

Negotiating the Double Mandate: Mapping Ethical Conflict Experienced by Practicing Educational Leaders

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The purpose of this study was to capture and describe ethical conflict experienced by seasoned educational administrators. Narrative inquiry via electronic survey was conducted with 42 participants with follow-up interviews conducted with a smaller sample of purposefully-selected participants. Findings suggest that ethical conflict is inherent in the practice of educational leadership and is most often experienced in relation to colleagues when the ethics of justice and care collide. Moreover, leaders' ability to mitigate conflict, which is exacerbated by institutional and external factors, is improved when coupled by longevity and diversity of leadership experiences. Finally, the role leadership preparation programs and in-service professional development play in building theoretical foundations and competence in applied ethical decision-making cannot be overestimated.

School leaders that rely on efficient approaches to solve dilemmas run the risk of suspending their ethical responsibility to students. Colnerud (1991, 1994, 2006) suggests that ethical tension and conflict finds their origin where ethical norms collide. The collision of these norms creates space for ethical dilemmas to arise in schools and in the decisions of those who work in them. In this context, leaders face a double mandate wherein their professional conduct is expected to support such norms as well as students' best interests. For example, when confronted with difficult decisions leaders can be: pressured by guidance that comes in the form of zero-tolerance (Keleher, 2000); influenced by norms associated with collegial loyalty (Colnerud, 1997); or suffer from the effects of goal displacement (Langlois & Lapointe, 2007). Further, in some cases, organizational conditions can inhibit moral agency

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or make inaction legitimate (Samier, 2008). While the literature suggests a multiple ethical approach can help leaders to make important decisions, such an approach does not dissipate conflict, but rather, can generate ethical conflict given that students, parents, colleagues and leader all have a certain ethical standing and do not always agree in terms of best interests.

Reconciling value-laden perspectives to promote moral ends is an ongoing problem in educational leadership and an important area of inquiry to which this project hopes to contribute. Although similar research has been conducted within the teaching profession (Colnerud, 1997; Pope, Green, Johnson, Mitchell, 2009), research is relatively slim that employs ethical theory to interpret conflict experienced by practicing educational leaders or relate their experiences to their personal and professional background and school context. Moreover utilizing the “critical incident technique” as a tool for capturing school leaders’ ethical conflicts has not been assessed. This research aimed to fill these gaps.

Purpose and Research Questions

The purpose of this research (McGee, 2013) was to capture and describe ethical conflict experienced by practicing educational leaders through a multidimensional theoretical lens. From this basis the following questions were investigated:

1. What is the nature of ethical conflicts that practicing educational leaders experience?
2. How does the nature of these ethical conflicts relate to leadership background?
3. How does the nature of these ethical conflicts relate to school context?

In addition to the above questions, this research also sought to explore the utility of the “critical incident technique” (Flanagan, 1954) to capture ethical conflict as perceived by seasoned educational administrators, as well as to forward recommendations for: leadership preparation programs; in-service professional development, and; future research endeavors. Before moving forward, it is important to share definitions of terms that were used throughout the research process.

Definition of Terms

Double mandate. Educational leaders can be conflicted by the normative-descriptive binary. In other words, leaders can be simultaneously informed by the way things *ought* to be and by the way things are. Such conflict can make it difficult to support students’ best interests.

Ethics and morality. *Ethics* derives from the Greek, *ethos*, that implies individual actions, while the term, *morality* derives from the Latin, *mores*, that implies group customs. While some view individual ethics as a means to promote social mores (Robbins & Trebicht, 2009), others recognize that balancing personal, group, and professional ethics can involve competing interests (Starratt, 1991).

Benevolence and beneficence in ethical decision-making. Benevolence refers to a cognitive macromoral concept that resides at the communal level (Rest, Navarez, Bebeau, & Thoma, 1999). Benevolence has to do with sympathizing with others and taking action as a result. Benevolent decision-making favors fairness and equity rather than contextualization

and intimacy. While educational decision-making grounded in benevolence can be efficient, it is not necessarily sensitive to individual student needs. Thus, leaders who practice this brand of decision-making risk compromising their ethical responsibility to students.

Benevolence, on the other hand, is action taken on behalf of others for the purpose of promoting their well-being. Benevolence is an affective micromoral concept that resides at the level of the individual (Rest et al., 1999). Benevolent decision-making issues from high levels of contextualization and intimacy that originates empathic volition that moves one to take action on behalf of another. Benevolent educational leaders are sensitive to individual student needs and take action to promote their well-being.

Ethical Dilemma. An ethical dilemma is a social situation that involves a conflict between imperatives such that supporting one often results in transgressing the other.

Literature Review

Colnerud (1994) suggests that ethical tension and conflict finds its origin where ethical norms collide. In this context, educators face a double mandate wherein their professional conduct is expected to support both ethical norms as well as individual students' interests. The collision of these norms creates space for questionable situations to arise in schools that can taint the decisions of those who work in them. In such cases, educators who have a singular ethical focus can rely on one ethic at the expense of others. Colnerud's (1997) descriptive study of professional ethics in teaching found that ethical conflict "in relation to pupils, parents, and colleagues" can jeopardize the well-being of students (p. 630). Similarly, supporting the best interests of students is an important responsibility of educational leaders.

Of particular relevance to supporting the best interests of students are the work of Starratt (1991) and Shapiro and Stefkovich (2011). Starratt proposes a multidimensional ethical framework that includes the ethics of justice, critique, and care. Shapiro and Stefkovich add to this an ethic of profession that results when the ethics of justice, critique, and care are merged. At the heart of the ethic of profession is consideration of the best interests of the student. The determination of the best interests of the student can involve applying the ethic of profession to three thoroughly contextualized best interest correlates; that is, rights, responsibility, and respect (Stefkovich & O'Brien, 2004).

The Ethic of Justice

The ethic of justice focuses on the laws and rules that govern society and on the accompanying rights of individuals. Justice reasoning is a source of the uniformity that is typically found in decision-making in schools. For example, some school leaders adhere to the deontological perspective that forwards the non-relativist belief that all people are moral agents and therefore, ought to be respected. Thus, breaking rules that may jeopardize the rights of other moral agents, even if it serves a greater good, is not an option (Strike, Haller, & Soltis, 1998). On the other hand, theorists such as Beauchamp and Childress (1994) advance a view that has its roots in utilitarianism. For those who align with this approach, rules are guides; and depending on the probable outcome of a situation, the rules may be violated. A useful way to describe the utilitarian perspective is via the principle of benefit maximization (Strike et al.) or choosing action bearing the greatest amount of benefit to as many people as possible.

The Ethic of Critique

Senge, Cambron-McCabe, Lucas, Smith, Dutton, and Kliner (2000) relate that the creative process is a powerful driver of innovation. Integral to the creative process is tension; that is, wherever there is tension can also be found an intention toward resolution. Thus, the ethic of critique highlights and relaxes the embedded tensions in the ethic of justice. The ethic of critique “takes aim at mindsets, structures, and practices that promote reproduction of the status quo” (Mansfield & Newcomb, 2014) and exposes the origins of privilege that legitimize social arrangements (Starratt, 1994). Educational leadership scholars who forward the importance of critique also emphasize the importance of purposeful action to create change at the macro level (Mansfield & Newcomb).

The Ethic of Care

Similar to the way that critique supplements justice reasoning, the ethic of care interpenetrates the ethic of critique. Rather than pursuing macro-social aims, the ethic of care features a micromoral orientation aimed toward the nurturance of relationships. The ethic of care grew out of feminist scholarship and unlike the ethic of justice that locates law and order at its core; the ethic of care considers caring as foundational to ethical decision-making (Marshall, 1995; Noddings, 2008). Conceptions of uniformity that are typically assumed to be the foundation of decision-making in schools can ignore the ethical diversity that exists in them. In this context, it is possible for decisions to be made at the expense of the child’s best interests. Thus, “caring has an uncertain status in competition with other values or norms” (Colnerud, 1997, p. 634).

The Ethic of Profession

Many professions such as law, medicine, and business have adopted codes of ethics that serve as guides or rules to be followed to advance professional practice. These normative codes typically outline high ideals toward which professionals ought to strive. Such codes of ethics can be normative or descriptive (Colnerud, 1997). Normative codes outline how things ought to be and descriptive codes outline how they are. The abstract nature of normative codes can limit their value in practice (Langlois, 2004; Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2011). Campbell (2001) “illustrates the difficulty, if not the impossibility, of applying ethical standards to actual situations in any professionally and ethically satisfying way” (p. 395). A more profound rendering of professional ethics may result through the blending of normative and descriptive ethical approaches. Working from this point of view, Campbell supplements empirical evidence with “first person narrative responses to the evidence” to offer that while professionals cannot recite relevant ethical codes, “most of us live lives in which we rarely have to stop to think how not to break the law” (p. 395). Her point here is to show that the moral core of the education profession reflects deeply embedded personal and public principles that ought to make codes of ethics independently irrelevant. Campbell goes on to suggest, “Professional ethics cannot be imposed, for by their nature they must be internalized to become part of the collective consciousness and the individual conscience” (p. 396). Her argument brings out a point of view in which normative and descriptive aspects reside in interdependence with each other. This point of view signals toward the work of Shapiro and

Stefkovich in the area of professional ethics in education and away from other fields such as law and medicine.

Shapiro and Stefkovich (2011) suggest that educational leaders must consider the moral aspects unique to the profession and that by combining the ethics of justice, critique, and care into an ethic of profession, educational leaders can be equipped with a tool of ethical decision-making that can help them to “leave behind any simplistic notions of right and wrong or good and bad” en route to dealing with the complexity of the post-modern world (p. 184). The ethic of profession can be understood to consist of a personal code of ethics coupled with a professional code of ethics. For example, Shapiro and Stefkovich suggest that in order to deepen the ethic of profession, leaders should “write out personal and professional ethical codes and compare and contrast their two codes” to determine where the personal and professional diverge and coalesce. This results in an internal dialogue that can make hidden code visible. Likewise, Sockett (2006) makes some relevant points in terms of unearthing personal ethics. He believes that the process issues from the Aristotelian concept of “*eudaimonia*” (p. 12 [italics in original]) or the thought that existing as a human being entails taking responsibility for the kind of person one becomes. Similarly, Starratt (2004) proffers a view of authenticity and advises that school administrators “bring themselves, including their deepest convictions, beliefs, and values, to their work” (p. 65). In addition to being barely discernible, Starratt goes on to suggest that authenticity is difficult to articulate because “it is so foundational, so close to the bedrock of moral motivation that it is rarely analyzed in its essential elements” (p. 66). Pertinent to both of these accounts of personal ethics is the concept of personal mastery made relevant by Senge (1990). Both Sockett and Starratt envision personal ethics as the simultaneous process of unearthing individual aspiration and awareness. To imagine is to intend toward something generally considered to be external, while the concept of the self typically points toward something internal. As a result, curiosity leads one to imagine, which informs self-awareness and development. This dual awareness of the external and internal creates a tension that by its nature seeks resolution through development.

Methodology

As the above literature review suggests, the most effective way to investigate issues of professional ethics is by studying them in relation to the interactions agents have with those in their professional life. Moreover, the literature suggests taking an applied ethics approach, viewing and interpreting participants’ stories via a multidimensional theoretical lens. Thus, a qualitative approach whereby active school leaders share their experiences with ethical decision making in their own words was deemed the best approach, along with utilizing an interpretive lens that takes a more holistic approach to conducting research in naturalistic settings.

The Multidimensional Ethical Framework

Applied ethics signals a path away from the tenants of pure reason and toward an acknowledgement that human factors such as affect supplement reason to form a more complete picture of ethical functioning. The present work subscribes to the notion that there should not be a dividing line between affect and cognition (Blasi, 1983), and that, in reality, attempting to divide affect from cognition is impossible and thus, a false binary. Rather, the

self exercises a central and active role in decision making that entails interplay between a variety of ethical, moral, and professional commitments. Thus, a multiple ethical paradigm is needed to get at the heart of ethical decision making in the case of this project.

As explained above in the literature review, the multiple-ethical paradigm consists of four areas related to applied ethics in school administration: (a) the ethic of justice, (b) the ethic of critique, (c) the ethic of care, and (d) the ethic of profession. In addition to viewing ethical decision making in light of these concepts separately, professional narratives were also examined to discover the interplay between the areas of consideration: for example, ways the ethic of justice interacted with the ethic of care, which will be explained in greater detail momentarily.

Participant Selection

Participants were purposefully sampled from a pool of experienced practicing leaders who are pursuing/were pursuing a doctoral degree (both EdD and PhD) in an educational leadership program from an accredited, Research I university in Virginia. The reasoning behind this approach was based on the need to find seasoned educational administrators who have had ample experiences in the field and may be open to sharing their experiences with a peer researcher. The population consisted of 167 potential participants who were sent an email inviting them to participate in an online survey which was hosted by SurveyMonkey. The email provided a brief overview of the project, the name of the principal investigator, acknowledged that participation was voluntary, explained that data would be protected, and provided a link to the online survey. Follow-up emails were sent to the same population during the second and third week following the original message. The same population received follow-up emails because there was no way to distinguish between those who had and had not completed the survey. Participants who also wished to participate in a follow-up interview were invited to provide contact information.

About the Sample

Regarding the years of experience that participants had as an educational leader, 6 of 42 respondents had 0-5 years experience (14.3%), 17 had 6-10 years experience (40.5%), 6 had 11-15 years experience (14.3%), 6 had 16-20 years experience (14.3%), and 7 had 21 or more years experience (16.7%). While a significant percentage of the sample reported an experience level of 6-10 years, no single experience level constituted a majority of the sample. Participants were asked to indicate the context in which the majority of their experience was invested. In terms of context, 11 participants reported that the majority of their experience as an educational leader was in urban contexts (26.2%), 5 participants reported that the majority of their experience was in rural contexts (11.9%), and 27 participants reported that the majority of their experience was in suburban contexts (64.3%).

To provide information relevant to describing the sample, participants were also asked to share the level at which the majority of their experience was invested. In terms of level, 13 participants reported that the majority of their experience was at the elementary/primary level (31%), 9 participants reported that the majority of their experience was at the middle level (21.4%), and 18 participants reported that the majority of their experience was at the high school level (42.9%). Additionally, 2 participants did not answer this question (4.7%). While

generalizability was not a specific goal of this study, it is important to point out that the spread of the sample in terms of years of experience and work contexts are varied, which signals toward a reasonable balance of the sample.

The sample of 4 participants for interview included leaders who identified evenly (current position) as assistant principal, principal, central office administrator, and other. Of the 4 participants, 3 were female and 1 was male; years of leadership experience reported, 0-5 years, 6-10 years, and 21+ years; and, in terms of leadership context and background, 2 participants reported that the majority of their experience had been in suburban middle schools, and 2 participants reported suburban high schools. Interview participants were purposely selected based on the nature of their critical incident reports amongst those willing to be contacted later.

Data Collection Methods

Data were collected using narrative inquiry utilizing the “critical incident technique” and semi-structured interviews. Literature supports the critical incident technique as an appropriate means through which to examine practicing professionals’ responses to ethical dilemmas in education (Colnerud, 1997; Pope et al., 2009; Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2011). Further, decision-making from a multiple ethical perspective involves affect (Starratt, 1991). There is evidence that the critical incident technique can capture such emotional content since “it is reasonable to argue that the perceived ‘critical incident’ is essentially an emotional event...” (Cope & Watts, 2000, p. 114). Since this research aimed to collect fully contextualized data, this approach allowed participants to respond in their own words and from their own particular perspective; thus, providing a complete description of the ethical conflicts they have faced.

Narrative Inquiry. A survey platform was used to gather narrative data via the critical incident technique specifically. There are three assumptions commonly associated with the critical incident technique (Flanagan, 1954): First, it is important that the incident correspond to a clearly articulated case. Second, if the respondent cannot produce a clear account of what occurred, then the case is not valid. Third, the unit of analysis is the critical incident itself. According to Pope et al. (2009) using the critical incident technique “involves asking subjects to respond in writing to a single question about a significant experience” (p. 779). Thus, to capture information relevant to the research question, the solicitation posed to participants was: “Briefly describe a situation or a kind of situation in which you find it difficult to know the right or wrong thing to do from a moral/ethical point of view in relation to [student best-interest]” (Colnerud, 1997, p. 629; Pope et al., p. 779). Consistent with literature, added to this solicitation is “Feel free to describe a first-hand experience with ethics and [the best interests of the student] or more general ethical issues you have encountered with [the best interests of the student]” (Pope et al., p. 779). As noted above, of the 167 potential participants invited, 42 committed to participating in the survey. Of the 42 who participated, 39 responses fit the criteria as outlined above and were included in the data analysis phase.

Semi-structured Interviews. To further tease out the relationship of ethical conflict to leadership background and school context, semi-structured interviews were conducted. As noted above, from the pool of reported critical incidents that met the criteria for inclusion, four participants were purposefully selected for semi-structured interviews. Face-to-face

interviews, lasting approximately 60 minutes each, were conducted and digitally audio recorded.

Data Analysis Methods

Maxwell (2005) advocates a three-pronged approach to data analysis: coding, organizing, and sense-making. In the present study, coding, organizing, and sense-making took place in an ongoing manner. As the critical incidents were received they were labeled with a numerical value from 1 to *N*. After examining the contents of the solicited critical incidents, a table scaffold was created displaying column headers representing anticipated domains of ethical conflict (Colnerud, 1997). After the critical incidents were categorized by domain of conflict, they were organized in a second table in relation to the ethical paradigms that conflicted (Starratt, 1991). The second table thus listed ethical paradigms of justice, care, and critique as row and column headers. Based on the outcome of this process, an organizational code was placed at the upper right corner that signified conflicting ethical paradigms.

Data gleaned via interviews were also organized and coded during the sense-making process. Reading transcripts numerous times enabled the gleaning of data that applied to four themes: 1) Ethical conflict and leadership background; 2) Ethical conflict and school context; 3) The role of ideals and principles in decision-making, and; 4) How decision-making helped or hindered meeting the needs of the student. Taken together, data from all sources were examined to find connections and make meaning that would produce substantive recommendations for professional development and future research.

Limitations

Generalizability is not possible and was not an aim of this study. Moreover, since most of the data collected was based on reconstructions of past events, reported critical incidents are dependent on respondents' ability to accurately recall them. As noted (Rest et al., 1999), sometimes people know more than they can tell; therefore, the critical incidents "may not accurately reflect the intensity of [...] thoughts and feelings..." (Cope & Watts, 2000, p. 116). But as these scholars note, capturing critical incidents as they naturally occur is a methodology that is very difficult to operationalize so "researchers will always be dependent on the subjective representations of their respondents" (p. 116). In addition, since the population for this study was 167, and the sample was 42, the sample size (25%) can be considered a limitation as well.

Findings

Conflict Domains

Prior research suggests that situations that cause teachers to experience ethical conflict find their origin with students, parents, and/or colleagues (Colnerud, 1997). As Table 1 shows, 9 (22.5%) of conflicts reported by this sample of leader had to do with students, 10 (25.0%) of reported conflicts had to do with parents, and 20 (51.3%) of reported conflicts had to do with colleagues.

Table 1
Critical Incidents Categorized by Domain of Conflict

Domain of Conflict	Students	Parents	Colleagues
	9	10	20

Student. Most frequently, the nature of conflict in the domain of student was related to substandard performance. Such substandard performance created the need for action on the part of the school leader. For example, one middle school principal recalled,

One year as a summer school coordinator, two eighth grade students performed poorly on their final Civics project, which meant they would fail the course. If they failed Civics they would have to repeat the 8th grade. I knew this would be the second time each student had failed a grade in middle school. I had the authority to “pass” these students onto high school, even though they had technically failed a required course. I was conflicted between holding these two students to an academic standard versus putting them back into a potentially negative situation by having them repeat another grade in middle school.

Another school leader shared similar thoughts, adding,

In education, there are rules, policies, and guidelines that you are expected to follow. At times, a student has not followed the rules and are supposed to receive a specific consequence. There are times when you know the student’s home life and it is better for him/her to be in school than not...

Conflicts within the domain of the student were not limited to the K-12 school setting. Rather leaders in higher education also expressed concern about balancing ethical decision-making in the best interests of students:

In my work with students in higher education, I encounter ethical conflicts when students with psychiatric/mental health concerns appear to be at risk, and parents become involved out of concern. I am bound by FERPA, however must weigh the safety of the student, their right to autonomy, and their risk for harm in making decisions to talk with parents or other support persons outside the university.

From the sample responses above, it appears that in dealing with conflict in the domain of student, leaders are able to discern the connection between their decision-making and its impact on the student’s best interests. When deciding to spare students from unnecessarily negative consequences, leaders seem equipped to draw from more than one ethical frame and are mostly disinterested in what rationalism may call for. It is, however, also important to note that the voice of the student is largely absent in the accounts of these leaders.

Parent. It appears conflict that involves parents is more nuanced and problematic than conflict with students. This nuance often seems related to the competition that results when the parent and the educational leader engage in an *ethical tug-of-war* with respect to the best interests of the student. The tug-of-war signals toward the inclusion of the perspective of the

parent in the leader's scope of justice (Passini, 2010). As the following quotes highlight, such competition can create space for the best interests of the student to be jeopardized. For example, one respondent complained that while parents have the interests of only one child in mind, as a school leader, they are responsible for the welfare of hundreds of students:

Parents often refuse to accept the fact that their child is not the only child to be considered in most instances. As building administrators, we must always find the solution that is in the best interest of not only the one student but all the students.

In addition to struggling to define best interests in terms of individual responsibility as outlined above, school leaders also struggle with parents over definitions of best interests when individuals' moral and ethical commitments differ culturally (or what constitutes good parenting). For example, one principal described experiences whereby students were caught stealing items in the classroom or directly from other students. Additional investigation revealed that, according to this leader, the adults in the home have condoned stealing: "It is difficult to suspend a student for a day out of school for stealing when they have not been taught differently." Another principal described their negative feelings when faced with "bending the rules" with "problem parents" when issues of residency are raised, noting: "I hate when they are moved multiple times during their elementary careers."

Colleague. The collegial conflict reported in the present study primarily involved superiors, however leaders can also experience conflict with subordinates. An important concern of the respondents in this study was that ethical conflict was due to occupying an uneven position of power relative to those who oversee their decisions. In effect, these leaders felt that they had no real choice given the stance and expectation of their superiors, which can favor rational decision-making. Thus, subordinate leaders may jeopardize student best interests as a result of remaining loyal to their superior. In other cases, a leader may maintain loyalty to a teacher or other colleague at the expense of a student's best interest. For example, one respondent reported an incident whereby the leader turned a blind eye to student maltreatment. However, much of the conflict involving colleagues was more closely related to Samier's (2008) notion of moral inversion or the notion that legal-rational values prevail at the expense of other approaches to decision-making. For example, one leader expressed,

It creates an ethical conflict for principals every day when they are told to adhere to zero-tolerance policies and to bring better classroom and behavior management to their schools (thus increasing student achievement and growth) AND, at the same time, are told that they must keep a keen eye on the number of out-of-school suspensions of students with disabilities or students of color.

In another example, a school leader described trying to balance support for resource officers with protecting students:

I always have an ethical issue when asked to sit in with the police officer during an interrogation. We are supposed to watch out for the student and yet we are also supposed to let them talk which in many cases results in a confession and legal ramifications.

Conflicting Ethical Paradigms

In addition to experiencing conflict across the domains of student, parent, and colleague, the participants also described ethical situations that showed conflict between competing paradigms. When the ethics of justice, critique, and care interface, they can conflict. Thus, leaders are called on to acknowledge the complexity of situations they face and view them as solvable puzzles. This conceptual frame is reminiscent of Shulman (1998) who observed that a fully developed professional educator ably confronts “highly situated problems that draw together theory and practice in the moral sea of decisions to be made, actions to be taken. Options are rarely clean; judgments must be rendered” (p. 525).

As shown below in Table 2, ethical paradigms can conflict with themselves and with other paradigms. The nature of the critical ethical incidents can be described by their location in Table 2. An examination of the pattern of results in Table 2 shows that of the 39 incidents, three (7.7%) involved justice vs. justice conflicts, 21 (53.9%) involved justice vs. care conflicts, 10 (25.7%) involved justice vs. critique conflicts, and five (12.9%) involved care vs. critique conflicts.

Table 2
Conflicting Ethical Paradigms in Reported Critical Incidents

Conflicting Paradigms	Justice	Care	Critique
Justice	3	21	10
Care		-	5
Critique			-

Note: Dashes indicate that ethical paradigms did not conflict in reported critical incidents.

Justice vs. Justice. When participants described critical incidents where concepts of justice collided, most often school leaders explained this justice-justice conflict as having to do with individual respect, the principle of greatest good, zero-tolerance policies, and professional duty. Only three responses fit this category and is captured in the following quote:

Maintaining a safe, orderly learning environment for every student may conflict with an individual’s best interests...So, overall, weighing the best interest of one versus the best interests of many often times brings questions and conflicting emotions.

Justice vs. Care. Respondents struggling to negotiate the ethic of justice with the ethic of care were found among all domains (students, parents, colleagues) and most often had to do with struggling with emotions, relationships, and communications and values of trust and beneficence. Responses indicated attempts to balance consequentialist perspectives embedded in the ethic of justice with elements of contextualization emblematic with the ethic of care. For example, one school administrator shared,

In education, there are rules, policies, and guidelines you are expected to follow. At times, a student has not followed the rules and are supposed to receive a specific

consequence. There are times when you know the student's home life and it is better for him/her to be in school than not, which becomes trivial with finalizing your decision.

Similarly, another school leader explained a justice-care conflict in terms of handling a specific zero-tolerance policy infraction:

As a principal, I had a student come to my office and show me a small knife he had accidentally brought with him to school. Policy dictated zero tolerance, and an automatic suspension. However, I discussed the situation with the student, called his parent with him present, and had the child talk with the parent. I then told the parent that the child had done the right thing in coming to me, and had them come to pick up the knife.

Justice vs. Critique. Recall that the ethic of critique can help to relax tensions associated with the ethic of justice. Conceptual themes associated with the justice v. critique conflict were oriented in social justice concerns such as protecting special populations and preserving equality. For example, one principal recalled a family with a single working mother who sometimes needs the older child to watch the younger children if they are ill. Normally, these absences would not be excused, but this particular principal was able to contextualize the situation and excuse the absences indicating, "If she does not go to work, she does not get paid." While having the child in school is important, the welfare of the family took precedence in this particular situation. Rather than expel the student for excessive absences, the administrator critiqued the policy in light of social justice concerns that took into account the contextual complexities of poverty and family obligations.

Care vs. Critique. Similar to the justice v. critique concerns, the care vs. critique conflict includes elements of contextualization as well as acknowledgement of special populations. For example, a higher education administrator noted:

In my work with students in higher education, I encounter ethical conflicts when students with psychiatric/mental health concerns appear to be at risk, and parents become involved out of concern. I am bound by FERPA, however must weigh the safety of the student, their right to autonomy, and their risk for harm in making decision to talk with parents or other support persons outside the university.

Rather than experiencing conflict with a student with a disability, one school principal reported experiencing conflict with a teacher with special needs who was not meeting the requirements of the job. When confronted with instructional shortcomings, the teacher in question "wanted me to feel sorry for her because she has a disability." This principal then had to find a way to show care for the teacher while also "holding her responsible for her job duties."

Taken together, the ethical conflict that practicing educational leaders experience can be categorized in terms of both conflicting paradigms and domain of conflict as shown in Table 3 below.

Table 3
Incidents Categorized by Paradigm and Domain of Conflict

Domain	Students	Parents	Colleagues	Total
Justice vs. Justice	2	0	1	3
Justice vs. Care	5	4	12	21
Justice vs. Critique	1	3	6	10
Care vs. Critique	1	3	1	5

In describing the ethical conflict experienced by this sample of leaders it becomes clear that mitigating conflict with colleagues is integral to supporting the best interests of students. As is shown in Table 3, the majority of conflict leaders experience involves colleagues (51%) and of these collegial conflicts 12 (60%) involve the ethic of justice and the ethic of care. Also of note is that the majority of all conflicts (53%) involve the conflicts between the ethics of justice and care and that 26% of conflicts involve conflicts between the ethics of justice and critique.

Ethical Conflict and Leadership Background

The three female interviewees emphasized how their years of experience, along with the varied contexts in which they have served over the years, played a major role in their ethical growth and decision-making processes. For example, one female principal shared that her almost 20 years of experience teaching and leading in the middle and high school settings had helped her understand the developmental process of youth across the years, enabling her to view infractions in terms of not only policy, but according to the developmental level of the student. Her rich background facilitated the decision-making process because she was better able to gauge appropriate vs. inappropriate behavior, perhaps better than someone who had less time in the profession and/or less diverse experiences. The other two female principals also noted the importance of their combined years in diverse settings and how their background facilitated the contextualization of relationships. While the sole male principal also expressed the importance of contextualizing relationships, his decision-making process was based on balancing “the mores of the community” and what is “best for the child within the context of the community,” with “what policy or normal procedure dictates.”

Ethical Conflict and School Context

As the above section suggests, leadership background is closely related to school context. All four of the principals interviewed discussed the importance of understanding the background of the students, families, and community when making decisions, but more importantly, the importance of considering the age and grade level of the student. For example, the male principal said,

Obviously there is a difference between the way we may deal with elementary students – very young elementary students, middle school students and high school students because of the level, the age, the work that we’ve had with kids. Personally, at one of

my schools where I had multiple ages...I had sixth, seventh and eighth graders, and when I would bring in my sixth graders in I would discuss information with them and talk to them about what my expectations where...my expectations were quite different with my eighth graders, particularly those that had been with me for several years and they knew what our rules were, what I would tolerate and what I wouldn't. And so my expectations were different for the older students than for the younger students. And I think in many cases, we see that our expectations would be different for a junior/senior in high school that has seen numerous situations as opposed to a student who is in first or second grade.

The Role of Ideals and Principles

While all four interviewees discussed the importance of taking a balanced approach to ethical decision-making, the three women specifically talked about the role of emotion and feelings of care that interplay in the decision-making process. It was also interesting that the sole male participant spoke about the inevitability of conflict as just one aspect of the job. Two of four participants (one male/one female) spoke about the importance of looking at the situation from the point of view of many in their quest to find a balanced approach. For example, the male principal said,

Principles will change; policies and procedures may change depending upon where you are, but your ideals kind of stay with you all the time. Ideals for me basically mean looking at situations and trying to do what's best for children...do what's best for kids. I'm constantly trying to balance what's best for the whole verses what's best for this individual student; what's best for the teachers in the teaching environment versus what I'm doing with this one student. But I always try to look at the individual child and make a decision that's best for the child without creating any kind of major conflict with our procedures, our policies and what we do for the whole.

Similarly, the female principal in consideration explained,

For me, one is your personal moral and ethical set of how you make decisions; that's one for me. Two, it's what we as a school have decided we are going to use as our guiding expectations and what consequences are going to be; we try to all be on the same page with that. There's the individual student piece and what that student needs, whether or not it may fit in that paradigm or that framework in which we have established as a school, district expectations and parental expectations too. But trying to weigh all that, I try to see things from various perspectives; from the perspective of the teacher, from the student perspective, the parent perspective, community perspective, what other students will see as a result of how we responded to that situation in trying to balance all of that for the most good of everyone involved.

The Best Interests of the Student

For all four interviewees, making decisions that are ultimately in the best interests of individual students is directly related to all of the above concerns. While one principal

believed her commitment to fully contextualize relationships enabled her to do the right thing, she also noted the emotional aftermath (or not) vis-à-vis “the ultimate support you have” and whether “you are going to be backed or not from your superiors.” The other three participants were less confident in their abilities to always do the right thing, but also connected the ability to meet the best interests of students to whether or not written policy and district office personnel gave individual leaders “space” for autonomy. For example, one school administrator noted that he strives to be a “good administrator” and to have a “good ethical foundation” but that policy generally, and zero tolerance policies in particular, “forces us to make some decisions that aren’t in the best interest of children.” Similarly, another principal acknowledged mistakes she had made:

Well I mean there certainly were situations where I think I called it wrong. There were certainly times where circumstances were outside of my control. There are times when it doesn’t matter what I think; whoever is ahead of me and gets involved and makes a decision, it doesn’t matter what my input is. Sometimes people who supervise us have rules and policies that we don’t understand, things that we don’t get so see in the big picture, and so there were times I felt student’s needs were not served because of those circumstances...

The Role of Preparation Programs and Professional Development in Ethical Practice

Only one of the three informants remembers taking a substantive amount of ethical training, but also noted that while this training was helpful, ethical theory did not become embedded in her personality until she had a chance to actually apply her knowledge in the field:

I did have a good ethics course...that helped, but I feel like you can’t really see the full spectrum until you’re in the middle of it and have to really sort through things, and consider, and think...

Two other participants seemed to lament the lack of ethical training because ethics was relevant to “everything you do” as a school leader. While all participants seemed to agree that on-the-ground experience was most important, they also believed a background in ethical theory would be beneficial to their work; especially to help them find balance between competing ethical demands. One principal noted that formal training provides an opportunity to “think...and see things from a different perspective and discuss with colleagues and reading a variety of pieces of literature” that would otherwise not happen if formal training in ethics was not present.

Discussion, Implications, and Conclusion

Aligning with the research literature, leaders categorized their ethical conflicts as taking place within the domains of students, parents, and colleagues and described situations in which paradigms conflicted in terms of justice, critique, and care. Of the three domains, conflict with colleagues was most prevalent and within the domain of collegial conflict, the interface of the ethics of justice and care most often are the source of the conflict. In addition, the spread of

incidents across levels and contexts suggest that leaders experience conflict irrespective of the level and context in which they serve.

Findings also suggest that leaders strongly believe their background and experience in context empower them to mitigate conflict to the benefit of the student. However, in situations in which the best interests of students are not served, leaders attribute the malfeasance to external/institutional factors. Coupled to participants' strong ethic of care, balancing policy and expectations of superiors was a source of conflict. While the descriptions of ethical conflict provided in narratives and interviews suggested that leaders in this sample have an awareness of applied ethics, they do not attribute their awareness to pre- or in-service training, but rather personal values and sustained and varied professional experiences.

Although not specifically pursued, the narrative inquiry and interview data both contain undercurrents of issues related to social justice. For example, both sets of data include references to race and social class. The finding that ethical conflict is spread across levels and contexts suggests that factors such as race and social class may be significantly connected to the ethical conflict leaders' experience.

Moreover, the concern for the student via the ethic of care is a predominate value that emerged in both the narrative inquiry and interview portions of this study. The leaders' perceptions of care, however, are incomplete because neither the critical incident data nor the interview data include the voice of the student. Because of this, leaders' conceptualizations of care are often based on inferred rather than expressed needs (Noddings, 2008). Since the ethic of care is integral to revealing the voice of injustice (Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2011) leaders who fail to consider the expressed needs of students may simultaneously fail to support their best interests (Mansfield, 2013).

In line with Campbell (2008), the responses of these participants are silent on the role their leadership preparation programs played in their ethical development. Campbell's concern that leadership programs model teacher preparation programs remains pertinent fifteen years later: that educational leadership and foundations departments work together to develop leadership programs that make firm connections between ethics in theory and ethics in practice (Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2011; Starratt, 1991) and that purposeful steps are taken to make leadership for social justice a cornerstone of educational leadership programs (Mansfield, Newcomb, & King, 2013). Similarly, steps can be taken to serve practicing leaders by providing opportunities for professional development that teases out the necessary components to balanced decision-making such as context, relationships, and age/level of students.

In terms of areas ripe for future research, there is a need for inquiry that amplifies the voices of students (Mansfield, 2013). For example, this study can be replicated featuring the student as participant. Remember that Iacoboni (2008) found that while humans are born wired with the capacity for assuming the perspective of others being wired does not also mean that such perspective taking is automatic. Care and empathy are integral to supporting the best interests of students and affective factors such as these are enabled when leaders are able to take the perspective of the student (Johnson, 1993; Singer & Lamm, 2009). It is difficult to imagine being able to assume the perspective of students without talking with them first (Johnson; Mansfield). While the critical incident technique proved fruitful in the case of this project, additional research could be done with students to test the efficacy of this tool to better understand the perspectives of students.

In comparison to the teaching profession, the leadership literature is sorely lacking in research that explores the complex and nuanced world of the persistent ethical dilemmas that school leaders face on a day-to-day basis. This study sought to address these gaps generally as well as specifically study the problem of the double mandate that school leaders meet their accountability standards to the institution while also meeting the best needs of students. By utilizing the critical incident technique, this study captured and described the complexity of ethical conflict experienced by a sample of practicing educational leaders through a multidimensional ethical lens. By demonstrating the ways practicing leaders wrestle with ethical beliefs in applied situations, ideal visions of how things ought to be, coupled with the realization of the sometimes-unseemly realities of what really is, the literature receives a modest yet important contribution from this study.

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