Journal of Authentic Leadership in Education

Not Gonna Go There:
Avoiding Uncomfortable Conversations
and the (Im)Possibility for Ethical Leadership

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Abstract

Educational leaders have to engage in uncomfortable conversations, particularly when dealing with ethical issues. Yet often there is reluctance to do so, partly perhaps because they may not have developed the skills needed either through their experience or course work in educational leadership programs. Using autoethnographic methods, this paper presents an ethnographic fiction of an uncomfortable conversation in an ethics class, which was prematurely ended by the professor. I examine the important opportunity to develop the skills to engage in such conversations that was lost in this class. I conclude that working through uncomfortable conversations is essential for ethical educational leaders to learn how to engage in *critical* self-reflection to understand their deep unacknowledged values.

Key Words

Ethics, Educational Leadership, Autoethnography, Values, Critical Self-Reflection

Ethics is an important concern in both the research and practice of educational leadership, policy, and school organizations, as evidence by numerous books and articles published on the subject (see for example Bottery, 2000; Haynes, 1998; Jackson, Boostrom, & Hansen, 1993; Sergiovanni, 1992; Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2016; Shapiro, 2006; Starratt, 2004; Stefkovich, 2006). It is further evidenced by the inclusion of ethics in the Interstate School Leadership Licensure Consortium (ISLLC) standards, as well as

the importance of including ethics courses in educational leadership doctoral programs (Beck & Murphy, 1993; Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2011; Starratt, 1991). Through the discussion of ethical dilemmas in these classes, students learn the importance of ethical leadership in developing ethical school organizations.

Yet, there are many *uncomfortable* conversations concerning ethics in educational leadership; and while these are important, often there is a reluctance to engage in such conversations (Shapiro, 2006). The purpose of this article is to explore the importance of engaging in uncomfortable conversations in ethics classes to help students critically reflect not only on their own personal and personal-professional codes of ethics, but also to develop courage of their ethical convictions. Through ethnographic fiction, I will look at an uncomfortable conversation that took place in an ethics class and question if ethical leadership can exist in the absence of such conversations.

Literature Review

Becoming "Professional" Educational Leaders

An important component in the construct of school leaders is *professionalism* (Friedson, 2001, Haber, 1991, Hughes, 1965; Johnson, 1972; Schmidt, 2000;). In his seminal work, Johnson (1972) critically looks at the role of professionals in industrial societies, which is salient to school leaders. Johnson offers two themes of professions and professionals, the first of these is altruism. Professionals are concerned with the welfare of the client (here students), rather than their own self-interest. This altruism, supposedly leads them to put the good of their client before their own needs. As part of this altruism, professions are stable elements in society: they inherit, preserve, and pass on traditions, modes of life, habits of thought, and standards (Johnson, 1972).

The second theme of professionals, bureaucracy, affects professionals in several ways. First, bureaucratic mechanisms limit the practices of professionals. Johnson posits that there exists a link between bureaucratization and the development of specialized professional education. Second, as the number of professions has grown they have become stratified with subspecialties requiring further specialized education. The result of this fusion of knowledge and power, he argues is the creation of a new kind of professional-technocrat who is in the process of replacing existing ruling groups. Additionally, as this would form an elite class on the basis of merit, it would have a "more complete and more secure authority than any historical ruling class" (Johnson, 1972). Finally, this design of ever increasing and specialized education produces a professional with high-level function and specialization, with limited responsibilities. Thus, for Johnson professions are Janus-headed: "On the one hand altruistic motivation and a collectivity-orientation have been imputed to the professional, on the other he is said to suffer from a trained incapacity for social responsibility" (1972, p. 17). Therefore, professionals are accorded authority, by merit of their high levels of education and specialization, while at the same time restricted in their capacity to shoulder the social responsibilities associated with such authority. By avoiding uncomfortable conversations then, students do not learn the skills needed to give voice to their values (Gentile, 2010) and engage in difficult discussions with peers, superiors and subordinates. As professionals engaging in such conversations is outside of their expertise, thus they are allowed to avoid responsibility for both the conversation and the (un)intended consequences of this non-action.

This lack of social responsibility is further hindered by "legitimate professional concerns" (Schmidt, 2000, p. 207). As a group, professionals hold common political ideologies and views. "At the workplace, experts can be somewhat independent in informal discussions, but never within their professional work itself; it is considered 'unprofessional' for experts to bring independent political thinking to bear in their work" (Schmidt, 2000, p. 207). Rather, their legitimate professional concerns are restricted to executing their tasks (Schmidt, 2000). This lack of social vision on the part of professionals ensures conformity, "and professional training does anything but produce people who envision a more democratic social order (Schmidt, 2000, p. 208). Thus, the *legitimate professional concern* of these (budding) professionals is limited to the execution of those tasks assigned to them by their superiors. Further, they bear no social responsibility for the consequences of their actions. They are doing their job – following orders.

Through increasingly specialized educational programs, emerging professionals learn what their legitimate roles encompass. That is to say, in these programs students learn to *think* and *speak* like professionals in their field (Mertz, 2007; Ehrensal, 2001). Professors employ their pedagogic authority to impose pedagogic action (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990) to impose the hegemony of professionalism on their students. In turn the students become disciplined, that is they embody the construction of *professionalism*, thus altering their subjectivity (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990; Foucault, 1979, 1991). Consequently, it can be argued that the *hidden curriculum* (Margolis, Soldatenko, Acker, & Gair, 2001) of an educational leader program is the alteration of students' subjectivity

from *teacher* to *educational leader/administrator* with all the constructs and discourses embedded within it.

Whether termed educational leader, servant leader or transformational leader, at the core of all of these constructs is managerialism (Hoyle & Wallace, 2005; Bottery, 2000). That is, these *leaders* are well schooled in the four functions of management: planning, controlling, leading and organizing. Such leaders know how to *do* things rather than *think* about the wider arena in which their actions take place and the consequences, both intended and unintended, of these actions. Following, these leaders are focused on means, not ends. Consequently, "their leadership is reduced to a level of implementation which does not require, indeed lacks, any sense of moral purpose" (Bottery, 2000, p.77).

Ethical Educational Leadership

Kristinsson (2014) argues, "educational leadership is an essentially ethical professional enterprise," consequently it is "an inherently ethical activity" (p. 11). Foster (1986) states "[e]ach administrative decision carries with it a restructuring of human life: that is why administration at its heart is the resolution of moral dilemmas" (p. 33). Branson (2014) asserts "[o]nly ethical leadership is actual leadership" (p. 440). Thus, it is critical for aspiring educational leaders to develop as ethical leaders.

What then, does "ethical" leadership mean? Tuana (2014) states that *all* educators need to develop "moral literacy," which "involves a complex set of skills and abilities that must be developed over time" (p. 154). Moral literacy consists of ethical sensitivity, ethical decision-making and ethical motivation (Tuana, 2014, p. 154). Shapiro and Stefkovich (2016) recognize that "professional ethics as a dynamic process requiring administrators to develop their own

personal and professional codes," and this process involves understanding one's self and others (p. 23).

How, then can one resolve the seeming contradiction between norms of *professional behavior* illustrated in the "fiction" presented here and expectations of *ethical behavior*?

Methodology

The methodology here is autoethnography. "Autoethnography is an approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyze (graphy) personal experience (auto) in order to understand cultural experience (ethno)" (Ellis, Adams & Bochner, 2011, p.1). Here research is a "political, socially-just and socially-conscious act…. Thus as a method, autoethnography is both process and product" (Ellis, Adams & Bochner, 2011, p.1). Understanding that personal experiences influence research, particularly in the social sciences, and that in the treatment of data scholars will change names of places and people as well as condense observations into a single text, "auto ethnography is one of the approaches that acknowledges and accommodates subjectivity, emotionality, and the researcher's influence on research, rather than hiding from these matters or assuming they don't exist" (Ellis, Adams & Bochner, 2011, p.2). In writing about epiphanies experienced by the researcher, autoethnography allows for the unpacking of the culture and cultural identity that shaped/made these insights (Ellis, Adams & Bochner, 2011, p. 4). Additionally, by acknowledging the subjectivity of the researcher, autoethnography gives voice to the "private" that is otherwise silent in research (Dauphinee, 2010). In doing so "it affords the possibility of conveying something that we would not otherwise have been able to hear" (Dauphinee, 2010 p.

806). Further, it offers a "reflexive awareness of the self as a perpetrator of a certain kind of violence in the course of all writing and all representations – a violence, incidentally, that cannot be avoided" (Dauphinee, 2010 p. 806).

The data here are presented as an ethnographic fiction (Hecht, 2007; Narayan, 1999; Schmidt, 1984). "Ethnographic fiction draws upon the author's ethnographic and auto-ethnographic experience and, like historical fiction...creates a narrative that allows the representation of a situation that collapses many disparate, but real, episodes and people into a coherent narrative" (Ehrensal, 2008, p. 55). The data presented in this ethnographic fiction were gather through participant observations in ethics classes and noted in my personal journals. Consequently, the class, faculty, and students represented here are both real and composites of many classes, faculty, and students participated in. That is, they are at once *real* and *not real*. Presenting an ethnographic fiction of an ethics class allows for silences to be heard (Dauphinee, 2010) and to "have clarity of pattern and logic of unfolding" (Watson, 2000, p. 497) of the events that occur in these classes. Further, by presenting these data in an ethnographic fiction and using pseudonyms for all of the people in the fiction, I am endeavoring to protect the identities and well being of all those involved in these classes (Lapadat, 2017).

An Ethnographic Fiction of an Uncomfortable Conversation

As part of their doctoral course in educational leadership, a group of first year students were studying ethics. These students included assistant principals, principals, people in central office positions, PreK-12 teachers, and a small group in administrative positions in institutions of higher education.   This cohort had been together for two semesters so had developed a rapport and ease with one another. In this class the

students had shared their personal and personal-professional codes of ethics, and engaged in discussions of various "cases." Given the progress of this group, Dr. Rosenthal decided to introduce a rather controversial case. Therefore, in this particular class session, the group was analyzing the *Cornfield* case, which involved school a administrator's strip-searching a 16-year-old student, believing he was "crotching" drugs.

In one of the breakout groups the discussion became rather animated, prompting Mary, an elementary school principal, to cry out "But we're all suppose to be friends here! Why are we fighting?" However, the real *fireworks* began in the large group discussion.

As each group reported out, they spoke in defense of the administrators' actions in the case, stating that these administrators have responsibility for the safety of *all* the students in their school. When Sandra, one of the higher education students, asked where was the safety risk, the response was that the principal believed that the kid was carrying drugs and drugs posed a danger. Sandra replied that the alleged drugs was actually marijuana, and again asked what was the safety risk. Joe, a middle school assistant principal countered that drugs pose a real danger, even marijuana, because using it leads to use of harder drugs – the gateway argument. Sandra asked for the statistics that demonstrate a causal relationship between marijuana and "hard drugs." Further she replied, even if that is true, in this case the drug is marijuana. Nancy, another elementary school principal cried "Have you ever seen someone on drugs?" Sandra remarked, "Yes, but I don't see where the danger was here. After all, the alleged drugs were *believed* to be in the kids crotch." Mary responded "Yeah, but if he took the drugs he could easily get out of control." "Ok," observe Sandra, "but the kid was allegedly carrying the drugs. And even

if he had taken them, there would be some time between ingesting and any havoc the kid might reek – plenty of time for intervention. So where was the exigency?" Sandra added, "Even if the kid did smoke the marijuana, the biggest safety risk would probably be him breaking into a vending machine because he had a bad case of the munchies!"

The group was becoming visibly agitated, so Dr. Rosenthal (who was not yet tenured) moved the discussion into a different vein, asking, "Thinking about your personal and professional codes of ethics, could you strip search a student?" The group agreed that they would have difficulty justifying a strip search with their personal and professional codes of ethics. Dr. Rosenthal pushed the point, asking "What if ordered to do so by your superintendent?" At that most of the group agreed that if ordered they would do it.

Sandra, who did not agree on this point, then asked "So you would do it, even though you personally didn't think it was *right* because your superintendent told you to?" The group answer was "yes." Sandra pushed "You would actually do it?" Don, a high school principal, a bit frustrated replied, "Yes, otherwise it would be insubordination and I could lose my job." Shocked, Sandra responded, "So you're invoking the Nuremburg defense – how ethical is that?"

At this point the class exploded. People were shouting all at once things like, "How can you compare this to the holocaust?" and "You're calling us Nazis!" Mary exclaimed, "How can you say that? We all love children!"

Dr. Rosenthal at this point ended the class session – 20 minutes early – and the topic was not addressed again.

Discussion

The choice and justification of these students to obey the direct order of a superior, regardless of the ethical nature of the action ordered, is not uncommon. In their study of school leaders Minnis and Fauske (2011) found that "[a]ll of the participants felt bound to follow policy and procedures when seeking resolution to their dilemmas" (p. 13). The participants in this study did experience conflict between policy and acting in the best interest of the student, as well as tension between the actions prescribed by policy and their personal codes of ethics. However, in the end, they followed policy and procedure. The "professionalism" of these leaders, gained through their advanced education provides an insight to this privileging of policy and obedience to authority.

Like those studied by Greer, Searby and Thoma (2015), the doctoral students of this fiction "employ the maintaining norms schema – conventional, hierarchal, by-the-book decision making – as a default mode" (p. 527). Further this proclivity for the status quo allows for "moral certainty, uniform application of policy, and a sense of doing one's duty" (Greer, et al., 2015, p. 527). Consequently, there is a privileging of social order and authoritarianism over civil rights, and a resistance to change. In such a context ethical leadership and acting in the best interest of students is problematic (Greer, et al., 2015).

Bazerman and Tenbrunsel (2011) argue that it is not that people in organizations choose to act unethically; rather they fail to see the issue as an ethical problem. The problems are often constructed as something else (e.g. financial, security, accountability). Consequently, ethical dimensions are not considered in the decision-making process. "It is only later…that we engage in any type of moral reasoning. The purpose of this moral reasoning is not to arrive at a decision – it's too late for that – but to justify the decisions

we have already made" (Bazerman & Tenbrunsell, 2011, 72). In short, organizational actors develop "blind spots" in terms of ethical consequences. Further, "[t]he process of moral disengagement allows us to behave contrary to our personal code of ethics, while still maintaining the belief that we are ethical people" (Bazerman & Tenbrunsell, 2011, 72).

Harvey (1988) examines how all too easily each of us can become "Eichmann in the Organization." That is, like Eichmann, it is effortless (even desirable) for all of us to just go along doing our job (well) with no regard of how our actions may be harming others. Arendt (1976) called this "the banality of evil." That is, these students are "dominated by an administrative, rather than a moral, outlook…[and their] values of *loyalty*, *duty*, and *discipline* derive from the technical needs of the hierarchy" (emphasis original) (Milgram, 1969, 189). Thus, like Eichmann, they were *thoughtless* (Arendt, 2003), that is, even in a class exercises, concern for their employment and career advancement motivated these students to obey the orders of a superior, abdicate their (ethical) responsibility, thus removing themselves from the consequences of their action. However, as Arendt (2003) notes, "[t]hat such remoteness from reality and such thoughtlessness can wreak more havoc than all the evil instincts taken together" (379).

Harvey argues that under the guise of *doing my job* people commit what he calls "little murders." That is they carry out task, which (potentially) are harmful to others, such as firing good employees, or here strip searching a student. Its not that the people carrying out these tasks enjoy it, rather they are quick to tell you that it's unpleasant, against their personal and professional codes of ethics, etc. Yet, nonetheless they

perform them because it's their job and if they don't they risk losing a chance at promotion or their job.

Ehrensal (2001) argues that managers are highly skilled and adept at committing little murders before their position requires them to do so. These skills are learnt and honed as part of their management education. Here I am arguing that the same is true for educational leaders. The use of case study analysis is one of the principal means of teaching such skills. Stewart (1991) posits that case study analysis as a class exercise socializes the students. This socialization "help[s] bring the neophyte into the community of the discipline…. Reading a case study, the neophyte sees not only what problems look like, but also what problem-solvers look like. By setting out the problem in such a way as to suggest how to play the role of the problem-solver, the case is in effect socializing the neophyte" (Stewart, 1991, 122).

What is perhaps even more troubling is that like Eichmann, they abdicate all responsibility for their actions. The doctoral students in the ethics class constructed the superintendent as the agent responsible for the consequences of their action. The superiors who issued the order are responsible, not the principal actually inflicting the pain or harm.

Shapiro (2006) also examines the concept of the banality of evil in educational settings. He maintains that one's entire educational experience is devoid of grappling with controversial issues. Consequently, Shapiro argues, most people are prepared neither culturally or educationally to examine their basic assumptions, constructs or beliefs. Indeed, as Shapiro observes, students actually get angry when you ask them to take on this task – certainly this was the situation in the ethics class. Shapiro further

asserts that there is a long history of reluctance to contend with controversial issues in educational settings. Eschewing these conversations results, he goes on to say, in the fostering of the banality of evil in society.

Sheppard (2006) also takes up the purpose of controversy in the educational setting. Far from being something "to be avoided at all costs," she argues that it should be embraced. Controversy, she argues, is not about convincing the opposition that I'm correct. Rather, the act of grappling with controversial subjects should be viewed as an opportunity to critically examine one's core assumptions, beliefs, and constructs. Additionally, by engaging in debates about controversial issues, students are able to hone their critical thinking and analytic skills. Thus, rather than be avoided, controversy should be embraced in educational settings at all levels.

Not Gonna Go There?

By ending the session as the group was reaching the boiling point, the professor in the ethics class stopped the conversation. In short, Dr. Rosenthal determined that the group was "not gonna go there." This conversation was *too* uncomfortable.

By not pushing the students to engage in this, or any, controversial issue, is Dr. Rosenthal fostering the banality of evil? Further in doing so, does not this professor, and indeed any one of us, become "Eichmann" in the organization? Will doctoral course experiences work to avoid uncomfortable conversations, thus foster the banality of evil, or will they be structured in such a way that all involved will be encouraged to questions assumptions, beliefs and constructs? In short can we conceive of a doctoral curriculum in educational leadership, which embrace controversy and all the discomfort it brings with it?

Shapiro (2006) asserts "we need to think of subjects not as nouns that we collect as items on a shopping list but as verbs that promise to do something for and within us" (114). That is, when designing and executing a course, and indeed the curriculum, we need to be conscious of what these experiences will do for and within both the students and the professors.

Gentile (2009) notes that even when people *see* the ethical concerns of a problem – that is they are not hindered by "blind spots" – they are reluctant to highlight it or voice that the decision conflicts with their values. Based on the assumption that people *wish* to do the right thing, she offers strategies to help people give voice to their values when participating in organizational decision making. However, in her research, Gentile found that those managers, who *chose* to vocalize their values, were able to do so because they had a "script" which they "practiced" with friends and colleagues. That is, these managers developed the confidence and skills to voice their values in a way that didn't alienate them from their colleagues, by practicing their script out loud with a trusted friend or colleague. Gentile (2009) concludes that "[b]y asking the questions – 'What if we wanted to voice and act on our values? What would we say and do? – out loud with colleagues and friends, we not only generate scripts and skills for ourselves, but we invite others to be part of our process…" (221). However, before giving voice to values, one has to *know* what those values are, including deep unacknowledged and hidden values that control one's responses and actions in an ethical incident (Branson, 2014).

In the class here students did agree that while conducting a strip search of a student went against their personal and personal-professional codes of ethics, if ordered to do so by a superior they would carry out the action. When the Sandra pushed the point of this

contradiction by raising similarities to the Holocaust this student uncovered the hidden values of social order and authoritarianism. When forced to look at this reflection of themselves, the other students reacted with anger and outrage. The unpacking of these deep values was the uncomfortable conversation that the professor actually avoided.

Perhaps the discussion in this class became too heated to allow for a reflection of contradiction between the students' espoused and hidden values, and ending it was the best strategy. However, by ignoring it (or pretending that it never happened) in future classes, the professor did not allow the students the opportunity to engage in the deep reflection necessary for the students to realize, understand and struggle with these hidden values. In doing so the professor was not only stunting the ethical development of these students, but also allowing them to view systemic violence in schools (Epp & Watkinson, 1996) as ethically justifiable to maintain social order.

To develop as ethical leaders, students must engage in *critical* self-reflection. This reflection needs to fully embrace the ethic of critique (Bottery, 2000; Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2016; Starratt, 1991). That is, as educators we must engage in uncomfortable conversations in which students unpack how thoughts and actions based on their values and ethics can result in reproducing systems of domination and oppression – even while believing that their actions are based on the ethic of care and in the best interest of the students. In doing so, we can facilitate students' development as ethical leaders who understand what the status quo actually is and the systemic violence it imposes. As educational leaders then, these students can engage in authentic ethical praxis, which will foster the development of ethical school organizations.

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