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**HOW VICE PRINCIPALS RESPOND TO MORAL  
DILEMMAS****Heather Rintoul**  
Nipissing University  
North Bay, Canada

Although the decisional leadership practices of school principals has been a central theme in scholarly literature for some time now (Begley, 1999; Begley & Johansson, 2003; Drake & Roe, 2003; Rintoul, 2006; Sergiovanni, 1992 & 2001; Starratt, 2004), much less has been written about vice principal decision-making (Marshall & Hooley, 2006). Often pejoratively considered the ‘armpit of the system’ (Wynott, 2005) the vice principal role seems a somewhat equivocal one (Armstrong, 2005), ill-defined and sandwiched as it is between the whims and demands of the principal/board and the needs and requests of students/parents. Nevertheless, the vice principal (called the assistant principal in the U.S., the deputy head in Britain, and the deputy principal in Australia) is an entry level position in administration. As second-in-command behind the school principal, the vice principal is charged with making many decisions every day around a plethora of substantive issues (for example: student discipline and attendance) that often defy easy resolution (Begley & Johansson, 2003; Rintoul & Goulais, in-press; Sergiovanni, 1992; Stengel & Tom, 2006). Moreover, the ‘do things right’ decision-making style of consequence and consensus now appears neither appropriate nor satisfying for vice principals trying ‘to do the right thing’ (Armstrong, 2005; Begley, 1999). Within this new urgency lies an inherent tension, in that, “to do the right thing” conjures the question “the right thing for whom?” In one situation, the right thing for the school community may conflict with the needs/goals of the board. In another instance, the right thing for the individual may negatively impact the needs/rights of other stakeholders (Greenfield, 2004). Unravelling the intricacies of resolution possibilities has become progressively more time-intensive and anxiety-ridden for

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vice principals navigating the decision-making landscape of their schools.

With an increasingly diverse school community, involvement in educational affairs has become more contentious concerning whose prerogative and expedience will have the most influence (Begley, 1999; Greenfield, 2004; Sergiovanni, 2001; Sobol, 2002). In a social reality of such complexity, vice principals are increasingly persuaded that the new requisite for navigating school-scape decision-making lies in ethically justifiable responses (Rebore, 2001; Begley, 1999; Rintoul, 2006; Rintoul & Goulais, in-press; Sergiovanni, 2001). As one vice principal, her hand near her heart, declared, “I have to live with my decisions here, in my soul.”

### **The Study**

Through analysis of their storied experiences, I sought to investigate and understand how 14 vice principals construe and manage decisional dilemmas in the context of their schools and school communities. I conducted a qualitative case study (Merriam, 1998) using in-depth personal interviews (Seidman, 2006) to investigate and comprehend (Anderson, 1990; Glesne & Peshkin, 1992; Greenfield, 1979; Seidman, 2006) the decision-making processes of vice principals contending with school-based dilemmas. Taped interviews of approximately one hour in duration, semi-structured and interpretive in nature were more conversational rather than in response to questions from the guide (Anderson, 1990; Merriam, 2001; Seidman, 2006). Emergent themes are derived directly from the interview data.

My participant sample included 14 vice principals from five different school boards in southern, central and northern Ontario, Canada. All have been educators in Ontario for at least seven years, first as teachers and presently as vice principals. All are from either elementary or secondary schools of the public system. Included are five males and nine females. Sixteen participants were known to me professionally and I contacted them directly. Two others were suggested by my participants. I purposively selected all (14) who expressed an interest in my topic and would agree to an in-depth personal interview. Both urban, from northern and southern Ontario, and rural (that is, neither urban nor suburban), from central and southern Ontario are represented. Ten participants are relatively experienced with four to five years in the

vice principal role, while three are less experienced with less than one year, to just over one year as vice principal. One very experienced participant has been in the role for just over seven years. They range in age from 31 to 44 years.

### **Discussion of Findings**

Searching for recurring themes across participant responses, I parsed interview data into five categories of their commonly-cited administrator dilemmas, specifically: 1) regulatory compliance, 2) interest dissonance, 3) time, 4) interpersonal tensions, and 5) monetary challenges. These categories are rarely separate and distinct, for part of the difficulty (as indicated by my participants) is that decisions made on one issue quite naturally have implications for other stakeholders frequently deepening the decisional challenge. Often, options acceptable to all stakeholders appear unavailable, and as a consequence, issues linger unresolved, as on-going reminders of tension and increased anxiety.

*Regulatory Compliance: “The rules are the rules are the rules”*

Participants disagreed about the significance of complying with school/board policies and directives. Some were highly skeptical of regulations viewing policies as frequently constraining, entirely too normative, often with an inherent retaliatory consequence, the “if you do/don’t do such-and-so, then this will happen.” Their examples include: mandatory suspension for non-attendance, suspension for swearing at a teacher, and too-strict rules related to in-school attire.

At the opposite end of the spectrum, still others viewed policies more as guiding statements affording ample room for professional interpretation. In this study, the longer the vice principal held his/her administrative position, the more likely were they to be somewhat flexible in applying school and board written regulations, and even more so concerning verbal directives/opinions such as phone exchanges, in-person conversations, and electronic communications.

A vice principal from a large northern urban elementary school recounted this incident.

A student was pushing people in the halls, running and hiding and jumping

out scaring people, being disruptive and aggressive. I had to physically restrain him—he was very strong even for two of us.

She called her superintendent who directed that she “not restrain the child but just let him run.’ I was not comfortable with that and eventually called 911.” When she called the board office to convey this latest action, a different superintendent responded and agreed that calling 911 was “okay,” but also that she now “restrict and restrain the child so he couldn’t hurt anyone.” In lieu of these conflicting directives, the vice principal felt justified in taking her own path. Uppermost in her mind was her “duty to protect her student population from harm,” therefore, “I continued to restrain him. My own superintendent really couldn’t provide anything else for me to do that I found acceptable.” This vice principal reported her actions in a timely fashion to her board, while using her initiative to make what she considered the appropriate decision given the circumstances and context, regardless of directives.

*Interest Dissonance: “It Just Depends”*

Another common challenge centred around complications that occur when a student’s best interest apparently impinges on the best interests of the school/board/community. Even with the best of intentions, decisional resolutions are frequently frustrating with dissatisfaction an ever-present constant for both the decision-maker and his/her student constituents. A vice principal recounted this incident from a large southern urban school.

I have a grade eight boy who is a bully of students and a manipulator of teachers. He has been suspended for creative lying and setting people up, like saying he saw someone taking something from a backpack when he really didn’t. He’d get everyone stirred up, and then become argumentative and defiant with the teacher in front of the students. He refused go to the alternate room or to the office when asked, so I suspended him and informed his mother.

The vice principal felt that it was in the student’s best interest and those of the school community that the student be removed from the volatile situation, giving him a cooling off period to reconsider his inappropriate and disruptive behaviour.

His mother went hysterical, became verbally abusive, screaming, accusing me of picking on him. She said people never listen to him and he has her permission to intimidate in order to be heard. Her idea of appropriate behaviour and mine are quite different.

A further subdivision of these ‘interest’ quagmires manifested as recurring dilemmas regarding just whose interests should hold the premier position. For example, one incident in central Ontario’s vacation area focused on out-of-school behaviour. “Two girls were caught and arrested for shop-lifting the day before their grade eight graduation and dinner cruise.” The vice principal (in concert with the principal) feeling that “the parents shouldn’t be punished for what the girls had done,” agreed to let the girls attend graduation but would not to allow them to participate in the celebratory dinner cruise as it was felt “they couldn’t be trusted.” An astounded vice principal soon discovered, “the mothers were absolutely outraged that the girls were being denied access to the cruise not feeling at all concerned about any supposed shame the girls had brought to their families.” Only the previous week one of these same mothers had called the vice principal “crying on the phone, distraught” that this same daughter “had been stealing money and make-up” from her purse. In this instance however, stealing was relegated to non-issue status because parents had spent their money on party clothing and were loathe to see it “wasted.” The depth of the outrage seemed to hinge on the depth of the parental monetary output for party clothing. The vice principal mused about the lesson the girls were learning when “you can get arrested one day and are allowed to party the next.”

One of the most commonly cited dilemmas concerns the weighing of individual interests against those of the wider school community, with most vice principals preferring first to examine each dilemma contextually from a “what’s best for the individual” perspective. They all have faced the perplexity of wanting to do what seems to be in the individual’s best

interest but to do so would conflict directly with the good of the school. The most senior of the vice principals remarked, “When you start making a decision for an individual student that has a negative impact on the school then that gets a bit dicey (tricky and problematic) because every student is just as important as every other one.” She and several others mentioned agonizing for days over “dicey” decisions. She continued,

My heart really goes out to these kids. Some have made very poor personal choices. They didn’t get sent here [to the vp office] by accident. I want to save this kid. Do I compromise some things in my values to benefit a particular student? *Yes!* [her emphasis] We can’t all fit into perfect boxes. If I’m giving a break to one student I just hope it won’t have a negative impact on the rest of the school.

One example she offered involved student behaviour towards girls.

Black youths are blocking access to a part of the hallway and comment on the girls. It’s sexual harassment, but it’s very messy to try and stop. We tell kids to move out of the hallway but then, am I forcing just Black kids to move? It’s mostly Black kids blocking the path, berating the Whites. Then the Whites berate the Blacks back. It’s been made into a race issue with educators being bombarded by parents and advocate groups who bully educators into making decisions not necessarily beneficial to all kids. The parents are driving it.

She (also a member of a visible minority, but not Black) has yet to resolve this issue to the satisfaction of stakeholders, but cannot “in good conscience” allow the harassment to continue. While she is insisting this issue is not race-based, the advocate groups and parents insist it is.

Of the 14 vice principals in this study the two most senior, a man and a woman, seemed to deliberate the longest and with the most mental

turmoil about their decision-making. Both are in southern Ontario urban secondary schools of 700 and 1900 students respectively, in middle to high socio-economic areas with a reputation of being challenging for school administrators. Like all my other vice principal participants, discipline issues are their responsibility.

In the largest school, the female vice principal was brought in by the principal “to clean up the school because parents were controlling the school with kids doing whatever they wanted.” She indicated that “attendance is horrible, the ‘late’ issue is huge,” with parents “not used to the behaviour of their children being called into question. Even a detention brings outrage. So, they call my supervisory officer, complaining about me and as a result he thinks I’m too harsh.” She feels pressure to bow to the board office but struggles against taking the “easy path” because she cannot, in good conscience, do what she feels is “morally corrupt.” She has the support of her principal but the board office is “unhappy with the number of parental complaints directed their way.”

The administrator having the second longest service is vice principal of another, as he termed it, “challenging” urban school. Somewhat in contrast to the previous principal’s view, he believes strongly that he ultimately must put the greater good ahead of the individual, resulting in decisions that are sometimes “uncomfortable,” giving him little satisfaction. He constantly searches for creative “wobble room,” a means of resolution that will enable him to make those decisions that are “ethically sound and satisfying at the end of the day.” But sadly, solutions that are “best for the child and best for the school” in many cases have yet to be found. “In a school of 700 or so people, even though you want to see each person as an individual, if they [sic] are infringing on the other 700, then the 700 have to win out. That sort of drives my decision.” He continued with a powerful caveat, “But at school I’m aware of the individual situations many of these kids are in. Some of their backgrounds are unreal in terms of the baggage they carry, the level of abuse at home. Then the decision becomes agonizing.” He recounted this, in his words, “horrible” story,

This girl came in, 14 years old, parents on welfare, mom having children continuously. The girl was pregnant and had absolutely no chance of

looking after the child, but the mother was almost proud the girl got pregnant because the mother was going to keep the baby. A big motivation is the cheque associated with it. I'm trying to work with this girl and the parents, in terms of schooling and ways to keep her coming to school. In the mother's eyes, whether the girl goes to school or not is irrelevant. Having that baby was the single most important thing. Now this is a real sticky issue because if you suspend for non-attendance, especially in this case, it's not helpful when the parents are non-supportive. I'm struggling with this because suspending for non-attending just doesn't work all the time.

In this instance, a solution to the attendance problem that is acceptable for his conscience, the school, the student, and the family still eludes him.

Several vice principals credit their training as Special Education Specialist for serving them well in their role as administrators, in that they were often called upon in that role to make difficult decisions regarding children. But another with similar training argues that the experience of coping with her own three children who had "disabilities, learning problems, and challenges of their own" were much more instrumental in assisting her with the decision-making processes in the vice principal position she now holds than "any Special Education or principal course. I tie myself to decency, equity, and fairness. All these choices really aren't in courses and books." The most senior vice principal thoughtfully offered, "It really depends on how I feel about it [the decision] afterwards. That's how I know if I've made the right decision."

Differentiating spheres of interest necessitate careful investigations and extensive deliberations by these administrators, as several noted, "on a case by case basis." One offered this incident in which a student was supposed to have a detention and didn't show up. It turned out that the student "had to buy groceries for his mother who was pregnant." But this seemingly simplistic tale had another twist in that the parent had to remain at home because "she was under house arrest." The vice principal views the 16 year old

as a "bright, under-achiever" and finds it a recurring struggle with the mother to get the young man to attend consistently. "Calling home every time he skips creates animosity between the school and the mother." The vice principal wondered aloud, "How does it benefit the student to see his mother openly undermining the school and defending his lies when he skips?"

*Time: "take time" and "get support"*

These vice principals were unanimous in their recommendation to "really try to take time for decisions" even though, as another put it, "Everyone wants an answer right away." In contrast to most of the senior vice principals, the most junior of the group indicated "I can't say I've ever felt pressured to take action that I did not believe was legitimate or warranted." Like others in this study she tends to be "very careful in decision-making" and gives herself "time and space to think— maybe a few hours, a half day, even over night." She credits her principal for encouraging her to construe the vice principalship in her own way.

Time difficulties surfaced around decision-making processes for special needs children. The number of children needing special accommodation appears to be increasing according to these vice principals. There never seems to be enough assigned educational assistants (EA) to adequately help all students needing special care and as a result only those in dire need get attention. One vice principal spends considerable time trying to schedule one full time and one part time EA for five children. "It's a game of trying to keep a lid on the thing and meet the needs of every child the best you can while trying to keep the big school picture in mind. The results of what I can manage are far from satisfying." This vice principal like many others relies on her "issue chats" with other vice principals.

In this study, those administrators who were relatively new to their positions were more likely to seek opinions and support from their colleagues. Such buttressing of support via telephone conferencing is especially common in rural areas where distances between schools and boards can be significant, making face-to-face discussions a rarity. There are also those who are uncomfortable contacting and disrupting a colleague's work day unless they know the person very well, preferring to silently soldier on alone.

This urge to seek collegial guidance also appeared to split along gender lines, at least in this study, with female leaders being much more likely to seek collegial confirmation than were their male counterparts. The split along gender lines may be impinged by the idea of the traditional male leader who is seen as “all knowing” and having the final, last, and irrevocable “right” answer. To suggest otherwise would have been unthinkable, therefore, some may not feel the need to seek assistance. Considering our more recent intentions toward inclusion and equity, this male/female split seems an intriguing area for further investigation.

*Interpersonal Tensions: “personal, moral and stressful”*

Several participants cited interpersonal situations as having ethical implications and being particularly stressful. Because the matters were deeply personal and intimate in nature, these vice principals tended to internalize moral struggles for a considerable time, often resolving conflicts, as one put it, “very poorly,” and another, “not at all.” Several cited professional embarrassment and feelings of powerlessness, finding themselves in morally untenable situations they could not resolve satisfactorily, both unable and unwilling to speak of them publicly.

Deeply-rooted enmity and acrimony between colleagues was a recurring issue often requiring considerable expertise, delicacy and discretion to resolve. Frequently, the genesis of the enmity was an off-shoot of unresolved racial or gender discrimination that tended to fester and poison both the interpersonal and professional atmosphere. One of the more experienced vice principals (who happens to be a visible minority) had an Administrative Officer (AO) who would not speak with her directly but would “ask my principal for details and by the time it got to me it had gone through several people—not at all my style.” Feeling “utterly frustrated,” the vice principal finally went in to the board office.

I confronted my AO and asked why he wouldn't have called me directly. He became very defensive and blamed it on my manner, even though we had never met, a cultural thing, explaining that I should take courses on dealing with the public.

The vice principal confided that she then made a “critical error.” She told her AO that she was “insulted” because he was “comparing her to a person who has difficulty dealing with the public,” and she does not perceive herself that way. She said, “I found his discussion insulting and I told him that. I shouldn't have done so. I explained to him that the difficulty is that I'm trying to enforce rules that have never been enforced at this school.” She claimed that the whole issue was “horrible” because he was her superior and at one point when she seemed to agree that there may be cultural differences between them, he asked, “Are you calling me racist?” He then proceeded to call in the Supervisory Officer (SO) who of course supported his AO.” Unfortunately, since then she has heard from reliable sources that her SO has made it his goal not to promote her even though her principal has stood up strongly for her. She mused, “I guess I should be better at the political game. I hate it though.”

Another vice principal spoke of an incident in which his female counterpart at school had drawn up a treaty and made the students “pinky-swear to tell the truth.” (For the uninitiated, ‘pinky swearing’ involves the joining of the smallest finger on your hand with that of another person.) When he called into question the merit of such a practice she responded the next day by complaining to their female principal that he (the male vice principal) had inappropriately touched a female student. The vice principal went to chat with his vice principal colleague who was making the “absurd” accusation but she wouldn't speak to him, instead telling the principal that the accused vice principal had “scared her by yelling.” Finding himself under investigation (even though his principal was supportive) he had to spend considerable time and delicacy proving his innocence and regaining his reputation. “Of course the pinky swearing discussion ended which is what she'd wanted anyway.” As a result, he will no longer have anything to do with this colleague without a witness present claiming she is a “manipulator, a dangerous personality.”

In another instance, a female teacher wanted her vice principal (also female) to suspend two girls for an accumulation of minor infractions: “they didn't bring the proper shoes” and “they were on the swings.” Feeling that these issues were rather trivial infractions and certainly did not warrant suspension, the vice principal refused to send the students home. As a

consequence, the vice principal learned that the teacher “bad-mouthed me to other teachers in my school, telling them not to take their problems to me, that I’m too soft on students and not supportive of my teachers.” The vice principal found her teacher’s behaviour “pretty unprofessional,” saying, “I can’t send students home just because a hard-nosed teacher wants me to.” She “felt badly about the situation with her teacher” but chose not to be confrontational, “hoping the situation would die a natural death,” anticipating that her subsequent actions would continue to reinforce to others that she was a good and caring administrator.

*Money: “Money? Where’s the Money?”*

“Ethically, everything in education comes down to money, whether class size, needs support or whatever.” Twelve of these 14 vice principals specifically mentioned decision-making processes for special needs children as being severely impacted by lack of funds. They are concerned that the number of children requiring special attention is increasing and that the necessary program funding is not keeping pace. One voiced her concern:

A handicapped child gets an EA about 50 percent of the time. Well, a child is handicapped 100 per cent of the time. There was a situation in Grade 2 where two little boys needed extra help and each was scheduled for a half time EA. I know that one little boy takes up far more than half the time so the one who is better behaved gets robbed of the support he should receive. I put them both in the same class to help alleviate this problem. This is a heavy ethical dilemma and I try to be the child’s advocate.

She does what she can for each child but acknowledges that sometimes it just “isn’t enough.”

**And Finally. . .**

As a testing and training ground for the principalship, the vice principalship is a multi-faceted, poorly-defined role (Rintoul & Goulais, in-press) focusing on satisfying the agendas of many educational stakeholders: principal, board, students,

colleagues, parents and the community. Most vice principals argue they have little training for the complexities of the dilemmas they face. Understanding that administrator decision-making reflects the moral and ethical climate of a school (Noddings, in Stengel & Tom, 2006; Rebore, 2001) the urgency to “get it right” is an on-going constant. As Greenfield has observed, “School leadership is, by its nature and focus, a moral activity” (Greenfield, 2004, p. 174). Decisional tasks can be broad-based, mentally challenging, time-consuming, and continuing sources of emotional anxiety (Begley, 2003). These vice principals appear to be seeking ethically-based solutions that they can live with, from their principals, their board superintendents and even themselves. They attempt to keep the big educational picture in view, but their guiding and clear focus continues to be assessing and addressing the on-going needs of their student constituents (Rintoul & Goulais, in-press). They fearlessly forge ahead undaunted, ready to make tough choices, when necessary, all in the best interest of their students. Said one, “I have to sleep at night.” Another participant perhaps summed up the vice principal decisional role best when she declared, “You will always have situations where people’s morals and ethics clash with yours, but you have to stand your ground if you know what the high road is and what’s best for the child.”

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## Note

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