents participated in focus groups: Male / Caucasian (6), Male / African American (2), Female / Caucasian (3), Female / African American (1). Focus Group 1 participants were selected utilizing the stratified random sampling method. Superintendents included in each stratum were those who did not participate in individual interviews and who were available to meet after the April, 2009 meeting of

the South Carolina Association of School Administrators (SCASA) – Superintendents’ Division. Six superintendents were selected and contacted via email. A letter of introduction stating the purpose of the study (see Appendix E) and the proposed field interview questions (see Appendix F) were provided via attachment to the email. Follow-up emails and telephone calls resulted in four superintendents who were able to participate in Focus Group 1. During the SCASA meeting, the researcher announced the need for additional participants for Focus Group 1, and one additional superintendent volunteered, for a total of five participants. Superintendents in this sample were diverse in gender, size of district served, and years of experience.

Focus Group 2 was comprised of a convenience sample. The group consisted of seven superintendents who had not been selected randomly and who volunteered to participate in the study. All of the volunteers serve on the Board of Directors of a particular regional educational consortium in South Carolina. The focus group discussion was conducted in the consortium office after a regularly scheduled monthly meeting. Superintendents in this sample were diverse in gender, ethnicity, size of district served, and years of experience, thereby lending more credibility to the use of a convenience sample.

The researcher allotted one hour for each of the two focus group discussions. After reading the interview script (see Appendix B), participants selected a pseudonym. The semi-structured interview protocol (see Appendix F) was used to guide the interview. Field notes were made during the interviews, as the researcher noted body language, voice inflections, and environmental details. Following each of the focus group interviews, the researcher transcribed the interviews from the taped recordings.

### *Coding Procedures*

After interviews were transcribed and available archival evidence was obtained, the researcher coded the data using Strauss and Corbin's (1990, 1998) coding procedures for data analysis. The analysis began with open coding, which is the process of "breaking down, examining, comparing, conceptualizing, and categorizing data" (p. 61). Phrases, sentences, and paragraphs were examined and phenomena were labeled or conceptualized. For example, "I talked it over with the board chairman" was labeled "consultation" and "I brought it to the board's attention" was labeled "information exchange." Concepts that were identified in this first step were listed and their properties were analyzed in order to group them into categories. An example of a category that emerged from the labels "consultation" and "information exchange" was "communication."

Axial coding is a second coding procedure "whereby data are put back together in new ways after open coding, by making connections between categories" (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 96). Causal, contextual, and intervening conditions were identified as subcategories were named. Differences among and within categories were discovered. Axial coding involves moving between inductive and deductive thinking as relationships that existed in the data were identified.

The third form of coding undertaken during data analysis was selective coding, "the process of selecting the core category, systematically relating it to other categories, validating those relationships, and filling in categories that need further refinement and development" (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 116). Selective coding requires the researcher to examine patterns, make comparisons, and identify connections in the data. The

grounded theory was derived at this stage and explicated in diagrammatic form as well as in the tradition of qualitative research - a thick, rich description.

### *Memoing*

Throughout the coding process, memos were written as ideas occurred or questions were generated about the data. Memos preserved the thoughts of the researcher during data analysis and the formulation of the theoretical framework. Memos are a “storehouse of analytic ideas that can be sorted, ordered, and reordered” (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 261) and they are essential in keeping a record of and giving direction to data analysis.

### *Member Checking*

Following the data analysis, the researcher emailed the Member Check Letter (see Appendix G), Member Check Questionnaire (see Appendix H), the Model of Superintendents’ Response to Ethical Dilemmas, and a summary of the research findings (see Appendix I) to each of the twenty participants to elicit feedback about the researcher’s interpretations and conclusions. The researcher talked face to face with 15 of the 20 participants to further explain the model if requested and to solicit their feedback. Other responses were emailed or mailed to the researcher, with 85% of participants providing feedback to the researcher. Participants’ feedback was examined and summarized and included in Chapters 4 and 5 as a part of the researcher’s data analysis, conclusions, and recommendations for further study.

## Summary

This qualitative study focuses on school superintendents' responses to ethical dilemmas encountered in their professional career. Eight practicing superintendents were interviewed individually and twelve participated in one of two focus groups. Random sampling was used to select superintendents for individual interviews and for one focus group, and convenience sampling was used for the second focus group. The researcher used random sampling to avoid selection bias which may occur in the study of peer groups. Member checks were conducted subsequent to data analysis and feedback gathered was included in the research findings.

Chapter 4 is a presentation of the data analysis based on the information gathered from the participants in this study. The coding procedures are described in detail and documents from the audit trail are presented so that the reader can follow the step-by-step procedure utilized in discovering the core phenomenon. A Model of Superintendents' Response to Ethical Dilemmas is presented, and the words of participants are used to support the grounded theory that emerged from the data. Chapter 5 expands on the rich, thick description of the relationships between categories discovered during data analysis and provides implications for practice and recommendations for further research.



## CHAPTER FOUR

### DATA ANALYSIS

*“Qualitative data are sexy. They are a source of well-grounded, rich descriptions and explanations of processes in identifiable local contexts” (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p.1).*

#### Introduction

This qualitative study examines South Carolina school district superintendents’ responses to ethical dilemmas experienced in the course of their professional career. Data analysis and the emergent grounded theory are presented in this chapter. Data were gathered through individual interviews, focus groups, archival evidence, and member checks. Strauss and Corbin’s (1990, 1998) structured procedures for data analysis -- open coding, axial coding, and selective coding -- were utilized to analyze the data and develop the grounded theory that is relevant and applicable to superintendents who are regularly faced with ethical dilemmas.

#### Participants

Twenty practicing non-interim South Carolina school district superintendents participated in an individual interview or a focus group for this study. Table 1 indicates that ten of the participants were male Caucasians, three were male African-Americans, five were female Caucasians, and two were female African-Americans. Half of the participants served districts with more than 4,500 students and half served districts with fewer than 4,500 students. The number of years in the field of education varied from 22 years up to 45 years, with a median of 30 years. The number of years as superintendent varied from one year up to 35 years, with a median of 5.5 years. The inconsistency in the median number of years experience and the median number of years experience as a

superintendent is not an anomaly. School superintendents typically work their way up through the educational system as teacher, assistant principal, and principal before moving into district level administration. Quite often they spend several more years at the district level before attaining their first superintendency.

<b>Demographic Information</b>			
<b>Ethnicity / Gender</b>		<b>Size of District (# Students)</b>	
Caucasian Male	10	9,499 +	4
African-Amer. Male	3	4,500 - 9,499	6
Caucasian Female	5	2,500 - 4,499	3
African-Amer. Female	2	850 – 2,499	7
<b># Years Experience in Education</b>		<b># of Years as a Superintendent</b>	
20-24	3	1-4	8
25-29	6	5-9	7
30-34	7	10-14	2
35-39	3	15-19	2
40-45	1	20-30	0
		30-35	1

Table 1: Demographic Information

### Interviews

The researcher interviewed eight school district superintendents individually and conducted two focus groups, one with five participants and one with seven participants. Individual interviews were conducted in April and May of 2009 and took place in the offices of the superintendents, with the exception of one that was conducted at the South Carolina Association of School Administrators’ (SCASA) headquarters. Focus Group 1 superintendents were also interviewed at SCASA and Focus Group 2 superintendents

were interviewed at one of South Carolina’s education consortium offices. The researcher prefaced the individual interviews by reading the interview script (see Appendix B) that provided the participants with the operational definition and an example of an ethical dilemma. The semi-structured interview protocol (see Appendix C) was then used to guide the interviews. Interviews were transcribed by the researcher after each interview session.

### Archival Evidence

Following the interviews, the researcher searched available databases for documents that would provide additional information about participants or about the ethical dilemmas described by participants. School district superintendents often use district websites to communicate their professional ethics and beliefs to the public. For example, one participant, whose ethical dilemma involved unethical staff members, posted a message on the website that included the statement, “We will maintain the highest ethical standards for all staff...” Newspaper accounts of high profile ethical dilemmas offered multiple perspectives of the events, and served to supplement participants’ descriptions. This archival evidence was coded in the same manner as interview data.

### Coding

#### *Open Coding*

The researcher coded the transcribed interviews and archival evidence as the data was gathered. A line-by-line analysis of the data was conducted, and the data were

broken apart and labeled. “By breaking down and conceptualizing we mean taking apart an observation, a sentence, a paragraph, and giving each discrete incident, idea, or event, a name, something that stands for or represents a phenomenon” (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 63). Subsequently, using the constant comparative method, incidents were compared within each case and across cases and similar phenomena were grouped together to form concepts. Using specific participants’ words to name the initial concepts was useful in helping “avoid researcher bias and the possibility of blending researcher meaning with that of the participants” (Scott & Howell, 2008, p. 6). Table 2 provides specific examples from this first phase of open coding.

During the next step of open coding, concepts were examined for shared meaning and characteristics. Concepts were grouped into categories and the categories were named, so they could then be developed analytically (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Strauss and Corbin suggested creativity in naming categories, but they also acknowledged that some of the names are likely to be borrowed from the professional literature. Table 3 shows the 61 initial codes and the six initial categories that were named.

<p>“Getting all of the facts” from “multiple sources”: On the horns of the dilemma</p>	<p>“I think the thing that’s important for me is that I take a step back, but I have to make sure that what I do is consistent because if I miss it for this one, someone’s eyes are watching.”</p>
	<p>“So there were a whole lot of things going on there, some of them emotional, some of them financial, some of them philosophical.”</p>
	<p>“I think you have to be very careful about getting all of the facts. And getting multiple sources. Even though you have very trusted cabinet level people that you may have known for many years, you still have to in your head go ‘let me think through this.’ And I always go backwards and forward, you know, if I make this decision what then? What are the consequences, and then play out each of those consequences. Now some of that can be done in 10 minutes, and sometimes it’s done in days, depending on how urgent it is.”</p>
<p>Taking “the temperature of the community”: Social context of the dilemma</p>	<p>“And it worked well for everybody but my little Bible Belt community.”</p>
	<p>“Folks who live in those communities would argue vehemently that whatever the deficiencies might have been in facilities and programs were far exceeded by other things that were going on in those communities, and that’s a valid argument.”</p>
	<p>“And you have to take the temperature of the community. You know this is what they’ve been doing for years and years and they wanted to continue. And some of those things you have to back off because of that.”</p>
<p>“A lot of pressure” in striving for “Kum Ba Yah”: Multiple sources of authority</p>	<p>“Every single board member said ‘fire those dumb shits...If you’re tough enough to do it, then we’ll stay with you.’ And we did a little Kum Ba Yah little deal.”</p>
	<p>“I don’t know how legal that is, but it is in policy.”</p>
	<p>“And they put a lot of pressure on me, first to hire him which I didn’t do. And then second to, you know, back off and let him try to win some money from the lawsuit which I wasn’t willing to do.”</p>

Table 2: Excerpt from Open Coding

Initial Categories		Initial Codes
Legitimacy	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1.</li> <li>2.</li> <li>3.</li> <li>4.</li> <li>5.</li> </ol>	<p>The moral fortitude of the district  Stepped back into protect the district mode  Consider the reputation of the district  What are people going to think?  Education will save you</p>
Source of Authority	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>6.</li> <li>7.</li> <li>8.</li> <li>9.</li> <li>10.</li> <li>11.</li> <li>12.</li> <li>13.</li> <li>14.</li> </ol>	<p>The board supported me  That's what the attorney said to do  Feedback from the public  What does the board policy say?  There was a state law on the books  They usurp the power of the superintendency  School Boards' Association did a workshop  Your community, your board, your politicians  It's what's best for kids</p>
Superintendents' Self-efficacy	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>15.</li> <li>16.</li> <li>17.</li> <li>18.</li> <li>19.</li> <li>20.</li> <li>21.</li> <li>22.</li> </ol>	<p>Sending a strong message...this is not tolerable  Doing what's right is inherent  Strong family values  Be true to myself  You go with your core value  Kept to my guns...I'm a tough broad  Stewardship responsibility / Missionary zeal  Retirees can be a little stronger</p>
Leadership: Taking the Dilemma by the Horns	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>23.</li> <li>24.</li> <li>25.</li> <li>26.</li> <li>27.</li> <li>28.</li> <li>29.</li> <li>30.</li> <li>31.</li> <li>32.</li> <li>33.</li> </ol>	<p>Gathering and digging  Analyzing the situation  Working through the legal part  Gauging support of board and community  Determining time frame  Taking a firm stance  Communicating and informing  Evaluation and self-reflection  Dealing w/public pushback and board waffling  Predicting outcome  Remaining objective</p>
Barriers	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>34.</li> <li>35.</li> <li>36.</li> <li>37.</li> <li>38.</li> <li>39.</li> <li>40.</li> </ol>	<p>Folks were doing some really irrational things  I was really close to her ... it was difficult for me  The public didn't know and I couldn't talk about it  I don't know what rumors are out there  Being a new superintendent  They wrote an editorial in favor of it  ...the SDE, the newspapers, prayer walks &amp; vigils</p>

Initial Categories	Initial Codes
	41. You select fights...based on the war you're in 42. Scripted...pisses off the media 43. The public would want him saved 44. In this town nobody really thought it was that bad 45. There was that understanding pact between them 46. A lot of things can be done by the local delegation
Outcomes	47. It did strengthen my faith 48. They understand the culture & what's expected 49. It's a learning opportunity 50. It turned out to be win-win 51. Shifted their focus...it helped heal a little bit 52. The headhunters started calling immediately 53. There's no personal or professional downside 54. I have learned some lessons 55. You can be right and still get in trouble 56. I think I gave a little bit on this 57. I did something I didn't feel like I should have 58. Had a complete turnover in staff 59. I lost some friends over it 60. They hate me and they always will 61. It impacts your family and all your friends

Table 3: Initial Codes and Categories from Open Coding

### *Axial Coding*

Axial coding, the process of rebuilding the data broken apart during open coding, was conducted to identify subcategories (see Table 4) and to examine cause and effect relationships between categories and subcategories. This examination led to the identification of the core phenomenon, the category that has the greatest explanatory power for the data. The categories and subcategories were evaluated in terms of their relationship to the core phenomenon and placed into the paradigm model (see Figure 2), called the frame of generic relationships (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

<b>Categories</b>	<b>Subcategory</b>	<b>Code</b>
Legitimacy	Outside-In Inside-Out	The moral fortitude of the district Stepped back into the protect the district mode Consider the reputation of the district What are people going to think? Education will save you
Sources of Authority	Legal Professional Stakeholders	There was a state law on the books That's what the attorney said to do What does the board policy say? The board supported me School Board's Association did a workshop They usurp the power of the superintendency Your community, your board, your politicians Feedback from the public
Self-Efficacy	Professional Duty Personal Values Experience	Doing what's best for the district and for students Sending a strong message ... this is not tolerable Stewardship / responsibility / Missionary zeal Doing what's right is inherent Strong family values Be true to myself You go with your core value Kept to my guns ... I'm a tough broad Retirees can take more risks
Leading	Sense-making Positioning Follow through Communicating Resilience	Gathering and digging Analyzing the situation Determining time frame Predicting outcomes Remaining objective Working through the legal part Gauging support of board and community Consulting Taking a firm stance Communicating and informing Evaluation and self-reflection Dealing w/public pushback and board waffling

Table 4: Axial Coding: Subcategories Identified



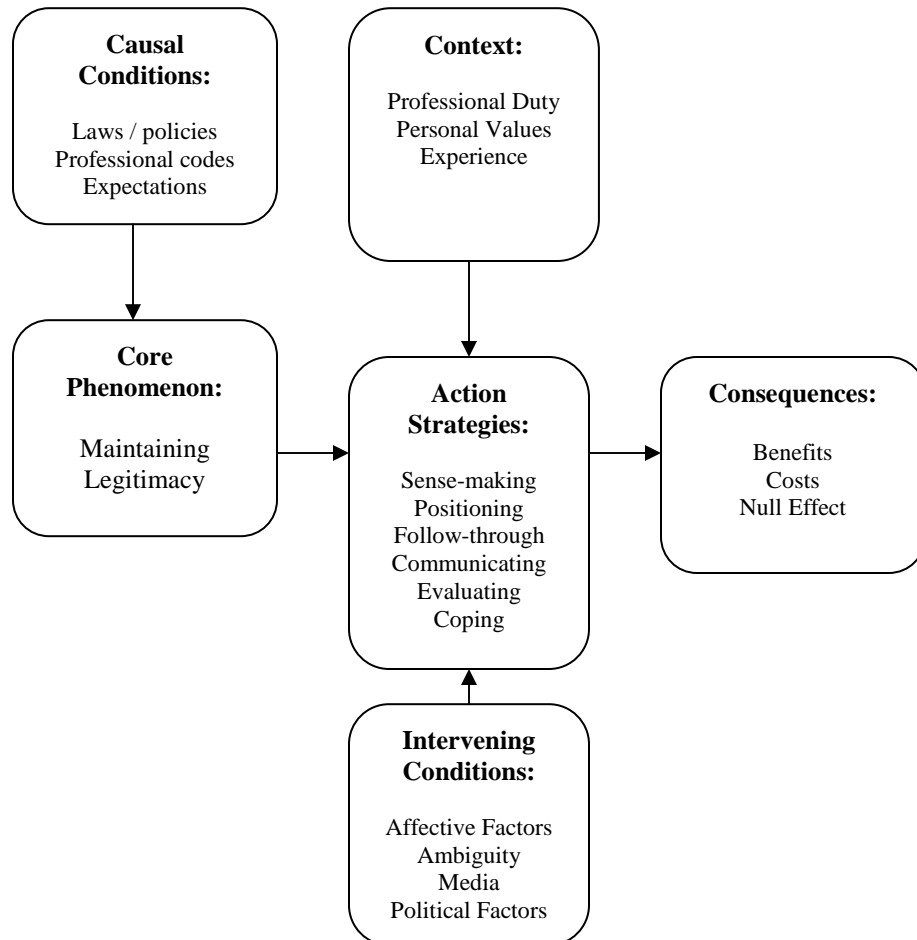


Figure 2: Axial Coding: Frame of Generic Relationships

Figure 2 identifies the core phenomenon as *Maintaining Legitimacy*. The causal conditions which lead to the need for *Maintaining Legitimacy* are breaches in *Laws/Policies*, *Professional Codes*, or *Expectations*. The action strategies that result from the efforts to *Maintain Legitimacy* are *Sense-making*, *Positioning*, *Follow-through*, *Communicating*, *Evaluating*, and *Coping*. The contextual conditions of the action strategies include superintendents' *Professional Duty*, their *Personal Values*, and their *Experience*, and the intervening conditions are *Affective Factors*, *Ambiguity*, *Media*, and

*Political Factors*. Consequences or outcomes of the action strategies taken to *Maintain Legitimacy* are *Benefits*, *Costs* and *Null Effect*.

### *Selective Coding*

Selective coding, the final phase of coding, was conducted to further explicate the core phenomenon through the integration of all of the categories (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, 1998). Data was used to validate the relationships, and the theoretical model, *Superintendents' Response to Ethical Dilemmas* (see Figure 3), was developed.

### Member Check

A member check letter (see Appendix F), a brief questionnaire (see Appendix G), a one-page narrative summary of the theoretical model (see Appendix G), and the visual model were emailed to all participants. Each participant was asked to rate the effectiveness of the model in representing the way that he or she responds to ethical dilemmas. Participants were asked to provide further comments and suggestions for improvement of the model. After sending the email, the researcher followed up with fifteen of the participants by meeting briefly with each individually. One of the participants asked that the model be further explained. Seventeen of the participants subsequently completed the questionnaire and returned it to the researcher. Ten checked “Strongly Agree” and seven checked “Agree” in rating the model.

One participant offered feedback to the statement “If there is any information you feel has been omitted from or that is inaccurate, please share.” He wrote,

“Sometimes regarding personnel, you/I might have to make a decision based on factors not easily measured – just not working out – feel something’s just not right.”

When asked if they had any additional comments about the research, the findings, or the conclusions, the following comments were written:

1. With the media today, ethics and behavior are open to review, discussion even more than before.
2. I think the research validates some common beliefs about one of the most difficult responsibilities of a superintendent. A superintendent is often asked to make difficult decisions with information that is only at his/her disposal. These decisions are usually not popular and challenge a superintendent’s ethical beliefs and behavior.
3. The topic is really interesting and I look forward to reading the final product.
4. An excellent model.
5. As a first year superintendent, this model accurately articulated my decision-making process in ethical dilemmas I faced.
6. The description is clean and accurate.
7. The model does reflect the many areas that a superintendent faces when dealing with ethical dilemmas. I fear that any decisions made quickly due to lack of staff and time in small districts when many people wear so many hats. The model presented would be an avenue to put more thought into decisions of any type.

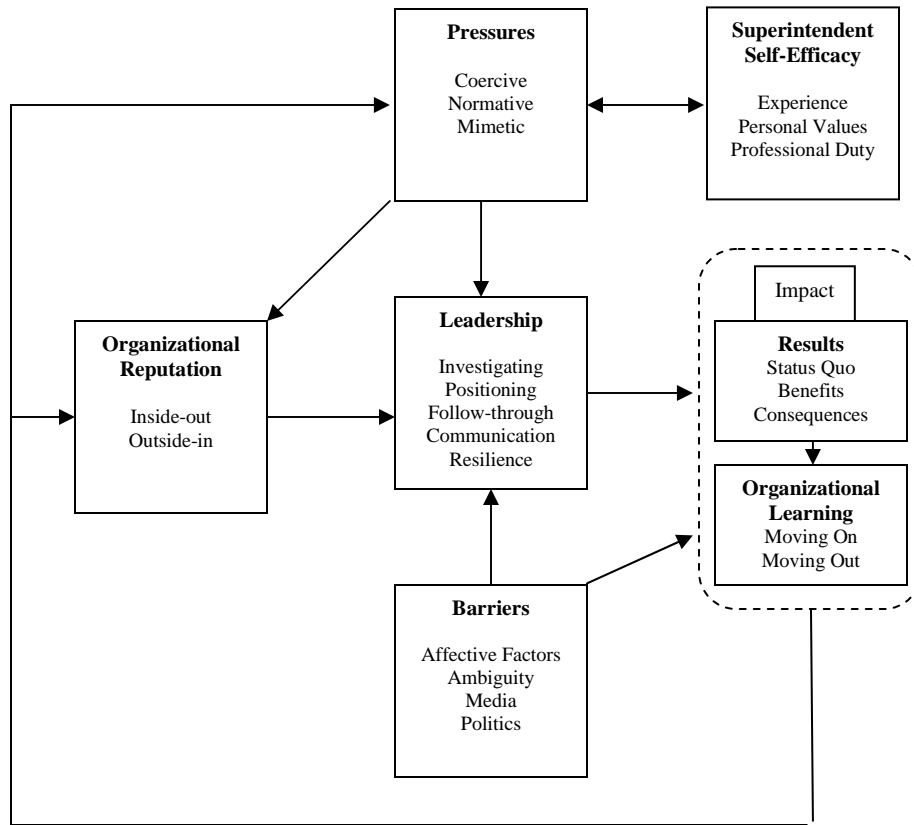


Figure 3: Model of School Superintendents' Response to Ethical Dilemmas

School Superintendents' Response to Ethical Dilemmas: A Theoretical Model

Figure 3, *Superintendents' Response to Ethical Dilemmas*, visually depicts the cycle of South Carolina school superintendents' decision-making when they become aware of ethical dilemmas. This cycle of decision-making begins when a superintendent judges an event or situation to be in opposition to one of the **Pressures** that affect the **Organizational Reputation**, and the event or situation involves conflicting values or principles. The challenge for the superintendent is to navigate through the ethical dilemma in such a way as to reach a satisfactory conclusion and to maintain the legitimacy of the school district.

## Pressures

Public schools must be perceived as credible and trustworthy in order to garner support from citizens (Marion, 2002). Public schools achieve legitimacy through various *Pressures* that have, over time, molded the institution into a largely standardized organization. *Coercive, Mimetic, and Normative Pressures* (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983) establish the rules, norms, and expectations for organizations. Participants in this study talked about *Pressures* that either spurred them into action or constrained them from acting when they experienced ethical dilemmas.

### *Coercive Pressures*

*Coercive pressures* include federal and state laws and school board policies. Many of the participants talked about ethical dilemmas that materialize when employees or board members break the law. Dan spoke about an ethical dilemma he experienced when board policy in his current district did not provide support for the decision he believed he should make when a teacher was arrested for driving under the influence (DUI):

And our policy says that if it's a misdemeanor typically what we do. Uh, well we don't do anything generally. Now that hadn't been my leadership style in the past...In this particular case it was the teacher's second DUI, and of course it had been over a 10-year period since the last one. So that kind of put me in a quandary, ah, trying to decide what kind of precedent I was going to set for myself dealing with an incident like this. So, second DUI with the teacher. Well-loved teacher here in the school district.

Freddy, who had three teachers arrested for DUI during spring break one year, talked about constraints to taking action due to the lack of attention given DUI arrests by the State Board of Education and because of the inner workings of the legal system:

I called, reported it to state board, and they don't even address it because they have so many. But the problem is arrested, not convicted. But almost every person, including these ladies and others, they get it dropped on a lesser charge – reckless driving. Some of the charges are dropped altogether. Knowing that...I don't know that I've had any that really had a conviction.

Becky experienced an ethical dilemma no other superintendent reported. The chairman of the Board of Trustees asked for her assistance in keeping his transgression a secret.

The chairman of the Board of Trustees who had actually been on this particular board for over twenty years came to visit with me to share with me that he was meeting with his attorney because he was fixing to be indicted by the state attorney general for income tax evasion. In addition to being completely shocked I got the particulars of it. He actually wanted to know what I could do to help him, was there any way to keep it out of the paper...So he was also wanting to know that if he got indicted was there any way we could keep his wife from knowing.

Becky wrote the board chairman's letter of resignation and demanded he sign it, amid his predictions that he would prevail in court. She told the chairman, "We are at that point I don't care if you beat this. You will resign from the board..." After going through the legal process, the chairman's offense was ruled a misdemeanor for which he served no time. He was reelected to the school board during the next regular election.

*Coercive Pressures* can serve as a license for decision-making or an impediment to decision-making as evidenced in these superintendents' stories. *Coercive Pressures* and *Mimetic Pressures* often coincide, resulting in ethical dilemmas for superintendents.

### *Mimetic Pressures*

When school superintendents become aware of inequity in district programs or facilities, they are pressured to create equal opportunities for all students. *Mimetic*

*Pressures* may come from stakeholders, the Board of Trustees, or from the core values of the superintendent.

Danny recognized inequity in his district that had three high schools, two of which were small and had fewer course offerings and facilities unequal to the one large high school in the district. He shared, “We had our own corridor of shame in terms of facilities, in terms of programs.” His ethical dilemma was whether to bring the two smaller schools up to standard or to consolidate the three schools into one. He faced two seemingly insurmountable issues, however. One issue was a state law pertaining exclusively to his district, enacted by local legislation. “...[T]he law said no school or no schools in [the county] could be consolidated without the unanimous consent of the Board of Trustees.” The other issue involved two small communities polarized against the larger community within the county and a Board of Trustees with representation from all three communities. Danny described the situation:

And so there was never a meeting for, God knows how many years, where there was not **at least one** of the trustees from [small community 1] or [small community 2] at the regularly called board meeting or even a special called meeting because they could have voted and had unanimous consent with a quorum there. So, you never had a meeting where at least one of those wasn't there to say no. And there was that understanding pact between them.

Danny's core values and professional duty to all students of his district drove him to find a way to make the programs and facilities equal. The solution was found in getting the state law changed, but that was a political quagmire for lawmakers who were willing to support Danny's efforts. Acting to advance the *Organization's Reputation* by correcting inequities had far-reaching consequences for all those who took the necessary steps to surmount the seemingly insurmountable obstacles, but the students now attend a consolidated high school.

*Mimetic Pressures* occur when school superintendents become aware that students are not being afforded equal opportunities. Sometimes *Mimetic Pressures* conflict with *Normative Pressures*, creating complex ethical dilemmas for superintendents.

### *Normative Pressures*

‘The way we do things around here’ is a phrase which portrays organizational norms. School superintendents who move into new communities often find themselves at odds with accepted practices that may conflict with their personal values or professional duties. Superintendents who wish to make program changes or introduce new programs to enhance the *Organizational Reputation* may face opposition from various stakeholders, because the changes interfere with business as usual or the changes are perceived as violating established norms.

Maggie experienced a challenging ethical dilemma within the first two months of her first superintendency. Her small, rural district was poised to participate in a multi-district grant that would allow her students to have opportunities like students in neighboring districts. She painstakingly recalled:

But we had a chance to be involved in an abstinence grant program. And it worked well for everybody but my little Bible Belt community. Uh, we sent out the permission form to the parents for the survey and based on the results of that, you know, we were supposed to have a wonderful opportunity to have counselors, school-based counselors, you know, cause we don’t have money for anything like that. Took the survey. Parents were livid over some of the questions. And it had been reviewed and studied prior to it. Well, they went to the State Department of Education, to the newspapers, had prayer walks, prayer vigils. It was just the biggest mess...



Bill related an ethical dilemma he experienced when he became superintendent in a district where Gideon Bibles were distributed annually to all fifth graders:

When we talk about separation of church and state and we get into a lot of religious issues, then it becomes a tremendous challenge. As a first year superintendent I was faced with a tradition as a district that there were Gideon Bibles given to all fifth grade students, and how were we going to handle that. And I had just never been in that situation where that was happening...But a group is coming in and doing that, and so a part of me feels like it's inappropriate because, of course, if I was to open it up to one organization then I'm opening it to anybody else. And I was a little bit surprised at the support it received in the community...

Lynn described an established practice wherein a local minister "who is a good school supporter" spoke at student recognition assembly programs. She attended one of these programs during her first year as superintendent and found, "...he was clearly crossing the line with separation between state and church, but with good intentions, but was clearly crossing the line."

Albert's ethical dilemma occurred when the principal of one of his schools asked to have a prayer vigil on campus at 7:00 a.m. on the morning following "the death of a faculty member which was, who was very, very, very prominent in the community."

Speaking with a reverent tone, he shared:

And there's no doubt you're really infringing on the Constitution and separation of church and state. But in the Bible Belt I felt like, you know, this is what was best for the staff, for that community, and it didn't involve students. Even though they're doing it on that school property I know you really shouldn't do that. And I felt like that's one of those in which ethics versus belief. And I think that's what it was like in this case in which you know you're on shaky ground but then you have to let your personal beliefs come into play.

In summary, *Coercive*, *Mimetic*, and *Normative Pressures* are the vehicles through which organizations achieve legitimacy and the public trust. These **Pressures** provide fertile ground in which ethical dilemmas take root. School superintendents'

decision-making may be helped or it may be hindered by laws, norms, and expectations as they respond to issues that involve conflicts in values and principles. While these *Pressures* influence superintendents' decision-making, their experience, their *Personal Values* and their commitment to their *Professional Duties* influence the *Pressures*.

### Superintendent Self-Efficacy

Bandura's (1993) self-efficacy theory explains how people's belief in their capacity to exercise control over their functioning and over events that affect their lives is a key factor in determining their level of performance. "Efficacy beliefs influence how people feel, think, motivate themselves, and behave" (p. 118). Participants in this study were self-efficacious leaders who were guided by their belief that they could have influence over the *Pressures* that often threaten their *Organization's Reputation* in order to achieve a positive outcome for the benefit of the students and staff. Some participants were able to draw strength from their accumulated *Experiences*, and some felt vulnerable by the lack of *Experience*. When self-doubt entered their minds, they turned to their support system for guidance and reassurance.

### *Experience*

Tom believed his years of *Experience* and his retired status were valuable in helping him overcome *Normative Pressure* from a board member "who asked me to put a letter of reprimand in a teacher's personnel file based on his comments with a student about an episode that happened with another student." He used a direct approach with the board member, telling her she was "out of her role." He brought it up at the next

board meeting and told all members that their role is not to be involved in personnel matters. Tom said, “So as a superintendent that’s pretty difficult to look across the table and tell your board members that they don’t tell you to put a letter in a personnel file.”

Tom attributes his *Self Efficacy* to his years of *Experience* in district administration and to his status of being a working, retired superintendent:

I think having been in education for 32 years now, and for being at the district level for over 20 years...I think all of those things have given me a level of experience to deal with some of these things that a younger superintendent or less experienced superintendent may have not dealt with it the same way. I also think that the key thing for me is I’m retired. I’m doing this, and being a retired person already puts you in a situation where I think you can be a little stronger than maybe a younger superintendent. Or somebody who is a little median in terms of job may have approached it a bit differently. It would have been hard to take the stand that I took for some superintendents.

When Tommy’s high-profile ethical dilemma occurred in the urban district she led, her 25 years total *Experience* -- four as superintendent -- served her well. The urban district, located in another state, was so large that it had its own police department. The police chief and his staff were district employees. Tommy had to fire the longstanding police chief because of corruption. The situation became ugly when the police chief made false allegations against her and sides were taken. She recalled, “So, you know, people who have known me for 25 years in that town, it was just like they’d call and say ‘hang in there girl, you’re gonna be fine.’ The business men and women were great.” In a press conference, as reported by the [city newspaper], Tommy stated, “To move a district forward, you have to make decisions not everyone will support...In a district like this, looking back 25 years, there has always been a controversy and there always will be.” Tommy’s *Experience* contributes to her *Self-Efficacy*, and she offered this advice for influencing *Normative Pressures*:

You have to know your climate. Your community, your employees, your politicians – it could be not a board member but a mayor. So you really need to know the players' customs and traditions. You may change something you think that is just so minor and everything blows up...So if you are new to a town, you need to spend a lot of time getting trusted people to tell you, you know, what is vital and important that you need to know about.

When asked if she thought years of *Experience* has anything to do with how superintendents handle ethical dilemmas, Ariel thought for a moment, then said:

Well, I think that's a 2-part question because years of experience you learn of course basically what to do and what not to do in handling situations, but making a final decision about what is right or ethically correct is inherent and is within the person. So, if you're a new superintendent or if you are a superintendent of thirty or more years, doing what is right should be the same - regardless of whether you're novice or veteran. But just the process of maybe making a snap decision of whether you're going to fire the person or what the consequences would be would probably change with experience. But bottom line in saying and doing what's right, I believe is inherent.

Ariel's *Experience* and her *Personal Values* were evident in her response. *Personal Values* were mentioned frequently by participants in the discussions about ethical dilemmas.

### *Personal Values*

Begley (1999) defines values as “conceptions of the desirable which motivate individuals and collective groups to act in particular ways to achieve particular ends.” Personal values are the ethical or moral standards that govern one's work and define a leaders' character, particularly during turbulent times (Patterson, Goens, & Reed, 2008). Self-efficacious superintendents are clear when it comes to the importance of their values.

Margaret and Meg spoke about their *Personal Values*, but they acknowledged the fact that they serve in postmodern society characterized by pluralism and diversity.

Margaret stated, “I have to remember that not everybody’s values and morals are the same as mine. So the first thing that I do is separate myself...” Meg chuckled, perhaps thinking ‘easier said than done,’ when she stated:

So, often I **try** to make sure that my personal views, you know what I believe personally, whether it be ethically, morally, based on religion, whatever, that I make sure I **try** to separate that from the bigger picture of superintendent of the school district. And, and it does depend on your district.

Danny spoke passionately regarding his *Personal Value* that every child in his district as well as every child in the state deserves equal educational opportunity. His *Self-Efficacy* led him to challenge *Coercive Pressures* in order to get the law that prohibited consolidation in his district repealed. He described his dilemma in vivid detail:

The dilemma for me was, are you gonna to treat kids differently in the same cotton-pickin’ town? Now, I don’t have a problem with choice and treating kids differently, uh when, when they’re choosing between and among quality programs...I have a problem with, I have a problem with all children in South Carolina not having access to safe, quality facilities and curriculum that prepares them for the world they’re going to go in. And I happen to live in a part of the state that values that and uh has quite frankly made a lot of sacrifices over time, paid for it. And they’re folks in other parts of the state that, because of decisions made by leaders decades ago, uh the folks today aren’t able to enjoy many of the benefits that kids here do. I just don’t think that, uh, a kid ought to have to, uh, settle for less than because of his geography. Uh, which presents a whole different set of ethical dilemmas for you. Rob to the rich and give to the poor? Give it to, uh, again people who made sacrifices a long time ago, anted up and did what they could do and as a result they’re where they are versus other people who made different kinds of decisions? People who say they’ve made their bed and lay in it, and all that’s true for adults. My, my dilemma is **kids don’t get to choose where they lay**. It’s that simple.

Jack also emphasized his *Personal Values* related to educating young people, no matter where they are from. He went on to state that the entire organization must share these values:

What we do is really important. I mean we have a stewardship responsibility to children in this community to see to it that these kids get a great education. Have it small or rural or poor or rich or whatever - it doesn't matter, but you have an obligation to these kids to try to make their life better. In many, many cases we are the only vehicle that they have in their life, and if we don't do our job well, they have no hope. And I take that seriously, and that, that means you have to have employees that agree with that.

*Personal Values* were an inherent part of participants' being. Closely related to those values were beliefs about their job performance and the performance of their employees. This dimension of the *Superintendents' Self Efficacy* category was called *Professional Duty*.

#### *Professional Duty*

Shapiro and Stefkovich (2001) defined the *ethic of the profession*, in their "Multiple Ethical Paradigm" as a consideration for what is in the best interest of students. Participants often referred to this ethic as their basis for decision-making and their motivation for challenging the *Pressures* that sometime constrain their decision-making.

Max, in his first two months as superintendent of a small school district, decided not to rehire the head football coach. The *Normative Pressures* from the community were to keep things status quo. He faced those pressures down because of his *Professional Duty* to the students.

However, I was going on the fact that whatever decision I made was going to be in the best interest of kids, of students. And winning wasn't everything but I want to be honest, it had to be a part of the decision. A real part of the decision, but also the individual's lack of interaction and professionalism with the students was a big part of that decision. But were there consequences? Sure.

Alex defined his Professional Duty as doing for others what he would have done for his own child. He knocked on the table for emphasis when he firmly stated:

If I wouldn't want you dealing with my child, nobody else should have you dealing with their child. So if I'm dealing with dismissing a teacher for some reason, I go back to, you know, can I live with this, can I live with the fact that this person can be responsible for children?

Jack stated similarly, "Your job is to take care of these kids. How would you want your children, your own kids handled? Would you put them in that classroom or in that building?"

Establishing high expectations and being role models were two other *Professional Duties* that participants mentioned. Becky said, "I have high expectations for our teachers, for our leadership here. My expectations are no different for the board." After firing the principal and the teaching assistant, everyone knew Alex's "number one rule – don't lie." Dan emphasized *Professional Duty* when he met with the teacher who had the second DUI and told him, "Because you know, as a teacher these parents hold you to a higher expectation, we do, these children do." Fred stated similarly, "'Cause we are models for our kids and models for the community, and that's a hard thing."

*Self-efficacious superintendents*, relying upon their *Experience*, their *Personal Values*, and their commitment to *Professional Duty* are challenged but undaunted by the *Pressures* that surround ethical dilemmas. They take the proverbial 'horns of the dilemma' and work through the *Pressures*, striving to respond in a way that maintains the *Organizational Reputation*.

### The Core Phenomenon: Organizational Reputation

Ethical dilemmas often arise when employees of school districts violate laws or professional codes of behavior. Ethical dilemmas also occur when there are inequities in educational programming, resulting in missed opportunities for students. When these situations come to light, the ***Organizational Reputation*** may be compromised. Self-efficacious school superintendents skillfully lead the way when ethical dilemmas occur, committed to achieving a positive outcome and maintaining the ***Organizational Reputation***.

#### *Inside-Out*

School superintendents are charged with establishing and maintaining an ethical climate. When ethical dilemmas occur it is important that the internal stakeholders have confidence in the organization via the decisions made by the leader of the organization.

Jack became superintendent in a district that he described as being in “desperate shape” from experiencing a lack of ethical leadership from district leaders, including previous superintendents. He said, “Uh, they are all accident victims. They are all, they are all in the ER around here.” He gave board members his word that he would “look out after your school district and your kids.” After the dismissal of an unethical superintendent, several central office administrators were continuing to contribute to the tainted ethical environment, which Jack called a “rat’s nest.” Jack explained:

There are staff members at the central office who thrive in this chaos environment. That’s all they know and they like it, because this, this person [former superintendent] can’t make decisions ‘cause they are completely compromised. Don’t know anything, and they’re in and out like a, like a bed sheet in the Hampton Inn along the highway. And so they take advantage of the situation. They are in a position where they know more than the superintendent,



have more power, connection, uh and, they usurp the power of the superintendency. Absolutely filled in the void.

Ariel had a dilemma with administrators as well, when one administrator accused another administrator of sexual harassment. She said, "...Sexual harassment is always a sticky topic when we talk about the moral fortitude of the district and trying to protect the victims." Interestingly, Becky also used the term "protect" in describing her role when handling the dilemma of the rogue board chairman. "I felt like I did a very good job of protecting the district. I didn't think twice."

Margaret had an internal issue that created a huge ethical dilemma for her. In the employment of a principal, she said another candidate was discriminated against. She recalled:

I knew that the person was discriminated against. I knew that. And I knew that the person would file a suit if they didn't get the job and that actually happened. So I'm called as a witness and I have to make the decision - am I going to support the district or am I going to do the right thing and say well, you know, we did an injustice? It was a case of discrimination. So, that was a **big** dilemma. I supported the candidate.

Employees look to the school superintendent for consistency in decision-making, and most of them appreciate superintendents who have the courage to take a firm stance when facing adversity. Tom summed it up when he shared:

I think the thing that gets superintendents in trouble more is when they're viewed as making inconsistent decisions. The other thing I've found that gets superintendents in problems with decision-making, especially the ethical type, is lack of making a decision. When people view you as wishy-washy and, you know. So I think, I don't have trouble making decisions and I think that has helped. And I've had people tell me, 'I don't agree with you but at least you made a decision.'

### *Outside-In*

School superintendents strive to preserve the *Organizational Reputation* in order to keep the public trust, which is of utmost importance when serving the most vulnerable citizens – children. Becky, striving to maintain her district’s reputation, said, “I had to consider the reputation of this school district. I had worked so very hard to make sure we had no impropriety anywhere, which was a clean-up job for me when I got here.”

Dan’s district was in recovery from one teacher arrest when his ethical dilemma, the teacher arrested for DUI, occurred. His tone revealed his frustration:

Like I said we had just had a teacher arrested that was all over the news. And what would it have done to the district had another teacher been on the news? That wouldn’t have been good either. ‘Cause it’s been a good, quiet, quiet three and a half years in this district. And I didn’t want people thinking all of a sudden ‘Lord, they just got all kind of junk going on over there.’

When the *Organizational Reputation* is threatened, it impacts the actions of the school superintendent. Superintendents are well aware of the gravity of their actions when they become aware of ethical dilemmas. The task of protecting and preserving the *Organizational Reputation* from the *Inside-Out* and the *Outside-In* requires *Leadership*.

### Leadership

School superintendents, as chief executive officers of school districts, recognize the magnitude of their influence. They know that when an ethical dilemma occurs their actions will be subject to scrutiny. Participants in this study talked about the actions they took and barriers they faced in making decisions during troubling -- sometimes turbulent -- events.

### *Investigating*

All of the participants were involved in investigating prior to making a decision about the ethical dilemma they experienced. Most of them worked closely with legal counsel every step of the way due to possible legal ramifications. They had to gather information from multiple sources and check their sources for veracity.

Within six months of being hired as superintendent, Alex had to terminate a principal and a teacher assistant at one of his schools for colluding to make a false Family Medical Leave Act (FMLA) claim. Alex questioned the principal and then let her know that he would be checking her story. “And when I told her that I was going to check up on it is when she wanted to come clean with me.” Alex has learned from his many ethical dilemmas “that people are capable of just about anything.” When he is investigating personnel matters, he lets employees know his expectations up front:

And I tell people when I bring them in here, if it’s a teacher, if it’s – whenever I’m having to deal with a personnel issue I tell them up front. I can deal with a lot of stuff, I said, but I do investigate thoroughly. I spend a lot of time on it. I said if I find out you have lied to me about any part of this, I won’t have you working for me, I said, because I won’t be able to trust you.

When Becky’s board chairman asked her to help him keep his tax evasion charge a secret, her investigation led to a surprising discovery. “[W]hat I found out was that five years earlier the board chairman had done the exact same thing.” Some investigations reveal absolutely nothing, as in Reynolds’s dilemma.

Reynolds, in his 18<sup>th</sup> year as superintendent, was clearly upset at the ethical dilemma he was investigating. With a tone of frustration and empathy, he said:

My situation is a veteran teacher, thirty plus years, who has been accused and had a warrant signed by a parent – assault and battery on a fourth grade child. You know if I ranked all my teachers from top to bottom she would be one of those least likely. And I had to put her on administrative leave...And there’s

**absolutely no evidence**, other than this kid, that she did it. But I also can't - (His voice trailed off, then he continued.) I found myself in this process trying to be her defense attorney, in trying to come up with an alternate theory...So nothing supports it but nothing disproves it.

Investigations are sometimes inconclusive, and superintendents must make decisions without all the facts.

Ariel had a similar experience with the sexual harassment allegation, because it was "one person's word against the other." The district's attorney recommended allowing the alleged perpetrator to come back with a strong letter of reprimand. Ariel stood firm in her belief that the person should remain on leave the rest of the year. She recalled, "That resolution was not so clear cut for me because upon the investigation it was clearly the opinion – **my opinion** – that the alleged person did cross the line."

As participants investigated and formed their own conclusions about what their course of action should be, they began to position themselves in order to gain support for their decision. School superintendents work at the pleasure of the board and their work is guided by the *Pressures* addressed previously, so *Positioning* for support of decisions in response to ethical dilemmas is a critical dimension of *Leadership*.

### *Positioning*

Jack was *Positioning* himself to clean up the "rat's nest" in the district he was serving. He presented the evidence he had gathered during his *Investigation* to the school board, and then outlined three options for responding. He said to board members:

What do you want me to do? It's your district. And do you know what they said? Every single board member said, 'Fire those dumb shits. Fire 'em. We've never had a superintendent who could stand up and do it. We've known these were problem people for a lot of reasons. Everybody knows they're a problem. We'll stand with you. If you're tough enough to do it, then we'll stay with you.' And

we did a little Kum Ba Yah little deal. I said, here's the deal – every one of them's got friends and connections. They're all related to somebody, most of them are career people. And there's gonna be talk back to you about me. And if you don't stick up for me, I'm not doing this. They're your employees, I don't care. But I'll take care of them, but I expect your support no matter who calls you or what the circumstances are. Everybody agree to that? Uh, we came out of that meeting the most tight superintendent-board thing that I probably have had in 20 years.

Jack fired four district office staff members the next morning. He admitted that his actions may not be defensible if challenged in a court of law: "...I have to stay within the law. Not everything you do is inside the law. When I said to that guy I'm going to fire you or you're quitting, that was probably not legal." Jack positioned himself so that the board made the final decision, and he trusted that they would back him up.

Bill explained *Positioning* for making a decision very well:

And one of the things I do with my board members, I try to tell them I don't need them to make a decision for me. But a lot of times I - an old phrase - I try to run it up the flagpole and see. I try to gauge where they're going to stand. Because I do not want them overturning me in public meetings. I do not want us going out making real controversial, tough decisions and then have those things overruled.

Superintendents regularly call on their peers during ethical dilemmas to get a different perspective and to seek guidance for their response. This helps them establish the position they are going to take. Albert explained:

I talk to a couple of superintendents that I call on a regular basis. And I try to voice out what I'm thinking, and I put it out there so that someone else hears what I'm thinking aloud. It's important for me to get that out. Then I want to hear what their response is. And sometimes I ask them, here's the situation, how would you handle it. Has this happened to you before? And if it hasn't happened to you, do you know someone else that it has happened to? And when they made that decision what was the fallout? So I try to get as much information as possible, share, then actually vent what I'm thinking and then maybe go back and make the best decision.

Maggie, dealing with the public outcry against the survey administered as a part of the abstinence program grant, called her mentor for advice. “So I called my mentor and just kind of, of course they knew about it, and [the mentor] said ‘pull out of the grant right now and call your attorney.’ Which is what I did.”

Danny used his network of peers to gain advice on consolidation of schools. He stated, “I talked to everybody who had been superintendent in [name of county] before...I talked to superintendents from other parts of the state, particularly those who had had some experience with consolidation or deconsolidation.”

Many of the participants mentioned the importance of speaking with community members when a decision will have an impact outside the walls of the school. Joe probably summed it up best when he said:

And you have to take the temperature of the community. You know this is what they've been doing for years and years and they wanted to continue. And some of those things you have to back off because of that...It's easy to crawl out there on that limb and say you're going to do this, this, and this and this. But you better look back and see who's holding the saw. Because people can let you go out there but they're up there sawing. So, you have to find out if you're going to be by yourself.

*Positioning* for action is an important part of the decision-making process for school superintendents. Gaining the support of board members, checking legal guidelines, consulting with trusted peers, and gauging community support are all ways that superintendents prepare to *Follow-through* with their decision.

### *Follow-through*

Following through with the selected course of action in response to ethical dilemmas takes courage. School superintendents know that many of their decisions are

not going to be met with favor from all stakeholders. Self-efficacious superintendents use their *Leadership* skills to work through the *Pressures* and the *Barriers* that come into play when tough decisions must be carried out.

Sometimes superintendents do not get support for what they believe should be done. They have to decide if they will act on their own or if they will compromise their personal values and beliefs. David told about his personal struggle:

I inherited a staff member who has a reputation as being a womanizer. Uh, he was hired politically. He's served under six superintendents and everything has been the same all the way through. Uh, and I guess my personal expectations would have been that somebody in the past would have got rid of him but because he has been through it so long it's very hard, and he has a lot of community support. So I do have to twist my own values a little bit to continue sometimes. Because sometimes you select fights, uhm, that are worth fighting based on the war you're in.

Two of Fred's board members turned against him when he did not hire one of their family members as principal. Legal proceedings ensued, and Fred was caught in the middle. He shared his recollection of how the events unfolded:

I had a gentleman apply for a job as principal in our district. He had previously been removed from that district, from that position. And we went through the interview process, hired a black female for the job. She was the most qualified. He sued the school district. Well, his best friend and his first cousin were on my board. And they put a lot of pressure on me, first, to hire him which I didn't do. And then, second to, you know, back off and let him try to win some money from the lawsuit which I wasn't willing to do. We went through months of this and the school district was spending a lot of money. And we finally got around to the fact that there was a settlement offer. And I had board members and their attorney, ah, in front of audiences calling me a liar and just making up all sorts of stories. And we had an opportunity to end it. And, man I fought hard... And I felt very fortunate that, even though I had to take a week off from my next job, because it went on for so long, that we did in fact prevail.

As school superintendents decide on a course of action and the necessary steps to *Follow-through* with their decisions, they must be skillful in *Communicating* with

their various stakeholders. Superintendents consider the context of the ethical dilemma in order to determine who to inform, who not to inform, and how much information should be released.

### *Communicating*

Ariel says she has learned an important lesson in her three years as superintendent of a small, rural district. She said,

Wow! I have learned some lessons. And I guess the lessons I've learned in my three years of sitting in that office is, uh, not to share so much information. When, cause I can recall when I began, I just thought that communication was the key to everything to solve problems.

She chose to inform only the board chairman about the sexual harassment allegations, due to the sensitive nature of the problem. Communication is constrained in the handling of personnel issues, and this is a *Barrier* that will be discussed in more detail later.

Ethical dilemmas that are played out in the media must be handled very carefully. Tommy called a press conference to defend her decision to fire the district's corrupt police chief, which worked to her advantage. She was very lively in describing how she handled this high profile event through media coverage:

Uh, but the most important thing was beating him to the punch with the newspapers. Having that press conference and being very strong and saying 'I will not be bullied.' Obviously you know this man has done some things that are not appropriate and not legal. So, **yeah**.

She talked about the need to be very careful with every word, scripting and practicing what she was going to say during press conferences. When Tommy retired from that district and became superintendent of a district in South Carolina, she was interviewed



by [news channel]. Her comments about the past events sum up the difficulty in *Communicating* about personnel issues. “I understand the facts and I know why decisions are made, and if folks could see all the information, which you really can’t in most personnel situations, you just have to trust that someone made the right decision.”

Alex spoke about how his communication style complicated the matter he was dealing with. Before holding a meeting with the faculty to share the news that the principal and teacher assistant would not be coming back, his attorney had told him to be very careful about “what you say and how you say it.” Alex said:

And when I went in, uhm - I think I came across really cold...I think they wanted more, they wanted to see me react more to it and be more emotional to it and I wasn’t. I was very cold. I guess in the way I delivered the information it was pretty much matter of fact.

As he looks back now, he wishes he had handled it differently, using more of a caring approach when *Communicating*. Alex and other participants in this study took away valuable lessons from their experiences -- lessons that became a part of their schema for responding to future ethical dilemmas and that built their *Resilience*.

### *Resilience*

Most scholars view resiliency as an adaptive and coping trait that enables people to overcome adversity (Christman & McClellan, 2008). “Resilient superintendents possess the ability to recover, learn, and grow stronger when confronted by chronic or crisis adversity” (Patterson, Goens, & Reed, 2008). *Resilience* enabled participants to endure the *Pressures* and cope with the *Barriers* encountered during their ethical dilemmas.

Becky had served 26 years in administration and had never before had to remove a board chairman from office. She exhibited confidence and strength in her ability to handle anything that came her way. She shared, “I’ve had some bad experiences to learn from to be good at what I do...Usually I will use events like this to help train someone else.”

Tom has learned over the years that the superintendency is “very tough and not for the mild and meek.” He acknowledged that difficult decisions have certain consequences for the decision-maker. He laughed while explaining, “But you just need to understand, and I’ve come to that grip a long time ago, that every decision you make somebody is going to be disappointed. And you just deal with that. I don’t lose sleep over that. I think that has helped me last as long as I have.”

Tommy’s *Resilience* was key in surviving her high profile ethical dilemma that played out in full media view. During the investigation of the police chief scandal, reporters sneaked into her gated community and “camped outside my house behind bushes.” Also during this same time frame, the district’s Chief Financial Officer “got caught for DWI [driving while impaired] and tried to lie his way out of it, and I ended up having to fire him. That was during the same period.” She laughed about it, but then stated, “I’m still standing. I’m a tough broad. What are you going to do to me?” One of her coping mechanisms was to get away on the weekends with her husband. “Uh, luckily we had a cabin way out in the mountains and we went on the weekends. I did lots of hikes.” Her husband was a source of strength for her during this difficult time.

Danny’s very public ethical dilemma is one that he describes as “one of those things that never, **ever** goes away.” He forged his way through in order that students in

his district would have equal opportunities, taking on local and state politics and enduring the wrath of many stakeholders in his district. He talked about how he coped:

A new decision like this, you gotta know going into it what it's gonna do to you. But it did strengthen my faith. I spent a lot more time in prayer and faith-based activities...And I think that those folks who were on the opposite side of that fence, those who appreciated, agreed with, knew me personally, cared about me personally, etc. I think to the same degree those relationships were strengthened. Whether one was equal to the other, I suspect that the positive was a lot stronger than the negative; otherwise, I'd have probably self-destructed or whatever.

*Resilience* is essential for school superintendents in responding to the multitude of ethical dilemmas encountered during their career. *Self-efficacious* superintendents work through the *Pressures* that threaten their *Organizational Reputation* by utilizing their *Leadership* skills, while also fighting the *Barriers* that seek to derail their efforts.

### Barriers

Intervening conditions, deemed *Barriers* in the model, are factors that constrain the *Leadership* of school superintendents in responding to ethical dilemmas. The subcategories that emerged from the data were *Affective Factors*, *Ambiguity*, *Media*, and *Politics*.

### *Affective Factors*

A majority of the ethical dilemmas that were shared dealt with personnel issues, and participants realized their decisions would result in life altering consequences. An important part of a school superintendent's leadership is building relationships with people, and participants talked about how they handled the *Affective Factors* that came

into play when their dilemma involved someone with whom they had formed a close relationship.

Becky made a very interesting proposal about how superintendents could learn to handle *Affective Factors*, and she revealed her challenge in keeping her emotions in check when dealing with her board chairman:

You know I always tell folks when I'm talking to them about growth and leadership. I think all leaders, in particular when you get in our role, need to take an acting class because you really have to learn to hide your emotions real well. Because I think if I could have strangled the man at that point in time...because we were such good friends I was able to show some anger, but the anger that I **wanted** to show at that point in time...! The fact that you had lied to me, the fact that what was fixing to come down would have greatly embarrassed this board and this school district, and you sat there and lied to me!

Alex talked about his emotional state in having to terminate the popular principal who had been employed by the district for more than twenty years. He stated, "I had distanced myself from it so much because - I was really close to her. I mean we had a really good relationship. Just laughed and had the best time, and it was, it was difficult for me." His attempts at acting to conceal his emotions backfired, however, after coming across as "cold" in front of the faculty:

They thought I was some type of **monster** who had absolutely no feelings. I had no feelings for this single mother who was going to be out of work. I had no feelings for this principal. I was firing this principal for **no** good reason. Uhm, so they thought I was just a machine - had no emotional attachment to anything.

Tommy, in dealing with her very public scandal, said she tried "to keep it very unemotional, even though it was very emotional." She talked about the way she dealt with her emotions, publicly and privately:

Finally, just after being very methodical, taking point by point, never gossiping, never saying any - even to my very best friends - did I give any information. Just kept, kept to my guns that, you know, I have evidence, I'm doing the right thing, I'm following the right procedures, as this is what's best for the district.

And, then of course with my husband, closing the doors, you, uh, cry your eyes out!

*Affective factors* at work in the community kept Danny looking over his shoulder. When asked if there was unrest in the community or an emotional response from stakeholders about his actions to consolidate the three county high schools, he recalled:

Yeeeeeees. It was the first time as a superintendent that I had the hairs on the back of my neck kind of stand up when I'd leave the office late at night by myself to go to the car. Uh, cause there were folks who were doing some really irrational things. Uh, I wasn't afraid, but I had a heightened sense of my surroundings.

Archived news reports of the consolidation incident tell of angry parents and students holding protests and attending school board meetings in droves, students staging a walkout, and citizens making the emotional plea "Don't kill our town" via roadside signs.

School superintendents are human, but responding to ethical dilemmas sometimes requires detachment from their human emotions. They must demonstrate courage under fire in order to show strength in times of adversity. Most operate by the creed 'never let them see you sweat.'

### *Ambiguity*

Ethical dilemmas emerge from the 'gray area' of school superintendents' worlds. Many times they must make decisions based on their 'gut feeling' or they have to choose between two alternatives, both of which could be deemed 'right.' Other complexities arising from ethical dilemmas, particularly those dealing with personnel, are the constraints to communication that cause *Ambiguity* among stakeholders.

Max defined an ethical dilemma very well when he stated, “If it’s a real ethical dilemma, it’s like you say it’s not right or wrong it’s what’s **more** right.” Tom spoke about *Ambiguity*, saying, “People think there are just black and white situations. There’s so many variables involved in this.” Ariel stated similarly, “Well I know that everything is not black and white when we are in the superintendency. A lot of times we’re forced to look in the gray areas for some things.” Fred believes, even when there are gray areas, that a superintendent must take a position:

Whenever possible I like to just boil it down to what’s right and wrong. I mean it’s easy to figure out sometimes that I’m going to be hurt by something, or somebody else could be hurt by something, but in the long run, if you want to be in it for the long run, want to be there and want people to believe that what you’re doing is right, you just choose the right way to go. And most of the time you can get to that point. I realize sometimes there’s some shades of gray, ah, but just because somebody’s going to get hurt is not the reason not to do the right thing.

When ethical dilemmas occur, school superintendents have to be very careful about their communication. One of the *Barriers* that frustrated many of the participants was the *Ambiguity* that resulted from not being able to communicate the facts.

Reynolds was very frustrated after placing one of his veteran teachers on leave, even though he believed she had been wrongly accused of assault and battery. With a pained look on his face, he stated, “I have a faculty that’s extremely upset because we can’t talk to them about it.”

Alex and his board members felt pressured by the inability to relay information about what had happened with the principal and teacher assistant. He candidly stated:

Some of the other board members were, initially they were all on board, but then when they started getting public pushback - because the public didn’t know. They didn’t know what happened, and I couldn’t talk about it!...Nobody but very few people really know what exactly happened to cause her to lose her job. So

then they [the public] all got, they, they heard rumors and there would be bits and pieces of truth involved in each little rumor.

Becky talked about how one-sided communication is when she deals with personnel disciplinary issues:

Whenever I have to deal with discipline with the staff, whatever occurs in this room stays in this room. Now if they want to go out and say something different that's up to them. My staff will know and my good, good staff will tell you that if they [staff members who have been disciplined] go out and tell a lie and say something completely different, I'm not going to correct it. I'm not going to confirm it. You can go out and you can say whatever you want to and that's up to you. That's up to you....you, your conscience and your God.

Danny spoke about the frustrations in not being able to tell his side of the story, saying, "You have to keep the high road. You can't, so many times you can't respond. You can't respond the way you want to." Freddy summed it up by saying, "It's always a one-sided story – **their side.**"

The inability to communicate all sides of the story often leads to *Ambiguity* and misperceptions about the *Leadership* of the superintendent in responding to ethical dilemmas. Ethical dilemmas can become even more complex for superintendents when the *Media* gets involved.

### *Media*

*Media* is a double-edged sword, but during ethical dilemmas the razor sharp side is often used to sensationalize and sell. School superintendents are often muzzled from telling their side of the story because of confidentiality laws and possible legal action pursuant to the incidents. The 'other side' typically gets the first word with the *Media*, having the opportunity to shape public opinion about the superintendent's actions, which also has the potential to shape the *Impact* of the superintendent's decision.

The participants in this study whose ethical dilemmas were highly publicized by the *Media* were Maggie, Danny, and Tommy. Archival evidence provided a broader perspective of the influence of the *Media*. Sources are omitted to protect the confidentiality of participants.

The first newspaper report of Maggie's ethical dilemma began with the word "Fury" in describing the emotional response of a survey that had been administered by the district. The article included emotionally charged quotes from three parents that took up twenty-four lines of copy compared to eight lines of copy from an interview with Maggie. Another article appeared in the same newspaper the next day, informing readers of a petition being circulated and a prayer walk that was being held in protest of the "sex survey." The story featured comments from a parent and a local minister, but no comments from the school district. The next day an article from the same newspaper featured two parents who spoke in support of the district, and it included a previously omitted but important piece of information – the Parent Advisory Council had reviewed the survey in question and had recommended that it be given to students.

Danny's situation made headlines for five months as the consolidation issue unfolded in his district. Television stations and newspapers gave parents and students a forum for voicing their opinions. Danny and his board members were given opportunities to provide the district's reasons for seeking consolidation of the three high schools. Of the three media sources reviewed, one was judged by the researcher as giving fair and balanced coverage to both sides. The other two sources used emotionally charged language, and presented more information from those who were against consolidation. This slanted reporting could have been done purposefully to



sensationalize and increase readership, or it could have been that the local reporters were inadvertently allowing their own bias to creep in. In this situation, *Media* coverage could have influenced the *Impact* of the ethical dilemma, contributing to continued division between the two small communities and the larger community even after consolidation was accomplished.

On the day Tommy fired the district's police chief, an article appeared in the city's major newspaper. The subject of the article was the former police chief. The former chief's lawyer professed his client's innocence, cast doubt on Tommy's action, and announced an imminent lawsuit against the district. The reporter stated that Tommy gave no reason for removing the police chief. An article from the same newspaper published six weeks later focused on the pending lawsuit, giving balanced coverage to Tommy and to the police chief's lawyer. One year later an Associated Press article, consisting of only six sentences, was posted to announce that the police chief had decided to drop his lawsuit. By that time, Tommy had moved to South Carolina to be a school superintendent.

*Media* was a **Barrier** to participants' *Leadership* in their response to ethical dilemmas. *Media* shapes public opinion, influencing the *Impact* of ethical dilemmas.

### *Politics*

"The well-being of any district, and of high-level actors as well, is dependent not only on the district's conformity to general societal expectations, but on its skill in managing local political realities" (Hannaway, 1993, p. 149). *Politics* can often be a **Barrier** to school superintendents' *Leadership* in responding to ethical dilemmas.

Joe described his ethical dilemma of addressing a local tradition that is contrary to state law:

We have a tradition in our school where one of the - former board members now - would shoot fireworks as the team came down the hill, which is against state law. And so I brought it to the board's attention, and to his attention, and I did what I thought was best to do. That's kind of precarious to do that when you have a board member who is responsible for that. And the response was 'if there's a fine I'll pay it.' And it's still continuing now. So sometimes, you have to say 'this is wrong, this is the law,' but in our position we still work for those people and if they want to let it continue, it continues.

He went on to mention the importance of going on record when local politics trumps the law, stating, "I think you have to do those things to protect yourself."

Freddy shared his thoughts about board members who, while in the board room, support superintendents' recommendations but succumb to political pressures outside the board room:

And you know the politicalness of the board is interesting. Cause they can approve that, but then it goes sour on them they'll flip on you and say, well I didn't really understand. It wasn't fully explained to me, or you withheld something - and they'll leave you out there on your own.

Reynolds spoke about his community, where interracial relationships were considered taboo. A teacher at the high school Reynolds's daughter attended thought Reynolds's daughter was dating an African-American male. He shared:

My wife went for a conference about academics and the teacher proceeded to say something to my wife about my daughter dating a black kid. Which - me personally - wouldn't have cared. Actually he was a pretty good kid. I wouldn't have cared. But I knew what my community thought...But then I also couldn't do anything, for some political reasons, I couldn't deal with that teacher and what they had done. But following up on that, we had, for a good number of years, my high school principal was just, just kind of quietly, if there was a black/white kind of relationship going on he would mention something and try and keep it from... And I've noticed just over the last two maybe three years that now we've gotten to the point where we don't worry about that anymore.

Becky's situation with her board chairman occurred in the larger context of a community that was experiencing ethical problems of its own. She described the situation with precise recall:

Understand that our town at that time had had - the town government was under investigation. We had had three police chiefs already either resign or be removed. Officers were being arrested right and left. The mayor was under indictment, the city manager was under indictment. So the town itself and city government... You know the thing McMasters [State Attorney General] was...He was going to make an example of the board chairman as another example of a city of corruption.

The board chairman's indictment was not perceived by the community to be a big deal, though it was for her. She went on to say:

And oddly enough in this town, we tease about it being Sodom and Gomorra. In this town nobody really thought it was that bad. It just it wasn't all that bad. Nobody - it - it was really blown off. But for me and my feelings - I have high expectations for our teachers, for our leadership here. My expectations are no different for the board.

He had an uncontested run for reelection to the board during the next regular election, less than a year after his resignation as chairman.

The *Media* and *Politics* are powerful **Barriers** when school superintendents are wrangling with ethical dilemmas. Along with *Affective Factors* and *Ambiguity*, these **Barriers** have the potential of influencing the **Impact** of superintendents' decisions as they attempt to orchestrate ethical dilemmas in such a way as to protect the **Organizational Reputation**.

## Impact

The overall *Impact* of the participants' responses to ethical dilemmas was two fold. The first subcategory that emerged from the data was *Results* and the second subcategory was *Organizational Learning*.

## *Results*

The *Results* of each of the ethical dilemmas were reported by participants to be a mixed bag, but the majority of the *Results* were beneficial for the organization. Participants were very honest in their assessment of how the ethical dilemma affected them personally and professionally.

## *Status Quo*

Bill's ethical dilemma about the distribution of Gideon Bibles to fifth-graders led him to gauge the support of the internal and external stakeholders for the practice. He believed the practice was "inappropriate," but he did an extensive investigation "to decide whether or not I was going to open up a can of worms." Ultimately, he decided maintaining *Status Quo* was best for his community, even though it tested him. He explained:

So it does stretch me and...am I doing the right thing? But, it seems like I'm doing the right thing for my community. I may not be doing the right thing overall, but for my community it's an expectation and it's one that they support wholeheartedly and fully expect. And so I think, I think I'll continue to support that until I hear otherwise. But that was a dilemma as I decided whether or not we would stop that practice of distributing those Bibles to fifth graders.

*Status Quo* was maintained in Joe's district, even after he made board members aware that shooting fireworks on school property was illegal. He said, "It's still going

on but it was documented that I did what I was supposed to do and brought it to the attention of the board. So, if there are consequences later on, I have done what I thought was right.”

Dan maintained *Status Quo* in his district by following a board policy with which he does not agree. He believes he should have more discretionary power when it comes to dealing with arrests for misdemeanors. He explains, “That policy I’d like to see strengthened a little bit, but it came from our School Boards’ Association and we’re doing what most people are doing...Let me decide what those actions are going to be. Don’t say that we’re not going to act on misdemeanors.”

### *Benefits*

“Professionally, I think it helped out the district and me because people [pause] took [pause] ethics [pause] **seriously.**” Alex was emphatic about the *Benefit* of his dilemma, going on to say, “I think it really just shook everybody and woke everybody up to, ‘hey, he’s not going to tolerate unethical behavior.’”

Becky reported similar results, saying,

I hate that the event occurred, but also for my folks that were now very used to seeing if you violate policy corrective action is going to occur; this is what happens. They also then saw that the board was not untouchable, and that Becky does her job up and down the ladder and nobody is beyond being removed if they don’t follow policy and the laws of South Carolina and everything. So I think it was a lesson learned up and down. So for us that was good.

Tommy’s handling of her ethical dilemma was beneficial to her career. Six months after firing the district’s police chief, she announced her plans to retire from the district. She laughed when she told about what happened next. “[T]he headhunters

started calling immediately, all over the United States... They had followed this story and it was like they would say ‘this chick can handle anything.’”

Danny reported similar benefits after putting the consolidation plans together. He was hired as superintendent in a neighboring county the summer before the plans were to be implemented. He said,

I think going through this is one of the things that made me attractive to this school district because this district has the same kind of challenges. What I mean by that is - high profile. They don’t have the challenge of any quality programming and facilities but they do have a challenge from the standpoint of people’s perception about some of these quality programs.

### *Consequences*

None of the participants spoke of any negative *Consequences* that their ethical dilemma had for the organization. A few of them talked about personal *Consequences*, but participants seemed accepting of those *Consequences* that result from being in such a position of influence. Losing friends was one of the *Consequences* mentioned by participants. Alex, Ariel, Becky, Danny, Tom, and Tommy talked about the loss of friends during their career as school superintendent.

A few participants talked about the *Consequences* of tough decisions on a superintendent’s career. Lynn made light of this *Consequence* in saying, “I think it was [name of individual] who told me a long time ago that four years was the limit because every year you tick off 25% of the people.” Albert also joked, saying, “I think being a superintendent is like the NFL – Not For Long – if you don’t know who’s on your team.” Bill talked about the erosion of public support over time:

I’m learning very quickly. I understand why you don’t usually find people who stay in one district as a superintendent fifteen, twenty years that you may have

seen years ago. They're kind of few and far between now because there are so many decisions that have to be made, and tough decisions. And a lot of times - be it a right decision - every time you make one of those I think you lose a little something, be it a certain level of support from a certain section of the community - regardless.

Fred, a veteran educator of 38 years, the past 17 spent as superintendent, smiled as he shared his wisdom:

I enjoy reading signs on churches, and my favorite one is 'Stand up for the right thing, even if you're the only one standing.' And that's probably the hardest thing to do is take a position because you believe in it, and try to ignore the consequences. And I realize that, you know, we all have to support our families and that's hard sometimes. But you do sleep better at night if you know you've done the right thing.

### *Organizational Learning*

What is the ultimate **Impact** of superintendents' responses to ethical dilemmas?

The data suggest that all of the players learn something from these experiences. *Moving On* and *Moving Out* are the two dimensions of *Organizational Learning*.

#### *Moving On / Moving Out*

Ethical dilemmas affected participants and their organizations in various ways. Alex's organization benefitted from a renewed focus on ethics. Even though the faculty distrusted him initially, he helped the faculty at the school move on by involving them in the selection of a new leader. Other principals in his district, however, were unable or unwilling to move on under his **Leadership**. He said his actions "scared a lot of principals. It made them afraid of me for some reason." In the five years since his

ethical dilemma occurred, his administrative staff has undergone a complete change. He said:

All my principals have retired or moved to other districts. And almost this whole office, both assistant superintendents I've hired, personnel director I've hired. Both my team of principals and district [staff] I've hired in five years, so it's just been a complete turnover in leadership in the district.

He considers this *Moving Out* to be a part of *Moving On*, as he stated, "So I think they [current administrators] understand the culture and what's expected and that makes it easier."

Becky talked about *Moving On* and how it benefited the entire organization and positively influenced the *Organizational Reputation*. She explained:

As far as the district I think it was, in the public eye, I think it was very good because of all that was going on in our city government - they were falling apart because of things that happened. We showed that we were very structured. When someone did something we addressed it immediately, the next person stepped in line and we continued moving right on. Our children also saw that. So that was very good. I think what happened with us showed a well-oiled machine. This is what happens, we have the structures in place. I hate that the event occurred, but also for my folks that were now very used to seeing - if you violate policy, corrective action is going to occur. This is what happens.

Jack's response to his ethical dilemma helped his district *Move On* when he hired trusted people to work in the central office to replace the ones he fired. The researcher spent some time with Jack's secretary prior to interviewing him. Field notes were made during that time. Jack's secretary had worked for two previous superintendents who displayed unethical behavior. She talked with admiration and gratitude about Jack's professionalism. She spoke with pride about the new people he brought in to fill vacancies in the district office. She said it is now "a great place" to work. Interestingly, Jack keeps a visual reminder of his ethical dilemma for himself and



others. He gestured toward his desk, smiled, and said, “And I leave those keys and that cell phone over there, because the first guy out brought me his keys and his cell phone inside of five minutes.”

A few of the participants *Moved On* by *Moving Out*. Danny talked at length about *Moving On* with the consolidation plan and about his *Moving Out*:

From a professional standpoint, I know that, I believe that I could have stayed there for some time to come. And in fact there were folks who believed that’s really what I should have done, uh to see the whole project through. I really felt good about the plan we had put together...So, I had a great deal of confidence in them and the board had a great deal of confidence in them, and they were so involved in putting it all together. It was kind of like, you know, I didn’t have to be there for it to work. The other aspect was that I believe that over time I could have gained back a critical mass of support in the two smaller communities. I would never, ever get all of it but I think over time I could have gotten a critical mass so that I would not have been a liability. Might not have been much of an asset, but I wouldn’t have been a liability to them. But because of everything - it was so well planned and there were so many people who knew intimately what we were trying to do - when I had an opportunity presented to me to go someplace different I considered it seriously. Cause I really felt that like by my not being there, and someone else who at least would be more neutral could enable those two communities to come back into the fold more quickly, and could minister to them more easily than I could have. So I think that part turned out to be win-win. I think it was divine intervention that I had an opportunity to do something else.

The *Impact* of superintendents’ responses to ethical dilemmas is two-fold. The *Results* lead to *Organizational Learning*, all of which help or hinder superintendents in their goal of maintaining the *Organizational Reputation*. The *Impact* may also affect the *Pressures*, as laws are promulgated or revised to address ethical issues that occur in public schools, and as professional associations develop policies to address those issues. All of these efforts are targeted toward maintaining the legitimacy of the institution of public education. Ethical dilemmas truly are, in Alex’s words, “defining moments” for superintendents, for organizations, and for institutions.

## Propositions

The last step of selective coding is making and validating propositions, or statements of relationships. Statements are checked to determine whether or not they fit the data. “One is looking to see if they fit in a general sense and in most cases, not necessarily in every single case exactly” (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). The following propositions are offered as a result of this study:

1. When ethical dilemmas occur, self-efficacious superintendents are confident in their leadership abilities to maintain the organizational reputation.
2. When ethical dilemmas occur, superintendents most often resort to the ethic of the justice – upholding laws and policies.
3. When ethical dilemmas occur, experienced superintendents use their existing schema from previous experiences in deciding how to respond.
4. When ethical dilemmas occur, the local political environment is the strongest barrier affecting the superintendent’s response to the dilemma.
5. If superintendents know the district and community norms and expectations, then they are more confident in responding to ethical dilemmas.
6. If superintendents are experienced, then they rely less on peers for advice during ethical dilemmas.
7. If a working superintendent is actually “retired,” then the superintendent is more apt to take greater risks in the response to ethical dilemmas.
8. If a superintendent experiences an ethical dilemma in the first six months of serving a new community, then there is a greater risk to the organizational reputation because a level of trust has not yet been established with internal and external stakeholders.
9. If an ethical dilemma is a personnel issue in which communication is constrained, then there is a greater risk to the organizational reputation.

10. If an ethical dilemma is a personnel issue and the person expresses remorse for a wrongdoing, then the superintendent is more likely to utilize the ethic of care.
11. If an ethical dilemma is highly publicized, then there is a greater risk to the organizational reputation.

### Summary

Ethical dilemmas, situations involving a conflict between values or principles, often arise when employees of school districts violate laws or professional codes of behavior. Ethical dilemmas also occur when there are inequities in educational programming, resulting in missed opportunities for students. When these situations come to light, organizational legitimacy is compromised. Self-efficacious school district superintendents skillfully lead the way when ethical dilemmas occur, committed to achieving a positive outcome and maintaining organizational legitimacy.

Leadership skills essential in responding to ethical dilemmas include synthesizing and analyzing information critical to decision-making. The district superintendent seeks information from multiple sources and positions for the response, enlisting support from the board of trustees, the central authority of the district. The superintendent is keenly aware of the importance of communication, though communication is often constrained during matters involving school personnel. Superintendents routinely evaluate and self-reflect in order to improve and learn from their experiences.

Superintendents often face barriers when responding to complex dilemmas, obstacles that may or may not have an effect on decision-making. Sometimes superintendents use discretionary power, operating on the fringes of laws or policies that

they deem to be prohibitive. School boards may disagree with the superintendent's decision, which presents another dilemma as personal values and professional expectations conflict.

Other barriers that may influence superintendents are affective factors, ambiguity, the media, and politics. These barriers may influence the outcome of the response to the dilemma as well. The media and political forces shape public opinion. Even though a decision may be the right one in the view of the superintendent and the board, those who are not privy to all of the information may cause further discord.

The impact of superintendents' responses to ethical dilemmas is two-fold. The results, whether they be positive, negative, or neutral lead to organizational learning which impacts organizational legitimacy. The impact may also affect the sources of authority, as laws and policies are promulgated or tweaked to address ethical issues that occur in the organization.

Chapter Four described the step-by-step procedures of this qualitative study. Strauss and Corbin's (1990, 1998) grounded theory coding processes were used to analyze the data, resulting in the identification of six categories and nineteen subcategories. The categories that emerged from the data were: *Pressures*, *Superintendent Self-Efficacy*, *Organizational Reputation* (core phenomenon), *Leadership*, *Barriers*, and *Impact*. A Model of School Superintendents' Response to Ethical Dilemmas was presented, and the categories and their relationships were explained using the words of the participants and archival data. The chapter concluded with proposition statements that the researcher proffers as a result of this study of how

South Carolina superintendents respond to ethical dilemmas experienced in their professional career.

## CHAPTER 5

### DISCUSSION

*“My momma always said, ‘Life was like a box of chocolates.*

*You never know what you're gonna get.’” (Forrest Gump)*

#### Introduction

Qualitative researchers reach into their box of chocolates not knowing what they are going to get. They may believe a chocolate has a caramel filled center only to bite into it and discover a coconut-cream filled core. The researcher had the experience of making a surprising discovery when she reached the ‘core’ of the study - institutional theory emerged as the new lens through which to interpret the data.

The extant literature on ethical decision-making summarized in Chapter Two provided a basis for the research questions that guided the study and a background of knowledge with regard to various ethical frameworks. The emergent theory, based on participants’ revelations about their responses to ethical dilemmas experienced in their professional career, must be further explained through the lens of institutional theory. Chapter Five is the final chapter of this study. It begins with a brief discussion of institutional theory and the research findings with regard to the theoretical foundation. The research questions are addressed in terms of the data that emerged from the study. Finally, implications of the study and suggestions for further research are offered.

## Institutional Theory

School superintendents are the chief executive officers of educational institutions, institutions responsible for transmitting values to children and molding them into successful, productive citizens. Superintendents are charged with maintaining legitimacy with internal and external stakeholders. Institutional theory provides a helpful lens for examining superintendents' ethical decision-making, particularly in response to events that threaten the legitimacy of the school district. Human and Provan (2000) asserted:

Institutional theorists argue that legitimacy building is the driving force behind decisions on organizational strategies and structures (Meyer & Rowan, 1977; DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Zucker, 1987) and that societal acceptance of the organization, and its subsequent survival, depends on its attaining the support of relevant entities in its environment. (p. 328)

Coercive, mimetic, and normative pressures establish the accepted parameters of behavior and practice within school organizations. The formal structures of the educational organization, including federal and state laws, teacher credentialing systems, professional standards, employment contracts, school board governance, accreditation organizations, and accountability systems, “increase the commitment of internal participants and external constituents” (Meyer & Rowan, 1977, p. 349). Having these structures in place “protects the organization from having its conduct questioned. The organization becomes, in a word, legitimate, and it uses its legitimacy to strengthen its support and secure its survival” (p. 349). Organizations that do not have trusted structures “are more vulnerable to claims that they are negligent, irrational, or unnecessary. Claims of this kind, whether made by internal participants, external constituents, or the government, can cause organizations to incur real costs” (p. 350).

When the structures of the school district are compromised by ethical dilemmas, school superintendents are well aware of the possible costs such as the loss of public support, the loss of federal or state funding, the costs of a lawsuit, or the loss of their job. They work diligently to maintain the legitimacy of the school district by working with their school boards to respond decisively to ethical dilemmas.

### Summary of Findings

Superintendents who participated in this study reported that ethical dilemmas occur frequently. The unpredictable nature of ethical dilemmas was troublesome for superintendents, as most of them occurred unexpectedly and required immediate attention. They had to spend inordinate amounts of time investigating and working through the pressures and barriers of ethical decision-making. Participants were usually very surprised by the actions of the person who perpetuated the ethical dilemma. In most cases, they had trusted working relationships with the individual and, in a few cases, considered the individual to be their friend.

Participants in this study were principled leaders who responded to ethical dilemmas because of their professional duty, their personal values, and to protect the reputation of the district that they served. Participants believed that maintaining the integrity of the organization is the responsibility of the superintendent and the school board. Participants did not shrink from their responsibility to take necessary actions, and they had high expectations of a positive outcome when ethical dilemmas occurred. Table 5 presents a summary of participants' responses to ethical dilemmas that were shared during this study.



<b>Participant (Ethical Framework)</b>	<b>Type of ED</b>	<b>Action</b>	<b>Pressures</b>	<b>Barriers</b>	<b>Impact</b>
<b>Alex</b> (Justice)	Personnel: Unprofessional conduct	Termination	C	AF A	“Defining moment” for district
<b>Jack</b> (Justice)	Personnel: Unprofessional Conduct	Termination	C	None	“Institution is so much better off”
<b>Tommy</b> (Justice)	Personnel: Corruption	Termination	C	AF A M P	Did “what’s best for the district and students”
<b>Ariel</b> (Justice / Care)	Personnel: Sexual Harassment	Admin. leave	C	AF A	Sent “strong message”
<b>David</b> (Care)	Personnel: Womanizer on staff	None	N	P	Status quo
<b>Dan</b> (Care / Justice)	Personnel: DUI	Reprimand	C	AF A	Status quo
<b>Freddy</b> (Justice)	Personnel: DUI	Reprimand	C	P	Status quo
<b>Meg</b> (Care)	Personnel: DUI	Reprimand	C	P	Status quo
<b>Margaret</b> (Justice)	Personnel: Discrimination Lawsuit	Supported plaintiff against district	C	P	“I’m no longer with that district”
<b>Max</b> (Profession)	Personnel: Poor performance	Head coaching duties pulled	C N	P	Did what was “more right” for district / students
<b>Reynolds</b> (Justice / Care)	Personnel: Alleged Assault/Battery	Admin. leave	C	AF A	Inconclusive / still under investigation
<b>Becky</b> (Justice)	Board Member Conduct	Forced resignation	C	AF A P	“Protect the district”
<b>Fred</b> (Justice)	Board Member Conduct	Defied members’ pressure to hire relative	N	P	“I fought hard” and “we did prevail”

<b>Participant</b>	<b>Type of ED</b>	<b>Action</b>	<b>Pressures</b>	<b>Barriers</b>	<b>Impact</b>
<b>Tom</b> (Justice)	Board Member Conduct	Didn't allow bd. member to step out of role	N	None	Improved supt/board relations
<b>Albert</b> (Care)	Separation Church/State	Allowed prayer vigil	C N	A P	Status quo
<b>Bill</b> (Care)	Separation Church/State	Allowed Bible distribution	C N	P	Status quo
<b>Lynn</b> (Justice)	Separation Church/State	Discontinued minister's speeches	C N	None	"We had to address that"
<b>Danny</b> (Critique)	Inequity of Programs / Facilities	Worked with local legislators to get law changed	C M N	AF A M P	Consolidated high schools but divided communities
<b>Maggie</b> (Care)	Curricular Issue	Pulled out of abstinence grant	M N	AF A M P	The community is "back together"

Table 5: Summary of Participants' Responses to Ethical Dilemmas

*Types of Ethical Dilemmas and Ethical Frameworks Used*

Fifteen of the twenty participants chose to share ethical dilemmas that related to the human capital of their school districts – employees and board members. In the eleven events that related to district employees, participants evinced the *ethic of justice* (Kohlberg, 1981; Strike, Haller, & Soltis, 1998) most often in addressing these issues, even though many of them exercised the *ethic of care* (Gilligan, 1982; Noddings, 1984, 1992) in trying to preserve the dignity of those at the center of the ethical dilemma.

Recall Ariel's sexual harassment dilemma which involved two of her district administrators. She favored the *ethic of justice* when she decided the alleged perpetrator would not be allowed to return, even though the district attorney advised her to allow him to come back with a letter of reprimand. Ariel made that decision out of care for the victim's welfare and the welfare of others, because the perpetrator had already been warned about alleged impropriety one other time. She preserved the dignity of the alleged perpetrator by keeping the alleged harassment as confidential as possible, informing only the board chairman of the investigation.

Four of the participants favored the *ethic of justice* in dealing with wayward board members. Three of the four participants spoke about the courage it took to be heavy-handed with their bosses. Recall Tom who described the experience as "very difficult," Joe who said it was "precarious," and Fred who stated, "I thought that that might have been my first and last year."

Three of the twenty ethical dilemmas centered on the separation of church and state. Two of the participants favored the *ethic of care* when they decided to allow religious expression, even though skirting the law made them uncomfortable. Recall Bill who preserved a longstanding tradition of distributing Bibles and Albert who allowed the prayer vigil to comfort a grief-stricken faculty.

Two dilemmas were in categories of their own. The ethical dilemma of equity was approached by Danny with the *ethic of critique* (Apple, 1988; Shapiro & Purpel, 1993, 1998), as he fought to have a law changed to pave the way for consolidation. A curricular issue resulted in turbulence in Maggie's small Bible Belt community, and she exercised the *ethic of care* in responding. After pulling out of the grant, she called those

who were most vocal, and she had the principal of the school call them to try to ease the tension and rebuild positive relationships.

The *ethic of profession* (Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2001) was evident as a foundational ethical framework for all participants, a way of life and reason for being in their position of leadership. “The best interest of students” and “the best interest of the district” were heard over and over during the interviews because those are the reasons these dedicated professionals have collectively given 608 years of service to the education profession!

### *Influence of Pressures*

Participants’ responses to their ethical dilemmas depended largely on the type of pressures surrounding the events. Coercive pressures figured predominantly in participants’ ethical decision-making. Sixteen of the participants reported events that were violations of laws or policies. Normative pressures existed in nine of the cases and mimetic pressures were reported in two of the cases. Participants in seven of the cases had more than one pressure to consider.

Coercive, mimetic, and normative pressures (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983) establish the rules, norms, and expectations for organizations. In some cases pressures forced participants into action, such as when Reynolds reluctantly placed the veteran teacher on administrative leave after charges were filed against her for assault and battery. In some cases coercive pressures constrained them from acting, as in the DUI cases of Dan, Freddy, and Meg. The teachers broke the law but, as the cases are

adjudicated, they are typically reduced to nothing more than a traffic ticket. Also, board policies typically do not specify punitive action for misdemeanors.

DiMaggio and Powell (1983), both institutional theorists, referred to these three pressures as isomorphic pressures, and tied them to the “homogeneity of organizational forms and practices” (p. 148). School districts’ standard operating procedures and board policies are very much the same all across South Carolina and across the nation due to isomorphism. “The concept of institutional isomorphism is a useful tool for understanding the politics and ceremony that pervade much modern organizational life” (p. 150). The concept of isomorphism is also helpful in understanding the ethical decision-making process of school district superintendents, as their responses to ethical dilemmas are heavily influenced by these pressures. DiMaggio and Powell also state:

To the extent managers and key staff are drawn from the same universities and filtered on a common set of attributes, they will tend to view problems in a similar fashion, see the same policies, procedures and structures as normatively sanctioned and legitimated, and approach decisions in much the same way. (p. 153)

### *Influence of Barriers*

Participants understood the powerful influence of the barriers to their leadership in responding to ethical dilemmas, particularly the media and politics as shapers of public perception. The influence of local politics was evident in thirteen of the twenty cases, followed by affective factors with eight occurrences and ambiguity with eight occurrences. The media was a factor in only three of the cases, but several participants acknowledged the media’s potential to influence the outcome of ethical dilemmas.

Almost half of the participants had more than one barrier to negotiate. Interestingly, the

two participants who were retired had no barriers to contend with in their ethical dilemma. Danny, Maggie, and Tommy, the three participants with the high profile ethical dilemmas, experienced all four barriers.

### *Impact of the Response*

The impact of ethical dilemmas is organizational learning. “Organizations pursue intelligence. In that pursuit, they process information, formulate plans and aspirations, interpret environments, generate strategies and decisions, monitor experiences and learn from them, and imitate others as they do the same” (March, 1999, p.1). Even if the outcome of an ethical dilemma is maintaining status quo, as in seven of the cases, something has been learned. Bill learned the importance of discovering the community’s “sacred cows” before making the decision about his ethical dilemma. In turn, his community members learned that he was willing to listen to them and to honor their traditions.

Overall, superintendents reported positive impacts from their ethical dilemmas. Organizational learning occurred from within, as in Alex’s district where the staff learned “he’s not going to tolerate unethical behavior.” Organizational learning was widespread in Danny’s district, as internal and external stakeholders learned about programs and facilities as they took steps toward consolidation.

### Answers to Research Questions

The theory developed from this study provides answers to the research questions that guided the inquiry.

1. How do school superintendents decide how to respond when faced with an ethical dilemma?

Participants relied on their leadership skills to respond when ethical dilemmas occurred. When they became aware of a possible breach of law or policy or of a situation that violated accepted norms and expectations, they began to try to make sense of the situation.

First, participants assessed the time frame within which they have to work. They conducted an investigation to try to discern the facts, checking multiple sources if possible. They consulted others, most often the district's attorney and the school board chairman. They thought about possible solutions and the consequences of each before beginning to position themselves to enact the preferred solution. If their preferred solution met with resistance from school board members or was inconsistent with community expectations and norms, they had to decide whether to hold firm and follow through, to seek a compromise and reposition, or to do nothing.

The ethical decision-making process required participants to analyze all of the facets of the situation in order to determine what the best response would be. Many participants said they like to "sleep on it" before acting, indicating a preference for carefully thought out decisions that are sensible and defensible.

2. What individual attributes (i.e. values, gender, race, years of experience) influence school superintendents' responses to ethical dilemmas?

Participants' personal and professional values influenced their response to ethical dilemmas. Many spoke of their "core values" and wanting to do "what's best for students" as guiding their ethical decision-making. The ethic that was dominant in the

analysis of their responses to ethical dilemmas was the *ethic of justice*. There was no evidence that suggested that participants' race or gender influenced their response. Experience was an influential variable. Participants who shared an ethical dilemma experienced in their first year spoke of the difficulty they faced in not yet knowing the community values and norms or in not yet having formed trusting relationships with internal and external stakeholders. Participants who mentioned consulting with peers as one of their strategies in ethical decision-making had less than six years of experience as a superintendent. The two participants whose professional status was "working retired" both spoke about their ability to operate from a position of strength with their board members.

3. What other factors, variables, or forces influence school superintendents' responses to ethical dilemmas?

Coercive, mimetic, and normative pressures influenced participants' responses. Affective factors, ambiguity, media, and politics also influenced their responses. The desire to maintain the organizational reputation influenced them as well.

4. How do responses to ethical dilemmas affect school superintendents personally and professionally?

Participants experienced frustration, anger, and anguish when ethical dilemmas occurred, but they were very guarded about allowing their emotions to show. They often lost friends as a result of the actions they took. They relied on peers and family members for support. Some participants spoke of professional benefits, such as improved board relations or new opportunities in other districts. The organizational learning that occurred in each case was a professional benefit, as superintendents built



tacit knowledge, knowledge that was experiential in nature and that can be used to solve future ethical dilemmas. Argyris (1999) believed tacit knowledge to be foundational for effective management.

### Implications and Suggestions for Further Research

This study resulted in a theory grounded in data of the processes that practicing superintendents utilized in responding to real ethical dilemmas. Results of this study add to the body of knowledge of ethical decision-making practices of educational leaders. Results of this study may help aspiring and practicing superintendents be more attuned to the pressures and barriers that influence the ethical decision-making process and help them to become more aware of their own approach to ethical decision-making. The study provides a record of tacit knowledge participants gained from their experiences. Aspiring and practicing superintendents can benefit by learning from the lived experiences of other superintendents. Results of the study may also be helpful for instructors in training programs designed for current and future superintendents.

Further study of the ethical decision making process is needed. Replicating this study in a region of the United States other than the Bible Belt would yield additional information about the normative pressures of ethical decision-making and may reveal additional barriers that influence superintendents. Replicating the study in a state with a strong teachers' union would produce information about the pressures and barriers that influence ethical decision-making, particularly issues involving personnel. This study could be replicated with a purposive sample of superintendents who chose to leave a district or who were fired because of disagreements with the board about how an ethical

dilemma should be handled. Information could be gleaned about the sources of conflict and barriers that could not be negotiated.

If the researcher were able to conduct this study over, she would sample a larger percentage of the population in order to increase the variety of ethical dilemmas shared. Three-fourths of the ethical dilemmas that were shared were personnel issues or board member conflicts. It would be helpful to interview additional superintendents who experienced ethical dilemmas in dealing with curricular issues and district consolidation. It would have been helpful to hear from superintendents who had experienced dilemmas with resource allocation in response to increased accountability and decreased funding. These issues, particularly those dealing with funding for public schools, have been debated in our state recently due to a sharp decrease in state revenues. A larger sample size would have also increased the data gathered from African Americans and females, allowing for additional exploration of the possible effects of gender and ethnicity on decision-making. Finally, if the researcher conducted this study again, she would include an interview with the state superintendent of education to explore ethical dilemmas he has experienced as the elected leader of education in the state of South Carolina.

### Summary

This qualitative study, conducted with the grounded theory research methodology, analyzed South Carolina school district superintendents' responses to ethical dilemmas experienced in the course of their professional career. Individual interviews, focus group interviews, and archival data were taken apart, examined, and

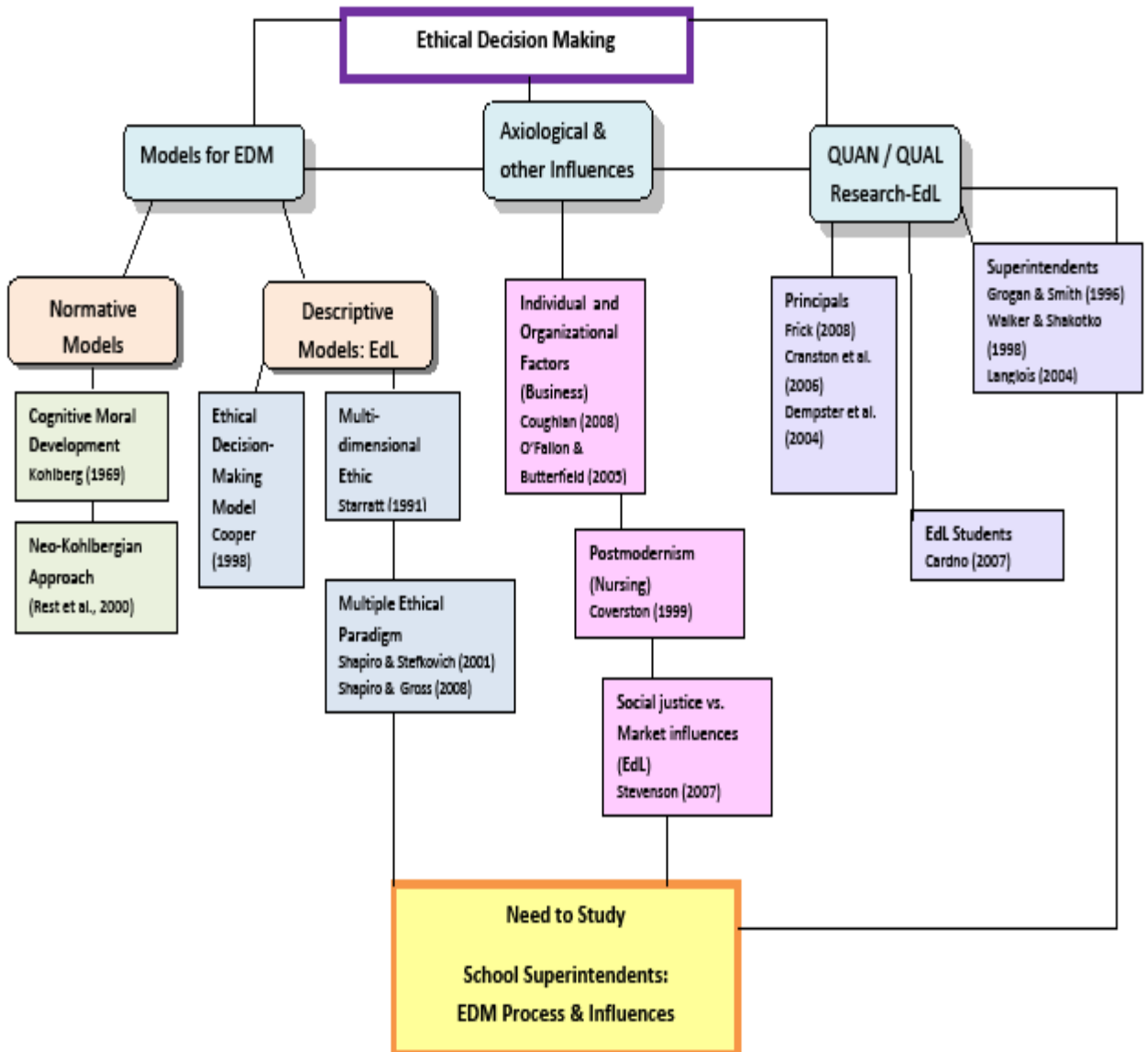
reconstructed around categories. A Model of School Superintendents' Responses to Ethical Dilemmas was created and participants' stories were used to elucidate the model. The tacit knowledge shared by participants in the study can be helpful to practicing and aspiring school district superintendents as they seek to become more aware of the pressures and barriers that come into play when ethical dilemmas occur.

In the words of Alex, ethical dilemmas are “defining moments.” The superintendent's challenge is to turn those defining moments into productive learning experiences for the organization.

## APPENDICES

Appendix A

Literature Map



## Appendix B

### Letter of Introduction

# **SCHOOL DISTRICT SUPERINTENDENTS' RESPONSES TO ETHICAL DILEMMAS: A GROUNDED THEORY**

## Script for Interviews

“Hi, I’m Fay Sprouse. I’m conducting a study under the direction of Dr. Jack Flanigan at Clemson University. My study is called “School District Superintendents’ Responses to Ethical Dilemmas: A Grounded Theory.”

You have been identified as a school district superintendent in the state of South Carolina. I want to learn more about the particular way in which you, as a superintendent, make decisions when faced with an ethical dilemma.

We will not use your name in the report; however, to identify your responses you may select a pseudonym.

We will give you the opportunity to review the transcripts prior to using them in the construction of our report.

There will be no payment for participation in this study. There will be an initial interview and the possibility of a follow up interview should clarification or the need to expound arises. Hopefully, a phone call for clarification will be all that is warranted.

What pseudonym would you like to use?

For the purpose of this research, an ethical dilemma is defined as a complex problem that involves a conflict between values, beliefs, or principles. It may be referred to as a “sticky situation” or “being caught between a rock and a hard place.”

As an example, in May of 2008 an ethical dilemma made headlines. A popular principal resigned because students were being allowed to form a Gay/Straight Alliance group at his school, which conflicted with his beliefs and religious convictions. The community became divided over the issue. This was an ethical dilemma for the superintendent, who had to consider, among other things, the various positions of the stakeholders, his own personal and professional codes of ethics, and laws and policies pertaining to the issue. Personnel issues, student discipline issues, and district finance issues often present ethical dilemmas for superintendents.

I would like for you to share with a particular ethical dilemma that you experienced in your time as a superintendent and information about how you responded to the dilemma.

Any questions before we begin?

## Appendix C

### Interview Questions

1. Describe an ethical dilemma that you have experienced as a superintendent.  
(What was the conflict? What parties were involved? How did you know that it was an ethical dilemma?)
2. How did you respond to this ethical dilemma?  
(Did you consult with anyone else before responding? What other steps did you take before & during the decision-making process? What choices did you have to make? What obstacles did you encounter?)
3. When you reached a decision, how did you go about communicating it with others?  
(What stakeholders were involved? Did you seek validation from others? Was this a public or private disclosure?)
4. What personal experiences or beliefs influenced your response to this ethical dilemma?  
(Did your gender, race, religion make a difference in how you responded? How about your years of experience as a superintendent?)
5. What other factors influenced your responses to this dilemma?  
(What political or societal pressures existed? Were there financial or economic considerations? Was there any unrest or emotional response from stakeholders? Did any of these factors affect the amount of time you took in taking action?)
6. How did the experience affect you?  
(Do you still stand by your decision? Were there any personal or professional consequences as result of your decision? Would you do anything differently if you had it to do over again?)
7. How does your response to this particular dilemma compare to the way you have handled other ethical dilemmas?  
(Have your responses to dilemmas changed as a result of years of experience? What lessons have you learned from other dilemmas you've experienced?)



## Appendix D

### **Information Concerning Participation in a Research Study Clemson University**

#### SCHOOL DISTRICT SUPERINTENDENTS' RESPONSES TO ETHICAL DILEMMAS: A GROUNDED THEORY

##### **Description of the research and your participation**

You are invited to participate in a research study conducted by Dr. Jack Flanigan, along with Fay Sprouse. The purpose of this research is to explore the decision-making process utilized by superintendents in responding to ethical dilemmas.

Your participation will involve participating in an individual interview about the way you make decisions and the factors which influence you when you experience ethical dilemmas in the context of your job.

The amount of time required for your participation will be approximately one hour for the initial interview and the possibility of one or more follow up interviews. It will also require approximately 30 minutes to an hour in responding to a follow-up questionnaire regarding the accuracy of the theory.

##### **Risks and discomforts**

There are no known risks associated with this research. Participants will remain anonymous throughout data collection and reporting.

##### **Potential benefits**

There are no known benefits to you that would result from your participation in this research; however, research may reveal practical implications which benefit you, fellow superintendents, and aspiring superintendents.

##### **Protection of confidentiality**

We will do everything we can to protect your privacy. Your identity will not be revealed in any publication that might result from this study.

##### **Voluntary participation**

Your participation in this research study is voluntary. You may choose not to participate and you may withdraw your consent to participate at any time. You will not be

penalized in any way should you decide not to participate or to withdraw from this study.

**Contact information**

If you have any questions or concerns about this study or if any problems arise, please contact Dr. Jack Flanigan at Clemson University at 864-656-5091. If you have any questions or concerns about your rights as a research participant, please contact the Clemson University Office of Research Compliance at 864.656.6460.

**Consent**

**I have read this consent form and have been given the opportunity to ask questions. I give my consent to participate in this study.**

Participant's signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

A copy of this consent form should be given to you.

## Appendix E

### **Information Concerning Participation in a Research Study Clemson University**

#### SCHOOL DISTRICT SUPERINTENDENTS' RESPONSES TO ETHICAL DILEMMAS: A GROUNDED THEORY

##### **Description of the research and your participation**

You are invited to participate in a research study conducted by Dr. Jack Flanigan, along with Fay Sprouse. The purpose of this research is to explore the decision-making process utilized by superintendents in responding to ethical dilemmas.

Your participation will involve participating in a focus group and taking part in an interview about the way in which you make decisions when you experience an ethical dilemma.

The amount of time required for your participation will be approximately one hour for the focus group discussion and approximately 30 minutes to an hour in responding to a follow-up questionnaire regarding the accuracy of the theory.

##### **Risks and discomforts**

There are no known risks associated with this research. Participants will remain anonymous throughout data collection and reporting.

##### **Potential benefits**

There are no known benefits to you that would result from your participation in this research; however, research may reveal practical implications which benefit you, fellow superintendents, and aspiring superintendents.

##### **Protection of confidentiality**

We will do everything we can to protect your privacy. Your identity will not be revealed in any publication that might result from this study.

##### **Voluntary participation**

Your participation in this research study is voluntary. You may choose not to participate and you may withdraw your consent to participate at any time. You will not be penalized in any way should you decide not to participate or to withdraw from this study.

**Contact information**

If you have any questions or concerns about this study or if any problems arise, please contact Dr. Jack Flanigan at Clemson University at 864-656-5091. If you have any questions or concerns about your rights as a research participant, please contact the Clemson University Office of Research Compliance at 864.656.6460.

## Appendix F

### Focus Group Questions

I want to find out about how you deal with ethical dilemmas that you often experience as a superintendent.

1. How do you know when you are experiencing an ethical dilemma?  
(What conflicts characterize ethical dilemmas?)
2. How do you typically respond when you experience an ethical dilemma?  
(Do you consult with anyone else before responding? What other steps do you take before & during the decision-making process? What choices are typically involved? What obstacles do you often encounter?)
3. When you reach a decision, how do you go about communicating it with others?  
(What stakeholders do you involve? Do you seek validation from others? Do you go public with your decision?)
4. What personal experiences or beliefs influence your response to ethical dilemmas?  
(Does your gender, race, religion make a difference in how you respond? How about your years of experience as a superintendent?)
5. What other factors influence your response to ethical dilemmas?  
(What political or societal pressures are there? Are there financial or economic considerations? How about unrest or emotional response from stakeholders? Do any of these factors affect the amount of time you take in responding?)
6. How do ethical dilemmas affect you?  
(Have you experienced personal or professional consequences as result of a decision? Would you do anything differently if you had a particular dilemma to do over again?)
7. Do you handle most ethical dilemmas in a particular way or use a particular process?  
(Have your responses to dilemmas changed as a result of years of experience? What lessons have you learned from the dilemmas you've experienced?)
8. Is there anything else you'd like to add about responding to these difficult situations?

Appendix G

Member Check Letter

Superintendents' Responses to Ethical Dilemmas: A Grounded Theory

Dear Colleague,

Thank you again for your earlier participation in my research project. After speaking with a number of our colleagues about how they make decisions when responding to ethical dilemmas, I have developed a theoretical model of ethical decision-making. I want to check with participants on whether I have adequately represented the process, as well as the factors which influence superintendents' decision-making when they are faced with ethical dilemmas.

Please take a look at this information and provide me with your feedback on the enclosed questionnaire. A self-addressed, stamped envelope has been provided for your convenience in mailing it back to me. I would appreciate your response by \_\_\_\_\_.

If you have any questions or would like to discuss any of the information presented, the questions, or the research project, do not hesitate to call me.

Sincerely,

Fay Sprouse  
31 Forest Lane  
Ware Shoals, SC 29692  
fsprouse@gwd51.k12.sc.us  
864-554-3051

## Appendix H

### Member Check Questionnaire

1. The model of ethical decision-making is based on responses from twenty superintendents in South Carolina. Please respond to this statement:

This model is representative of the decision-making process I use when responding to ethical dilemmas.

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

2. If you responded Disagree or Strongly Disagree, please state the reason.
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
3. If there is any information that you feel has been omitted or that is inaccurate, please share it in the space below.
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
4. Any additional comments about the research, the findings, or the conclusions?

Thank you for your participation and for your timely feedback!  
Please place this survey in the enclosed, self-addressed stamped envelope and mail it back to me by \_\_\_\_\_.

## Appendix I

### **Model of School Superintendents' Responses to Ethical Dilemmas: The Narrative**

#### **Fay Sprouse**

Public schools are institutions established, in part, to promote democratic ideals. If the school district is perceived to be credible or legitimate, it is likely to have widespread public support. School districts achieve legitimacy from various sources of authority. These sources include laws and regulations that set standards of behavior, professional associations that provide training for educational professionals and accreditation for schools, and from stakeholder groups, such as Parent Teacher Associations and School Improvement Councils, that establish norms and expectations.

Ethical dilemmas, situations involving a conflict between values or principles, often arise when employees of school districts violate laws or professional codes of behavior. Ethical dilemmas also occur when there are inequities in educational programming, resulting in missed opportunities for students. When these situations come to light, organizational legitimacy is compromised. Self-efficacious school district superintendents skillfully lead the way when ethical dilemmas occur, committed to achieving a positive outcome and maintaining organizational legitimacy.

Leadership skills essential in responding to ethical dilemmas include synthesizing and analyzing information critical to decision-making. The district superintendent seeks information from multiple sources and positions for the response, enlisting support from the board of trustees, the central authority of the district. The superintendent is keenly aware of the importance of communication, though communication is often constrained during matters involving school personnel. Superintendents continually evaluate and self-reflect in order to improve and learn from their experiences.

Superintendents often face barriers when responding to complex dilemmas which may or may not have an effect on decision-making. Sometimes superintendents use discretionary power, operating on the fringes of laws or policies that they deem to be prohibitive. School boards may disagree with the superintendent's decision, which presents another dilemma as personal values and professional expectations conflict.

Other barriers that may influence superintendents are affective factors, ambiguity, the media, and politics. These barriers may influence the outcome as well. The media and political forces shape public opinion, and even though a decision may be the right one in the view of the superintendent and board, those who are not privy to all of the information may cause further discord.

The impact of superintendents' responses to ethical dilemmas is two-fold. The results, whether they be positive, negative, or neutral lead to organizational learning which impacts organizational legitimacy. The impact may also affect the sources of authority,



as laws and policies are promulgated or tweaked to address ethical issues that occur in the organization.

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