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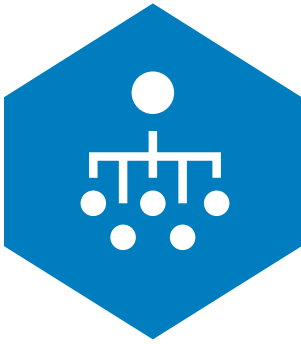
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BENJAMIN KUTSYURUBA, KEITH WALKER, AND SABRE CHERKOWSKI

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The Grounds and Strategies for Ethical Decision-Making in Canadian Principals

Benjamin Kutsyuruba, Queen's University, Canada
Keith Walker, University of Saskatchewan, Canada
Sabre Cherkowski, University of British Columbia, Canada

Abstract: This article describes Canadian school principals' (n=177) perceptions of the factors that constitute their ethical decisions, the grounds, and the strategies for ethical decision-making in their school work. For the participants, primary factors that made decisions ethical were truthfulness and honesty; alignment with values; doing what is best for students and the learning community; and the challenge and pressure of knowing that ethical considerations are the bottom line when it comes to making the right decisions. Their personal and professional grounds for making ethical decisions were confidence in personal ability to consistently make good ethical decisions; faith in the abilities of others to make ethical decisions; and knowledge of the relevant professional ethical codes. Discussing their strategies for ethical decision-making at work, participating principals emphasized self-discipline as a means to deter unethical decision-making; past experiences/precedence as aids in making the right ethical decision; referral to a relevant ethical code as support for decision-making; and, advice and feedback from others as moral support and accountability mechanisms. This study provides educational leaders with a better understanding of the nature, grounds, and strategies for improved ethical decision-making in school administration.

Keywords: Ethical, Decision-making, Moral Agency, School Administration, Canadian Principals

Introduction

The need to examine the realities in human organizations and professional responsibilities with moral and ethical lenses has become important work for scholars (Starratt and Leeman 2011). Furthermore, moral leadership and ethical decision-making has increased attention in the field of educational administration. Foster (1986) noted that administrative decisions carry a consequence of restructuring of human life and an observation that administration is fundamentally about the resolution of moral dilemmas. Moreover, leaders are not only faced with *right* versus *wrong* dilemmas based on a violation of a certain core moral value, but also with a *right* versus *right* dilemma where different core moral values conflict (Kidder 2005). Principals, as leaders in school organizations, are charged with establishing and maintaining a moral and ethical climate in the school. In this sense, leaders become moral agents responsible for proactive shaping of the ethical contexts and environments in groups, organizations, and societies (Johnson 2004; Starratt 1991). The use of the notion of moral agency varies across different sectors; semantically it is derived from the Latin word "agere," meaning "one who acts." A typical leader ("agent") is seen acting on behalf of another person or an organization ("principal"). This is not meant to confuse us, but a school principal is not the principal in principal-agency terms but, instead, acts in the agentic role. Agents are morally bound to pursue the aims of their "principal" or superordinate without violating the rights of others or doing anything immoral. For Bandura (2001), the agent is the one who acts intentionally to make things happen and this certainly resonates with the work life of school principals. While the argument that educational leaders must develop and articulate a much greater awareness of the ethical significance of their actions and decisions is central to much of the ethical leadership literature (Campbell 1999), greater understanding of different ways, means, and approaches for establishing a sense of moral agency among others in the schools is required.

The purpose of our larger, exploratory study was to bring to description Canadian principals' perspectives of the notions of moral agency and trust; their perceptions of ethical problems, challenges, pressures and influences; and grounds for their ethical decision-making and

recovering of trust in schools. This article focuses on how the participating principals expressed their meanings and understandings with respect to the factors that constitute an ethical decision; the grounds that guide them in making ethical decisions; and, the strategies they use for making ethical decision-making in their school work. Before analyzing the participants' perceptions, we first review the literature on educational leadership through the lens of moral agency, and then detail approaches to making ethical decision in educational leadership. The article concludes with the analysis of the participating principals' perspectives in relation to the extant literature.

Educational Leaders as Moral Agents

The assertion that educational leadership is a fundamentally moral endeavor is not new; it has been developed over many years by numerous scholars (Begley 1999b; Furman 2004; Hodgkinson 1991; Johansson 2004; Langlois 2008; Sernak 1998; Starratt 1994). Ethical leadership is essentially a two-part process consisting of "the demonstration of normatively appropriate conduct through personal actions and interpersonal relationships, and the promotion of such conduct to followers through two-way communication, reinforcement, and decision-making" (Brown, Treviño, and Harrison 2005, 120; Brown and Treviño 2006). Therefore, in addition to demonstrating moral character traits, carrying out duties, making wise decisions, and mastering ethical challenges of their roles, leaders are also responsible for the ethical behaviors of others. Leaders, then, become moral agents; followers' behavior largely depends on the example set by leaders. The influence dimension of leadership requires the leaders to have an impact on the lives of those being led; therefore, making a change in other people carries with it an enormous ethical burden and responsibility (Northouse 2013). The significance of a leader's actions is amplified by the fact that unethical actions by individuals can have a power that transcends the individual and can induce others to be unethical (Rebores 2001).

Moral agency is a person's ability to make moral judgments based on some commonly-held notion of right and wrong, to do so on behalf of others and to be held accountable for these actions (Angus 2003). Moral agency is about a leader's ways and means being characterized as consistent with what is seen as ethical living. Principals who act as moral agents have given attention to their own development of moral character, have reckoned and decided to pay the cost of following the principles of ethics, and have committed to the care for others and sense of stewardship a leader must have for others or for a principal cause (Hester and Killian 2011, 96). In addition, Bandura (2001), helpfully identified four features of personal agency: intentionality, forethought, self-reactiveness and self-reflectiveness.

As moral agents, leaders are bound to pursue the aims of their organization without violating the rights of others or doing anything immoral. But, in addition, moral agents are also bound to do right, to pursue the good, to be ethically excellent and to foster ethical behavior in others. Moral agency, then, denotes accountability to others for one's own behavior and a responsibility for the behavior of others. In this light, moral agency needs to be understood as a relational concept. As moral agents, school leaders must determine the best ethical course of action within a complex web of relationships that make up the school organization. Moreover, they must recognize their responsibility for ensuring the moral behavior of others in the school.

In our increasingly diverse societies, principals may find themselves exercising moral agency within and among competing stakeholder interests. Developing capacities for moral agency within increasingly complex and diverse educational settings is an essential capacity, then, for school principals. Recently, increasing principals' moral literacy—the habits, skills and competencies—towards greater moral agency has become an important research focus (Tuana 2007). Similarly, researchers assert that moral competence in leadership helps to seek understanding and build harmony and trust among stakeholders (Kohn 1997; Normore and Paul-Doscher 2007; Paul-Doscher and Normore 2008). For moral agents, as Stefkovich (2006, 4) noted, "...ethics should guide school leaders' decision-making, [so] that there can be common

ground even in multicultural, pluralistic society, and that, rather than impose their own values on students and teachers, school leaders should strive to reach a higher moral ground in making decisions.” Moral agency is a complex and layered responsibility that requires that school principals act in different capacities, at different times, with different people. We know of no singular formula for establishing moral agency that can transform a school towards a higher moral ground; however, in this article, we suggest that moral agency is played out to varying degrees and in a variety of ways as principals engage in decision-making in their daily work.

Ethical Decision-making

Ultimately, principals as administrators are decision-makers. Ethics is an essential part of their decision-making as they often deal with fairness, equality, justice, and democracy as much as they deal with test scores, teacher salaries, parents, and budgets (Strike, Haller, and Soltis 1988). Many of the ethical decisions that principals make involve situations that are not usually black and white; there is difference between actions that are obviously right or wrong and those that may be reasonably placed in a gray area (Beckner 2004). According to Kidder (1995), the two categories can be distinguished as either “moral temptations” or “moral dilemmas.” For school administrators, the most difficult decisions center on the “right versus right” dilemmas, where each of the possible options is firmly rooted in one of the core moral values that inevitably create a value conflict (Beckner 2004; Kidder 1995). Educational leaders increasingly find themselves working in environments where value conflicts are common (Begley 1999a).

We know that the pathways to resolving ethical dilemmas are as complex as the pathways into their creation, and step-by-step strategies to ethical decision-making are not always the best solutions in various situations. Kidder (1995, 176) came to the conclusion that:

there can be no formula for resolving dilemmas, no mechanical contraptions of the intellect that churns out the answer. Yet, in the act of coming to terms with the tough choices, we find answers that not only clarify the issues and satisfy our need for meaning but strike us as satisfactory resolutions. [Ethics are] less a goal than a pathway, less a destination than a trip, less an inoculation than a process.

However, various authors (Hodgkinson 1991; Kidder 1995) did provide helpful linear guideposts for the journey of ethical decision-making. We are not going to detail these in this article, but we believe it is important to unearth the principles that underlie these more mechanical expressions.

According to Rebores (2001, 31-33), three approaches to making ethical decisions are identified as having the greatest application to educational literature: strict consequentialism, mixed consequentialism, and deontologism. Consequentialist ethical theories are dominated by the principle of benefit maximization and rely solely on consequences to judge the morality of the action (Strike, Haller, and Soltis 1988). For strict consequentialists, the following steps constitute the process of making ethical decisions:

1. Identify the problem;
2. List alternative courses of action;
3. Predict the consequences for each alternative;
4. Assign a value to the good produced by each alternative; and
5. Select the alternative that produces the greatest good.

However, as Rebores (2001) stated, the problem with this approach is the subjectivism that is involved in determining both what is meant by good and how good is to be produced.

Mixed consequentialist’s approach may include the following steps:

1. Identify the problem;
2. Analyze the problem (who, what, context);
3. Analyze the values involved that are influenced by a person's beliefs and convictions;
4. Identify norms that should guide the action that protects the person's values;
5. Explore the consequences of the action;
6. Compare the consequences with the values;
7. If the consequences and values are inconsistent, explore other alternatives and test them to gain feedback about the norms that protect the person's values; and
8. If the consequences and the values are consistent, perform the action.

Deontological approach may include the following set of procedures:

1. Identify the problem;
2. Match up alternative courses of action with corresponding norms (comparing the alternatives with the norms should yield one of the following conclusions: one alternative is consistent with the norms; several alternatives are consistent with the norms; one alternative is consistent with one or more norms but is in conflict with one or more other norms); and
3. The highest norm is the one that should be acted on.

Strike and colleagues (1988) identified another approach fitting for ethical decision-making in educational administration – nonconsequentialism. It is based on the principle of equal respect, requiring people to act in a way that regards human beings as having intrinsic worth and treat them accordingly. Nonconsequentialist theories regard moral action as the action that gives first consideration to the value and dignity of persons. The essence of this approach is expressed in the Golden Rule.

Methodology

In this descriptive ethics study we aimed to go beyond superficial descriptions ("begreifen") to look, rather, at leaders' internal understandings ("verstehen") (Ladd 1957). As Bird and Waters (1987) alerted those researching in the ethical domain, the leaders will not likely be systematic or traditional in their use of ethical language. Therefore, in this article we have organized the data collected from these leaders into categories and taken due care to guard the integrity of the meanings and contexts of their particular ethical wrestling.

The participants sampled in this study (see Table 1) were Canadian principals from the ten provinces and three territories. The emails and mailing addresses were harvested from various public domain and online sources, including links to all of the school boards across Canada. The participating principals fit into four different age range categories (31-40; 41-50; 51-60; and 61 or more), the majority (79%) being in the 41 – 60 age range. Gender representation was almost equal, with the slight prevalence of male principals. More than half of the participants were experienced educators with extensive experiences in principalship and significant experiences with formal training in ethics.

Table 1: Demographics of Respondents (n=177)

Age Range	%	Province	%
31-40 yrs	14	Alberta	20
41-50 yrs	37	Saskatchewan	23
51-60 yrs	42	Ontario	20
61 yrs or more	2	Others	37
Gender	%	Years of Professional Experience	%
Male	53	10 years or less	3
Female	45	11 to 20 years	27
No Response	2	21 to 30 years	52
		31 years or more	15
Formal Ethics Training	%	Years of Experience as a Principal	%
Yes	53	5 years or less	31
No	25	6 to 10 years	35
Unsure	22	11 to 15 years	14
		16 years or more	19

For this exploratory study, primary data collection tool was a survey that consisted of self-report, structured questionnaires with open-ended questions and demographic data items. Open-ended questions for the instrument were developed by the researchers based on suggestions and recommendations from an expert panel of principals, the relevant literature, and adapted items from related instruments. The survey was field-tested with a group of principals prior to distribution in both mail-out and on-line forms. Hard copies of survey were sent to approximately 2000 principals; invitations to participate in on-line surveys were sent to approximately 3000 principals across Canada. To be blunt, we were deeply disappointed in the return rate (3.5% or n=177); a response much smaller than expected. We considered the responses sufficient for the needs of this descriptive aspect of the study; but we are appropriately modest in our generalizations. It is difficult to know how the low response rate may have affected our findings and whether or not those who did respond were of a particular subset of the population with respect to disposition relative to the ethical challenges of principalship. We believe such a low response rate was indicative of principals' extremely busy professional lives, lack of personal contact between the researchers and participants, and technical issues (including spam filter blockage and outdated address data). While economies of on-line surveys are attractive, reports of blocked e-mails and ease of dismissal led to a regrettably poor response. The study design and resources did not afford follow up on either surface or on-line surveys; again, reducing response rates.

Responses to open-ended questions were received by the researchers and coded according to the dominant themes recurring in the responses (MacMillan and Schumacher 2006). Codes were then combined into categories, and categories into patterns or concepts (Lichtman 2010). Analysis of open-ended responses provided rich descriptive data for the study.

Research Findings

Principals' responses were analyzed and grouped according to three categories: a) factors that constitute an ethical decision; b) the grounds that help principals make ethical decisions; and, c) the strategies for ethical decision-making in schools.

Factors that Make Decisions Ethical

For the participants, the factors that make decisions ethical tended to be clustered within four themes – truthfulness and honesty; alignment with values; doing what is best for students and the learning community; and the challenge and pressure of knowing that ethical considerations are the bottom line when it comes to making the right decisions. The principals noted the importance of transparency, honesty, openness and forthrightness described by some as “up front and by the book” and that an ethical principal “follows guidelines and [is] above board, honest.” The responses captured the challenges of establishing and maintaining trust within the larger community while ensuring authentic communication; there was a desire to “talk freely and not tell untruths, i.e., tell people that they are doing a good job when they are not. This also means that you have to tell people the truth when they have areas to improve. I tend to look to myself first when things go wrong.”

Honesty and staying true to personal and professional values were clear factors that made decisions ethical. The participants described the need to ensure that decisions “mesh with my moral compass” and to question if the decisions “mesh with my professional ethics in regard to confidentiality, moral behavior, impartiality, justice, etc.” They noted the difficulty of ensuring alignment with their values so that public perception of teaching and education remain positive and that making the decision “does nothing to create a poor perception of the teaching profession.” However, the principals were clear that ethical decisions they made were not necessarily popular; but it was an integral part of their job to make these difficult decisions with which others may not agree. In order to address these difficulties, they overwhelmingly stated a desire to make informed decisions; as one principal described, “I usually feel confident when I make the decision because I usually research all aspects of the concern. What concerns me is the time it takes to make sure maximum knowledge is gained.” The responses indicated that the school administrators wrestled with complexity of making informed decisions in a timely fashion while ensuring that they adhered to their own moral compasses, the values of the school, and their professional code of ethics. The overwhelming factor in decision-making was ensuring that they did no further harm while acting in the best interests of the students and others in the learning community.

The most widely cited factor for ethical decisions was acting in the best interest of students and the learning community. The responses indicated a mindful approach to ethical decision-making with the intention of ensuring the safety, security, and well-being of the children in their school. They noted how such factors as the impact on student learning, appropriate differentiation based on individual and group needs, and the desire to know that they are doing the right thing in a compassionate and supportive way for students and their families were important for their decision-making process. Decisions “in the best interest of children” were not always obvious nor easy, and the principals knew that “usually some party would be disappointed” and that “[they] want to make everyone happy yet [they] know that [they] probably won’t.” The participants also added they needed to rely on a solid set of grounds to guide their ethical decision-making as they wrestled with the challenges and complexities of these decisions and their impact on the learning community in schools.

Grounds for Making Ethical Decisions

The participants had personal and professional grounds on which they relied for making ethical decisions: a personal confidence in their ability to consistently make good ethical decisions; their faith in the abilities of others to make ethical decisions; and their knowledge of the relevant professional ethical codes. These grounds provided a firm ethical platform for many of the participants.

Findings indicated that the majority of principals believed that personal rules and personal convictions were highly important grounds in solving an ethical dilemma. The main grounds in

solving an ethical dilemma or making a difficult ethical decision tended to be a personal conviction of the rightness of the decision. For the majority of the participants, most important indicator of rightness was the consistency with which they made good ethical decisions. This sense of rightness was described as “instilled in me by parents” or “my upbringing” and a “personal values system.” For one respondent, the test of a correct decision sometimes was “if I can wake up the next day and know that I’d make the same decision again then it’s all good.” Many of the participants relied on an appropriate “common sense” blended with professional codes of ethics and conduct to guide their personal sense of ethical decision-making from a personal set of values that included compassion, honesty, respect, and forgiveness. For some, these values were grounded in religious faith. For others, the values emerge from an understanding of “universal laws and principles” for treating all humans with dignity and respect.

The respondents noted the importance of being able to rely on their colleagues and staff to help in decision-making. One respondent noted the importance of “learning from other administrators who are good at what they do” as a positive influence for ethical behavior. They are supported by their faith in the goodness of others and in others’ abilities to make good decisions in the best interest of children. They rely on professional, religious, and personal codes of conduct, “policy manuals, experience, common sense” to ground their decision-making and determine, as best they can, what is the best course of action “to serve the greatest good” and “do what in my heart is best for kids.” However, data analysis revealed that community expectations and religious constraints, although important, were not the main guiding principles in their dealings with ethical dilemmas.

Ethical Decision-making Strategies

Discussing their strategies for ethical decision-making at work, participating principals emphasized their use of disciplined reasoning skills when making decisions; referral to a relevant ethical code as support for decision-making; and, advice and feedback from others as moral support and accountability mechanisms. Their strategies reflected the factors and grounds for making ethical decisions. For example, many of the participants commented on the importance of honoring their personal values of honesty and compassion as part of their strategy for making ethical decisions. Their strategies were often guided by a personal set of ethics based on religious or other codes of ethics and aligned with a professional code of ethics.

The use of disciplined reasoning and personal self-discipline was one of the strategies for some principals. One principal explained a step-by-step routine for making decisions:

#1 - Is it in the best interests of my students, and then my staff and school? #2 - If it is a "right" vs. a "wrong" decision, I move forward with my decision. If it is a "right" vs. a "right" decision, I go on to step 3. #3 - Would my mentor make this same decision? Would they be proud of me? #4 - If it were to be in the media, would I be comfortable with how I was portrayed? #5 - Will I be able to go to sleep tonight with a clear conscience?

Other respondents indicated their use of a structure or model for arriving at ethical decisions and that these often started with evaluating safety and security followed by how the decision impacts learning and other benefits for the child and the school. The models often included input from teachers and other colleagues to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the details and to enable the principal to develop a level of buy-in about the decision from those who will be affected.

The participants’ descriptions of their strategies reflected an awareness of the complexity of decision-making and of the need for multiple inputs as they move towards action on decisions. One principal explained, “I follow a filtering system: considering the decision or virtue of the particular action; considering the obligations and legalities of the problem; consideration of the

short and long term consequences; the relevant circumstances that pertain to the students.” Another respondent explained, “take some time to make a decision, gather all the facts, talk to people you trust (their opinion), talk to my spouse, ask for spiritual guidance, use my ethical tool kit, then make a decision.” Ethical decision-making strategies were similar in that the respondents sought to “listen to all sides and try to determine the ultimate ‘right,’ as often there are two ‘rights.’ Find a solution that works for all.” Finally, communicating the decision to all who are affected was a common component of their strategies.

The respondents noted that although they aim to use disciplined reasoning skills, codes of ethics, and advice from trusted others as strategies for making ethical decisions, they often turned to their personal ethics (religious-based or otherwise) and a sense of personal understanding about ethical behavior, a “sense of right and wrong,” to guide their decisions. The participants repeatedly mentioned the importance of keeping the best interest of children and their learning at the forefront of their decision-making.

Discussion

As evident from the data, moral agency is easier said than done. School principals, as moral agents seek ways to develop transparent processes for adjudicating and promoting decisions that align with their stewardship of ethical values and their efforts to mediate non-ethical but nonetheless important social values. As Sergiovanni (1996) and Starratt (2004) noted, educational leadership is productively conceived in terms of service to students, staff, and society. A sense of stewardship and commitment to the care for others is also one of the key characteristics of moral agents (Hester and Killian 2011). From our findings we see that the exercise of agentic service in the escalation of exogenous and endogenous pressures and complexity is daunting for school principals. This exercise becomes even more daunting as leaders are considered architects of the organizational moral ambiance (Wagner and Simpson 2009). Therefore, securing the best interests of children and fostering vibrant learning community environments are paramount concerns for principals as school leaders.

As Strike (1999) posited, there would probably be less stress in leadership positions if leaders paid attention to developing and maintaining an appropriate moral vision for their schools. Moreover, if it is true that leaders fail because they lack vision or virtue or both, then our informant principals provide us with a snapshot of both vision and virtue. Their ethical vision and virtue are expressed through their conscious commitments to ethical principles and their courage to act in a manner consistent with them. Moral agents in our study know that people expect their school administrators to do right rather than wrong, to promote good rather than evil, and to act justly rather than unjustly (in other words, to be virtuous). They were also cognizant that not every ethical decision is a matter of “right versus wrong,” as they have often resolved “right versus right” dilemmas (Kidder 2005). Having a moral platform to stand on and to stand up to difficult issues was seen as an important feature of moral efficacy for these principals. But more than this, the principals that informed this study expressed the need for their efforts to establish and maintain trust between and amongst the various partners in education. Not only moral competence, as posited by researchers (Kohn 1997; Paul-Doscher and Normore 2008), but also moral grounds on which leaders can rely help with the establishment of trust among stakeholders.

The principals indicated the connections between personal and professional ethics, and, indeed, the connection between their behaviors and attitudes and the general reputation of the profession of principal-educators, as personals and professionals of integrity. These factors were significant for developing their strategies for making ethical decisions that possessed, in varying degrees, features of mixed consequentialism, deontologism, and non-consequentialism (Rebore 2001; Strike, Haller, and Soltis 1988). A self-proclaimed call for school leaders to equip themselves with effective and ethical global positioning systems (grounds, warrants, and

strategies for their moral agency) was a key finding in this study. Of course, any ethical commitment can be misused, misinterpreted, or manipulated. However, as expressed by participating principals, the confidence in their own ability to consistently make good ethical decisions and faith in the ability of others to do the same seems to exert hopefulness for effective ethical decision-making in school administration.

Conclusions and Implications

The greatest practical implication of this research is its potential for providing educational leaders with a better understanding of the nature of ethical decision-making such that they, ultimately, are better able to make the tough ethical choices with integrity. From this study we have seen that much of the work of the principal calls those who hold such positions to assume the role of moral agent with an overriding moral and educative purpose. By their own formulation, they are to serve their constituents (principal stakeholders) in a fashion that expresses personal integrity and sound ethical judgment, while assuring that other agents and beneficiaries give and receive the highest possible quality of ethical service (education), through well-considered decision-making and moral strategies. There appears to be a rather short list of ethical values and principals by which most of the principals in our sample operated. They were grounded in the common principals and accompanying behavior of caring, honesty, justice, and promise-keeping (to name a few). The ascertaining of appropriate knowledge to make critical and timely decisions, the importance of collaboration in key decision-making moments, the positive regard afforded to professional and school system mandates (duties), multiple expectations (role virtues), and the consequences (impact) of decisions made were each highly regarded and commended. The public and direct constituent trust were seen, by those in this study, as fragile and as demanding their attention through constant efforts to work with all persons and groups to build mutual respect and to enhance communications. Navigating the mind fields of complex situations and the constant demands required principals-as-moral-agents to be learners, committed to the cause of education and the good of all.

The need to further examine the realities of school principals' moral and ethical agency continues to be an important type of research because of its implications for school leader development and the need to clarify the range of grounds and strategies entailed in the practice of the principalship. While there has been increased attention for this topic, there will always be a need to continue research for this field of study.

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Dr. Benjamin Kutsyuruba: Assistant Professor, Faculty of Education, Queen's University, Kingston, Ontario, Canada

Prof. Keith Walker: Professor, Educational Administration, Johnson Shoyama Graduate School of Public Policy, University of Saskatchewan, Saskatoon, Canada

Dr. Sabre Cherkowski: Assistant Professor, Faculty of Education, University of British Columbia, Okanagan, Kelowna, British Columbia, Canada

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