Crossing Into Uncharted Territory: Developing Thoughtful, Ethical School Administrators

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In this distrustful, unstable, and ethically polarized era, there is a need to prepare school administrators to resolve a myriad of moral dilemmas. As professors of school administration, how can we make sure that our future leaders have the capacity to make thoughtful, ethical decisions? How do we prepare these leaders to develop, foster and lead tolerant and democratic schools? What follows is a small action research project aimed at elevating moral and ethical wherewithal among graduate students studying school administration. Ninety-Six percent of the students indicated that learning through dialogue or Socratic questioning, deepened their understanding of the topic. Most importantly, one-third of the students indicated that the dialogue caused them to uncover errors and incorrect assumptions in their own thinking and change them as a result.

What comes to your mind when you hear the name Bernard Madoff, the investment advisor? How about Enron's Ken Lay and Jeff Skillings? How about the ousted Illinois Governor, Rod Blagojevich? If you are like me, you want to trust people and really don't like that feeling of not knowing who to trust. Politicians and lawyers are generally the most mistrusted folks on planet but, it seems like the list is expanding. Most educators have a different reputation, thankfully. In fact, school administrators and teachers are among the most trusted individuals in the world.

At a time when our trust in public figures has been derailed and our economy has jumped up and bit us, it is important for us to remember how easily trust can be lost. I can't think of anything more important in troubling times than to find comfort in normal things like going to school and being surrounded by people who care about you and who understand that every decision that they make has an impact on human lives. In this unstable, ethically polarized era, there is a need to offer different perspectives to future leaders in order for them to be prepared to solve the real-life dilemmas that they face each day in their schools (Parker and Shapiro, 1992).

Educational administration as a field needs to prepare future leaders to be change-agents for difference and not merely succumb to the conformist demands of the problems in bureaucratic settings. Administrators who lack socio-cultural consciousness will unconsciously and inevitably rely on their own personal experiences to make sense of students' lives which

often leads to misinterpretations and miscommunication. School administrators have an ethical obligation to be aware of the role that schools play in perpetuating and challenging inequities. (Villegas and Lucas, 2007) The literature on issues of diversity in educational administration is expanding, however, the discussion of difference in school administration remains scarce. Without better preparation we are sending our future leaders lacking some of the most critical skills that they need to resolve the multitude of ethical, social and political dilemmas that they face in our schools. (Parker and Shapiro, 1992) As professors of school administration, how can we make sure that our future leaders have the capacity to make thoughtful, ethical decisions? What follows is a description of a small action research project aimed at elevating moral and ethical wherewithal among graduate students studying school administration.

The Dilemma

Our society is becoming more and more demographically diverse and educational administrators must be more prepared to develop, foster and lead tolerant and democratic schools. Leaders need to be prepared to recognize and celebrate difference. This is one of the many paradoxes that leaders face in attempting to make ethical decisions. At the same time, we live in a culture that prizes "scientifically-based" solutions to educational problems. Science, a centuries-long quest for certainty, *in theory* eliminates the need for ethical deliberation, because science determines the correct course of action. Our dominant culture is in lockstep with this theoretical assumption. Science converts human phenomena into numbers and we increasingly depend upon numbers to manage and control everything. But here is the catch: behaviors are never produced by measurement. The qualities that make a person ethical or unethical: honesty, a propensity to discern what constitutes justice, caring, commitment, these are impossible to quantify. The truly humane dimensions to human life, those that everyone would like to see in schools, certainly those that every parent would like to see (as John Dewey so eloquently argued), fall into an ethical, rather than empirical, domain. How would one attach a number to a professional code of ethics? How would you quantify the best interests of children? How about a sense of community? Can you put a number on that? Put simply, ethical decisions simply cannot be quantified. Yet here we are, immersed in a policy milieu defined by hyper-testing that creates an environment for dishonesty and unethical practice, making the era in which we live a time when ethics have never been more important to the educational enterprise.

The Project

I developed a readings-based approach to catalyzing sophisticated thinking about the place of ethics in the school leadership enterprise. I carefully selected them first to set the stage to have them consider their life in a democracy and about the freedom that we have to act, with or without integrity. I also chose a reading which enabled them to relate and contextualize ethical decision-making by connecting to their personal frame of reference. The stage was set by reading the first two paragraphs from Neil Postman's 1969 classic, *Teaching is a Subversive Activity,* in Chapter 1, titled "Crap Detecting*."*

> In 1492, Columbus discovered America. Starting from this disputed fact, each one of us will describe the history of this country in a somewhat different way. Nonetheless, it is reasonable to assume that most of us would include something about what is called the "democratic process," and how Americans have valued it, or at least have said they valued it. Therein lies a problem: one of the tenets of a democratic society is that men be allowed to think and express themselves freely on any subject even to the point of speaking out against the idea of a democratic society. To the extent that our schools are instruments of such a society, they must develop in the young not only an awareness of this freedom but a will to exercise it, and the intellectual power and perspective to do so effectively. This is necessary so that the society may continue to change and modify itself to meet unforeseen threats, problems, and opportunities. Thus, we can achieve that John Gardner calls and "ever-renewing society."
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> So goes the theory.
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> In practice, we mostly get a different story. In our society as in others, we find that there are influential men at the head of important institutions who cannot afford to be found wrong, who find change inconvenient, perhaps intolerable, and who have financial or political interests they must conserve at any cost. Such men are, therefore, threatened in many respects by the theory of the democratic process and the concept of an ever-renewing society. Moreover, we find that there are obscure men who do not head important institutions who are similarly threatened

> because they have identified themselves with certain ideas and institutions which they wish to keep free from either criticism or change (Postman, 1968).

After I captured their interest with a short recitation of Postman, I began to pose some open-ended questions. Using a dialogue or a form of Socratic questioning seemed to offer the best way for the students to connect to the content, contextualize it through their own frame of reference and value system. A dialogue is collaborative: several sides work toward shared understanding as opposed to a debate which is opposition and each side tries to prove the other wrong. In a dialogue, one listens to understand, make meaning, and to find common ground. Dialogue reveals assumptions made and opens up those assumptions for examination and reevaluation. Dialogue enlarges and expands ones point of view. Dialogue assumes that many people have pieces of answers and that cooperation can lead to greater understanding (Greybull, 2006).

I was pleased at the richness of the dialogue. The question was posed, "What does the word *ethic* mean?" Students give various high-level responses. A follow-up question was posed, "What are some unethical practices that you've seen in the news lately?" Students responded with such names as Bernie Madoff and banking executives who took economic stimulus money as their bonus pay rather than using it to stimulate the economy. Next the students were asked about ethical issues that seem to be a political hotbed. They responded with such things as reproductive rights and stem cell research. The next question posed was, "Who determines ethics" and a follow-up, "what assumptions do we make about ethics based upon gender, sexual orientation, social class and religion?" The dialogue became livelier but, was not heated. My observant eye noted the depth of engagement of the students. They were intently listening to each other but, not talking over one another. The dialogue was working and they felt safe enough with their peers to speak out with passion. Another follow-up question: "As educators, do we speak with one voice?" As a result of these questions, it was apparent that the students understood that there were specific ethics that we follow as a profession, but they were also very well aware that they were unique based upon their own personal set of values.

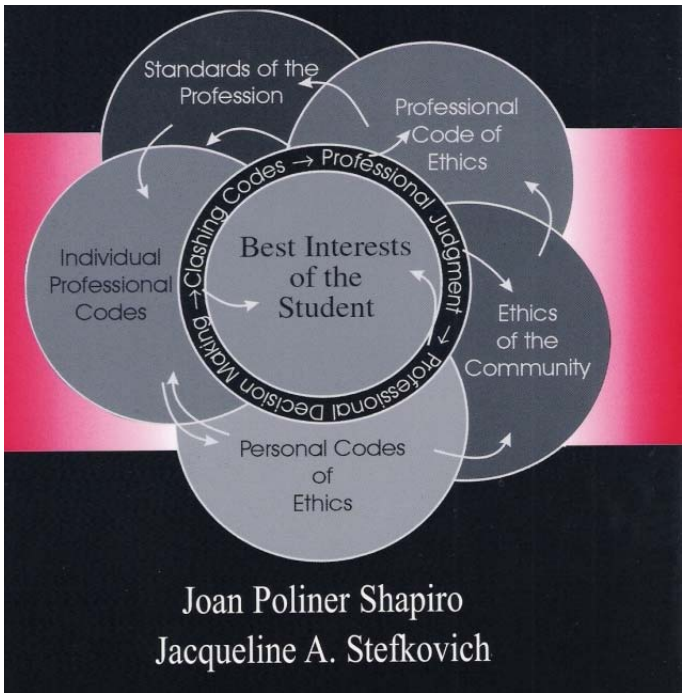
The next part of the dialogue focused specifically on schools. "What are public schools for?" followed up with "whose interests are served and whose should be served in a system of compulsory education?" The students understood the importance of education for sustaining a democracy but, they also thought that it was important for education to create and sustain a

workforce. The dialogue shifted and students talked about the traditional curriculum espoused by Chester Finn, Diane Ravitch, E.D. Hirsch and others and voiced their disagreement. Some students mentioned that this type of curriculum might reproduce the inequalities of society. When the subject of domination/subservience and 'whiteness' arose, I realized how important it was that we were having a dialogue and not a debate. Through this dialogue students were given the opportunity to have their views heard in a nonjudgmental way but, were also open to hear the thoughts of others, allowing them to open up and reevaluate their own assumptions. I was quietly pleased with the dialogue that took place. It was apparent that students were coming fact to face with their own misconceptions about race.

The next question posed was, "What makes teaching a moral endeavor?" The students were well aware of the impact of their decisions and understood the importance of being a role model. Pushing a bit harder, I asked them, "What is best for kids? And who decides this? The students unmistakably believed in doing what is best for kids but, realized that the phrase was often overused and often for self-serving purposes and decisions needed careful thinking about the intent. The follow-up question was, "how does what you value impact what you do and the decisions that you make?" "what filters do you use to make those decisions?" In the final portion of the dialogue, students talked about ethical dilemmas that they had experienced or witnessed at their schools.

Students were challenged by the dialogue and left the evening with much to consider and re-evaluate about their own thinking. Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium for School Leaders**,** Performance expectation 5: Ethics and Integrity, "Education leaders ensure the success of all students by being ethical and acting with integrity." It was important to connect theory to practice, so taking the dialogue to the next step meant helping them understanding a framework to fall back on when they had to make difficult decisions while "thinking on their feet." I found a beautiful essay entitled, *It Was a Tuesday Morning (Shapiro, S.H. 2003),* and read this to my students. The essay is about Tuesday morning, September 11, 2001 at Aida Rodriguez daycare and preschool in lower Manhattan on that momentous day when two planes hit the World Trade Center in a terrorist attack against our country. The essay describes Aida's response to the crisis in her center and the decisions that she made throughout the day in response. Throughout the essay, the author describes how different ethics in the framework influenced her decisions moment by moment. This is how the framework was introduced.

The framework that I used is the "*Ethic of the profession"* developed by Joan Shapiro and Jacqueline Stefkovich. There are three rich traditions which provide important foundations for understanding ethics, the ethic of justice, the ethic of critique, and the ethic of care. The students were exposed initially to these ethics in the reading of, *It was a Tuesday Morning.* A short lecture followed to emphasize the important philosophical bases of these three traditions. Students were given names of classic and contemporary scholars on each philosophy as well as a reading list. Finally, they were shown the framework. The framework is diagram of five intersecting circles that converge to create the Ethic of the profession. The circles are standards of the profession, professional code of ethics, ethics of the community, personal codes of ethics, individual professional codes, and best interest of the students. Other factors also play a part in the professional paradigm. They are found surrounding the best interests of the student circle and include: clashing codes, professional judgment, and professional decision making. The arrows indicate the various ways the factors interact and overlap with each other (Shapiro, J and Stefkovich, J, 2005).



Ethics are very personal and in order to teach ethical decision making it is important that students view ethics through their own context. The Shapiro and Stefkovich framework provides a very thorough lens for students to look through to make difficult decisions. With time, moral dilemmas will become easier to manage for new administrators. Most importantly, the framework will help administrators make thoughtful decisions when faced with a variety of circumstances.

The Results

A short survey was given to the class to take on *Survey Monkey* at their leisure. Ninety-six percent of the students indicated that learning this information through dialogue or Socratic questioning, deepened their understanding of the topic. When asked specifically what new learning they acquired as a result the students had a variety of responses most describing the value of hearing other points of view in the dialogue: "People have various and often differing definitions of what is ethical." "I learned about issues that are more specific to Educational Administration." "I gained a lot of information from the discussion and hearing the points of view of others." One-third of the students indicated that through the dialogue they were able to uncover errors or assumptions in their own thinking and changed them as a result. All of the students indicated that the questioning techniques allowed them to connect new information with what they already knew about the topic. The students enjoyed the essay and the essay assisted them understanding the application of ethics in a real life dilemma: "I found the perspective especially helpful. I was able to connect to the feelings of an educational leader and the experiences we had during that day. I realized the importance of the leadership role beyond the walls of the school by showing concern for parents and the community." "The story described a vivid moment in time that is the ultimate worst case scenario to have to imagine. I do not know how history would interpret my choices but, I'm glad I've had the opportunity to consider them." Another student was more focused on understanding the ethical decision making to attend to: "It is always important to keep a level head in those situations. Ethically your number one priority is to keep your students safe! This can be difficult when you are worried about your own friends and family but in the end the kids in your care are what is the most important at that time." Another student struggled with the reading. "It would have been better for me to have had a copy that I read before class. I also lost the focus of what we were focusing on, 'ethics,' and got more into the human interest story of 9/11."

Conclusion

The ethics lesson is one that I will continue to teach. I will strengthen it by pre-teaching more about the framework and putting further emphasis on listening for it during the reading. In addition, I will give the students a copy of the essay to read before class. Even after reading it, I believe that they would enjoy hearing it read in order to understand how the ethic was played out

in the story. The dialogue proved valuable in uncovering students' hidden biases. Students learned in a constructivist manner from the perspectives of other students. Leadership and teaching in culturally diverse environments demands two fundamental qualities: sociocultural consciousness and an affirming view toward diversity (Nieto, 1996).

Socio-cultural consciousness is the awareness that a person's worldview is not universal but is profoundly influenced by life experiences mediated by race, ethnicity, gender and social class. Leaders who lack socio-cultural consciousness will unconsciously and inevitably rely on their own personal experiences to make sense of students' lives which often leads to misinterpretations and miscommunication. Leadership needs to be aware of the role that schools play in perpetuating and challenging inequities (Villegas and Lucas, 2007). Evidence also suggests that many teachers and leaders see students from socially subordinated groups through a deficient perspective. Lacking faith in the student's ability to achieve, they are more likely to have low academic expectations and ultimately treat them in ways that stifle their learning (Nieto, 1996). Leaders and teachers have an ethical obligation to help all students learn. To meet this obligation, leaders need to serve as advocates for students, especially those who have been traditionally marginalized in schools (Villegas and Lucas, 2007).

With careful attention, school administrators and teachers can remain among the most trusted individuals in the world. We are looked to for comfort and consistency during troubling times. We owe our future school leaders every tool we can possibly give them to help them make difficult decisions. Most importantly, our future school leaders need to understand that not all decisions, nor even most, can be made or should be made using a scientifically-based instrument designed to determine what ostensibly constitutes Truth. Increasingly, a potential school administrator needs to be able to demonstrate ethical decision-making in an attempt to secure a position as principal or superintendent. Those who prepare school administrators need to work at this task systematically and with purpose in mind.

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