

Managing Ethical Dilemmas in School Administration

Atukunda Lucky

Faculty of Business Administration and Management Kampala International University Uganda

Email: lucky.atukunda@studwc.kiu.ac.ug

ABSTRACT

Ethical dilemmas in school administration have intensified over the past two decades due to shifting demographics, expanded legal obligations, and evolving definitions of identity and morality within educational environments. This paper examines the multifaceted nature of ethical challenges faced by school leaders, highlighting how cultural, legal, and political shifts intersect with administrative decision-making. Drawing on empirical studies and theoretical frameworks, the paper categorizes common dilemmas, including competing interests, confidentiality breaches, fairness, and professional conduct. It examines the responsibilities of administrators in balancing diverse stakeholder perspectives, legal mandates, and personal integrity. The analysis emphasizes ethical leadership, professional development, and institutional training as key strategies for fostering morally sound decision-making. Ultimately, while codes of ethics and legal frameworks provide necessary structure, they cannot resolve the ambiguity inherent in ethical dilemmas, requiring school administrators to lead with both courage and compassion.

Keywords: Ethical decision-making, School leadership, Educational administration, Moral responsibility, Cultural competence, Legal considerations, Professional ethics.

INTRODUCTION

Over the past two decades, U.S. colleges and universities have undergone significant changes due to the influx of students from non-traditional backgrounds. This has shifted perceptions and behaviors, broadening definitions related to sex, race, and academic identity. Traditional behaviors, once acceptable, became deemed unacceptable, prompting efforts to redefine conduct codes. Historical discrimination and unearned privileges have led to new forms of group discrimination affecting student governance. While there is a valid interest in promoting the well-being and representation of subordinate groups, this has created imbalances in campus diversity. Critical scholarship has emerged, revealing overgeneralizations about student groups based on identifiable traits. Ethical standards for conduct have been established by including various groups in the process to codify expectations. Ethnic, gender, and lifestyle teams have formed, and diversity training programs have been introduced. Violations of substance policies have led to recommendations for suspension or expulsion. Many policies have been modified using new technologies to comply with guidelines. Mainstream students faced suspicions of cheating, and their tests were processed through flawed algorithms, resulting in absurd outcomes. Previous ethical violations have bred resentment toward rejected transfer requests, and legitimate academic requests have been denied amid dubious claims. Challenges to academic freedom and personal values emerged, with confessions of otherwise imprudent behavior sought after. Ultimately, well-defined ethical codes cannot eliminate ethical dilemmas, which may lead to conflicts, especially if enforced rigidly [1, 2].

The Role of School Administrators

A school administrator must be a principled leader equipped with a moral framework for navigating complex educational decisions. With increasing political scrutiny over spending public funds, the importance of fiscal transparency has grown. School board meetings focus on how funds should support learning, emphasizing the dual nature of power and responsibility in administration. Each district should adopt an ethical code similar to the state constitutions that guide elected officials. Hiring key personnel is a critical responsibility, especially given the limited pool of potential candidates for positions like elementary school principals, which complicates recruitment. Ethical dilemmas can expose

administrations to criticism, prompting them to overlook diverse candidates who might offer unique solutions. Two significant trends in hiring include race and gender, as many districts strive to diversify their staff. However, a homogeneous recommendation network may inadvertently hinder the inclusion of candidates from varied backgrounds, as districts tend to prefer candidates who resemble existing employees [3, 4].

Identifying Ethical Dilemmas

The study investigated the ethical dilemmas faced by student conduct administrators and generated rich qualitative data. Respondents were instructed to provide a 2-3 sentence description of the most challenging ethical dilemma they have experienced in their current student conduct position. A total of 220 respondents answered this question. Open and axial coding techniques were used to identify categories and themes that were reviewed by members of the dissertation committee. The responses readily fit under many of the categories identified in a study of student affairs administrators. The categories identified were balancing (BAL), competing interests (COI), disagreement (CONF), compassion versus (CVC), insufficient evidence (INSF), fairness (FAIR), inconsistency (ICEP), misrepresentation (MS), power (PAT), and questionable professional behavior (QPRO). The dilemmas expressed by the student conduct administrators illuminate the importance of professional ethics within the NASPA and ASCA professions, particularly in regard to the balancing and possible competing interests of administrators. Knowledge of the overall spectrum of dilemmas can assist in the training of student conduct administrators and in the development of ethical codes. They can also encourage administrators themselves to reflect on and document their ethical dilemmas. While the study did not focus on resolving ethical dilemmas, there are four ways to approach these ethically challenging situations. The ideology of rules addresses how competing interests might best be checked. Through ethical codes and standards of professional practice, violations of self-determined vision can be sanctioned. The code provides a common framework that highlights the agency of rhetoric in the ethical dilemmas faculty face and the variety of responses that can be deployed. These mechanisms, while useful, can never completely check or resolve ethical dilemmas since they are rooted in interpretation, themselves also a source of agency and ambiguity [5, 6].

Frameworks For Ethical Decision-Making

Ethical decision-making is a process involving the identification of ethical dilemmas, consideration and evaluation of alternative resolutions, followed by implementation of the most acceptable choice. Superintendents face complex pressures and obligations, often resulting in conflicting ethical dilemmas. The ethical nature of actions can change based on the obligations considered; for instance, if one course of action is deemed morally acceptable, it justifies the avoidance of another that may seem ethically wrong otherwise. These pressures are further explored through various situations and through interviews addressing school administrators' ethical dilemmas. Questions include personal experiences as administrators, involvement of students or parents, actions taken, potential misleading, regrets, and advice for peers in similar situations. The case study method sheds light on the real ethical dilemmas faced by female superintendents in Connecticut during the 1990s, emphasizing the need for peer-based reflection and dialogue among administrators in isolation. To broaden the perspective, additional interviews were conducted with a female school board member and a professor in women-in-leadership studies, focusing on proactive strategies to avoid ethical dilemmas in educational leadership positions [7, 8].

Legal Considerations in Ethical Decision-Making

School administrators today face numerous ethical dilemmas during the learning process in a much more complex and demanding climate than in previous decades. With the expansion of students', parents and society's rights and expectations, the nature of concerns that go before school administrators has also expanded. Proactive measures must be taken to strengthen the moral compass surrounding daily administrative decisions. Whether they be issues of student discipline, grading procedures, or student privacy, administrators often struggle to balance what is ethical against what is required or more easily justifiable. Yet to navigate the vast waters of ethical dilemmas, one must first identify the sources from which the dilemmas arise and the processes that can aid the decision maker in determining a more moral approach to the problem. Lawyers point out that ethical and legal decisions have completely different foci. Attorneys defend their clients only on legal grounds, and lawyers honor the law by providing their best possible defense for the guilty as well as the innocent. However, a basic premise of law is that it does not distinguish right from wrong, nor does it keep score. The law may condemn wrongdoing as defined by statute or a body of case law, but it cannot compel anyone to do good. School law, school rules, and teacher-administrative policies function to impose duties and rights on teachers and administrators,

reflecting behavioral obligations and dictates rather than a sense of what ought to be done or not done. Legal behavior does not guarantee morality. Yet the law does offer firm obstructions against violations of certain moral standards, and it ensures standing to accuse those who transgress those boundaries. Nevertheless, the moral dilemmas of the day do not carry statutory solutions. Only those actions and conditions that are egregious are amenable to legal remedy [9, 10].

Cultural Competence and Ethics

The case described centers around early ethical dilemmas in the career of a fictional school counselor. However, the issue examined appears to apply to many school counselors, educators, and administrators who find themselves faced with similar situations. The ethical dilemmas in this case can be categorized into two conflicting situations based on the setting and the nature of the conflicts involved. The first series of dilemmas relates to handling a student who experiences inappropriate behaviors from a peer and requesting the counselor's assistance in keeping the matter secret. Maintaining the confidentiality of the student complaints appeared to trump all other concerns, although the confidentiality of disclosures made by students is protected only in limited circumstances. In fact, under the ethical standards of school counseling, student concerns of discrimination or abuse, harm to self or others, and serious illegal behaviors fall under the counselor's obligation to report these issues to ensure the safety of the student and others. Counselors are required to report threats or serious concerns regarding potentially unsafe behaviors of any party. Although this notion disregards the confidentiality of student complaints, it appears necessary to protect the safety of the student or parties impacted. Additionally, maintaining the confidentiality of student complaints about bullying or harassment perpetuates the abusive behaviors faced by the student. Hence, although there is a broad assurance of confidentiality, it is vital to clarify the limits of confidentiality as fears or serious concerns toward possible retaliation arise once another party is made aware of the bullying complaints. In addressing these issues, conducting a preliminary investigation into the situation, such as speaking to the alleged bully directly, might benefit all involved parties. This action allows assistant principal involvement if necessary and acts in the best interest of the bullying concerns raised by the student [11, 12].

Stakeholder Perspectives

Actions by school leaders should take moral perspectives of stakeholders into account in making decisions on past ethical dilemmas. Moral perspectives of stakeholders in the selected dilemmas are analyzed as follows. * 1. A policy to establish an elementary charter school that would draw students away from other district public schools - Students, parents, and teachers: The proposed charter school would serve largely white students. Black students, parents, and teachers would not favor the charter school because it would detract from racial desegregation in the district. In South Suburban, black students and parents were very much against the proposed charter high school because of its negative impact on race relations in the district. Some teachers acted on moral grounds in hopes the board of education would vote down the charter school. - School board members: The school board would be disappointed with the charter school, which would take students and money away from their district schools and present them with a huge challenge to counteract its impact. The opponent board members in South Suburban would likely take a similar view since the reasons against the charter school override internal views of their own characters or actions. * 2. Catering a lunch for teachers that included alcohol - Teachers: Teachers would generally oppose an "alcohol and cake" lunch for colleagues because they believe such disreputable activity runs counter to the mission of the school and reflects poorly on them as professionals. The proposal was unanimously condemned at a faculty meeting. Teachers voiced frustration with their colleague for being so politically naïve and inappropriate. - Parents: Parents in the same way as teachers would not favor the proposed lunch since it would prompt questions about the professionalism and character of the teachers and school, and would far more probably hire a good reputation public relations firm to handle situations like this. - Students: As the lunch would undoubtedly damage the character of the school both in the eyes of its own student body and in the community, students on the whole would oppose the "lunch-and-drink" idea [13, 14].

Strategies For Resolving Ethical Dilemmas

Administrators facing ethical dilemmas can employ structured approaches that involve ethical reasoning and careful follow-up. Writing the dilemma clearly helps clarify thoughts about the decision's context and potential consequences. This written statement should identify affected stakeholders, including students, faculty, and external groups. It's crucial to understand both direct and indirect stakeholders. Administrators should evaluate their beliefs regarding schools and responsibilities, particularly focusing on assumptions about students and education, while considering possible inequities among groups. Evaluating alternatives is essential, asking if actions align with the school's vision, enhance student

growth, respect all stakeholders, recognize students' uniqueness, and adhere to established guidelines. Considering potential ramifications, both positive and negative, is key, along with anticipating longer-term consequences. Gaining support and alleviating fallout are important strategies. Discussing the dilemma with trusted colleagues can provide valuable perspective and feedback. After thorough contemplation, the administrator must make a decision, acknowledging any uncertainties involved. Implementing the decision openly and honestly is necessary to maintain ethical integrity. Post-implementation, it is important for the administrator to evaluate stakeholder responses, assess the rationale's perception, and reflect on the decision-making process for future improvements [15, 16].

Ethical Leadership in Schools

Ethical leadership in schools looks to a future in which school leaders possess strong ethical values that focus on what is best for students. There is widespread contempt for school leadership and a general disappointment at the poor quality of school leaders. The reasons for this are similar to those for concerns about leadership more generally. They include: perception of 'Self' before 'service'; purposive, deceitful practices good leaders purport to stand against; and an obsession with efficiency that cared little for the human costs of their actions. The ethical problems faced in every aspect of the work of school leaders underscore the call for ethical leadership. Given the context, there is a growing search for different paradigms for school leadership. These will need to be leadership paradigms that are value-driven, ethical and people-centred. Therefore, the ethical challenges faced by school leaders now and in the future are not likely to diminish. The ethical dimensions of educational leadership will only increase in prominence. Educational leaders must understand that learning is a moral enterprise and lead their schools accordingly. Ethics is defined as the study of the general nature of morals and of the moral choices individuals make about the atmosphere in which they live. It attempts to answer questions about what is good and bad, what is right and wrong. In the work environment, the terms ethics and ethical are commonly linked to codes of conduct. The codes prescribe behaviours expected to be right according to an ethical theory. Ethics is prescriptive rather than descriptive. It transcends compliance and practice. Ethics is a component of philosophy. Ethics is concerned with man's relationship to nature and other men to properly identify ethics in the field of educational leadership as it relates to character. Ethics, in this sense, describes what is good or valuable, its nature, and how man should relate to it, the virtue of being ethical, and ethical behaviour [17, 18].

Training and Professional Development

Appropriate preparation that is sustained throughout a professional career is essential to the solution of ethical dilemmas in school administration. The condemnation of a particular course of action accents the moral dimensions of the situation, but it does not solve the dilemma. Professional development in ethics is imperative for school improvement because it acknowledges the complexity of moral decision-making by administrators and provides them with a professional imperative for dealing with ethics in daily practice. The process of ethics training must be both practical and theoretical. A practical course would give professional educators opportunities to explore their ethical systems and how these systems relate to the constraints of the educational system. They would consider case studies and examine notable ethical dilemmas presented in the news and by fictional characters. A theoretical course would include readings on ethics that present a variety of relevant philosophies. Topics would include the obligations of all professions, the role of ethics in society, and descriptions and critiques of virtue theory, utilitarianism, duty ethics, and several more contemporary ethical theories. Institutionalized ethics training is not unique to school administrators. Several recent articles point to the need for fresh directions in teacher preparation programs. In the business field, codes of conduct and ethics training are mandated in many organizations. The ultimate goal in developing appropriate training programs is not a professional code of ethics, but professional decision-making regarding ethical dilemmas. Informed and principled adults make ethical decisions and pursue a course of action that is reflective of their values and convictions. This is an incessant process that is often undertaken alone, but should be pursued in collaboration with academic peers, mentors, and representatives of other disciplines [19, 20].

Evaluating Ethical Practices

Originality can be disconcerting. In confronting the singularity of one's perspective, one can experience doubt, unease, or even isolation. Because of this discomfort, some leaders may hastily reject or overlook an ethical dilemma. In the case of an ethical decision regarding corporate funding for school-based services, this discomfort may manifest itself as resentment towards outside organizations that seek influence or sway. Suspicion toward representatives of the agency may be evident; fear may loom regarding the agency's prospective and extensive influence on the educational process. On the other hand, there are also positive aspects of ethics as singularity. The bewildering nature of originality is akin to the

boisterously complex human experience itself. In deciding to confront the ethical dilemma, the instructional leader must enter their unique values, beliefs, and commitments; they cannot simply rely on strategic considerations about how to get the “want that would most likely be the action taken. In such a case, a host of human questions linger nebulously, untouchably. Instructional leaders would enter the bland weightlessness of an ethical vacuum. However, if they were to take an unflinching look at the ethical dilemma, they would discover the essence of their considerations and the reasons why or why not such funding was acceptable. Herein lie the standards of practice; and herein lies the role of peers as monitors of practice. Nevertheless, the question about the ethical reasoning remains—the question that is too often avoided. In scholarship, it is claimed that a multitude of ethical philosophies must guide one in their reasoning. It is emphasized that ethical philosophy is outcome-oriented, with an implicit view of morality as calculation and prediction of results. Therefore, due regard to pressure is the foundation for a program to ground ethics, and it is in a principled leader’s good. Presumably, once understood, this functionalist pressure could potentially quell apprehension regarding any unethical application of the foundation. However, closer examination of this approach will yield a temporal and systemic moral vacuum that infects practice. While peer discussion is a foundation upon which to erect a practice for ethical administration as widely understood, it is important to note that every principled leader should have a stance against major criticism before discussion [21, 22].

Future Trends in Ethical School Administration

Future trends in ethical school administration are considered. The need for professional integrity in higher education is critical as institutions navigate new laws, funding systems, and legal actions. The ethical decision-making done by educational leaders emerges as both complex and necessary to implement increased expectations while preserving ethical principles. The ethical assessment of student learning is challenging, but states retain the power to shape curricula and standards. In this regard, the question of integrity in evaluation promises to stir more discussion as pressure mounts on postsecondary institutions to produce quantifiable measures of student learning, particularly in the ethical domain. Conclusions are drawn, and implications for scholarship and practice are offered. Responses clustered into literature affecting or calling for action, suggestions for research topics, inclusion of student conduct in professional organizations, and ethical school administration in the Academy. A current focus is on ethics education. The picture of ethics education presented here is complex. College curricula now underline the importance of ethics education as it relates to a globalizing, fast-changing world. Student affairs focus on ethics education in higher education, including the ethical implications of global issues to civil intellectual and curricular rights, safety, and fairness. Educational administrators working collaboratively with student affairs professionals emerge in discussing what ethics education in higher education is. Educational leaders face new responsibilities as preparations for the 21st century begin to take shape. They must respond to outside expectations as they sift in and out of political pressures. They must attend to the behavioral plans while simultaneously battling for autonomous decision making, as concern mounts for potential failures. Understanding of judgment development has increased significantly. A nuanced and powerful conception of moral/moral judgment development has emerged. New questions are raised concerning the role of moral reasoning in civic engagement. As it concerns the moral domain of student affairs leadership, ethical dilemmas abound [23, 24].

CONCLUSION

Ethical dilemmas in school administration are complex, evolving challenges that cannot be fully mitigated by codified rules or legal precedents alone. As educational institutions face increasing demands for transparency, inclusion, and accountability, administrators must cultivate a principled approach grounded in ethical reasoning, cultural awareness, and stakeholder sensitivity. This requires a commitment to continuous learning through professional development and reflective practice. Effective ethical leadership hinges on the ability to make difficult decisions in morally ambiguous situations—balancing competing interests, honoring diversity, and maintaining the trust of the school community. Ultimately, ethical administration is less about finding perfect answers and more about navigating imperfect circumstances with clarity, integrity, and empathy.

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