



VALUES AND ETHICS IN EDUCATIONAL ADMINISTRATION

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CONSTRUCTING MORAL PATHWAYS IN THE TRANSITION FROM TEACHING TO ADMINISTRATION

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To claim that ethics and morality lie at the foundation of effective administrative praxis is neither new nor revolutionary - numerous studies have demonstrated that moral issues are embedded in the weave and texture of schooling and influence administrative choices (Begley, 1999; Foster, 1986; Greenfield, 1993; Hodgkinson, 1996). However, while this knowledge base has contributed invaluable insights into the importance of ethical leadership, it has concentrated primarily on the external aspects of leadership behaviour - what leaders should *do* - without an in-depth exploration of the internal landscape of leadership - how leaders *think* and *feel* (Ackerman & Maislin-Ostrowski, 2002), and *how* newcomers develop moral praxis in the transition from teaching to administration. In addition, its almost exclusive focus on the moral imperative of principals has negated the importance of vice-principals and their role in creating ethical schools (Calebese, 1991; Marshall, 1992).

There are many compelling reasons why theoreticians and practitioners who are committed to fostering moral leadership should include vice-principals' voices in the discourse on moral leadership. Although vice-principals are portrayed as a minority in theory and practice because of their location at the bottom of the administrative power pyramid, they outnumber principals

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and constitute the largest group of administrators. In addition, the vice-principalship forms an important link between the moral worlds of teaching and administration because it is the only gateway from teaching to administration in most jurisdictions (Marshall, 1992). It is within this position that new administrators confront the core dilemmas of schooling and become socialized to the values and norms of the administrative ethos (Hartzell, Williams & Nelson, 1994; Marshall & Mitchell, 1991). Maximizing the potential of these formative administrative experiences is therefore important because they are the foundations that undergird subsequent professional attitudes, values, choices and careers pathways (Hartzell, 1991). This paper explores the challenges, tensions and dilemmas new administrators experience. It is framed by the experiences of eight recently appointed secondary school vice-principals in a culturally diverse urban environment. A metaphor of epicycles is employed to describe the iterative cognitive, socio-emotional and moral pathways these individuals construct as they negotiate the organizational boundaries between teaching and administration. The article concludes with recommendations for sustainable structures that scaffold the moral developmental needs of newcomers.

Negotiating the Administrative Landscape

Although there is limited research regarding how vice-principals construct ethical pathways, what exists suggests that the transition from teaching to administration is neither smooth nor linear, and it requires substantial personal and professional adjustments in order to cope with the demands of their new role and contexts (Hartzell, 1991; Marshall, 1992; Sigford, 1998). Becoming a vice-principal entails giving up former teacher identities and orientations and assuming new managerial roles, perspectives and behaviours (Hartzell et al., 1994; Scoggins & Bishop, 1993). Personal and professional transitions do not occur in a vacuum - they are influenced by the vagaries of socio-historical, political and cultural contexts in which they occur (Marshall, 1992). In recent times newcomers to school administration are likely to encounter a fragmented, reform-oriented environment that demands quick responses and is intolerant of mistakes (Marshall & Mitchell, 1991; Olson, 2000). Their frontline position requires them to interact with a wider variety of constituents and in multiple social and political arenas (Marshall, 1992). They find themselves publicly visible in ways not previously encountered and accountable to the whole school, the district, and their extended community. Moreover, the typical absence of a clearly articulated job description leaves them open to powerful and conflicting

moral socializing forces both inside and outside of education (Calebese 1991; Marshall, 1992; Olson, 2000). Finally, they are often poorly prepared to assume administrative duties (Hartzell et al., 1994). Even if adequately trained to perform the technical tasks, they are often overwhelmed by the variety of conflicting expectations inherent in their role, the socio-emotional and political realities of middle management, and the idiosyncratic challenges of their particular school and district (Marshall, 1992; Sigford, 1998).

Empirical data confirms that administrators experience ethical dilemmas on a daily basis in performing their duties and identifies an increase in conflicts due to interpersonal interactions and/or incompatibility between personal, professional or organizational values (Begley, 1999, 2003; Brown, 1995; Greenfield, 1993). Vice-principals in diverse settings experience additional tensions where issues such as curriculum, scheduling, and testing are contested terrain, and often require that tough decisions be made under complex and ambiguous conditions (Begley, 1999; Foster, 1986; Greenfield, 1993). Competing sources of tension also emanate from their legal obligation to adhere to system policies that maintain the status quo, while at the same time addressing the shifting demands of external change agendas that conflict with local needs (Marshall, 1992). They experience ambivalence when their actions and values conflict, and they feel frustrated and disappointed when they find themselves lacking the competencies, power, and moral compasses necessary to resolve the tensions and ambiguities inherent in their administrative roles (Brown, 1995; Oshry, 1993). They are shocked to discover the variety of conflicting roles and expectations inherent in their new position, and the personal and psychological impact it has on their lives (Hartzell, 1991; Marshall, 1992; Scoggins & Bishop, 1993).

Findings and Discussion

The interview-based narratives of vice-principals' transition experiences confirm prior research findings indicating that ascending the administrative hierarchy is a powerful developmental process that provokes unexpected responses that are consistent with major personal and professional change (Nicholson & West, 1988; Sigford, 1998). Crossing the boundary between teaching and administration forces individuals to adopt roles and perspectives that destabilize their emotional, cognitive and ideological bases and provokes a range of conflicting emotions due to the tensions inherent in leadership and management. The two different Greek definitions for pathway, *odos* and *poros*, provide a useful framework for

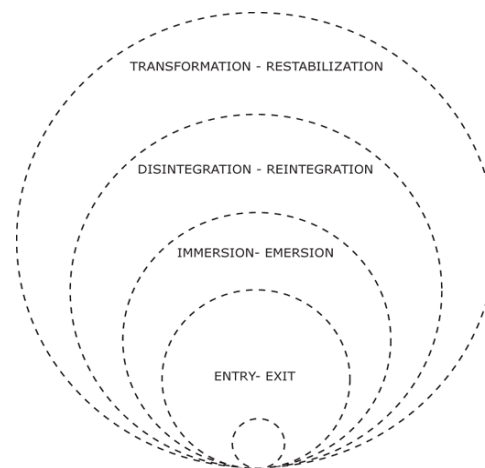
understanding the nature of the moral trajectory precipitated by this transition to administration. Kaufman identifies (1988; in Burbules, 1997) an *odos* as a pathway that connects two knowns and leads to a fixed answer, while a *poros*, is a route that leads to an unknown destination, and involves creating a trail where one does not exist. This second type of journey causes a crisis of meaning or an *aporia*, because of the choices and challenges it entails. The newly appointed vice-principals' trajectory across the administrative terrain is consistent with a *poros* because of the nature of the pathways they encounter and the absence of professional maps and guides to inform their ethical decision-making. Each phase of the transition brings new surprises that push their cognitive, emotional and social boundaries and provokes a pronounced redefinition of self, role and direction. Additional challenges derive from the paradoxical nature of their organizational role, professional position and their new moral responsibilities. Their ability to resolve these issues is a function of idiosyncratic individual, social and context variables such as, predisposing personality factors, prior experiences, as well as mediating variables related to the institutional culture and the types and levels of support they receive. Although each vice-principal's trajectory is unique, their collective narratives reveal that crossing the personal, professional and organizational boundaries between teaching and administration entails a series of common iterative pathways on the internal and external landscape.

Pathways, Trajectories and Epicycles

A metaphor of epicycles, a constellation of cycles within cycles, is used to describe the iterative cognitive, emotional and social trajectories experienced by recently appointed vice-principals. These trajectories are triggered by the duties and responsibilities of their role, conflicting personal and institutional expectations associated with their role, and the type of school in which they are placed. Epicycles represent an open, dynamic system that is influenced by the actions, reactions and interactions of the vice-principals within their professional and organizational spheres. In essence, pathway construction is a complementary individual and environmental dynamic where the newcomer and the terrain become interconnected entities and conduits for moral action. The four cycles of *Exit-Entry*, *Immersion-Emersion*, *Disintegration-Reintegration*, *Transformation-Restabilization* are corollaries of each other, and their names capture the paradoxical nature of the constructive process, as well as the potential for retrograde and forward progression that is inherent in change and transition trajectories. Figure 1 depicts the increasingly complex iterations as perceived from the newcomer's basic egocentric viewpoint, as well as his or her changing

perception as he or she progresses through the transition and socialization process. The new vice-principal is positioned in the middle of the transitional cycle to illustrate his or her centrality to the process.

Figure 1- Epicyclical Model of Transformational Trajectories



The primary circle of *Entry-Exit* represents the local or first-order trajectory where the perception of the first pathway is one of relative constancy and simplicity. The second-order trajectory of *Immersion-Emersion* is created when a secondary circle is drawn around the point that generates the first-order trajectory. Although both motions appear to be simple progressions from the outsider's perspective, when overlaid, they are perceived as complex from the first-order egocentric view. This is increasingly true for higher-order trajectories when observed from the first-order egocentric vantage point. However, as the newcomer moves to higher orders of perception, he or she can look back on the simple motions that comprise the lower order egocentric perceptions of the trajectories, and develop a clearer perspective of his or her moral journey.

Boundary Crossings - Epicycle 1- Entry – Exit

Although the newly appointed vice-principals' elevation in the educational hierarchy provides a perspective of pathways possibilities that were invisible from their former classroom location, it is destabilizing at the cognitive and emotional levels because it makes them more visible and responsible to the entire school population. The newcomers experience the promotion from teaching to administration as a critical developmental shift that places them at the crossroads of these two interdependent, but competing professions. During the first few weeks, they discover that the moral and mental maps developed from their teacher perspectives do not match the terrain of the new administrative landscape. In addition, they realize that, in spite of the fact that both fields are interconnected, their respective purposes and values often conflict because of

the administrative focus on organizational stabilization versus teachers' focus on changing or transforming individual students (Reed & Himmler, 1985). Their new role is an on-going source of ambiguity because of its intermediary location between teachers, administrators and the school community. Unclear definitions of their role's boundaries, competing stakeholder expectations, and the constant pressure to resolve a wide range of problems increase their feelings of vulnerability. Greg describes the stress that newcomers experience when converging socializing forces pressure them to conform to traditional and often contradictory constructions of the vice-principalship.

People expect you to fit the role and the teachers, the students and the parents perceive you and your title with a particular script... So, it's having to meet the community's expectations of what a vice-principal is. *That* is a challenge.

The shift in role from teacher to a larger-scale administrative perspective exposes the newly appointed vice-principals to a range of technical and moral problems, whose scope and depth challenge their mental and physical capacities. The frequent claim that "there was no clear pathway" encapsulates the aporia that is precipitated by a loss of the mental maps that guided their sense of purpose and identity as teachers. Inadequate training and unfamiliarity with the moral and technical challenges of their role force them to rely on veteran teachers and administrators, whose interpretations sometimes conflict. In addition, the pervasive fear of appearing incompetent provokes a desire to please the more powerful stakeholders and to follow pre-established administrative pathways that often conflict with their personal values. Sandy explains newcomers' tendency to adhere rigidly to policies and procedures, "And when you are new at a job, you tend to follow the rules. You don't make your own interpretation because you want to do things right". Early insecurities about their new role produce a narrow focus on technical and operational issues and provoke questions such as, "How do I do this?" "What do I do next? Where do I go?" This focus on "doing things right" engenders a rule-based egocentric morality, which is driven primarily by personal needs and a desire to appear competent. These experiences cohere with research findings indicating that newcomers' greatest worries centre on their ability to fulfill role requirements. This makes them more likely to comply with the demands of the superiors in the administrative hierarchy, thus reproducing custodial roles and pathways that maintain the status quo (Marshall, 1992; Matthews & Crow, 2003; Nicholson & West, 1988).

Digging Deeper - Epicycle 2- Immersion –Emersion

Moving to the second level of the epicyclical trajectory is a traumatic experience for all of the newcomers, with frequent articulations of metaphors such as "sink or swim", "jumping off the deep end", and "swimming against the tide" providing insight into the chaos and turbulence of this phase of their trajectory. Institutional "rites of passage" (Van Gennep, 1960) ensure that the newcomers are given difficult tasks such as timetabling, and they work overtime to solve chronic student, staff and community problems. The *Immersion-Emersion* cycle is precipitated during the first few months on the job when they are inundated by the dilemmas related to position, people and policy issues. The new vice-principals, particularly those who are in high-needs schools, are confronted for the first time with the harsh social and emotional realities of their students' lives, such as violence, abuse, poverty, and racism which were hidden or veiled in the classroom setting. These individuals, who all chose to become administrators because they felt that they could "make a difference for children", often feel overwhelmed and depressed by the enormity of the problems, and their inadequacy to deal with the core issues and the values conflicts that emerge from them.

Although policies and procedures constitute the cornerstone of administrative practice and are used to rationalize administrative decisions (Begley, 2003), they create anxiety for newcomers because they do not address all eventualities or provide specific solutions to local problems. In addition, because policies are often open to interpretation, they create interpersonal conflict at the community board and school levels, as well as within their own administrative teams. Sandy identifies the multiple sources of conflict that impact on the policy implementation process.

You have that conflict and tension between me and the parent, me and the teacher. The problem too is often your colleagues within the team, because we are very different. We have different philosophies, there are three of us ... and that can be frustrating at times.

Proximity to the management tasks such as staffing, scheduling, and supervision also open their eyes to the ways in which institutional policies and practices maintain the hegemonic structures of schooling. It is also from this perspective that they become aware of the injustices of schooling and some of them question their role in perpetrating systemic inequities.

During the first year they go through a period of "digging deeper" to determine how they can impose their own values and skills on the position. The ethics of zero

tolerance policies, in particular, are identified as a factor that further marginalizes poor and minority students. Esther describes the moral roadblocks that vice-principals encounter when implementing “one-size-fits-all” policies that criminalize typical adolescent behaviours and conflict with their personal values and local school needs. “Sometimes I think certain policies and procedures stand in the way of doing what you feel is right, using your judgment or even doing what is best for students”. Grappling with moral issues increases the newly appointed vice-principals’ tensions, but it also allows them to differentiate their values and pathways from those imposed by the district. Like all of the vice-principals, Greg acknowledges his complicity in perpetuating systemic immoralities. “So most of the time we are reactive. And so we tend to punish, and that does have a long-range effect, so in fact, we are creating more problems in many cases by being reactive than proactive”. Similarly, Esther questions institutional barriers and role constraints that restrict professional autonomy and hinder vice-principals’ discretion as moral agents.

Are we just there to take care of business or are we there to empower students, staff and community leaders? How can we stop so many students being suspended and ending up in the court system? So, how can we bring those types of changes if we are so bogged down at the grass roots level?

Some of the vice-principals come to the realization that while they do not have to provide immediate solutions to all of the problems, they have a moral and ethical obligation to alleviate some of them. Sandy describes the internal conflict associated with complying with assigned tasks and policies that conflict with personal beliefs. “But I am struggling with that. If you immerse yourself in it and think of the bigger picture, there is a lot of moral tension in the job. And it doesn’t have to be, I suppose.”

Attempts to reconcile the dissonance between their personal values and institutional definitions of their role motivate the vice-principals to move outward to explore pathways that are more consonant with their moral values. This *Emersion* phase signals their surfacing out of the downward spiral of *Immersion*, and marks the emergence of a new orientation to their administrative role. Although personal and professional safety needs are still pervasive concerns during this period in the epicycle, some of the vice-principals are able to shift their focus away from their own personal survival to their moral obligation to support the people in their schools. This outward shift or emergence is reflected in the types of questions they pose. For example, previous surface technical and operational questions of *how*, *what* and

where are deepened to, “How can this be done to balance school and district policies and meet the needs of students?” The vice-principals identify forming alliances with positive leaders within their schools, and networking with former colleagues, friends and mentors as important milestones in their upward redirection. In addition, individual acts of morality connected to making a positive difference for students and their families and supportive feedback from others, help reorient them to their original purpose. This combination of personal introspection and social interaction marks a progression away from their earlier egocentric focus on personal and professional needs to concerns about the wellbeing of their immediate community, and facilitates a clearer understanding of the impact of some of the choices they made in their previous trajectory.

Resurfacing - Epicycle 3 - Disintegration – Reintegration

The process of questioning themselves and their institutions that began in the previous epicycle is intensified as the vice-principals become more aware of the immoral consequences of their actions, and indeed, some individuals deal with this by attempting to return to their department headship positions. The discovery that these familiar teacher avenues are closed to them provokes feelings of loss and precipitates the *Disintegration* epicycle. However, a complementary process of *Reintegration* ensues. This involves holding on to and reshaping existing competencies, as well as trying on new roles and identities. *Relinquishing*, *retaining* and *reframing* are critical developmental tasks in reconstructing moral pathways. *Relinquishing* requires that the vice-principals divest themselves of the talents and perspectives that contributed to their success as teachers, but are dysfunctional in their new administrative role. Esther describes the emotional and moral tensions involved in letting go, even though she is cognitively aware of the impracticality of her earlier dreams to support all students.

Emotionally, I have said to myself, I cannot internalize everything, and I have to take a broader look at students and the relationship between how I can achieve the best for them ... And I realize that I cannot save everybody, because some really need saving. And I get distressed over the fact that I have to ignore some of the ones that need it. It’s difficult to let go.

Greg describes the difficulty of letting go of his teacher orientations and values, and the complementary challenge of developing other qualities that will allow him to impose a moral leadership framework on his administrative role.

So it's been having to grudgingly give up some that were appropriate as a teacher... and just mourn their loss. But dig deep to find out what other aspects of my abilities can be brought into the job, to make it more than just a management position.

Retaining and *reframing* are achieved by integrating their teacher skills within their new role in a meaningful way in order to improve their school communities. This process is part of a personal and social dynamic that involves a search for meaning and a mutual give-and-take between the newcomers and their social environment. An important aspect of this moral developmental process involves intentionally choosing routes that counter institutional definitions of their role as managers and disciplinarians, such as interpreting policies to benefit students and staff, by "bending the rules" and "finding gray areas". Sandy identifies the moral tension that comes with an increased awareness of her role and commitment to a moral course that is more congruent with personal values.

I'm really there to help. And I think part of helping is taking risks, giving chances and never putting yourself in a position where you have to do something because people said you had to ... I think I struggle with that a lot more because of the stage I am at ... maybe more so than in the beginning. And I think it has to do with the confidence and a better understanding of the larger picture of the job.

Bridges and Networks - Epicycle 4 - Transformation–Restabilization

Transformation-Restabilization represents the culminating phase of the newcomers' transitional trajectory. *Transformation* is a basic change in the way in which a situation is viewed and involves broader values shifts such as seeing transitions as important opportunities to learn about one's self, the world, and the process of change (Bridges, 2001). *Restabilization* is a function of experience and marks the return to a state of relative stability and comfort that results from familiarity with the school culture and the administrative ethos, and the establishment of a network of people on whom newcomers can rely for support. Experience with the cycle of the school year, their assigned duties, and the needs of their constituents enable them to impose more systematic proactive frameworks on their pathways. Although moving to a higher vantage point in the administrative socialization cycle does not reduce the moral tension inherent in their role, it affords a clearer perspective of the

moral and immoral impact of their choices, and the ways in which they can improve their communities, as Sandy explains,

And you are being forced always to look at the bigger picture. Because when you plan something, you don't just look at how it is going to affect my little world as a teacher in this little room teaching this subject, you are looking at how it affects the entire population, your community.

A concomitant outward shift in perspective beyond the local school to the larger system level is evident in Jerry's definition of his moral purpose. "So you have a vision of what you think you can do to make the educational system better and to make where you are working a better place." At this level, negative institutional configurations of their role continue to hinder their attempts to construct moral communities and they all consciously engage in activities that counter the stereotype of the punitive disciplinarian. Sandy highlights the importance of having a more proactive approach to her role as a precursor to ethical practice.

A good idea is to see your role rather as preventing rather than curing. I think the more time you spend supporting anyone, be it student or teacher, the easier your job will be, because in the end, when the problems come, they come to you.

The vice-principals identify additional landmarks such as working proactively at the school and system levels to address issues of poverty, literacy, at-risk populations, curriculum delivery, mentoring new teachers and coaching. Although these initiatives are not as far-reaching as they anticipated from their teacher perspectives, they are regenerative because they provide meaning and integrity and are an antidote to the more negative aspects of their role. All of the vice-principals emphasize building interpersonal relationships within and outside of their schools as critical developmental milestones. Like Barb, those in their third year identify the shifts such as focussing on people rather than tasks, engaging staff in decision making processes, and working together for a common goal as important steps in building moral pathways and communities.

I think a lot of things are probably prevented by having good relationships with people in the building ... being available, being a hard worker and being a participant in the school helps build relationships with teaching staff and kids ... People will get down in the dirt and do the work

because they see you get down in the dirt and work.

An essential task of reconstructing viable professional pathways also entails developing the cognitive and emotional schema to deal with the dilemmas, tensions and ambiguities that they encounter in their administrative middle space location. At this point in their trajectory, they are better able to balance some of the paradoxes and tensions of their role related to: leadership and management; huge responsibilities and little power; a massive workload and little time; justice and care; and equity and fairness. They are also more cognizant of the impact of their personal and professional moral decisions, and openly raise critical questions about institutional practices and policies such as *why, for what and to whose benefit?* The vice-principals with three years of experience express more confidence in asserting their moral stand even when it creates personal and professional conflict. Andrew describes a progression from “doing what’s right” to “doing the right thing”, and he attributes his decision to take the moral “high road” as critical to his renewed sense of purpose and his leadership role. “If I believe that something is not right, I will stand up for my own position ... It doesn’t mean that we cannot be diplomatic, but when it comes to principles and values, I believe that’s important.” This vantage point appears to be a function of experience and is achieved through the process of creating cognitive and emotional maps and problem solving frameworks. It entails becoming aware of and testing personal and organizational boundaries and pathways, and developing strategies for negotiating the pitfalls on the administrative landscape. The comfort derived from this perspective encourages the more experienced vice-principals to move outside the school to participate in system-wide initiatives, and to explore the possibility of movement to the principalship.

Recommendations and Conclusion

The vice-principals’ narratives show that despite the fact that current management efficiency paradigms have the potential to make issues of vice-principal morality invisible, William Foster’s (1986) assertion that “leadership lies not in the position *given*, but in the position *taken*” (p. 15) still holds true. Although they had crossed the administrative landscape with the worthy intention of changing schools to benefit students, they found that their avenues for ethical praxis were obstructed by hegemonic structures and policies that maintained the status quo. Their random acts of morality provide testimony of missed opportunities, unintended consequences and unfulfilled promises, and confirm that preparation, training and support for vice-principals are fragmented, sporadic and disconnected from the realities

of contemporary schooling (Sigford, 1998; Marshall, 1992). The vice-principals’ experiences highlight the need for coordinated approaches and interventions that address the problematic nature of their management role, and prepare them for its intense socio-emotional, moral and physical toll. School districts, universities and regulatory bodies, have a legal and moral obligation to provide the professional development and working conditions that are conducive to fostering sustainable pathways and support equitable, democratic and moral leadership. Failure to initiate these processes will reinforce current reactive approaches that punish those students who are most vulnerable, and will ensure the continued reproduction of system inequities that perpetuate unethical practices.

Finally, Nicholson and West (1988) identify transitions as important developmental opportunities for individuals and organizations because of their potential to provoke growth and/or crisis. The transitions described in this article represent critical personal, professional and organizational turning points that offer opportunities for moral growth and transformation. As new vice-principals negotiate the crossroads between teaching and administration, they consciously and unconsciously create pathways that have important long-term ramifications, not only for themselves, but also for the student, parent and teacher communities to whom they are responsible (Greenfield, 1985; Marshall, 1992; Sigford, 1998). Immoral pathways are vicious circles that cement existing hegemonies and lead to dissatisfaction and despair. Moral pathways are webs of connection that are scaffolded by respectful, caring relationships and ensure equitable possibilities for children and their communities. They allow vice-principals to exercise their moral and ethical quotient, and lead to deeper personal and professional meaning and purpose.

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