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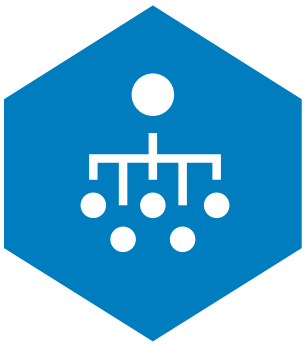

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Perspectives of Canadian Principals

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Ethical Challenges in School Administration: Perspectives of Canadian Principals

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Abstract: The nature of ethical decision-making by educational leaders as moral agents has become a topic of increased attention in the field of educational administration. This article reports findings from a descriptive ethics study that allowed the participating Canadian school principals from the ten provinces and three territories (n=177) to express their own meanings and understandings with respect to the nature of ethical decision-making, types of ethical challenges, pressures and grounds for resolving ethical dilemmas. The research methodology consisted of self-report, open-ended questionnaires administered in both mail-out and on-line forms. Findings revealed that most often work-related ethical issues in their schools arose between school administration and teachers and staff. In their dealings with ethical dilemmas, participants experienced internal pressure of staying true to personal values and external pressure of stakeholder groups with different agendas. The concept of the best interests of students was regularly described as the core or center of ethical decision-making and the heart of educators' work. 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 are, ultimately, better able to make the tough ethical choices with integrity.

Keywords: Moral Agency, Ethical Decision Making, Educational Administration, Canadian Principals

Introduction

The nature of ethical decision-making by educational leaders as moral agents is a topic garnering increased attention in the field of educational administration. Numerous scholars and researchers describe the contrast between the normative duties and actions of ethical leaders as compared to technical-rational leadership practice (Rucinski and Bauch 2006). Addressing the common focus on pragmatic and operational matters, Leithwood (1992) advocated for greater emphasis on the leaders' internal processes, attitudes, values, and beliefs. Problems in the external environment and within the educational system give rise to daily challenges for educational leaders (Fullan 1993; Hodgkinson 1991; Rebore 2001; Sergiovanni 1992; Sockett 1993; Starratt 1991, 2005; Strike and Ternasky 1993). The need to examine the realities in human organizations and professional responsibilities with moral and ethical lenses is important work for scholars (Starratt and Leeman 2011). Leaders, as moral agents in their organizations, are often charged with choosing a certain course of action from alternatives.

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 about the types of ethical problems and challenges in their schools, their experiences with pressures and influences in making work-related ethical decisions, and their perceptions of the nature of ethical decision-making in schools. Before analyzing the participants' perceptions, we review the literature on educational leadership as a moral endeavour, moral agency of school leaders, and decision-making through a multidimensional ethical framework comprised of ethics of justice, care, critique, community, and profession. The article concludes with the analysis of the participating principals' perspectives in relation to the extant literature.

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Ethical Perspectives in Educational Leadership

While the principalship has traditionally been framed within the notions of 'administration' or 'management', only recently leadership has overtaken them as the main descriptor for what is entailed in running and proving public service organizations (Bush 2008; Hoyle and Wallace 2005; Selznick 1984). Leadership is often linked with change, vision, values or purpose, whereas management and administration are related to maintenance, implementation, or technical issues (Bush 1998; Cuban 1998). However, both dimensions of organizational activity are present and important in the role of school administrators (Bush 2011). As Hallinger (2003) argued, leadership perspective on the role of the principal does not diminish the principal's managerial role. Starratt (2004) cautioned about presenting and interpreting issues that school leaders face primarily as technical, rationalizable problems resolvable by technical, rational solutions, and not surfacing the human, civic and moral challenges nested in many of those problems. Similarly, Sergiovanni (1992) implied that technical expertise without a moral compass is inadequate for the task, as is a moral compass without technical expertise.

Applied ethics help educational leadership to move from bureaucratic systems and control toward teacher empowerment and participatory decision making (Rucinski and Bauch 2006). Ethical considerations enlarge and enrich the language and frames of deliberation for school leaders with respect to their professional and moral purpose, obligations and agency on behalf of students and other stakeholders. In this article, we have positioned the moral agency as an important aspect for leaders' ethical deliberation and determinations. Our interest here is to provoke enhanced dialogical competence, particularly with respect to ethical issues and decisions in schools.

Ethical Leadership and Moral Agency

The practice of ethical leadership is essentially a two-part process involving personal moral behaviour and moral influence (Brown and Treviño 2006). Ethical leadership is viewed as "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). Moral action of leaders constitutes of carrying out their duties and shaping the ethical contexts of their groups, organizations, and societies (Johnson 2004). In addition to demonstrating moral character traits, making wise decisions, and mastering ethical challenges of their roles, leaders are also responsible for the ethical behaviors of others. Leaders become moral agents; how followers behave depends on large part on the example set by leaders. Campbell (1999, 152) observed that central to much of the ethical leadership literature is that "educational leaders must develop and articulate a much greater awareness of the ethical significance of their actions and decisions." As Starratt (1991, 187) suggested, ultimately "educational leaders have a moral responsibility to be proactive about creating an ethical environment for the conduct of education." Conversely, leaders become products of their own creations: "ethical climates promote the moral development of leaders as well as followers, fostering their character and improving their ability to make and follow through on ethical choices" (Johnson 2004, xxi)

In their examination of the daily practices of school administrators, researchers (Langlois 2004; Langlois and Starratt 2001; Starratt and Leeman 2011) discovered that certain situations were increasingly challenging for them in terms of how they justified their decisions and in the difficulty they experienced in understanding the ethical issues within their practice. Similarly, Beckner (2004) posited that to many administrators, philosophy and ethics seem rather far removed from the everyday challenges of educational leadership and management, while they tend to rely more on experience and personal judgment. However, 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). Moreover, 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."

The use of the notion of moral agency varies across different sectors but typically a formal school leader/administrator (agent), is seen acting on behalf of another person or an organization. Moral agency is a person's ability to make moral judgments based on some commonly-held notion of right and wrong and to be held accountable for these actions (Angus 2003). Moral agency is characterized by consistent ethical living, the development of one's moral character, the cost of following the principles of ethics, and the care one has for others (Hester and Killian 2011, 96). Agents are morally bound to pursue the aims of their "principal" or superordinate without violating the rights of others or doing anything immoral. As moral agents, school leaders must determine the best ethical course of action by weighing competing interests of stakeholders.

Multidimensional Ethical Paradigms

Scholars have produced and elaborated multidimensional ethical frameworks (Begley 2006; Furman 2004; Katz, Noddings, and Strike 1999; Shapiro and Gross 2008; Shapiro and Hassinger 2007; Shapiro and Stefkovich 2001; Starratt 1994; Stefkovich 2006) that envisage and conceptualize the impact of different ethical perspectives or paradigms on educational leaders. Developed in response to the complex ethical challenges facing contemporary society, the approaches of ethic of justice, ethic of care, ethic of critique (Starratt 1994), ethic of profession (Shapiro and Stefkovich 2001) and ethic of community (Furman 2004) may be drawn together by principals to create an integrated framework for ethical practice. As Starratt (1994) noted, the interpenetration of each of these ethical and interpretative themes is necessary for the fully developed moral person, fully developed human society, and, we would add, the agentic leader. We contend that the ethics described below should not be set in opposition to each other but viewed as collectively comprising an ethics system with a web of concepts and applications.

Ethic of Justice

The *ethic of justice* focuses on rights, law and policies, and concepts such as fairness, equality and individual freedom (Noddings 1999; Shapiro and Hassinger 2007). Starratt (1994) conceived the ethic of justice as requiring that we govern ourselves by observing justice, and henceforth treat each other according to some standard of justice uniformly applied to all relationships. Denig and Quinn (2001) stated that this ethic perceives ethical decision making as rational, logical, systemic and enhanced by universal principles.

Ethic of Care

Rucinski and Bauch (2006) called for in-school administrators to be grounded in the ethic of care and in the belief in the sacredness of human relationships and the good of human beings within the school organization. Noddings (2005) and Sergiovanni (1992) challenged the dominant status of the ethic of justice and called for attention to concepts such as loyalty, trust and empowerment inherent in the *ethic of care*. Beck (1994, 20) contended that "the communal relationships between people mean that the welfare of each is inextricably related to the welfare of others…such that caring for others is, in fact, caring for oneself."

Ethic of Critique

The *ethic of critique* is typified by a critical inquiry of differences, social justice and human dignity, and the morality of social and political resistance (Shapiro and Hassinger 2007; Starratt 2003). It is aimed at awakening our attention to the inequities found in schools and in society and represents a challenge to the status quo in order to give a voice to the marginalized (Rucinski and Bauch 2006; Stefkovich 2006).

Ethic of Profession

A number of scholars (Beck 1994; Begley 1999; Normore 2004; Shapiro 2006; Starratt 2010; Stefkovich 2006; Willower 1999) advocate for school administrators to have professional preparation in ethics, and especially in ethical decision making. As leaders strive to make ethical decisions with the context of educational settings, Shapiro and Stefkovich (2005) suggested that educational administrators would be well served by using the best interests of the student as the heart of their decision making. Similarly, Starratt (2004, 2010) argued that educational leader's professional ethical responsibility is to promote the good of the practice of the profession, namely to promote the good of learning, the good of general education.

Ethic of Community

Furman (2004, 215) defined an *ethic of community* as "the moral responsibility to engage in communal processes." An ethic of community envisages administrators, teachers, school staff members, students, parents, and other community members engaging in communal processes as they pursue the moral purposes of schooling. An ethic of community privileges the communal over the individual as moral agent – its shift of the locus of moral agency to the community as a whole. According to Furman (2004), the ethic of community captures the centrality of this need for collaborative work and communal processes in a way that the ethics of justice, critique and care (Starratt 1994) and the profession (Shapiro and Stefkovich 2001) do not.

Given these ethical paradigms for decision-making, what challenges arise and how they are dealt with in the ethical adjudication work of school principals? These were the questions we attempted to understand through the research study detailed in this article.

Research Methodology

This article reports findings from a descriptive ethics study. Inasmuch as possible due to methodological constraints, this study attempted 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 by harvesting email and mailing addresses of the principals and schools 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 about their work-related ethical issues were analyzed and grouped according to three categories: a) the types of ethical problems and challenges, b) the pressures and influences in making ethical decisions, and c) the perceptions of the nature of ethical decision-making in schools.

Types of Ethical Problems and Challenges in Schools

Participating principals indicated that they encountered ethical challenges fairly often in their interactions with various stakeholders – teachers, staff, central office administration, parents, and students. The data revealed that most frequent work-related ethical issues in the participants' schools arose between school administration and teachers or staff. They reported mediation in instances of professional conflicts (tensions over job parameters, instruction, evaluation, supervision, scheduling, staffing and teaching loads, extra-curricular expectations); professional misconduct (inappropriate behavior with students, verbal and physical abuse); communication issues (breach of confidentiality, miscommunication, lack of candor); abusing rights to school property (stealing, misuse of resources); dishonesty (misuse of professional days, sick leave abuse); and personal conflicts (accusations, blaming, gossips, backstabbing; personality clashes); to name a few. School administrators described enacting moral agency to resolve a wide variety of issues. For example:

> Secretary absconded with $8000, drug addict; do you charge or not?
>
> Staff member suspected of taking product and/or money from a school program, no checks/balances in place to prove losses, this had gone on for many years;
>
> Request for sick time when they need a day for personal time—should they be taking time without pay? How do I deal with teachers' attitude of entitlement and to what extent do I have to 'set them straight'?
>
> Our school's security was threatened because over the years many people had gained keys to the building. To rectify the situation, we had the school rekeyed. The new key system gave teachers a sub-master [key] that allowed them access to most areas but not all—maintenance rooms, administrative offices, etc. This caused one of the teachers to become upset. He became disengaged and would not communicate with the administrative team for over a month and refused to take part in the leadership team activities;
>
> Teacher (long service and very popular) accused multiple times of inappropriate activities with female students; new principal (me) oversees sanctions imposed by the School District; appearance is that I caused the problem because he got away with it before;
>
> A teacher was telling me I wasn't being ethical because I was supporting a student and not the teacher (student had been held up against the wall by the teacher).

Ethical dilemmas that principals were commonly related to issues arising between teachers and parents and between the administration and parents. These tensions were described as related to parental reaction to decisions made in attempt to resolve discipline issues with students. For example,

> Bullying was discovered that had been going on for a long period of time with no intervention; school's intervention was not well received by parents causing the principal to move to a new school;
>
> A situation of conflict arose between two students. One was suspended the other was not. This created quite a clash between the parent of the child suspended and myself;

> Whether to retain to follow policy or make a point or to do what is socially – ethically right – give this student an additional choice;
>
> Knowing when to call parents regarding discipline issues when I suspect the students will face harsh discipline from parents.

In some cases, principals felt unethical decisions affecting them. For instance, one administrator shared that:

> Parents voiced mad allegations regarding my performance; senior administration supported the parents, never asked me to share my perspective, although my track record was impeccable; senior administration moved me without consultation; I consulted as to my actions with my professional group – to no avail. I am degraded, devastated, discarded, disillusioned.

Instances of ethical quandaries in addressing students' behaviour and discipline, such as:

> Difficult decisions, whether to retain the student and thus to follow policy or make a point, or to do what is socially – ethically right – give this student an additional choice;
>
> Knowing when to call parents regarding discipline issues when I suspect the students will face harsh discipline from parents.

Ethical decision-making commonly hinged on giving priority to policy and legal procedures or showing care and using professional judgment as to what outcome would serve the best interests of students.

The least frequently indicated ethical dilemmas associated with the principals' dealings with the school system, school board, and senior administration. Those issues involved dealing with politics at the Central Office, where they felt decisions were made "without regard to what was in the best interest of students." For example:

> Decisions made at the central office level without consultation of administration at the school level;
>
> Senior administration influenced by wealthy and influential parents;
>
> Eight years ago I was passed over in the hiring process for a job that I had set as a goal early in my career. It was a political decision at the central office level. Politics is the root of evil in our education system.

Overall, principals indicated that the ethical practices in central office management of personnel have changed significantly over the years, with many of administrative decisions being "political" in nature.

Pressures and Influences of Ethical Decision-making

The ethical decision-making process for participating school administrators was fraught with pressures to make the "right" decision that will benefit the situation the most. On the one hand, comments revealed the *internal* or inner pressure of staying true to personal values. In their ethical deliberations, principals found themselves reflecting on questions like: "Will the decision I make be the right one?" "Did I take the time to make the best decision?" "What if I'm wrong? What if this makes things worse?" On the other hand, they emphasized the immense *external* pressure coming from "wanting to please everyone" and considering wishes and expectations of

stakeholder groups with different agendas; namely, government(s), senior administration, teachers, staff, students, parents, and larger community.

Within their accountability to the school community and individuals, a number of participants felt "pressured to make popular decisions rather than ethical or fact-based ones." However, they often realized that popularity and fairness of decision did not always equate with "rightness;" as one principal stated, "decision may not be 'popular,' and it's difficult for people to accept a decision they may not agree with." Additional pressures came from the need for obtaining complete information or "getting the truth" before a decision is made. Common concerns among participants were the amount of "time that is required to make sure maximum knowledge is gained before decision is made," as well as maintaining confidentiality in justification of their decisions to others who would not be entitled to possess comprehensive information and details about the ethical situation.

The Nature of Ethical Decision-making in Schools

The best interests of students were regularly described as the *core* or *center* of ethical decision-making and the *heart* of educators' work. Some of the responses were: "The standard is that we do what is best for students; we always take the high road" and "So long as any decision is made with due regard for the children's benefit, it is ethical." It was evident that the respondents mitigated decisions of best interest by placing the students at the *heart* of decision-making, or as one respondent articulated, "we need to see to their needs ahead of our own." Respondents identified an ethical duty and responsibility toward providing students with best possible care and attention including decisions on their behalf. The sense of service prevailed: "Students are our client and we have a responsibility to our students" and that an agreed central purpose of education, best interests, should be "to serve students." Finally, respondents indicated that in their ethical decision processes they had to acknowledge the complexity of educating students and recognize their multi-faceted lives. Respondents indicated that the holistic approach for understanding what best interests entail embraces "academic, social, emotional, spiritual and intellectual criteria," or in other words, "all the needs, dimensions and variables of student life."

In their musings, school administrators discussed the challenge of addressing the collective or individual best interests of students. Despite the widespread articulation that the majority of students' interests should take precedence, many respondents acknowledged the recognition of individual student needs. Such course of inquiry was highly dependent on situations imagined or experienced by the respondents. However, most of the respondents identified the need for a balanced approach in weighing the interests of the collective student body and each individual student: "We always need to do what is in the best interest of individual students, however, we must be aware of the message that our decisions send for the collective learning community we serve." With this comes the difficulty of being multi-focused, or "the balancing of individual and common needs when making decisions." Instrumental in this test was the relation of the 'best interests of students' principle with the notions of fairness and equality, or as one principal phrased it: "fair is not equal; fair is giving everyone what they need, but yet what is best for each child."

Principals commonly expressed their belief that ethical decisions are based upon the best interest of not only students, but also other stakeholders (staff and parents) with regard to policy and procedures. The point that "an ethical decision is the one made in the best possible interest of everyone involved or affected," was mentioned by a number of participants. As one administrator noted, he was "trying to be a good mediator so that all stakeholders [were] satisfied with final decision." For some, a valid test for ethical decision-making was "whether someone benefits or is hurt by the decision."

Participants seemed to have developed certain approaches and criteria system to guide their decision-making process. As one principal stated, "I follow a filtering system: considering the

decision or virtue of the particular action; considering the obligations and legalities of the problem; considering the short and long term consequences; and considering the relevant circumstances that pertain to the students." Principals indicated that they usually researched all aspects of the concern and took time to reflect on the issue. Some resorted to the use of online and published resources on ethics and seek assistance from materials used in their ethics training courses or professional development activities. Furthermore, respondents frequently consulted with other administrators or more experienced teachers: "I run through my ideas/take on a situation with my vice-principal/or other staff member to hear how it sounds and seek feedback." Even when at the end of the day they had to realize that some decisions could only be made by an administrator, responding principals highly valued collaborative decision-making and the importance of trust their colleagues afforded their professional judgment.

Discussion

Through the analysis of these findings, we have seen the array of situations entailed in the work of principals who indirectly and directly deal with ethical challenges. When one assumes the benefits of leadership, one also assumes ethical burdens, as there are ethical consequences associated with exercising influence over others; thus, ethics are at the heart of leadership (Johnson 2004).

The findings of this study highlighted the ethical struggles of principals with at least two types of ethical problems (Higginson 1988; Walker 1995). Some ethical problems are clearly matters of right or wrong (such as issues of gossip, stealing, dishonesty, misconduct, breach of confidentiality, etc.). As Walker (1995) found, these "misdeed problems" present no sustained conflict between values and appear to be generally agreed upon as "black and white" in nature. The misdeed category problems were described in this study as being ethical because they possessed or presented characteristics of clear ethical wrongdoing in the eyes of school administrators. These problems characteristically pushed against what have been considered to be core ethical values held by administrators or by those within their organizational setting. These problems were understood by the principals as potential challenges to the ethical tone of the educational environment.

On the other hand, there are those problems that educational leaders really struggle with, rationally and emotionally (Walker 1995). These "quandary problems" become more complex by the disagreements, value conflicts, and context specific variables. These are the so-called "gray area" or "swampy" problems (Leithwood, Begley, and Cousins 1992). Higginson (1988, 16) stated that such dilemmas are deeply agonizing and involve an enormous amount of heart-searching and tossing arguments backwards and forwards, and continued: "peace can ensue when a decision is finally made, but there is no guarantee of that." Principals reflected on *internal* pressure of staying true to personal values in their ethical deliberations and struggled with decisions even after they were made. These dilemmas were also discussed in our study in relation to *external* pressures and influences in principals' mediation of stakeholders' interests. They often had to find a balance between best interests' of students and other stakeholders to make a sound moral and ethical decision. Similarly to Leithwood, Begley, and Cousins (1992, 44), we found that the significance assigned to such problems by an educational leader was highly situational and subjective. As they claimed, decision-making with such dilemmas depends on administrators' "existing knowledge, skills and dispositions – presumably a function of such things as previous experience with similar problems, relevant education and support."

Ethical pressures and challenges in this study highlighted the interplay between the individual and communal notions of moral agency. The individual agentic characteristics identified by the participants reflected consistent ethical living and role-modeling, development of moral character, following the principles of ethics (and the cost of doing so), and caring for others (Hester and Killian 2011). In school leaders' work, a number of agentic relationships

(stakeholder groups) competed for their attention: government(s), senior administration, teachers, staff, students, parents, and larger community. This finding reflects one of the two major tensions of principals' daily work – the tension between their own strongly held personal/professional values and the plurality of values expressed by the school's publics (Kelchtermans, Piot, and Ballet 2011; Starratt and Leeman 2011). Obviously, the greater the number and the more complex the relationships and more diverse the tasks of school leaders, the more complicated the agency. The more abstract the demands on the agent (school leader), the harder the work and the more likelihood of unmet expectations. When a principal's obligations to multiple and conflicting interests need to be balanced, the weighing of the relative strength of completing obligations must be founded on ethical considerations (for example, consideration of circumstances, consequences, conscience, common ethical principles, professional convictions, moral imagination). Principals are placed in positions requiring that they develop tiebreakers for dilemmas or find some justifiable mechanisms for determining the right, the good and the virtuous decision as they seek to decide ethically.

Some responding principals expressed having experienced the shift of the locus of moral agency to the community as a whole (Furman 2004), from a locus on either themselves as decision maker or from particular individual interests that had dominated their perspectives. School administrators were seen engaging in communal processes and collaborative decision-making with teachers, school staff members, students, parents, and other community members as they pursued the moral purposes of schooling. The concept of moral agency applies not only to individuals, but can be extended to organizations. Public agencies, such as schools, exists to serve a value that the society deems significant, but the mission and mandate of schools is full of competing values and competing priorities, multiple stakeholders, vague legislative intent, budget pressures, and shifting mandates. As Bowman and Williams (1997) stated, public organizations rarely have a consistent approach to ethics, which implies human service professionals struggle when faced with making ethical decisions. This gives rise to a need for ethical consciousness, ethical reasoning skills, ethical commitment and ethical courage in school administration and leadership.

Our findings support the usefulness of categories of ethical orientations: ethics of justice, care, critique, profession, and community for real-life ethical dilemmas in leadership practices of in-school administrators (Langlois and Lapointe 2007; Shapiro and Stefkovich 2011). Principals reinforced the interconnectedness of the ethics within the ethical decision making of in-school administrators. Starratt (2003) argued that each ethic needs the strong connections embedded in the other. Incidences of thinking consistent with the various ethics were prevalent amongst the data. In many cases the responses of the in-school administrators exhibited the complexity and layering of ethical interconnectedness. In-school administrators tended to balance the policy and law requirements (ethic of justice), the comprehensive needs of the stakeholders (ethic of caring), attention to the benefits and hurts of decision outcomes for various stakeholders (ethic of critique), collaboration, advice, stakeholder involvement (ethic of community), and universal standard of the profession (i.e., *best interests of students).* The interplay between various ethics is reflective of the second tension experienced by principals – the tension between their professional responsibilities to advocate for students as they negotiate the complexities of the learning process and the bureaucratic demands of the school system and its authorities for uniformity, predictability, control, efficiency, and effectiveness (Kelchtermans, Piot, and Ballet 2011; Starratt and Leeman 2011). Furthermore, this finding may be attributed to the years of experience, as the majority of the respondents in this study have been in the administrative positions for six or more years, and almost a quarter with 11 or more years of experience. The interconnectedness of ethics allows for fuller expression of ethical leadership and is linked to the number of years of experience gained as a principal; experience is a key factor in the development of a professional ethic that is reflexive rather than procedural (Langlois and Lapointe 2007).

Conclusions and Implications

The results of this study emphasized that the notion of moral agency in leadership is more about influence than position, and more about behaving ethically than giving orders that obligate others to organizational missions and strategies (Young and Hester 2004). Many of the everyday challenges of educational leadership and management for principals required decision-making of moral and ethical nature. Our findings support the claims by Rebore (2001) that ethics not only provide a framework for decision making, but also require reflection upon personal and professional values, attention to the disciplined ways of thinking, and ethical analysis to respond to the demands of administration and leadership.

Consideration of the actual ethical problems, which are perceived as relevant for practitioners, is important for enhancing both preparation programs and field-practice. As ethical reflection takes place in the actual situations of choice and action, academic ethics must take these situations of human moral wrestling as the primary material of ethics and bring resources that enhance the quality of judgment and action (McCoy 1985). This study brought many situations of human moral wrestling in school administration to the foreground. As Cooper (1990) pointed out, administrators must develop skill in thinking about ethical problems, toward the end of creating a working professional ethic of their own. Furthermore, without cultivating this ability to theorize and generalize from experiences, no public administrator can transcend the boundaries of particular events to comprehend and assess them. Similarly, Shapiro and Stefkovich (2011) believed that educational leaders should be given the opportunity to take the time to develop their own personal codes of ethic based on life stories and critical incidents, and create their professional codes based on the experiences and expectations of their working lives as well as a consideration of their personal codes. Factors that play out in the development of professional codes may include, but not be limited to, the inclusion of considerations of community standards, including both the professional community and the community in which the leader works.

Ethical problems and pressures outlined in this article represent an agenda for practitioner discussions concerning the “gray area” challenges of educational leadership.

Providing school leaders with competencies to increase their awareness of these quandary problems and to equip them to better handle the inevitable conflicts between competing values and demands is recommended. Hodgkinson (1991) suggested that various social, economic, and political factors call for extra-ordinary value sensitivity on the part of educational leaders. We contend with his claim that the conscious practice of administration is properly called praxis and that to ground action on the best theory available should be the highest function of the executive. Therefore, the greatest practical implication of our research is its potential for providing educational leaders with a better understanding of the nature of ethical decision-making such that they are, ultimately, better able to make the tough ethical choices with integrity.

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