

How to Implement the Ways of Knowing Through the Realms of Meaning as an Ethical Decision-Making Process to Improve Academic Achievement-Ten Recommendations

Desiree A. Skinner
PhD Student in Educational Leadership
College of Education
Prairie View A&M University
Academic Advisor
Bryan Independent School District
Bryan, Texas

William Allan Kritsonis
Professor
PhD Program in Educational Leadership
Prairie View A&M University
Member of the Texas A&M University System
Visiting Lecturer (2005)
Oxford Round Table
University of Oxford, Oxford, England
Distinguished Alumnus (2004)
Central Washington University
College of Education and Professional Studies

ABSTRACT

“Values, purposes, and understandings are fragile achievements and give way all too readily to attitudes of futility, frustration, and doubt” (Kritsonis, 2007, pg.7). Ethical decision-making is one way for school leaders to contribute to improving education. Effecting change is the duty of school principals; this may often come in making decisions that are controversial, and give way to the question of ethics. An ethical dilemma occurs when electing one best moral action from two potentially correct options. Dr. William A. Kritsonis’s book *Ways of Knowing Through the Realms of Meaning* (2007) can be a practical and valuable resource for navigating through these turbulent situations.

Introduction

What is involved in an ethical decision-making process? The answer to this question has several possibilities. Understanding this concept is the first step to implementing what ought to be done; a universal notion of right. Using Dr. William A. Kritsonis's *Ways of Knowing Through the Realms of Meaning* (2007) provides a well-laid foundation for ethical decision-making in order to improve academic achievement in schools. Ethical decisions are not always inline with individual values, and it is imperative that school leaders have a template in which to utilize when making tough choices. Ethical decisions can also require taking action that may be deemed as controversial, which stresses the point of possessing the ability to demonstrate moral authority.

Purpose

The purpose of this article is to explain how the principles of Dr. William A. Kritsonis's book can be used as a support in making ethical decisions. The *Ways of Knowing Through the Realms of Meaning* (2007) connects philosophic patterns in a useable and practical manner, which provides all leaders a tool for discovering solutions. Taking advantage of this information, and applying it, virtually guarantees success. Making ethical decisions in the school environment will enhance curriculum, school culture, and ultimately morale of the building, district, and community. School leaders are responsible for carrying out duties that are in the best interest of all stakeholders connected with the school from the custodial staff to the community. Eventually students will be contributing members of society, and it is vital to their futures that they have been exposed to ethical standards and leaders. Having an ethical decision-making model "...will aid leaders to confront the most acrimonious issues and make the decisions that best serve the needs of students and the community without making moral compromises" (Hermond, 2005-2006, ¶ 1).

Dealing with moral dilemmas and ethical decision-making is hard for anyone. "In short, contemporary life is pervaded by doubts about the basis for moral commitment, and by skepticism as to the possibility of reliable meaning in the ethical realm" (Kritsonis, 2007, p. 64). Clinging to wise decision-making gives structure among chaos and promotes reasonable judgments.

Recommendations

The following ten recommendations can be used as a guide when moral and ethical concerns arise. "...a moral dilemma must exist before there can be a need for

ethical decision-making” (Kallio, 2003, ¶ 4). These suggestions are embedded in the realms of meaning according to Dr. William A. Kritsonis.

A complete person should be skilled in the use of speech, symbol, and gesture (symbolics), factually well informed (empirics), capable of creating and appreciating objects of esthetic significance (esthetics), endowed with a rich and disciplined life in relation to self and others (synnoetics), able to make wise decisions and to judge between right and wrong (ethics), and possessed of an integral outlook (synoptics). (Kritsonis, 2007, p. 15)

Legality

When considering a decision, a principal must first consider the legality of each potential response. Legal responses are part of the equation for ethical decisions; however, legality and ethics do not always mirror each other. For example, a principal encouraging a teacher to change a student’s grade for athletic purposes is a legal action, but it is unethical. “Strict adherence to what the law permits or requires does not necessarily equate to making decisions that are moral” (Kallio, 2003, ¶ 7). Careful consideration of different options, with the law as the ethical framework, will steer one to optimal decisions.

Consider All Possibilities

When coming up with a solution to a problem, a principal must generate many ideas. Creating a list of facts aids in having a comprehensive understanding of the issue. After creating the list of facts, narrowing the list of possible solutions helps to identify those that are moral. Ultimately the goal is to choose the best resolution. “In short, before a person can know where to go, he needs to understand where he is starting from” (Kritsonis, 2007, p. 459). By considering all options, a principal is open to new ideas that will expectantly lead to the best response. Choosing a program to best serve at-risk students is filled with many possibilities from an alternative campus to self-paced curriculum.

Conduct is not moral if one acts without due deliberation, does what first comes to mind, follows precedents automatically, or chooses on the basis of accidental factors. The improvement of conduct depends upon the habit, in making each decision, of bringing into consciousness a range of different possibilities from among which a selection can be made. (Kritsonis, 2007, p. 459)

The conscience is a gift to use for intuition of right and wrong. Through sincerity and persistence of seeking what is right, authenticity is actualized.

Affect on Others

How will the response affect others? Is the action fair? Is the decision willing to be experienced personally? Does the decision conform to the values of the school, district, and community? “Sound ethical decision-making starts with being in touch with your own, as well as the community’s, core ethical values” (Kidder, 2002, ¶ 7). If a school’s policy is to not change schedules once instruction has begun, unless to correct a scheduling error, then it is imperative for all staff involved in this process to be consistent. When the most influential parents call to demand a change because their child has had a change of mind, requires staff to hold firm to the no change policy. Allowing these changes not impact master schedule, but they are unethical. Many students have had a change of mind and do not have advocates with the same erudition to manipulate the system. By overriding this policy the interests of all students are being overlooked. “...an ethical decision must take into consideration the rights and interests of others” (Kallio, 2003 , ¶ 8).

The next six suggestions come specifically from the *Ways of Knowing Through the Realms of Meaning* (2007). These suggestions support the construction for ethical decision-making.

Model Behavior

Symbolics is the first realm and in reference to the topic of ethical decision-making, symbolics is used to describe behavior, through speech and action that a principal exhibits to promote ethical behavior and decisions. Behavior includes bodily language and facial expressions. “It is a commonplace...that communication is a function of the person as a whole, including gestures, facial expressions, and bodily posture” (Kritsonis, 2007, p. 157). Students are sensitive to language and actions that are contradictory. Communication is a complete and interconnected process that consists of symbolic patterns; hence, a principal must be congruent at all times.

“...school leaders should possess valuable beliefs about what is right and wrong and translate those beliefs into action” (Hermond, 2005-2006, ¶ 4). Actions communicate a message much more clearly than words. When a principal acts on a purpose that is just and right, students witness a symbolic testimony to moral action and ethical decision-making. With dress code as such a sensitive subject in schools, expectation of professional and appropriate dress is modeled through the attire of the principal; this sets the tone for the building.

Data Driven

Empirics are the second realm, and it deals with facts. With enough data from observations, generalizations are produced, and with enough information these generalizations eventually become facts. All possible decisions need to be based on research. Empirically supported alternatives are the only considerations. Data driven options “...express meanings as probable empirical truths framed in accordance with certain rules of evidence and verification...” (Kritsonis, 2007, p.12). An ethical act is recommending and implementing accommodations for special education students that are based on empirical information. This is true because research has been done and a consensus has been reached, possibly a universal agreement, for the best outcomes of particular accommodations.

Outcome Appreciated

“In the esthetic realm the object of knowledge is the singular particular form” (Kritsonis, 2007, p. 273). Esthetics is being used in this topic to refer to the principal skillfully thinking in an ethical and moral manner. By implementing these thoughts and decisions, the principal is engaging in esthetics of purpose and values. Is the outcome of the decision admirable? Conceiving a vision that inspires others to be supportive involves creating a sense of esteem and respect. In the end, educators are expected to do what is in the best interest of students. Establishing an environment of harmony, balance, and satisfaction culminates the esthetic realm.

For a system to work, decisions need to be made to benefit the masses. In the big scheme there may be a few that feel they deserve a different kind of treatment and it is possible for these few to unravel the system. Referring back to the schedule change example, if a campus has made the decision to not change schedules the support of central office is detrimental. With phone calls of a few parents that bypass the campus straight to central office, decisions to change schedules could potentially undermine the schedule change process of the campus. To keep systems in sync and flowing, the esthetics of purposefully holistic decisions need to be made for effectiveness.

Personal Knowledge

According to Dr. Kritsonis (2007), the fourth realm of synnoetics, envelops personal knowledge. “Synnoetics signifies relational insight or direct awareness” (Kritsonis, 2007, p. 12). Principals must have complete and clear understanding of situations in order to make well-informed decisions. Integrating synnoetics into a decision-making guide requires the principal to be engaged in the process and implementation to effect change in response to the situation. The more stable the principal, the better able to make appropriate ethical decisions, and in the end valuable relationships will be created with school stakeholders. “...the quality of person’s life is deeply affected by the quality of the relationships with the significant persons (e.g., parents, siblings, teachers, peers) with whom one lives” (Kritsonis, 2007, p. 411). Deciding to remove vending machines in the building to promote student wellness will also be reflected in the ethical decision to remove vending machines from the teacher’s lounge. Even though this decision will result in the loss of school funds through the machines, this is an example of being well balanced in regards to the health of students and faculty.

Moral Knowledge

Ethical decision-making is a complex task and there is not a clear-cut path to moral mastery. Ethics is the fifth realm, and the keystone for this article. “...morality has to do with personal conduct that is based on free, responsible, deliberate decision” (Kritsonis, 2007, p. 13). If nothing else, principals are expected to behave in a manner that is intentionally just and honorable. Being an educational leader makes it a nearly impossible task to satisfy everyone, but upholding moral conduct is a universal responsibility. “...the really tough decisions typically arise because both sides of a dilemma are rooted in values and, in many respects, are right” (Kidder, 2002, ¶ 18). Utilizing accepted social standards could provide guidance for making decisions due to the embodiment of well-tested ethical knowledge. “By far the most significant sources of such influence are the laws and customs of society” (Kritsonis, 2007, p. 454).

Principals must consider the outcome of decisions that are made and not made. Making wise decisions and the ability to judge between right and wrong summarizes possessing moral knowledge. “The leader must always consider the moral validity of what is done or not done” (Thomas, 2002, ¶ 18). When people are involved, ethical elements are an everlasting presence in trying to do the right thing and do what ought to be done. A strong commitment and maturity are essential. Ethical decisions are in the spotlight for people to pass their personal moral verdicts. “The ethical domain is not defined by what conduct is about, but by the fact of its being deliberate and subject to the judgment of right and wrong” (Kritsonis, 2007, p. 453).

If a principal were to spend school funds on personal indulgences it most definitely is a wrong action; therefore, an unethical decision. Mistakes in judgment will happen, they are inevitable. When action and word (symbolics) are in harmony, integrity is established, and sincerity of one's intentions is undeniable.

Integrative

Synoptics, the sixth realm, can be used "...for the purpose of revealing what man by his deliberate choices has made of himself within the context of his given circumstances" (Kritsonis, 2007, p. 13). Ethical decision-making takes on a holistic connotation that is edged by past events. "Leadership has a setting, a historical framework, a wholeness of meaning and a diversity of influences" (Thomas, 2002, ¶ 6). A unified perspective and integrative function create a synoptic view. This outlook enables a principal to avoid practicing educational hypocrisy and walk the path of integrity.

Past events are good teachers for future decisions. School shootings, such as Columbine and Jonesboro, have raised the awareness of school safety. Implementing the wearing of school identification cards and metal detectors are ethical steps in creating safer schools. Improving human conditions by learning from the happenings on other campuses is imperative. Keeping up with current and past events is an expectation that is placed on all school leaders.

The good life consists in the realization of meanings, in all realms: in the ability to communicate intelligibly and forcefully, to organize the experience of sense into significant generalizations and theories with predictive power, to express the inner life in moving esthetic constructions, to relate with others and with oneself in acceptance and love, to act with deliberate responsibility, and to coordinate these meanings into an integrated vision and commitment. (Kritsonis, 2007, p. 471)

Discovering universality of ethics with the school community as a moral enterprise increases meaning through the realms.

Evaluate Decision

Once a decision has been made and put into action, the principal must evaluate the results. What are the consequences? Who benefits? Who is harmed? At this time, the principal is able to determine whether the decision was the best choice. If the decision

were not the best answer, an ethical principal would start over and find an alternative solution.

Having moral courage in a world that sometimes seems to have lost its code of ethics can be challenging. Principals are in a position to emulate the strength of reputation, mental and emotional well-being, self-esteem, and character. “Moral courage plays itself out daily, hourly, in the interstices of our lives. Without it, our brightest virtues rust from lack of use. With it, we build piece by piece a more ethical world” (Kidder, 2002, ¶ 44).

Concluding Remarks

In conclusion, having a model to make ethical decisions is a necessity for all leaders; the principles of Dr. William A. Kritsonis’s book can be a starting point. Sometimes a principal is expected to go beyond the comfort zone, and make decisions that outsiders may not approve. The *Ways of Knowing Through the Realms of Meaning* (2007) connects philosophic patterns in a useable and practical manner, which provides all leaders a tool for discovering solutions to ethical dilemmas. “But leadership is also the process of going beyond the status quo, exploring new ideas and creating new forms” (Thomas, 2002, ¶ 10).

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