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Students at the Centre: How 3 Secondary School Vice Principals Resolve Ethical Dilemmas.

**Heather M. Rintoul: Nipissing University
and
Richard Kennelly: Durham School Board**

Abstract:

The purpose of this qualitative study was to gain insight into the decision-making of 3 secondary school vice principals in Ontario, Canada when dealing with student-based dilemmas. In-depth recorded interviews revealed commonalities among participants in the adoption of a “doing the right thing” orientation in the best interest of the student(s). Ethical resolutions of dilemmas were accomplished by working in ‘grey areas’ of policy and practice to meet individual student needs. Compromise, balance and considering the perspectives of all stakeholders were key strategies necessary in resolving these complex and multi-layered ethical dilemmas.

Key words: ethics, dilemmas, values, administration, vice principals, best interest.

Complete Text

Interacting with students in the adjudication of school-based dilemmas appears to be particularly challenging for administrators both here in Canada and around the world (Cranston et al., 2004; Dempster & Berry, 2003). Such interactions often include resolving ethical dilemmas on an array of issues (Cranston et al., 2004; Dempster & Berry; Rintoul, 2010) impacting a range of school and community stakeholders (Dempster & Berry). Two of the most prominent streams of decision-making are commonly “doing things right” (procedural correctness) versus “doing the right thing” (acting ethically) where, in the latter consideration, administrators balancing the “best interest of the student” with the best interest of other stakeholders (Armstrong, 2005; Rintoul, 2011; Rintoul, 2010) has become increasingly challenging for vice principals. It is the navigation of this ethical minefield which is the focus of our current study. Through in-depth one-on-one personal interviews we wanted to understand if/how the three vice principals from three different schools within the same district school board in Ontario, Canada employ values and ethics in their adjudication of student-based dilemmas.

Study Rationale

The idea of a “transcending agenda” which calls on educational leaders and practitioners to reflect upon our own values, to be sensitive to the value orientations of an expanding group of stakeholders, and to encourage sustained

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dialogue with one another was put forward by Begley in 2006. Affirmed in research by Armstrong (2004) and Author (2010), many vice principals are challenged and troubled by the moral and ethical considerations in their daily interactions with students and other stakeholders (Begley). Compounding the difficulty for these administrators is the realization that they are poorly prepared to adjudicate many of ethical dilemmas/decisions which they are required to make (Armstrong, 2005; Cranston et al., 2004; Dempster & Berry, 2003; Kennelly, 2011; Leithwood & Steinbach, 1992; Rintoul, 2010) for, in Ontario, Canada administrators receive training for the principalship, not for the vice principalship (Rintoul, 2012). The vice principalship itself has long been considered merely an interim position for these *principals-in-waiting* (Rintoul & Goulais, 2010).

Definitions and Understandings

For the purposes of our research, all definitions occur at the personal level unless otherwise stated. Based upon the cited works and the definitions within them, but adopting a narrowed focus for this research, we contextualize and define morals as the thoughts, feelings and determinations of right and wrong in situations which may lead to an improved condition for those involved. For values, our definition contextualizes values as the ideas, beliefs, and concepts which influence choices that will lead to a moral outcome. Ethics, which, by definition occurs in the action position between values and morals, is influenced by Starratt (2004) and for our purposes will be understood thusly: ethics are considered the choices and actions, guided by values, which are used to resolve situations with a moral outcome. The working definition of ethical dilemmas is adapted from Cranston et al. (2004) and influenced by the various works of Shapiro, Stefkovich, Gross, and Hassinger with an in the best interest of the student viewpoint. We argue that ethical dilemmas are student-centered situations wherein vice principals must choose between competing and equally valid ethical actions to meet the best interests of affected stakeholders in achieving a moral outcome.

Review of the Literature

There seems to be some compelling reasons to include vice principals in the research on educational administration, more particularly with respect to their experiences as decision-makers. Vice principals outnumber principals for sheer presence within schools, vice principals are the pool from which principals are usually promoted, at least in Canadian schools (Armstrong, 2004), and vice principals are faced with decision-making dilemmas of substance that are not necessarily easily resolved (Rintoul, 2010).

Theories of Administration

In the literature there is considerable consensus as to centrality of values, ethics and morals to the role of school administration (Armstrong, 2004; Begley, 1996, 2006; Dempster & Berry, 2003; Greenfield, 2004; Lazaridou, 2007; Leithwood & Steinbach, 1992; Rintoul 2010; Sergiovanni et al., 2009; Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2011; Starratt, 2004; Wagner & Simpson, 2009). Most research can be sorted into two groups, those which consider motivations, meaning, or identification of specific values and ethics influencing administrators (Begley, 2006) and those examining processes of application (Begley, 2006; Cranston et al., 2004; Dempster & Berry 2003; Kennelly, 2011; Leithwood & Steinbach, 1992; Rintoul, 2010).

Similarly, there is considerable consensus that educational leadership is an innately moral undertaking (Begley, 2006; Greenfield 2004; Sergiovanni et al., 2009; Starratt, 2004; Wagner & Simpson, 2009). Acting in a moral way is not necessarily easy, as Sergiovanni (2005) points out, "Leadership as moral action is a struggle to do the right thing according to a sense of values and what it means to be a human being" (p. 113).

Values in Educational Administration

Whether in isolation or in conjunction with morals and ethics, the study of values seems to dominate current literature in educational administration to a great extent because of seminal scholars in the field like Hodgkinson (1991), Greenfield (2004) and Willower (1991). More recently researchers like Begley (2006), Shapiro & Gross (2008), Shapiro & Stefkovich (2011) and Rintoul (2010) have taken up the mantle. The various perspectives in the values literature span the continuum from the theoretical: the long-standing philosophical discussion about the origin of values, value formation, and the influence/impact of school administration (Hodgkinson, 1991, 2002; Richmon, 2004; Starratt, 2004); to the practical, with research attempting to identify the value processes which administrators use to solve dilemmas (Begley, 2006; Kennelly, 2011; Leithwood and Steinbach, 1992; Rintoul, 2010; Stefkovich and Shapiro, 2011). The process of solving ethical dilemmas puts values/ethics at the forefront given that ethics involves the selection of an action from value-informed choices (Begley, 1996).

Ethics in Education: Administration and Decision-Making

The consistent connection between ethics and decision-making/problem-solving/dilemmas aligns with the idea that all involve choices impacting individuals. The increased profile of ethical educational decision-making may be due to this inseparable connection between ethics and decision-making as suggested by Begley (2006),

Sergiovanni et al. (2009), Shapiro and Gross (2008), as well as Starratt (2004).

Begley (2006, 2000, 1996) advocates a problem-solving approach using values perspectives to inform administrative decision-making. Ethics of care, justice, and the profession are central in the work of Shapiro and Gross (2008), Shapiro and Hassinger, (2007), Shapiro and Stefkovich, (2011), as well as Stefkovich and O'Brien (2004).

Surprise! 'Ethical Leadership': It's important!

"Educational administration is also an ethical science concerned with good or better processes, good or better means, and good or better ends and, as such, is thoroughly immersed in values, preferences, ideas, aspirations, and hopes" (Sergiovanni et al., 2009 p. 130). This importance of ethical leadership is explicitly laid out in the writings of Begley (2006), Fullan (2001), Sergiovanni et al. (2009), Shapiro and Gross (2008), as well as Wagner and Simpson (2009). Similarly, Greenfield (2004) discusses how values are central to the role of educational administration and that value-based decision-making is an inherently moral activity because it involves children and relationships. Within the research-based literature, the importance of ethical leadership is treated as more of an assumption (Armstrong, 2005; Cranston, Erich & Kimber, 2004; Lazaridou, 2007) which supports the examination of issues or problems related to or based on ethics in school leadership.

The Nature, Scope and Source of Dilemmas

Dilemmas are one way that values and ethics come to the surface in educational administration. Cranston et al. (2004) studied the scope and content of dilemmas typically faced by school administrators while other researchers use dilemmas as a means to exemplify their problem-solving frameworks (Lakomski & Evers, 2010; Shapiro & Gross, 2008; Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2011; Stefkovich & O'Brien, 2004; Wagner & Simpson, 2009).

The literature confirms that dilemmas are integral in educational administration. As a fundamental challenge dilemmas reflect two aspects of the administrative role: they are guaranteed to occur and they present an inherently dangerous "minefield" (Dempster & Berry, 2003, p.1) to administrators. Shapiro and Gross (2008) state, "even in the best of times, educational leaders have confronted difficult moral dilemmas each day" (p. 3). Problem-solving in general is at the core of educational administration (Leithwood & Stager, 1989) and Leithwood and Steinbach (1992) argue that one in five problems are ill-structured or messy. Sergiovanni et al. (2009) note that value conflicts and ethically unique situations are just part of the job.

The quantity, complexity, and scope of the dilemmas are on the increase (Begley, 2006; Dempster &

Berry, 2003). This increase seems to be attributable to two areas of change in the school context of contemporary society: changes in society and the issues with which schools are required to deal are becoming far more complex, wide ranging and unpredictable. As a complication, schools are administered with high levels of central office and governmental directives combined with increased transparency and accountability (Dempster & Berry, 2003). Begley (2006) also attributes the increase to changes in society in that, when there are multiple cultural viewpoints, conflicts and dilemmas are usually more common.

Determining the source of the dilemmas and the values and ethics which interact are important aspects in understanding the vice principal role. Dempster and Berry (2003) identified four broad categories of ethical dilemmas: "students, staff, finances and resources, and external relations" (p. 464). The focus of their study was student-based dilemmas: harassment/bullying, student behaviour, home/school conflict, suspending students, and abuse/custody issues (Dempster & Berry).

Rintoul (2010) in a study of school administrators in Ontario, identified five categories: regulatory compliance, interest dissonance, time, interpersonal tensions, and monetary challenges. The first, regulatory compliance addresses conflict between board policies/ Ministry laws and the administrators' personal beliefs about the best course of action. Armstrong (2004), in another study of Canadian administrators, supports this idea. What Kennelly (2011) adds to the discussion is that the longer a person is in the administrative role, the less significance is placed on the regulations and the more flexibility is used in the resolution of dilemmas, perhaps suggesting that the more experienced the administrator the more fluid the resolution path, an idea noted by Greenfield (2004) and Shakotko (2005). The category of interpersonal tensions covers situations created within administrative teams wherein differing beliefs generate conflict in reaching consensus on the resolution of an issue (Armstrong, 2005; Rintoul, 2010).

If a situation were easy to resolve ethically, it would not be considered a dilemma. If the decision is between right and wrong, it should not be that difficult. The complicating aspect of ethical decision-making is that often the choice is not between right and wrong but rather between right and right and/or dependent upon a variety of equally valid viewpoints (Cranston et al., 2004; Dempster & Berry, 2003; Rintoul, 2010).

The Impact of Decision-Making

Much of the literature regarding decision-making centres around the dilemmas, substance, resolution processes, and the influences affecting decision-making. Researchers and scholars highlight the importance of ethical decision-making which implies that they comprehend the harm that unethical decision-making can

have on stakeholders (Begley, 2006, 2000, 1996); Starratt, 2004; Shapiro & Gross, 2008; Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2011). Starratt (2004) suggests that “educational leaders encounter certain situations that are challenging, not because of the technical problems they entail but because of the messy human problems or serious human consequences involved in the situation” (p. 6). To support the critical impact of administrative decision-making on the lives involved, Foster (1986) argued “Each administrative decision carries with it a restructuring of human life: this is why administration at its heart is the resolution of moral dilemmas” (p. 3).

“Doing the Right Thing” or “Doing Things Right”

The concept of ‘doing the right thing’ (acting ethically) versus ‘doing things right’ (procedural/rule-based correctness) is a recurring one as many researchers write about the explicit influence that each perspective can have on decision-making (Armstrong, 2005; Begley, 2000; Greenfield, 2004; Kennelly, 2011; Rintoul 2010, Shakotko, 2005). Armstrong, Kennelly, Rintoul, and Shakotko all speak to the experiences of practicing administrators who struggle when doing things the right way lead to outcomes which are troublesome. *Doing the right thing* sometimes works in the ‘grey area’ where rules are bent (Armstrong, 2005; Frick, 2008) and where Begley’s notion (2000) of ‘creative insubordination’ occurs. Armstrong, Author, and Shakotko indicate that there is a pattern of behaviour where, early in their careers, new administrators tend to make decisions more from a ‘doing things right’ rules-based perspective and over time adopt a more flexible ‘doing the right thing’ ethical point of view.

The Best Interest of?

“Best interest” is a concept prevalent in the literature (Armstrong, 2005; Begley, 2000; Dempster & Berry, 2003; Frick, 2008; Lazaridou, 2007; Rintoul, 2010; Shakotko, 2005). The best interest is related to *doing the right thing* in that it is the driver of action toward making ethical decisions. Researchers agree that in some situations this strategy can lead to conflict because the interests of individuals may be in opposition to those of other stakeholders. Frick (2008) observed that many administrators use the phrase *best interest of the student*; but few mentioned it when discussing how they resolved dilemmas.

Research Methodology and Method

In qualitative research, the goal is learning about individuals, relationships, how these individuals experience the world around them (Anderson & Arsenault, 1998; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Merriam, 2009), and finding meaning in those experiences through understanding social interactions (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005).

As our interests were in hearing the stories of three secondary vice principals and the meanings which

they gave to their experiences in dealing with students in ethically complex dilemmas (Merriam, 2009), we selected interviewing as the method to inform the research. Interviewing is a reliable and central means of data collection in qualitative inquiry (Merriam, 2009; Seidman, 2006), allowing for the collection of stories/reflections and reconstructions about events which occurred in the past (Merriam, 2009), and specifically providing the opportunity for the richness of data achieved by the vice principals telling their stories using their own words (Seidman, 2006). In this study the specific method used to collect the data was in-depth recorded interviews as part of a case study of three secondary vice principals (Merriam, 2009; Seidman, 2006).

Selection of Study Participants

Study participants were selected using purposive sampling (Glesne, 2011; Merriam, 2009; Seidman, 2006) with a maximum variation strategy (Anderson & Arsenault, 1998; Glesne, 2011; Merriam, 2009). The desire to gain the most insight and understand the viewpoints of 3 vice principals led us to purposefully select the participants (Glesne, 2011). With such a small sample and limited diversity within the sample population, we selected participants who, we felt might offer the most diversity of response. Seidman (2006) proposes that purposeful sampling is the most commonly agreed-upon method to use for sampling when random selection is not an option.

Sample Selection Criteria and Participant Overview

In order to elicit a maximum variation in potential responses, participants were selected for variation on a number of factors: gender, age, race, and education and administrative experience. Elise is a White female between 45 and 55 years old, has been an educator for more than 25 years, a vice principal for more than 5 years and has worked in that role at three different secondary schools. Mark is a 35—45 year old male of visible minority heritage, an educator for about 15 years and a vice principal for more than 3 years. Valerie is female, 35—45 years of age, of visible minority heritage who has been in education about 9 years and a vice principal for 3 years.

The Interviews: Procedures

Participants were interviewed once, from 40 minutes to an hour. The format of the recorded interviews was one-on-one (Merriam, 2009) using a semi-structured Interview Guide. This guide facilitated posing open-ended questions and provided the flexibility to ask follow-up questions based on each participant’s own responses (Merriam, 2009).

Data Analysis and Interpretation

No formal interpretation was done until all of the interviews were completed so that the data could be considered in its entirety, looking for patterns and themes.

Individual transcripts were sent back to the participant for review and amendment to better express their intended meaning (Seidman, 2006).

Each transcript text was organized with participant profiles created from participant statements. The context and content of responses were captured (Seidman, 2006) employing a thematic approach across participant responses (Merriam, 2009; Seidman, 2006). With only three participants, all comments by any participant were valued and included. When all statements had been classified, each section was examined for both similarities and differences, which were then grouped into themes and exceptions (Merriam, 2009).

Interpreting the Data and Ethical Concerns

Interpretations (Merriam, 2009) were used to develop follow-up questions in the conversation, travelling wherever the participants took their responses, then sorting, categorizing, and organizing responses for later reference. We then considered participant responses more holistically and provided interpretations regarding what had been learned or what questions arose through the interview process (Glesne, 2011; Seidman, 2006).

We were very conscious that there is no separation between who we are as people and as researchers (Seidman, 2006). There were ethical concerns about data collection, given the risky nature of participants speaking about their values, ethics and actions, and we feared potential participants might not want to contribute. No one refused, but there was still some concern that the nature of the subject matter might reveal some participant hesitancy in providing full and honest details. Given the potential of this study to perhaps influence the future practice or study of vice principals, we were careful to mitigate participant anxiety.

Anonymity, Confidentiality, and Informed Consent

To help protect the identity of the participants, pseudonyms were used and the confidentiality of participant responses were guaranteed (Seidman, 2006) retaining all identifying information in a safe locked environment (Seidman, 2006).

Informed consent is one of the fundamental principles of ethical research (Anderson & Arsenault, 1998). Each participant was given oral and written assurances about the signed and informed consent outlining participants' rights around issues of anonymity, confidentiality, and the right to refuse to answer any question and/or withdraw from the study at any time without any penalty whatsoever (Seidman, 2006).

Interpretation and Analysis

Despite the diversity of experiences and viewpoints, participants' responses revealed some recurring themes related to ethical conflicts: 1) *the best interest of students*, 2) *the importance of relationships with*

students, 3) *decision-making stressors*, and 4) *working in the "grey" area*

Decision-Making in Context

Each participant indicated divergent levels of comfort in their decision-making abilities upon entering the vice principalship. Elise was comfortable after her informal preparation, Mark felt unprepared for the complexities of being a vice principal and Valerie, though uneasy with making decisions, was comfortable with her approach to decision-making "*Probably it was easy for me to focus my decision-making around students because that is my philosophy base... the student first and about what is in the best interest of the student.*"

The Best Interest of ?

The concept of the "best interest" has seemingly two possible interpretations where a narrow focus applies to the student about whom an action or decision is contemplated and a broad view in which the 'best interest' is applied to other stakeholders as well as the affected student.

All three participants used "the best interest of the student" as both a strategy in decision-making and as justification for their decisions. All addressed the conflicting nature of balancing interests and spoke about the difficulty in making all stakeholders, including teachers and parents, happy with a decision. While they felt it would be ideal if everyone was in agreement, the best interest of the student was their priority.

Valerie was very explicit about the best interest of the individual student as her basic philosophy with the exception if others were in danger. Both Elise and Mark indicated that the "best interest of" was fundamental to their decision-making, and acknowledged the balance between the student and other stakeholders.

The participants expressed concerns with accountability and "best interest" point of view, in explaining or justifying decisions to people who may not be allowed to be privy to certain information or who have different end goals from those of the vice principal. Valerie spoke about the struggle to convince "*other staff members or colleagues who don't see that my decision was reflective of what is in the best interest of the student.*"

Doing the Right Thing

As a theme, 'doing the right thing' is the action aspect of the best interest of students. If the foundational belief is that the best interest must be served, then, ethically, we would argue that 'doing the right thing' means doing what is in the student's best interest. Each of the participants' responses related to 'doing the right thing' however, their decision-making career journeys all began from a 'doing things right' procedural orientation and later shifted to a 'doing the right thing' orientation. Elise noted, "*I think that as I began, and maybe this is not unusual ...*

it's easy or more comfortable to respond to kids and situations in a more black or white fashion, the consequences fitting the crime if you will."

Valerie spoke about her early decision-making:

When I first started, my focus would not have been student based it was more about what I needed to do based on policy, our school-based philosophy, and what other vice principals were doing. The best interest of the student came later on.

Given the inherently moral position of 'doing the right thing', it is perhaps not surprising that participants feel they work from that perspective. The participants clearly spoke about the difference between 'doing things right', and 'doing the right thing'. These interpretations were consistent with the reviewed literature (Armstrong, 2005; Author, 2010).

Internal/External Pressure and Influences

When discussing their decision-making, the participants mentioned that sometimes there were factors outside of their own decision-making processes which impacted the outcome.

Elise started her interview:

Generally, I am really comfortable with most decision-making and in making decisions but... depending on who you are working with and who you are working for, you have to be aware about the decisions that you make. Sometimes those aren't always made independent of other people and the influence of other people.

Identifying decisional challenges, Elise noted, "I think that the decisional challenges,...I mean obviously the political influences, the fact that vice principals answer to a lot of people beyond just the circumstances that are in front of them."

Elise did acknowledge that she understands that her decisions may get overruled for reasons she may or may not know, but was comfortable if she made the best decision based on what was in front of her. She spoke about decisions made by those above her as being influenced by factors such as whether parents will engage lawyers or not, which may determine whether an expulsion is pursued.

Valerie identified three sources of pressure: pressure from more experienced colleagues with different decision-making orientation; pressure in situations involving teachers who have negatively contributed to the dilemma or have tried to influence her decision; and pressure from parents who threaten to go to powers above her.

Mark's spoke about the 'status quo' nature of schools and how vice principals new to a school are

expected to conform to "the way we have always done things."

Perhaps the challenge around which the participants demonstrated the highest level of emotions: frustration, anger, and sadness, was in dealing with situations in which teachers were part of, or even the cause of, the dilemma. In these types of situations, Elise said, "I think it is my job to balance, the best interest of the student and their learning with a response that teachers feel comfortable with and can live with."

Mark also finds it difficult when teachers contribute to the dilemma but makes his teacher protection priority pretty clear. He expressed a high level of frustration at the conflict that is created by trying to support the teacher while acting in the best interest of the students. In the end, often no one is happy:

[When the teacher is wrong] you have got to go to the parent and try and smooth things out and try to come up with that compromise, and that is one thing that I do a lot in my decision-making. Where is the compromise? "How can we solve this and move forward?"

In stories shared by the participants where teachers added complicating factors, each of the vice principals felt he or she had to publicly support their teachers with student consequences more significant than were required or were in the students' best interests.

What we found to be interesting is that all of the identified pressures were internal to the education system. Teachers, supervisors, and supervisors acting on behalf of parents created the influence to alter decisions, and the participants all agreed that they went against their own perspective of acting in the best interest of students.

Working 'in the Grey'

In education, people who make decisions from a 'black or white' orientation, typically adopt views of right or wrong, guilty or not guilty, and argue that policies and procedures are not open for interpretation (Armstrong, 2005). This orientation prizes rules for rule's sake believing with more rules, more order is created. Similarly, from a consequence point of view, a 'black or white' orientation calls for consistency, where everyone is treated the same. With a 'shades of grey' orientation people are more likely to see shared blame, mitigating circumstances, and look to policies and procedures as initial guidelines for action. Individuals with a 'shades of grey' orientation prize the discretion that is provided to them in decision-making and may look for 'wiggle room' in policies and legislation.

The participants used the black/white or 'grey area' terminology in three distinct ways. The 'black or white' orientation was referred to with respect to behaviour and consequence decision-making which was not necessarily in the best interest of students. The 'grey area'

was discussed as an effective strategy for resolving dilemmas but required navigation. Specific challenges were presented where complex situations involved parties with both orientations. This is an area that we wanted to understand from the participants' viewpoints.

When describing his challenges in gaining autonomy to make his own decisions from the best interest viewpoint, Mark showed visible frustration:

I work with some people that are strictly 'black or white.' What it says on the paper is law, that is, the procedure you need to do. But not everybody fits into 'black or white' and, as an administrator, there is some grey, and you have to be able to deal with that.

A similar sentiment was shared by Valerie when talking about working a 'black or white' orientation when she is a self-professed lover of the 'grey area' "[I] want to respect the opinions of my colleagues who have more experience but at the same time stay true to my beliefs." The same sentiment shared by Mark and Valerie is powerful and speaks to the impact when members of administrative teams have different orientations.

The participants shed some insight into their dilemma decision-making with startling consistent responses. Valerie discussed board policy as a guideline:

Board policy is there for a reason, [but] I think there are shades of grey, it's not the be all and end all in my opinion... you can manage a situation so that the outcome for the student is a learning opportunity, as opposed to being punitive.

Elise spoke about the subtleties of working her way through situations involving multiple people and perspectives:

There is always an awareness that people do have a stake in the decisions that you make, but... for me, it is the best interests of students first... it is not a balance for me as much as I prioritize with that first, the rest is a little bit of a political game, I have a lot of empathy where teachers and parents are concerned. I want things to end well for them, but I have to say that the forefront is the students, and if it doesn't go well with the rest well then so be it, but it is nice if it does.

Elise's use of the term 'political game' is of interest as none of the other participants referenced resolutions in this way, yet it is arguably a significant factor in decision-making. For school administrators, the political aspect means reaching a resolution which is acceptable to everyone or is perceived to be acceptable to

everyone. These politicized responses involve finding balance, compromise, and spin (twist) in most cases.

All participants seemed to indicate that key in resolving complex dilemmas is compromise that will work for everyone, is not harmful to students, and leaves staff feeling that they have been supported.

Right and Wrong, Can It Be a Very Fine Line?

The themes of "best interest" and "doing the right thing" were prevalent throughout the interview data from a positive personal perspective. Elise however spoke about the harm that can be done and expressed concern about decisions she would like to change.

First starting out, you respond in a much more 'black or white' fashion but [pause] I made a lot of decisions in my first one or two years that may or may not have had long-term negative impact on kids. They weren't done with any malice or anything along those lines, but they were serious, [and] I would have liked to have done some of those things with the experience and background that I have now.

Elise continued ,

We do hold a fair bit of power and influence to make some life-changing decisions for other people and for kids in particular. And, I find that the people doing the job are incredibly different from one another. The levels of experience are different, where they come from is different, how they respond to situations, and I mean inconsistent is a negative word, but there must be a distinct lack of consistency and I think that alarms me a little bit. Because I can be inconsistent from day to day and week to week depending on what significant things are going on, say, in my personal life. Although you try to be consistent, given the number of people [administrators] and the number of places [schools], I would imagine that the responses vary pretty radically.

The analysis of the interview data provided some detailed insights into how these three vice principals deal with ethical dilemmas. They revealed common 'best interest' orientations, a desire to solve dilemmas in the 'grey area', and aspects of dilemmas which create the greatest challenges in their decision-making.

Results and Conclusions

Our research investigated, through personal interviews, how three secondary school vice principals resolve ethical dilemmas. The nature of student-based dilemmas is that they are complex because of the various ethical perspectives of the involved stakeholders.

Our interpretation of the data indicated that the three participants resolved their most difficult and challenging student-based dilemmas within the 'grey area'. When speaking about how working in the 's' helped these vice principals resolve ethical dilemmas, compromise and balance were their key strategies to finding solutions which were in the best interest of the students while supporting and listening to all stakeholders. Acting in the best interest of students and trying to 'do the right thing' were key influences on the ethical decision-making of these vice principals. As the primary influences, these values were most often involved in the dilemmas as expressed by the participants.

Supporting teachers who contribute to a dilemma as well as dealing with the "black or white" perspective of others came out as the 2 most significant challenges to vice principal decision-making. The participants all felt an obligation to support teachers, even when the teacher had behaved or acted inappropriately. This support often came at the expense of the student who received undeserved consequences which our participants found troubling. Dealing with people, primarily staff, who have their key value orientation as 'black or white' presented a decisional dilemma for the participants who value 'doing the right thing' over 'doing things right.' Adopting the 'doing the right thing' orientation seemed to be a skill gained with experience as all participants admitted to favouring the 'black or white' perspective early in their careers as administrators.

Pressure on the decision-making process itself did not come as much of a surprise to us. The idea that the sources of that pressure for all three participants came from inside the education system did seem somewhat surprising.

The Importance of This Type of Study

A number of the themes which came from the data in our study are similar to themes within the literature around school administration decision-making (Armstrong, 2005; Begley, 2000; Rintoul, 2010). It is possible that someone replicating this study could achieve different results as the background and experiences of their study participants may be different than those of our participants. As well, replication would be at a different time and circumstance.

For even further enhancement of the data, a natural extension to interviews might be the inclusion of an observation component to the study. Being an observer or job shadower (Andersen & Arsenault, 1998; Merriam, 2009) could provide the opportunity to collect data in the very setting where vice principals make their decisions (Merriam, 2009).

Study Strengths

This study may initiate professional dialogue for people interested in the application of values and ethics in the everyday practice of secondary school vice principal

decision-making and the preparation of candidates for the role. We can't help but consider that if administrators were exposed to some of the effects of their actions, the impact on students' lives, and the inconsistency in our practice, more interactive discussions would occur. Our study results align with the existing literature and adds to the limited research base on secondary school vice principals.

Considerations for Future Research

Further research into the vice principal role seems necessary, perhaps even critical as it is in the hands of the vice principal that many life-altering decisions affecting students are made. It might be of interest to determine if other administrators in the number two position: deputy head (Britain), assistant principal (the U.S.) and deputy principal (Australia) experience similar concerns and dilemmas. The internal pressure experienced by the participants of this study, begs the question that if vice principals (deputy head, assistant principal, deputy principal) are acting in the best interest of students, and others within the system are pressuring them to alter their decision, ultimately whose interest should they/are they being asked to advocate for?

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SUBMISSION INFORMATION: The editors will review all articles to determine their suitability for this publication. In addition, at least two additional reviewers will conduct blind reviews of the article.

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