

Defining Moral Leadership in Graduate Schools of Education

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Abstract

This article explores how ethics education has evolved over the last 15 years in graduate schools of educational leadership. A review of previous studies showing an increased attention to ethics education is analyzed in the context of external pressures such as new NCATE standards, and the emerging role of moral psychology to inform how ethics is taught in other pre-professional college programs.

Introduction

Moral leadership has become an increasingly popular topic in the field of educational administration. It has been the focus of policy initiatives, accreditation standards and a body of research that emerged over the past fifteen years identifying moral leadership as a characteristic of high performing schools, particularly among high poverty schools (Fullan, 2003; Hodgkinson, 1991; Nucci, 2001; Sergiovanni, 1992; Sizer & Sizer, 1999; Starratt, 1991). However, the increased attention to moral leadership in schools has not shed much light on how to best teach moral leadership in the preparation of school administrators. The burst of interest since the early 1990s in developing moral leadership in schools has largely taken the form of identifying moral leadership as an important, in some cases critical, element of a strong school.

A resurgence of interest in moral leadership has been spurred on by anecdotal evidence that increasing pressures to meet student accountability measures brought on by state reform and the federally mandated No Child Left Behind Act have resulted in an increase of both fraud and unethical allocation of school resources (Pardini, 2004). A general concern with thin applicant pools for school leadership positions has also raised concerns that many ascending to top school

positions may not be ready to make strong moral decisions in the face of increasing pressures (Pardini, 2004; Stover, 2002). In a survey of chief state education officers, executive directors of American Association of School Administrators' (AASA) state affiliates, and executive directors of the National School Boards Association's (NSBA) state affiliates approximately 60% felt they were facing a leadership applicant pool crisis, over 84% felt the quality of the applicant was decreasing, and 75% of the respondents cited a need to improve pre-service graduate programs (Glass, 2001; Stover, 2002)

Long before NCLB the ethical behavior of school administrators was under fire as the 1990s brought a seemingly endless string of high profile stories detailing ethical charges against top school officials (Pardini, 2004). Stories of nepotism, embezzlement, and sex scandals led to an increased critique of the role of moral leadership in schools. The result was not only more attention from scholars in the field but also increased activity among policymakers and professional organizations to establish ethics standards. For example, in 1992 the state of New Jersey passed the School Ethics Act, which established the School Ethics Commission with the power to investigate ethical violations among school board members and school administrators, and to recommend disciplinary actions to the commissioner which range from formal sanctions to removal. The commission is responsible for oversight of a wide range of potential ethics violations but at the time was established to curb what was seen as rampant nepotism during the 1980s and early 1990s (Holster, 2004).

Attempts to Define Moral Leadership

Despite a spike in scholarly activity advocating for moral leadership and increased attention to ethics regulation, the body of research exploring the nature of moral leadership remains thin. From these studies researchers have found that for school district leaders: size of district and salary are positively correlated, and years of service negatively correlated, with more ethical responses to moral dilemmas. These same studies show that in general terms the ethical capacity of school leaders was not sufficient for the demands of the job (Pardini, 2004; Fenstermaker, 1996). Fenstermaker (1996) found that less than half (48.1%) of 2790 responses to borderline ethical dilemmas by 270 randomly selected superintendents that responded to the survey were scored as ethical. The growing evidence of ethical shortfalls within the profession in the mid-1990s led to a broad call from within and outside the field to address the moral decision making of school leaders. Both pre-service and in-service ethics education programs were prescribed to teach ethics to aspiring and sitting administrators (Pardini, 2004; Fenstermaker, 1996).

As those shaping policy and developing responses to the “moral crisis” in schools began their work it became clear that talking about morals in schools was still a controversial topic and there was not a clear definition of what moral leadership was, despite the charge to hire more of *it* and help those already hired to have *it* (Starratt, 1994). Research that claims moral leadership as a key indicator of student success often fails to define what moral leadership looks like, and when definitions are provided they vary greatly across schools and studies. In a review of moral leadership studies from 1979 to 2003, it has been concluded that a limitation of the studies of moral leadership within the past 20 years is that few scholars have defined clearly what they mean by moral leadership (William Greenfield, 2004).

For example, in a review of 12 high performing, high-poverty schools “moral leadership” was identified as instrumental to student and school success. According to research by Bell (2001), schools identified several definitions of moral leadership including:

- Vision - what adults do in schools plays a major role in shaping children’s lives and preparing them for lifelong success.
- Respect/high expectations/ support/ hard work.
- Empowerment.
- Moral leadership - staff and students visualize themselves as part of the whole system/schooling was more than preparation for academic success/it laid a foundation for success in life.

The different definitions of moral leadership are largely a result of the diverse context and needs of schools that successful leaders must address. However, this creates a difficult challenge for teachers of educational leadership attempting to develop curriculum and teaching methods that will serve new principals and superintendents best as they graduate and enter an unfamiliar context with needs and ethical pitfalls that may not be immediately known to them.

The Influence of Accreditation Standards

The call to invest in moral leadership training has come from scholars, policymakers, and professional organization in the field of educational administration. Graduate programs must prepare future leaders to be more aware of their ethical and moral responsibilities as well as being better equipped to execute them if they are to effectively steward the increasingly complex and high pressure school of the 21st century. School leaders are best able to positively influence school culture and success when well-established and significant

community values that support equity and social justice are connected with what Grogan and Andrews (2002) call “morally and ethically uplifting leadership.” According to Grogan and Andrews, graduate programs in educational leadership have been shown to have a significant effect on leadership capacity when programs have strong theory/research bases, provided authentic learning experiences, simulate the development of situated cognition, and foster real-life problem-solving skills.

National professional organizations and accreditation standards have played a major role in shaping the curriculum of school administration graduate programs. The first among major professional organizations to place an emphasis on moral school leadership was the National Policy Board for Educational Administration (NPBEA), who in 1994 created the Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLLC) with the goal of establishing universal professional standards that would guide the practice and preparation of school leaders (Murphy, 2005). Although, consortium leaders recognized that infusing new standards with values and ethical guidelines would be controversial they also acknowledged that behavior, policy, and practice was influenced by values and it was impossible to disentangle moral leadership and how schools functioned. According to Murphy, this value-centered approach was reinforced by a belief among ISLLC founders that the effort to create a scientifically anchored, value-free profession resulted in an ethically truncated if not morally bankrupt profession.

Six years after the initial formation of ISLLC a working group was formed by the NPBEA to establish performance-based standards that would serve as the National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education’s (NCATE’s) review standards for educational leadership programs (National Policy Board for Educational Administration, 2002). This working group included representatives from the major professional organizations in the field including the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education, the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, the American Association of School Administrators, the National Association of Secondary School Principals, National Association of Elementary School Principals, the National Council of Professors of Educational Administration, the National Association of School Boards, and the (UCEA) University Council for Educational Administration (National Policy Board for Educational Administration, 2002). The result of this broad based and powerful coalition was a set of standards officially adopted by NCATE in 2002 that are the foundation of NCATE’s accreditation review process for educational leadership graduate programs. The NCATE standards were closely aligned with the ISLLC standards providing a single, unified set of

national standards guiding administrative practice for the preparation of principals, superintendents, curriculum directors, and supervisors (National Policy Board for Educational Administration, 2002).

The NCATE/ISLLC review process, that since 2002 has been the prevailing accreditation standard throughout the profession, has seven components. Standard number five refers specifically to ethics. It suggests that candidates who complete the program are educational leaders with knowledge and ability to promote the success of all students by acting with integrity, fairly, and in an ethical manner. The NCATE narrative continues to describe the purpose and function of the ethics in the profession noting that the standard addresses the leader's role as the "first citizen" of the school and/or district community. Educational leaders should set the tone for how employees and students interact with one another and with members of the school, district, and larger community. The leader's contacts with students, parents, and employees must reflect concern for others as well as for the organization and the position. They must develop the ability to examine personal and professional values that reflect a code of ethics. Further, they must be able to serve as role models, accepting responsibility for using their position ethically and constructively on behalf of the school/district community. Finally, educational leaders must act as advocates for all children, even those with special needs who may be underserved.

NCATE also provides guidance for graduate programs assessment criteria. The three elements of the ethic standard are described as being met for school building and district leadership when a potential school leader:

- 5.1 - Acts with Integrity: Candidates demonstrate a respect for the rights of others with regard to confidentiality and dignity and engage in honest interactions.
- 5.2 - Acts Fairly: Candidates demonstrate the ability to combine impartiality, sensitivity to student diversity, and ethical considerations in their interactions with others.
- 5.3 - Acts Ethically: Candidates make and explain decisions based upon ethical and legal principles.

The standards go on to provide specific guidance to faculty regarding the activities and practices that would serve as good measures of candidate performance.

- Candidates are required to develop a code of ethics using personal platforms, professional leadership association examples, and a variety of additional source documents focusing on ethics.

- Candidates are required to conduct a self-analysis of a transcript of a speech delivered to a community organization and look for examples of integrity, fairness, and ethical behavior.
- Candidates are required to lead a discussion around compliance issues for district, school, or professional association codes of ethics.
- Candidates are required to make a speech to a local service organization and articulate and demonstrate the importance of education in a democratic society.
- Candidates are required to survey constituents regarding their perceptions of his/her modeling the highest standards of conduct, ethical principles, and integrity in decision-making and behaviors.
- Candidates are required to present an analysis of how he/she promotes teaching and learning that recognizes learning differences, multicultural awareness, gender sensitivity, and appreciation of ethnic diversity.
(National Policy Board for Educational Administration, 2002a)

We can expect that the merger of the ISLLC standards with the NCATE accreditation standards will bring about more interest in the design and assessment of moral leadership. It is, however, important to note that as the NCATE standards become more prescriptive there is a clear focus on producing documents that stem from reflection, but it is unclear how the practice of reflection, for example, is taught and reinforced as a fundamental practice for school leaders. The NCATE ethics standard is an important vehicle for promoting teaching ethics in graduate programs, but falls short of promoting the process of moral reasoning and it is there where the field is still searching for an understanding of what effective moral leadership training encompasses, and how to best deliver a comprehensive moral reasoning curriculum.

The Evolution of Ethics Education

The emergence of moral leadership as a topic of policy and a component of the accreditation standard has not been lost on graduate schools. Many graduate programs identified as exemplary in recent years place moral leadership at the core of their curriculum. In a 2002 study of exceptional and innovative programs in educational leadership, most of the exemplary programs were closely aligned with the ISLLC standards and almost all placed a particular emphasis on the ethics standard (Jackson & Kelley, 2002). For example, in summarizing the Miami University (Ohio) program emphasis, Cambron-McCabe and Foster (1994) stated that if educators are to accept school leadership as an intellectual and moral practice, they must understand their role in shaping the purposes of schooling for

a new era and how this cannot be detached from the broader social and political context.

Historically, however, examples like Miami University have been the exception not the rule when it comes to program emphasis on moral development. Attempts to study teaching ethics and moral decision making in pre-service school leadership programs have focused largely on moral leadership as an emerging field with an emphasis on explaining the growth of ethics as an interest in school leadership, curriculum, and instructional strategies. Two studies have attempted to survey UCEA schools to measure the approach to ethics in educational leadership preparation programs (Farquhar, 1981; Beck & Murphy, 1994). In the first study of its kind, Robin Farquhar (1981) surveyed 48 UCEA colleges and found that only four schools reported they had distinct program components intended to deliberately focus on ethics and additionally found only two schools endeavored to consciously integrate ethics into what they teach. Murphy and Beck (1994) revisited the study of ethics in UCEA schools by surveying department chairs about their practice and perceptions of teaching leadership ethics. While only four out of 42 respondents reported that their department offered learning opportunities concerned with ethics “a great deal,” 21 schools responded to the same question “somewhat,” and only 7 schools reported little or no ethics based curriculum of any kind. The Beck and Murphy study found that those schools that were actively engaged in an ethics curriculum did so because of the practical necessity for administrators to effectively wrestle with moral dilemmas and an increasing theoretical basis for attention to moral leadership. Just over one-third of the responding schools offered courses in ethics showing a dramatic increase in attention to teaching moral leadership from the early 1980s to the early 1990s with an emphasis on the early 1990s as a burst of activity since many chairs reported these courses as new or under development at the time of the study.

In a review of curriculum at UCEA schools teaching leadership ethics 17 schools surveyed sent course syllabi and materials for Beck and Murphy (1994) to analyze. The approaches to teaching ethics was varied but tended to draw from philosophy as the theoretical base and focused on problems in practice. Teaching strategies ranged dramatically and included deductive, inductive and reflective approaches. Four trends emerged in the course content:

- Written cases and dilemmas.
- Readings from outside education.
- Readings focusing on professional ethics.
- Readings discussing specific ethical principles or issues.

Beck and Murphy point out that a contributing factor to the diversity of course content and pedagogy is the myriad definitions of ethics not only in the field of

educational leadership, but in the literature as ethics is discussed cross-contextually. The lack of a unified definition of moral leadership and the wide range of thought about what moral leadership looks like and what it means for school success makes it difficult for research in the field to build on itself.

In other professional development fields (i.e., dentistry) the introduction of more strongly established operational definitions from moral psychology has provided a common language and facilitated growth in understanding profession-specific moral development by building on an existing body of research in professional ethics training in fields that have already adopted or applied moral psychology research (Bebeau, 2002; King & Mayhew, 2002). The lack of connection in the literature between the field of developmental moral psychology and educational leadership preparation is striking. For example, scholars such as Kohlberg and Rest are rarely cited in research that examines how prospective school leaders are taught and there have been few attempts to explore how moral psychology currently informs and may better inform the development of school administrators.

Conclusion

It is not clear whether the increased attention given to moral leadership education is more a result of accreditation standards, the public call for better moral leadership, or the presence of more scholarly articles on the subject. What is evident is that the overarching theme found in the literature has translated to practice in the majority of school leadership graduate programs. Moreover, the prescriptive elements of the NCATE standards have influenced the kinds of assignments and assessments most commonly used. In several cases school leadership programs have engaged their faculty in a thoughtful planning process to integrate the teaching of moral leadership into their curriculum and develop meaningful assessment strategies. Highlighting these exemplary programs will be a critical next step in sharing information among faculty about how to teach moral leadership and evaluate student work in this area. However, before this can be effectively done the field must begin to reach a shared understanding of how moral leadership is defined within programs and in the literature. It is on this point that the work already done in moral psychology as applied to other pre-professional training programs can be most helpful.

The Neo-Kohlbergian approach to moral development that gave birth to Rest's four component model has shown great promise in identifying independent and measurable skills that make up the process of effective moral decision making. The field of moral psychology has shown us how these components can be

effectively taught and students can become better at identifying a moral problem, sifting through the myriad lines of action, making morally justified decisions about which line of action to choose, placing that choice in the context of often competing personal and professional values, and having the strength of conviction to persist and follow through with the moral choice. Adapting these efforts to the context of school leadership would help faculty develop stronger assessments as well as address teaching methods to bridge the gap that exists between moral motivation and implementation.

Over the last 25 years the field of educational administration has moved from formally introducing ethics into the education leadership curriculum to a widespread effort to emphasize moral leadership through myriad methods and theoretical frameworks. The next steps in this evolution are to critically examine how colleges of education teach moral decision making, ask the question “what works” and build a knowledge base that informs and improves pedagogy, curriculum, and assessment in the field of moral school leadership.

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Biography

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