Ethical Decision-Making Using the Best Interests of the Student as a Guiding Principle: Where Does it Lead?

by

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// Abstract

The purpose of this study is to explore how educational leaders engage in their decision-making processes and whether the expression, “the best interests of the student” serves as a guiding principle for them when they do. This study is a replication study of Dr. Frick’s *Practicing a Professional Ethic: Leading for Students’ Best Interests* (2011) and also considers whether Shapiro and Stefkovich’s (2011) *Ethic of Profession and Its Model for Students’ Best Interests* is a viable conceptual framework for ethical decision-making. The data collection consisted of two interviews, one based on a vignette and the second, based on a set of open-ended questions. Eleven secondary school principals and vice-principals within one school district volunteered to participate in this qualitative study. Participant responses suggested themes that not only reflected their use and perceptions of the expression, “the best interests of the student” in their decision-making processes but also revealed the complexity of being a school leader amid competing stakeholder interests. The study compared the original and replicating studies in two ways, one was a comparative analysis of the findings and the other was a cross educative analysis. Relevant literature and participant responses were included to contextualize, interpret, understand, and answer the research questions. The findings of the study showed that “the best interests of the student” was challenging to conceptualize and had practical implications due to its lack of definition. The results also revealed divergent findings from the original study.

Keywords: Best interests of students; Ethical decision-making; Educational leadership; Ethical leadership

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Glossary and Acronyms

BC	British Columbia
BCTF	British Columbia Teachers' Federation
Best Interests of the Student	Refers to the student as an individual; best course of action for the student (Stefkovich & Begley, 2007)
Boundary Spanning	Concept in organizational research which refers to leaders' need to maintain and manage relationships between different organizations and/or groups (Barner-Rasmussen, 2017)
Bracketing	Recognition of how the researcher's own experiences, cultural factors, and assumptions influence how they view the study's data (Fischer, 2009)
Educational Leaders	Vice-principals and principals of schools; used interchangeably with school leaders
Ethical Behaviour	Involves an individual, making decisions that will add value to others and to society (Kaufman, 2008) and engaging in choices and actions which they are ultimately accountable.
Ethical Decision-Making	Recognizing the presence of an ethical issue (Johnson, 2011) and then applying one's own beliefs to weigh different options
Ethical Leadership	An attempt to act from principles, beliefs, assumptions, and principles in guidance of others (Starratt, 2004)
Ethics	Underlying beliefs, assumptions, and principles that characterize a person's life (Starratt, 2004)
Holistic Coding	Involves identifying key ideas or issues by chunking them, coming to recognize emerging categories (Saldaña, 2013)
In Vivo Coding	Codes are participant generated, note researcher generated to preserve the meaning (Saldaña, 2013)
Reflexivity	Awareness that the researcher's values, beliefs, background, and previous experiences can affect the research process (Cope, 2014)
Replication Study	A study that either precisely or in a large part repeats the same research methods that were used in an earlier project (Thomas, 2014)

School Board	School district employees, including senior management
School Leaders	Vice-principals and principals of schools; used interchangeably with educational leaders
School Board Trustees	Local citizens elected to make up the Board of Education
Structural Coding	Uses codes and categories data to examine comparable segments, commonalities, differences, and relationships (Saldaña, 2013)
The Ministry	British Columbia Ministry of Education
Trustworthiness	Concept used to assess rigour in qualitative research
Values	Principles, fundamental convictions, ideals and standards that guide behaviour (Halstead, 1995)

Chapter 1 - Introduction

Introduction

In this chapter, I will provide context to my study by sharing some of my experiences as a teacher and as a school leader that has led me into this area of inquiry. As background information, I will discuss the role of schools and schools as caring places, leading into my main discussion which will focus on ethical leadership and its connection to the best interests of students. To give a broader sense of and more context to my study, I will also provide a brief overview of provincial assessment in British Columbia. I will end this chapter by sharing the purpose of my study and my research questions.

Background

When I started my doctoral studies, I had no idea on what I would focus my studies. Nothing could have prepared me for this interesting and long journey. At the time I started, I had been a teacher for thirteen years and a summer session site supervisor for seven years, with a mix of both, classroom and school leadership experience. I knew my jobs well, enjoyed my students but was feeling static. I entered the doctoral programme with enthusiasm and anticipation. I am a nerd at heart and hoped I would get the much-needed intellectual stimulation that I had been missing for a while.

The ethics and law in leadership course led me into ethical issues and educational leadership, I began reflecting on my own ethical behaviour and how I engaged with my students and colleagues, becoming more aware of my interactions. I became particularly interested in the works of Kidder (1995) and Strike (2007). Kidder's work provided a

framework for resolving ethical dilemmas in daily life and Strike's work discussed ethical leadership in schools and why it is necessary but neither addressed the process of ethical decision-making in and of itself.

Ethical leadership became my focus. As a classroom teacher and summer session leader, I have worked with numerous educational leaders at both the school and the board level. Using my previous interactions with various educational leaders as a frame of reference, I began reflecting on the ethical nature of their leadership, especially when dealing with student issues. As most of our interactions were student related, I expected some level of consistency regarding discipline and behaviour issues, however, I realized that that was not always the case. I often noticed that students who had engaged in the same behaviour did not always receive the same consequences and with no viable explanation for that. Noting this furthered my interest in researching the decision-making processes of school leaders.

Initially, I wanted to research how school leaders engaged in ethical decision-making in their interactions with both teachers and students. However, through discussion with Dr. Cox, I narrowed my research to only school leaders and students. Eventually, I came across Frick's (2011) study, which focused on the process of ethical decision-making by school leaders in the best interests of the student. What interested me about Frick's (2011) work was its focus on the decision-making process of school leaders and how they conceptualized the ethical nature of their decision-making. As I contemplated how to pursue this avenue of research, I decided to conduct a replication study of Frick's work. I contacted Dr. Frick and was granted permission to do a replication study of his work with my research to be done in Canada where his was

completed in the United States. Now, twelve years later, after life's ups and downs, I am ready to share the results of my study.

The Purpose of Schools

Schools play a pivotal role in society as they provide a means for educating, developing, and socializing students into well-rounded individuals who make good decisions that will eventually allow them to become contributing members of society. However, as the world continuously changes, so do schools in order to keep pace. As information has become more readily available with easy access to information outlets such as the Internet, students are able to get information faster than schools can dispel it. Social media, peer relationships, and entertainment are distracting influences on students. Schools can no longer be institutions that simply impart traditional knowledge to students within a fixed frame (Huber, 2004) because schools are no longer the gatekeepers of knowledge. To better provide for students, schools need to constantly renew themselves in order to take present and future needs of students into consideration (Dalin and Wolff, 1990 as cited in Huber 2004). The education system contributes to social inclusion (Busemeyer and Guillaud, 2023) and is a reflection of society's traditions and values but schools do need to be adaptive in order to serve the needs of their students. Schools are firmly embedded into their communities (Huber, 2004) and as students spend so much time in school, they too become more embedded into their community. Schools have become increasingly focused on providing students with an environment that is socially just, inclusive, and respects diversity (Smith and Goldblatt, 2009), making schools the core of social development of students.

Biesta (2015) outlines three “domains of educational purpose” (p. 77): (a) qualification, (b) socialization, and (c) subjectification. Qualification provides students with knowledge, skills, and dispositions intended to prepare them for the workforce. Through socialization, students learn norms and values that allow them to become part of a particular social, cultural, and political order. Subjectification is the process by which students are able to become more autonomous in their thinking and acting. Although each function has its own outcomes, they do overlap with the intention to create students into well-rounded, independent individuals. Schools need to be more adaptive so that they can be places where students can flourish. Schools have the responsibility to provide opportunities for students to develop their talents and explore their interests so they can reach their full potential (Krashen, 2016) and school leadership is a key factor in making that happen.

School as a Community

Schools are formal and legitimate organizations (Sergiovanni, 1994) in that they are organized into grade levels and subject departments with management structures and procedures in place (Meyer, 1984). However, schools are unique organizations because they are collaborative in nature and the reality of a school is that the people within it, whether they are school leaders, teachers, and/or students, cannot exist in isolation from each other. The school environment is not merely an organization but a community, where the connections that people form with one another and their purpose for being in that shared space is not based on contractual obligation but a commitment to work together (Sergiovanni, 1994). Schools as communities are social structures where members are bonded together through concepts and values that form a shared idea

structure, creating a sense of “we” and formed through the development of meaningful relationships (Sergiovanni, 1994). Because these relationships are based on shared concepts and values, decisions made by one group inevitably have an impact on the others and vice versa with the focus always on what will best contribute to student success. School leaders are responsible for a school in its entirety so they are the essential change agents with significant influence whether their school will develop into a learning community or not (Huber, 2004).

School Leaders and Caring Schools

Creating schools as communities begin with educational leaders (namely vice-principals and principals) and comes with the recognition that schools are central to the formation of moral habits because they are habitats where the values and beliefs of a community can be passed on (Ozolins, 2010). Because school leaders are responsible for the overall operation of a school community, their decisions can have widespread and long-lasting impact, not only on the school but also on individual students, especially if their decisions are not made with careful consideration. For a school community to develop citizenry within its students, school leaders must first embrace the domains of ethical enactment which means treating everyone in school as human beings with care and compassion and engaging with them in ethical ways when the situation requires (Starratt, 2005). Students and educational leaders share more than just space together. School leaders should seek out opportunities to foster and create genuine interactions with students, but when educational leaders fail to do so, they risk reducing the co-operation and engagement of individuals thereby creating a sense of powerlessness and helplessness (O’Neil, 1995). School leaders need to consider themselves to be the driving

force for their school to become a learning community that is able to adapt to the changing needs of their students and re-invent itself when needed. An ethical leader is one who demonstrates ethical behaviour in all actions, public and private, and embeds these ethical behaviours into their decisions, recognizing how these actions affect the common good (Robicheau, 2011).

Educators serve as strong role models for their students and when they model values of care, justice, empowerment, community, and social responsibility (Berman, 1990) in their daily interactions with both staff and students, they create a community that is based on communication and strong connections between its members. If school leaders wish their students to develop values of care and ethics, then it is only fair that educational leaders should first embody those qualities themselves so that students can see ethical behaviour enacted on a regular daily basis and in a consistent way. Caring is an essential component for building secure relationships, especially for students, and when school leaders recognize that education for students is not just based on acquiring knowledge, school leaders can have a longer, lasting impact on the lives of children and their families (Larson, 2010). Students experience school holistically, not just as a set of classes that they attend so when they feel cared for in school, they are more engaged (Mitra, 2004), increasing their sense of school connectedness. Students have varied needs and interests and come from even more diverse backgrounds. By acknowledging differences, school leaders are acting in the best interests of their students and as school leaders adapt their schools to be more inclusive of students, they are creating a positive school climate for everyone.

School Leaders as Ethical Leaders

Capable educational leaders are multidimensional and understand the various learning tasks that schools must cultivate (Starratt, 2005). School leaders must have educational goals, not just for knowledge acquisition, but also for social and emotional development so that students can develop the interpersonal skills necessary for them to engage in their communities. For educational leaders to be effective, they need to take proactive responsibility to make this social learning a reality (Starratt, 2005). However, educational leaders must first start with themselves and their own decision-making processes before they can hope to model ethical behaviour for their students. School culture is heavily influenced by its educational leaders because they have the ability to bring a school together through a shared vision, but if school leaders do not embody, exhibit, model, or consider virtues of ethical leadership in their daily interactions and decision-making processes, students cannot be expected to internalize and/or develop ethical behaviour within themselves.

Ethical leadership goes hand in hand with ethical decision-making but school leaders face more and more ethical dilemmas in the face of increased demands for school accountability and student achievement (Feng, 2013). School leaders must be sensitive to a variety of competing interests within the school community and from different education partners and stakeholders, all who make the assertion that decisions regarding students should be made in the best interests of students. The challenge inherent to ethical decision-making is two-fold. First, school leaders must be able to recognize the presence of an ethical issue, otherwise they have no chance to even begin solving the moral problem (Johnson, 2011). However, because school leaders come from such diverse

backgrounds and experiences, the ways in which they make ethical decisions can be just as varied which brings forth the second challenge. For a sense of commonality and consistency, school administrators need to make their decisions guided by an ethical framework with the knowledge that the decisions they make may not please everyone. Under this guiding principle of ethical decision-making, one such framework focuses on making decisions in the best interests of students.

Assessment, Curriculum, and Accountability in British Columbia Education

Standardized achievements tests have long been used to measure students' educational progress (Volante & Jaafar, 2010) in the name of accountability and in British Columbia (BC), this is not a new phenomenon. At the time of my data collection in 2019, the British Columbia education system was undergoing a curriculum and assessment shift. The British Columbia Ministry of Education (the Ministry) had just eliminated provincial examinations in 2016 and was beginning the process of implementing new provincial testing which came to be known as Literacy and Numeracy assessments over the next three years. In this section, I will provide an overview of the assessment practices in British Columbia to further contextualize my study and my participants place within it.

As school leaders, all of my participants have had experience with provincial exams because typically in each secondary school, one of them is in charge of following and implementing the exam schedule. Also, as many of my participants are products of the BC education system, they would have written their own provincial exams, as I did, in their grade 12 year, so they would have been familiar with the provincial exams from multiple perspectives. Although, the study was not about standardized testing or their

opinions of it, to better understand their responses, it is important to place them within the context of standardized testing, their knowledge of provincial exams, and how assessment practices have evolved in BC.

Provincial examinations were re-introduced to British Columbian students in 1983 after a decade long absence as part of the government's efforts to restore confidence in public schools (Odo, 2012). These examinations were administered for all grade 12 academic subjects and accounted for 40% of the overall subject grade combined with the 60% class grade. These high stakes exams were written to meet graduation requirements and provided data that education stakeholders such as parents, taxpayers, and the Ministry could use to evaluate whether the BC education system was working for its students and justified the funding for it. The provincial exams were also a way to determine whether schools were teaching the curriculum set forth by the Ministry and to gauge if students were equipped with the necessary knowledge and skills to move into their future. As neo-liberal viewpoints became more prevalent in BC, educational policies began to shift in favour of citizens having more voice in education accountability and choice and in tying education to the economy as stated in the School Act of BC (British Columbia Ministry of Education, 1989) that: "the purpose of the British Columbia school system is to enable learners to develop their individual potential and to acquire the knowledge, skills, and attitudes needed to contribute to a healthy society, and a prosperous and sustainable economy" (D-88).

In 2001, the BC political landscape was radically changed with the Liberals winning a landslide victory in 77 of the 79 seats in the provincial legislature (Elections B.C., 2013) and over the next twenty years, a strong neo-liberal agenda was applied to

education in BC. Neo-liberals see education as a commodity to be bought by consumers (students and parents) and sold by suppliers (schools and in this case, the Ministry) with schools being training grounds for future workers (Poole, 2007). Some of the hallmarks of neo-liberalism in education are demands for efficiency, accountability for student outcomes, usually using standardized test scores and graduation rates, choice for parents (public, private, or charter schools), privatization (user-fees, public funding for private schools, private-public partnerships and sponsorships) and attacks on teacher unions (Poole, 2007). Under the Liberal government, a new education funding formula was introduced based on a per student allocation that drastically reduced overall funding to the BC education system. School boards were encouraged to develop ways to generate revenue moving them into a more market driven model of education. In response, many school boards began operating overseas schools, selling district-generated curriculum, and recruiting tuition-paying international students to boost their districts' operating budgets (Poole, 2007).

Student achievement is high on the priority list of neo-liberal policy. The Foundation Skills Assessment (FSA) was introduced in 2000 for all Grade 4's and Grade 7's as a standardized test to measure reading, writing, and mathematics. In addition to administering province wide assessments, the Ministry also began releasing the test results in the interest of providing parents with information that they could use in making educational decisions. A neo-liberal think tank, the Fraser Institute, began annual rankings of schools using the FSA results, further increasing the pressures on educators and increasing the tension between the provincial labour union (the British Columbia Teachers' Federation (BCTF)) and the Ministry regarding test score use. In 2005, the

provincial examinations were revamped where new exams were introduced as others were eliminated. Gone were the majority of the Grade 12 exams, except for English 12 and Communications 12 exams (still accounting for 40%) and newly added were English 10, Science 10, Math 10, and Social Studies 11 (or BC First Nations 12) exams, accounting for 20% of the overall grade. This formed the new set of exams that had to be written to meet graduation demands. Although there has been an increased understanding of the importance of social and emotional awareness over the past twenty years BC education policy (Storey, 2017), the call for accountability was still focused on test driven data.

Since 1989, the School Act (British Columbia Ministry of Education) has mandated the development of "The Educated Citizen" who "exhibits skills in critical thinking, communication, creativity, decision making, and advocacy, they are self-motivated, cooperative, principled, responsible, respectful of others regardless of differences, contribute to society and has positive self-image, finding satisfaction in achievement and physical well-being" (D-88). With this in mind, the BC education policy has been evolving toward a more integrated holistic approach to learning (Storey, 2017). In 2016, provincial exams at all secondary school levels were eliminated and replaced by literacy and numeracy assessments that were phased in over the next three years. The introduction of the Literacy 10, Numeracy 10, and Literacy 12 Assessments coincided with the development of BC's redesigned curriculum, introduced in 2015 by the Liberal government and subsequently implemented by the NDP government, when they formed the provincial government in 2017.

With the new redesigned curriculum, assessment has greatly changed with a very clear and distinctive move away from standardized testing. Instead of facts and figures being the emphasis of learning, students are now assessed based on core competencies that are not only subject specific but also meant to be cross-curricular to promote integration across subjects and grades. This holistic approach is intended to provide flexibility to teachers and students so that learning is more student-focused and provides more opportunities for students to grow intellectually, personally, and socially. While government and citizens still want some measurement in a standardized way, it is important to develop a system of assessment that demonstrates that it values the learner over the institution and promotes diverse learning needs and success of all students (Magnusson & Frank, 2015). This broad approach to assessment allows recognition of multiple forms of student achievement, both tests and beyond with the large-scale provincial assessments making up only a small part of a students' overall process (Magnusson & Frank, 2015).

The FSA and literacy and numeracy assessment results are still released to the public and continue to be used by the Fraser Institute to rank schools. However, with the new redesigned curriculum, assessment is more student centred within the classroom where students are given varied opportunities to not only be assessed by their teachers but students are also engaged in self-assessment and self-reflection about their own work. Accountability is now promoted more through communication between teachers and parents so that parents have a better understanding of their child's academic progression in order to help plan and support the child's future learning (Magnusson & Frank, 2015). Although writing the literacy and numeracy assessments are graduation requirements, the

results do not count toward any part of the students' overall grades in any subject. With the new redesigned curriculum, the focus of assessment has also shifted toward a more student centred approach which highlights student achievement.

Statement of Problem and Purpose of Study

School communities are unique places because they are environments that are almost entirely centred on the development of relationships, community, and commitment of teachers, school leaders, staff, and students to one another (Beattie, 2002). School leaders seek to make a difference in the lives of their students and to create positive experiences in their own schools (Fullan, 2002). Relationships between school leaders and students are fostered through authentic engagement over time and under the assumption that decisions made by school leaders are in the best interests of students. However, in most schools, interactions between school leaders and students can be somewhat limited and what school leaders conceive of, perceive as, and act upon as ethical leadership and ethical decision-making within themselves may not be perceived in the same way by others, especially by students who may have had little exposure to ethical engagement between people.

My Research Study

My research will be a replication study of Dr. William C. Frick's *Practicing a Professional Ethic: Leading for Students' Best Interests* (2011). Frick's empirical investigation not only examined secondary school principals' perspective about the expression "the best interests of the student" as a viable professional ethic for educational leadership but also looked at how school leaders interpreted their experience of

leadership decision-making as a moral activity (Frick, 2011). The study did not specifically investigate decision-making but rather, focused on the school leaders' reflection about their decisions made about a hypothetical situation and their moral reasoning that reflected the expression, "the best interests of the student" (Frick, 2011). The intent of the study was also to determine whether school leaders experienced ethical decision-making in ways depicted by Shapiro and Stefkovich's *Ethic of Profession and Its Model for Students' Best Interests* framework (2011). Although my research will be a replication study of Frick's work, where Frick's research was done in the United States, my research study was completed in Canada, specifically the province of British Columbia. Because little research has been done into this topic within Canada, my research may have implications for Canadian school leaders, as well as provide the opportunity to compare Canadian and American perspectives toward ethical decision-making.

The Need for Further Study

Related research literature on ethical leadership and educational leaders focuses on the following:

A. the need for ethical leadership in education (Starratt, 1994; Strike, 2007; Arar et al., 2016; Okanda et al., 2021; Berges-Puyo, 2022)
B. the role of an ethical leader in a school (Starratt, 1994; Winston, 2005; Gerstl-Pepin & Aiken, 2009; Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2011
C. Attempts to define ethical leadership by identifying virtues and qualities that an ethical leader should embody (Lashway, 1997; Robicheau, 2011; Branson, 2014; Notman, 2014)
D. Interactions between ethical leaders and teachers (Fullan, 2002; Ilgan & Ekiz, 2020)
E. How to resolve ethical dilemmas (Kidder, 1995; Arar & Saiti, 2022)
F. Best interests of students (Stefkovich & Begley, 2007; Frick, 2011; Walker et al., 2011; Ouma Jwan, 2011; Mullen, 2017)

These categories were based on extensive reading in the area of ethical leadership in education. Through much of the readings, there was a clear acknowledgement that ethical leadership is a necessary component in education and discussion as to what the role of an ethical leader in a school should look like with most research focusing on administrator-teacher relationships. However, there was no clear consensus or formula as to how ethical leadership was to be enacted within a school. Many researchers delved into how ethics, morals, and virtues could be applied to an educational setting while other writers focused on what characteristics an ethical leader should either embody and/or cultivate. The discussion surrounding the qualities of an ethical leader was quite broad, often philosophical in nature with little applicability to an educational setting. Writings about resolving ethical dilemmas recognized ethical dilemmas and ethical decision-making as moral activities. Kidder (1995) provides a framework for resolving ethical dilemmas but his framework does not apply to a school setting and Arar & Saiti's (2022) work focused on building an ethical school culture to resolve ethical dilemmas. Where there was research in the area of best interests of the student, the focus was more on the principle and perceptions of what best interests of the student meant for teachers and school leaders and when and where to apply it. Ultimately, aside from Frick (2011) and Shapiro & Stefkovich (2011), there was little research found that delved into the connection between ethical decision-making in education and the best interests of the students

Despite the different areas of research regarding ethical leadership in education, very little research examined how educational leaders come to make their decisions and whether a specific theoretical framework is being used when they do. The issue of

ethical decision-making focused on the best interests of the student led me to the following questions:

A. How do school leaders make their decisions, especially when faced with ethical dilemmas?
B. How do school leaders know whether they are engaging in ethical decision-making?
C. What does the best interests of the student mean to school leaders?
D. How do school leaders know what the best interests of the student is when considering each student as an individual?
E. How do school leaders weigh the best interests of the student with the best interests of the school community?

These questions gave me a starting point to my research but they were wide in their outlook. After reading Frick's work, I narrowed the scope of my academic inquiry and decided that replicating Frick's study would delve into answering some but perhaps, not all of those questions. My research questions were adapted from Frick's study.

Research Questions

1. Is there a guiding principle(s) that assists school leaders in making value-laden decisions? Particularly, does the notion of "best interests of the student" emerge as a principle? (Frick 2011)
2. What do principals mean by "the best interests of the student?" (Frick, 2011)
3. Do secondary administrators conceptualize "the best interests of the student" in a way that mirrors the Ethic of Profession and Its Model for Students' Best Interests? (Frick, 2011)
4. Are there any significant commonalities and/or differences between Canadian and American school leaders' perspectives on "the best interests of the student?"

Summary of Introduction Chapter

This chapter included some personal background to my study and how my interest in researching ethical decision-making came about. To provide some wider background of my study, I also discussed the purpose of schools, creating caring school communities, and the pivotal role that school leaders play in ensuring the purpose of schools through

creating a caring school community. I also provided an overview of province wide assessment in British Columbia to give more context to my study. I ended the chapter by introducing my research study in relation to Frick's (2011) work and the questions raised regarding ethical decision making.

Organization of the Study

This study is divided into six chapters. Chapter 1 provides my background and contextualizes my interests in this research area, in addition to stating the purpose and need for further study. Chapter 2 will present a literature review that delves deeper into topics related to ethical leadership in education as well as discuss the conceptual framework that will be used to interpret my findings. Chapter 3 will detail the methodology and limitations of my study. Chapter 4 will consist of the closer examination of the findings from my data collection and how my findings were coded into themes. Chapter 5 will focus on my discussion of my findings as I delve into answering the research questions. Finally, in Chapter 6, I will consider potential implications of my study and areas of future research.

Chapter 2 - Literature Review

Introduction

In this chapter, I will present a review of the literature that identifies and discusses the key issues and themes that pertain to ethical leadership in schools as well as ethical decision-making. My review will start by creating an understanding of ethics, virtues, and values and how they are applied to ethical behaviour, especially within an educational setting. Although ethical leadership is not limited to an educational context, ethical leadership does take on unique perspectives when enacted in schools. How school leaders engage in their decision-making processes can and will have great impact on students which will also be discussed.

In addition, I will present the conceptual frameworks and ethical model that I have incorporated into my study. I will discuss each of the frameworks and the ethical model to show how they all intersect to provide school leaders with ways to engage in their decision-making that is grounded in ethical consideration. Finally, I will provide a brief discussion about Canadian and American education systems to note any significant differences and/or similarities for a later comparison of my study results.

Understanding Ethics, Virtues, and Values

Ethics delve into the nature of right and wrong, good or bad. Ethics are understood to ask two basic questions: What is good and what is right? (Strike, 2007). However, ethics are not just about believing in the differences between right and wrong, ethics are also about engaging in conscious behaviour that reflects knowing the difference between the two. According to Kidder (1995), "ethics is not blind impartiality, doling out

right or wrong according to some stone-cold canon of ancient and immutable law. It's a warm and supremely human activity that cares enough for others to want right to prevail" (p. 50). Rooted in the Greek word *ethos* which means character and used to describe the principles, customs, or beliefs of a group or society that distinguishes them from another, ethics become the essence of how social interactions will take shape in a community. Ethics are the underlying beliefs, assumptions, andprinciples that characterize a person's life (Starratt, 2004) and are personal to each individual, serving to guide their behaviour on a daily basis, in a consistent manner.

Ethics are about beliefs but more significantly, ethics are about how individuals make decisions and act on those beliefs. Ethics centre on the community and how a person engages in ethical behaviour, which is largely based on how they make their decisions, and whether those decisions are public and/or private. Ethical behaviour involves an individual, making decisions that will add value to others and to society (Kaufman, 2008) and engaging in choices and actions which they are ultimately accountable.

Contemporary ethics takes three philosophical approaches to determine the ethical nature of an action: (a) *utilitarian,* (b) *deontological,* and (c) *virtue* (Lawler & Salzman, 2013). *Utilitarian ethics* states that morality is determined not by whether the action is right or wrong but rather by the consequences of the behaviour which can in turn lead to unethical behaviour. *Deontological ethics* is derived from the work of Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) and focuses more on the motive of a person engaging in the act, arguing that the motive itself is what determines the ethical nature of behaviour. Therefore, according to Kant, if the intention and the action is good, then that act is deemed good. However,

Kant does not address the context of when and where the person is engaged in their action which can prove problematic because not all actions can be considered good simply based on the intention of the person. *Virtue ethics* follows the work of Aristotle who believed that there were ethical virtues that people could develop with the help of the community that would lead to living a good life.

Ethics within an educational context follows the philosophical perspective of virtue ethics with the idea that ethical leaders can embody and act based on specific virtues that are associated with ethical behaviour. Ethical leadership, as professed by Lashway (1997), is built on virtues of truth, respect, honesty, integrity, caring, and grace. Lashway (1997), referencing Aristotle, views the ethical leader, not as someone who acts with reason but rather, an ethical leader is a person whose actions are always guided by these virtues, not just when there is an ethical dilemma that needs to be resolved. Starratt (1994) suggest that there are three virtues that ethical leaders within schools should have: (a) responsibility, (b) authenticity, and (c) presence. As responsible human beings, ethical leaders understand that they are only one of many stakeholders in a school setting and work to develop and sustain working relationships with different stakeholders to create a healthy school environment. Ethical leaders are authentic when they build relationships that respect individual rights. The essence of ethical leadership strives toward making decisions that are ethical not by accident but by intention (Nash, 1996). Finally, ethical leaders are present in that they have a clear awareness of self and others, able to identify problems and work towards resolving issues in a transparent manner.

Ethics and values are often used synonymously. However, they are not the same. Values refer to principles, fundamental convictions, ideals, and standards that either

guide behaviour or are used as points of reference to make decisions (Halstead, 1996). Personal values have power because they are a primary influence in every person's decision-making process so every choice or judgement that a person makes is informed by their values (Branson, 2014) so how people come to make ethical decisions is based on the values that they have. Schools are embedded in society and values considered to be important are imparted to students through the curriculum and the organizational structure of the school community. From this perspective, values are what drives ethical decision-making and school leaders can and will be guided by their values when faced with ethical issues. An integral part of ethical leadership is dependent on the values employed by school leaders as they make their decisions (Notman, 2014). Ethics and values are intertwined because ethics are the conscious behaviour that people choose to engage in based on what their personal values are.

Ethical Decision-Making

Making the right choice is a challenge faced by many leaders, regardless of whatever organization for which they are responsible. Arguably, there is no such thing as a right choice and depending on the situation and the circumstances, often, leaders are faced with making decisions based on which option will do the least harm to or benefit the greatest number of people. For educational leaders, decision-making can be even more complex because their decisions must balance between professional considerations, such as school district policies, and considerations specifically relating to their own school community and students (Eyal et al., 2011). Conflicting demands by education stakeholders can affect how school leaders make their decisions, especially choices that are ethical in nature. The first step to ethical decision-making requires a conscious effort

on the part of educational leaders to recognize when there is the presence of an ethical issue (Johnson, 2011). Jones (1991) argues that the stages of ethical decision-making are impacted by the characteristics of the ethical issue (also called “moral intensity”), which involve identifying the moral issue, making a moral judgement, establishing moral intention, and engaging in moral behaviour.

Ethical decision-making is not always easy because there is neither a strong consensus nor a specific standard that governs all ethical dilemmas. More often than not, individuals rely on their own value systems and their interpretation of a code of behaviour (Eberlein, 1989) because that is what they are most comfortable with. The CPA Ethics Committee (1986), has set out four moral principles used most consistently by professionals: (a) *respect for the dignity of persons,* (b) *responsible caring,* (c) *integrity in relationships,* and (d) *responsibility to society* (Eberlein, 1989). *Respect for the dignity of persons* is the belief that each student is an individual, deserving of respect. Students are not to be treated as objects and interactions with students should be authentic. *Responsible care* is a basic ethical expectation that requires self-awareness, especially in professions that involve the welfare of others. Ethical leaders must be competent and not engage in activities that could potentially harm others. *Integrity of relationships* stresses that relationships fostered within a school setting must include fairness, impartiality, and straightforwardness. Educators have a *responsibility to society* in that they are expected to use their knowledge to develop social structures and policies for beneficial purposes (Eberlein, 1989), meaning that schools do not exist in isolation but are part of a larger society.

Ethical decision-making is not always about making the right or wrong decision because ethical dilemmas often encompass making a choice between two options that may be equally right or equally wrong. The intention behind the decision is what deems the act to be ethical or not. When leaders make decisions that deliberately consider the needs of others at the expense of their own personal needs and desires (Branson, 2014), they are engaging in the practice of ethical leadership. Ethical leadership is only achievable through conscious intention (Taylor, 2003) and requires careful thought and consideration.

Ethical Leadership

Leaders cannot lead without those who are willing to follow. Leadership is a people-oriented endeavour and effective leaders understand that people and the relationships that they build are at the centre of their work. Leaders are only able to influence others when authentic relationships have been cultivated through communication and care. Effective leadership requires action that is follower-focused, directed, and purposeful, setting the tone for all members of an organization. Leadership is more than just expertise or knowledge in a given area. Leadership, and even more so, ethical leadership encompasses all that a leader does, the values that they embody, and how they manifest those values in their daily interactions. When it comes to ethical leadership, maintaining a desirable character is far more valuable than technical efficiency (Celik, 2003).

Ethics are a reminder that individuals, not organizations, engage in ethical or unethical practices (Mendonca, 2001). Leaders cannot expect their followers to engage in ethical behaviour if they do not do so first. Therefore, ethical leaders cannot afford to

behave unethically. Ethical leaders bring forward the essence of ethics thorough ethical policies and practices that are essential to the organization (Nash, 1996). Not all individuals have a solid grasp of what ethics are and what ethical behaviour entails, making it even more imperative that leaders be conscious of their actions because not only are they responsible for their own ethical behaviour but whether they realize it or not, they are also inadvertently responsible for the development of ethical behaviour in their followers as well. In a school setting, ethical behaviour is even more important because the followers are not just colleagues, such as teachers but also, students in their formative years of education. Leaders are also role models and the actions they exhibit are naturally deemed appropriate, especially in the minds of students who are at an impressionable age.

Ethical leadership is the attempt to act from principles, beliefs, assumptions, and values in the leader's espoused system of ethics (Starratt, 2004) so ethical leaders must be aware of their own core values and have the courage to stand by them in the face of opposition. Ethics determine behaviour in both private and public spheres of a person's life. An ethical leader knows and recognizes how their actions can affect the common good and so, their decisions can only be made after careful consideration (Robicheau, 2011) with the desire to make decisions that do the greatest good for the greatest number of people.

Ethical leadership is reflective in nature as each situation that a leader faces can be complex and unique, leading them to draw from past experiences. Leaders need to ensure that they live up to ethical standards that are both reasonable and achievable. The most visible test of an ethical leader is in how they take action in response to dilemmas

that test their ethical standards. Finally, leaders must act ethically by modelling virtues of trust, respect, and integrity in the belief that by acting ethically, their acts will result in the good of the whole (Robicheau, 2011).

Ethical Leadership in Schools

Leadership in schools is fraught with challenges as school leaders are faced with balancing the needs of teachers, parents, students, school board, and school board trustees, who are just a few of the stakeholders in the current education system. School leaders are not only tasked with ensuring that schools are active learning environments but they are also expected to exhibit vision, connect everyday activities to values, cultivate shared goals, meanings, norms, and commitments (Willower, 1987). As public officials, school leaders have a responsibility to engage in ethical conduct because the organization in which they work exists in the public sphere and is subject to continuous scrutiny. In addition, schools are intended to educate students in academic subjects along with teaching students which behaviours and beliefs are deemed appropriate by society.

Ethical leadership is an integral component of an effective school (Calabrese, 1988). Effective leaders lead by example and this is especially true of school leaders who are challenged with supporting and/or creating a school culture that consistently promotes recognizable ethical actions. How school leaders approach decision-making can serve as a model for the school community as well as having a profound, long-term effect on the ethical culture of a school and its inhabitants. Ethical leadership is not ego-driven and those leaders who behave ethically in both their public and private lives are characterized to be honest, caring, and principled individuals who make fair and balanced decisions

(Kavakose, 2007) with no question that their decisions are made in the best in interests of students and the rest of the school community.

Educational leaders work in collaboration with teachers to develop school goals and visions. Ultimately, the effective implementation of school goals falls on school leaders because their passion and commitment can create purpose and bring a school together (Davies & Brighouse, 2010). If education is valued within a society, then education should result in students becoming democratic citizens, prepared to fulfill the demands of democratic citizenship as they move into adulthood (Covalskie, 2010). However, students cannot become ethical people or recognize ethical behaviour if they are not exposed to ethical behaviour on a consistent basis. When school leaders display ethical behaviours in their daily interactions with teachers and students, they are reinforcing and thereby institutionalizing and modelling ethical principles that they want students to adopt.

Educational leaders establish an ethical atmosphere that intertwines responsibility with action and each decision by them serves to create ethical purpose (Calabrese, 1988). Schools are dynamic settings that expose students to different people from diverse backgrounds and varied ages. Within a school community, school leaders play a critical role in enhancing democracy and hold enormous power to work toward greater social justice through education (Larson, 2010). Ethical behaviour can be learned through modelling and repeated exposure. The more ethical interactions that students are part of in their daily lives, the more likely they will be able to learn to be ethical and internalize ethical behaviours within themselves. Specific values are neither chosen nor are they

entirely predestined, but rather, values are based on developmental experiences and acquired through interactions with others (Wray-Lake & Syvertsen, 2011).

Greenfield (1990) states that ethical school leaders genuinely want to be good and are committed to securing the welfare and serving the interests of others. Greenfield (1990) identifies five standards of good practice that he considers vital and serve as the foundation for ethical behaviour for school leaders. The five standards are: (a) have a point of view, (b) invite others to consider your point of view, (c) become informed about good educational practices, (d) develop the habit of being reflective, and (e) put students at the centre of decisions. School leaders who engage in ethical practice are reflective and deliberate in their daily practice, recognizing that because their decisions have such widespread impact on students and the school environment, their decisions cannot be made in isolation.

When it becomes clear that values such as equality, mutual respect for opinions, and trust (Wray-Lake & Syvertsen, 2011) are nurtured and lived within a school community by school leaders, teachers, students, and staff, then an environment rooted in ethics can be fostered and allowed to flourish. Starratt (1994) argues that a major part of a school leader's responsibility is to help the school define and develop itself as a learning community and to help the members of the community make meanings of their worlds. When educational leaders engage in ethical conduct, their words are consistent with their actions, their decisions are clearly equitable and honest, they take responsibility for their actions, and they participate in fair and respectful interactions with their colleagues (Lynch, 2012).

Ethical Leadership and Students

Ethical relationships that reflect values of sharing, cooperating, respect, and engagement (Haughey, 2007) develop over time through authentic interactions between participants. Within a school environment, a variety of relationships develop daily such as those that exist between students and teachers in the classroom. However, just as important is the cultivation of relationships between school leaders and students. School leaders are public custodians and find themselves in a unique role to nurture and interpret basic values of society (Nash, 1996) as role models for their students. Ethics are distinct from other behavioural expectations due to the leader's ability to affect people and through decisions that can produce good or harm (Nash, 1996). Ethical leaders within school environments work to promote individual responsibility, increase participation of all its members, and create opportunities for ethical communication (Nash, 1996) whether it is with colleagues or with students. According to Fullan (2002), relationship building establishes the foundation to sustain long-term changes and effectiveness in a school community. For a school community to develop ethical values within is students, school leaders must first start with themselves and embrace the domains of ethical enactment which means ensuring that everyone is treated with care and compassion (Starratt, 2005), and most importantly, valued as an important citizen of that environment. Students need to be surrounded by models of values and principles of care, justice, empowerment, and social responsibility (Berman, 1990), if the hope is for students to acquire these qualities themselves. Without consistent exposure to these values and principles, students will not be able to recognize what care and compassion look like. For schools to become a community, they require affirmation. Community building and social responsibility

demand basic social skills such as communication, cooperation, conflict management, and perspective taking (Berman, 1990), all qualities that school leaders should first embody as ethical individuals if they expect and want their students to develop those same qualities. Lessons on ethical behaviour should not feel like lessons but rather, ethical behaviour should be the standard by which members of a school community interact with each other.

School leaders have profound influence on the ethical development of their students. The role of school leaders is not to indoctrinate but to cultivate skills and develop character in their students (Paul, 1988). To make a difference, school leaders who embody ethical behaviour understand the various dimensions of learning tasks that schools must develop (Starratt, 2005), recognizing that educating students is not education based on subject areas but educating students means helping them develop into well-rounded, contributing members of society. To become an ethical leader, school leaders need to look toward making themselves more of an interactive element in their school community so that when they are faced with making challenging ethical decisions, their actions can be understood as being ethical.

The Best Interests of the Student

The School Act gives schools the authority to act *in loco parentis* which means "in the place of a parent" thereby entrusting school leaders to make decisions for students in their care as a parent would. Students are the heart of the school community and although making decisions in the best interests of the student may seem obvious, the challenge for school leaders is determining what the best interests of the student are. The best interests principle is a widely used ethical, legal, and social construct, especially

when it comes to decisions involving children (Koppelman, 1997). The conceptualization of best interests within an educational context intentionally considers the student as an individual, as opposed to students in a group with the underlying assumption that all students will be treated with fairness, justice, and caring (Stefkovich & Begley, 2007). The best interests of the student is an expression that is laced with nuance and complexity because it is ethical in nature. What serves the best interests of one student may not serve the best interests of another and what is best for one student may not be what is best for the larger school community. School leaders work within the confines of their school communities and must use their discretion and professional judgement within the context of each situation to determine what is the best interests of the student (Stefkovich & Begley, 2007) but their decisions cannot be made in isolation. Problem-solving in schools is subject to interpretation, negotiation, dialogue, and other contextual realities (Schwab, 2004 in Mullen, 2017) so school leaders as reflective agents must be deliberate and engage in personal, interpersonal, and social interactions (Mullen, 2017) as they enter into ethical decision-making processes. When school leaders consider the best interests of the student, they are engaging in sound decision-making (Walker et al., 2011) and if school leaders are making student interests and needs central to their decision-making, then they are engaging in ethical leadership (Mullen, 2017).

Conceptual Frameworks

My replication study will use the critical lens of Joan Shapiro and Jaqueline Stefkovich's (2011) Multiple Ethical Paradigms, which has its roots in Robert J. Starratt's (1994) Multidimensional Ethical Framework, because their frameworks consider the ethical aspects of education, especially in the area of ethical decision-making. The

Multidimensional Ethical Framework (Staratt, 1994) examines ethics through the ethics of critique, justice, and care. The Multiple Ethical Paradigm (Shapiro and Stefkovich, 2011) builds on Starratt's (1994) work by adding another paradigm, the ethic of profession and incorporating Jacqueline Stefkovich and G. Michale O'Brien's (2004) model for "the best interests of the student." The frameworks and the model work as theories to be applied to ethical decision-making and intersect to provide school leaders with a way to interpret and consider the ethical nature of the decisions that they have to make in their daily practice. Both frameworks and the model will be discussed in turn.

Multidimensional Ethical Framework

In his book, *Building an Ethical School: A Practical Response to the Moral Crisis in Schools* (1994), Starratt discusses the moral issues that are found in schools and explores the challenges that educational leaders face in creating an ethical school. Starratt (1994) proposes that for an ethical school to become more than just an idea, school leaders must first have foundational qualities of an ethical person and adopt an overall framework that provides unity and coherence to what they do. Starratt's Multidimensional Framework brings together three areas of ethics: (a) the ethic of critique, (b) the ethic of justice, and (c) the ethic of care. According to Starratt (1994), all three are necessary to provide direction in ethical practice because together, they complement each other to provide richer response to complex ethical challenges.

Ethic of Critique

The ethic of critique encourages ethical leaders to actively question the bureaucratic structure of schools and society while awakening leaders to various social inequities and raising questions about the just nature of laws (Starratt, 1994). This critical stance comes out of critical theory which explores social life as problematic because

society is inherently filled with struggles and the competing interests of groups and individuals. Because schools are microcosms of society, these inequities can unintentionally embed themselves into schools, creating disparities between students. For ethical leaders to make changes in their school community, they must engage in the theme of critique so that educators can confront the morals issues that arise when schools disproportionately seem to benefit some groups in society while failing others (Starratt, 1994). The ethic of critique forces school leaders to question the organizational structure of schools and determine what changes need to be implemented for a school to be "ethical."

Ethic of Justice

The ethic of justice serves as the foundation for legal principles and ideals and upholds values that are accepted by society (Starratt, 1994), especially when considering the rights of the community versus the rights of the individual. The ethic of justice recognizes that schools are a product of the community, reflecting society's practices and social structure. However, at the same time, schools are where individuals acquire knowledge and develop their identities. School leaders are challenged daily to balance the needs and the rights of the community and the individual. They need to be aware of their decision-making processes so that they do not create further inequities but instead, allow for both the school community and individuals to flourish. In practice, ethical educational leaders work to encourage open communication and engage in participatory decision-making to best meet the needs of the majority.

Ethic of Care

The ethic of care focuses on the relationships between people that are developed through positive regard for one another and not based on contractual obligations (Starratt,

1994; Rucinski & Bauch, 2006). This ethic requires the leader to view each individual as having value, dignity, and worth (Rucinski & Bauch, 2006) and requires a willingness to acknowledge an individual's right to be who they are, an openness to encountering them as an authentic individual, and a loyalty to the relationship (Starratt, 1994). A school grounded in the ethic of care holds human relationships to be the essence of school community and the good of humans to be sacred. According to Starratt (1991), the ethic of care provides school leaders with a way to respond to complex moral processes by showing concern for others as part of decision processes.

A Model for the Best Interests of the Student

In their work, *Best Interests of the Students: An Ethical Model* (2004), Stefkovich and O'Brien construct a model for determining what is in the "best interests of the students" when making various types of ethical decisions in school. School leaders will often use the idea of "the best interests of students" as the guiding principle for their decision-making. However, due to the lack of a clear definition of the actual expression, increased pressure has been placed on school leaders to make the "right" decisions, allowing for a lot of discretion on the part of decision makers. In some cases, school leaders within the same school may not agree and have very different ideas about what "the best interests of students" are when faced with having to make a challenging decision that is ethical in nature. Taking into account the varied nature by which school leaders perceive "the best interests of the students," Stefkovich and O'Brien (2004) have created their "best interests" framework based on a new conceptualization of the three R's, rights, responsibilities, and respect. Stefkovich and O'Brien (2004) do note that their conceptualization is based on the student as an individual, rather than on the group.

Rights

Basic human rights such as the right to freedom of religion, speech, and privacy to name a few are essential to determining a student's best interests. Students are individuals who are entitled to be treated with dignity and to be protected from undue harm and humiliation.

Responsibility

Rights do not come without responsibilities. As members of a school community where each student is valued as a unique individual, each student must remember that they are still a member of a larger community with responsibilities to that community. School leaders, teachers, staff, and students are considered moral agents with the ability to make rational decisions and with that ability, also comes the responsibility to make decisions that do not abuse the rights that they have been given. Decisions should not be harmful to others and/or to the school community.

Respect

Respect is mutuality and dictates how individuals interact and treat each other. Respect emphasizes relationships that are built around "equality, tolerance, acceptance of one's own as well as other's frailties, an appreciation and celebration of diversity, and a commitment to finding common ground in an increasingly multicultural, pluralistic society" (Stefkovich & O'Brien, 2004, p. 204).

Multiple Ethical Paradigms

In their book, *Ethical Leadership and Decision Making in Education: Applying Theoretical Perspectives to Complex Dilemmas* (2011), Shapiro and Stefkovich introduce the Multiple Ethical Paradigms which centres around studying ethics through the lens of four distinctive yet overlapping and complementary paradigms. At the centre of the

ethical framework is the "best interests of the student" since educators often use this concept to justify ethical decisions (Stefkovich & O'Brien, 2004). The Multiple Ethical Paradigms as coined by Joan Shapiro & Jacqueline Stefkovich finds its roots in the work of Robert Starratt's (1994) Multidimensional Ethical Framework. In his book, *Building an Ethical School*, Starratt (1994) views ethics as coming from three areas: (a) the ethic of critique, (b) the ethic of justice, and (c) the ethic of care. Shapiro & Stefkovich (2011) add a fourth paradigm to Starratt's framework by including the ethic of profession. The Multiple Ethical Paradigms is a framework that when applied to a context that uses the ethics of critique, justice, care, and profession, school leaders are able to become ethical leaders through the ethical behaviour within their work.

The ethic of critique highlights problems inherent in the ethic of justice. While the ethic of justice deals with a commitment to laws, human rights, and freedoms, the ethic of critique encourages people to question decisions made by those in authority so that decisions are not automatically accepted but instead, open to discussion. The ethic of care includes the emotional and personal relationships in society, recognizing the social nature of human interactions and how people engage in their own personal and professional code of ethics.

The field of educational leadership has minimal to no ethics course requirements despite a growing interest in ethics in educational decision-making, a fact that has troubled Shapiro and Stefkovich. In addition, ethical codes set forth by professional associations do not adequately respond to the day-to-day ethical dilemmas that school leaders may face. Through their work, Shapiro and Stefkovich (2011) believe that school leaders need to have the opportunity to develop their own personal code of ethics in a

way that allows them to better understand themselves and others. Using the ethics of critique, justice, and care, school leaders should be challenged to reflect on what they perceive to be right and wrong, good and bad, and how they come to make ethical decisions.

The ethic of profession is not as easy to embody as the other three because there are four possible clashes that may occur as school leaders develop their own code of ethics. First, there may be a clash between their personal and professional code of ethics when the code is established by the profession. Another clash may occur across professions if the individual has worked in more than one profession. Thirdly, there may be clashes of professionals in what one school leader views as ethical, another may not. The last clash may exist between the profession and the community where what is deemed to ethical may again be quite different depending on the situation or the group. To avoid this particular clash, ethical leaders should engage in participatory decision-making where feedback is solicited from different community partners.

Shapiro and Stefkovich (2011) believe that there is a moral imperative for education to serve “the best interests of the student” and that this ideal should be at the core value of any professional paradigm for school leaders. Stefkovich and O’Brien (2004) conceptualize that decisions related to students’ best interests are those that include individual rights, accepting and teaching students to take responsibility for their actions, and respecting other students. These three R’s, rights, responsibilities, and respect, emerging from Stefkovich and O’Brien’s (2004) work are key to making sound ethical decisions within the ethic of profession, thereby fulfilling the professional obligation of educational leaders (Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2011).

Applying the Framework to My Study

The Multidimensional Ethical Framework (Starratt, 1994), the Multiple Ethical Paradigms framework (Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2011), and the Model for the Best Interests of Students (Stefkovich & O'Brien, 2004) intersect to recognize ethical considerations that exist in education. There are moral aspects that are unique to the profession of educational leadership (Frick, 2011) because education is a people-oriented enterprise, centering on the well-being of students. School leaders are constantly aware that their decisions can and will impact the students in their care, so it is paramount that they engage in decision-making processes that are ethical in nature.

For my study, I will be using Shapiro and Stefkovich's (2011) Multiple Ethical Paradigms framework to contextualize my study and to analyze its findings for two reasons. Firstly, because my study is a replication study of Frick's (2011) work, I want to replicate his work as closely as possible and Shapiro and Stefkovich's (2011) framework is what he used in his study to interpret his findings. My choice to use the same framework stems from my view that Shapiro and Stefkovich's (2011) framework builds on both Starratt's (1994) and Stefkovich and O'Brien's (2004) earlier work, encompassing the key ideas of ethical-decision making processes for the best interests of the student.

Research Questions

1. Is there a guiding principle(s) that assists school leaders in making value-laden decisions? Particularly, does the notion of "best interests of the student" emerge as a principle? (Frick 2011)
2. What do principals mean by "the best interests of the student?" (Frick, 2011)

3. Do secondary administrators conceptualize "the best interests of the student" in a way that mirrors the Ethic of Profession and Its Model for Students' Best Interests? (Frick, 2011)
4. Are there any significant commonalities and/or differences between Canadian and American school leaders' perspectives on "the best interests of the student?"

Education Systems of Canada and the United States

Canada and the United States are close allies with many similarities. However, education is not one of them. Both countries have established a comparable universal public education that share many attributes and features (Wallner, 2012) such as their organization into elementary and secondary schools where students are grouped by age and grade levels and curriculum that reflects the values and history of their respective territories. However, there are also key differences in terms of how their education systems are implemented, most notably as to which level of government retains the authority of educational administration. The educational system in Canada is housed within each province and territory with no federal ministry of education to oversee them whereas in the United States, there is a national education department that sets policies for the entire country with requirements as to how education is to be delivered offset to the state level. Wallner (2012) identifies three key areas where Canada and the United States have the most significant differences in education: (a) educational administration, (b) education finance, and curriculum polices. Toward the end of my study, I will refer to these key areas to provide context as I compare and contrast whether any or all of these areas account for commonalities and/or differences perspectives of school leaders on "the best interests of the student."

The following table provides an overview of the education systems of both countries. This comparison is not exhaustive and is only meant to provide a snapshot for reference as further comparative discussion will be made in subsequent chapters.

Table 1 - Comparison of Canada and United States Education System

	Canadian Education System	**United States Education System**
Educational Administration	Ministry of Education - administered by each province and territory through their respective School Acts - decentralized within Canada - highly centralized province and territory	National Education Department - national policies set by NED offset to state and local levels - key policy - ESSA (2015)
Education Finance	- provincial and local	- state and local - federal government top up
Curriculum Polices	- set by each province and territory with autonomy	- state level

Summary of Literature Review Chapter

In this chapter, I engaged in a discussion of key ideas related to my study. I organized ideas into categories of understanding of ethics, virtues and values, ethical decision-making, ethical leadership, ethical leadership in schools, ethical leadership and students, and the best interests of the student. I also included the conceptual framework that I will be using to analyze and interpret my findings. By applying a specific conceptual framework, I hope to make sense of the data thorough interpretation and exploration to add to the existing literature. Included is a restatement of my research questions to continue to connect my study to both the existing literature and the framework. I ended with a brief comparison of the education systems Canada and the

United States which I will discuss further in a subsequent chapter once I have completed my data collection. Through my study, I intend to engage in discourse to further my understanding of ethical decision-making for the best interests of the student.

Chapter 3 - Methodology

Introduction

In this chapter, I will discuss my research methods, beginning with a review of the purpose of my study and my research questions. I will provide an overview of what replication studies are and how they contribute to academic research. In my discussion of replication studies, I will reference Frick's (2011) study in acknowledgement that my research study is a replication study with extension of his work. I will also explore my use of qualitative research in my study and my use of interviews as a valid data collection method. In addition, I will discuss the need for bracketing and reflexivity to uphold my integrity as a researcher and to ensure the trustworthiness and the rigour that is necessary in qualitative research. My research methods will be outlined so that it is clear how my research study was conducted. I will close the chapter by identifying the coding methods that I used to organize my data to facilitate further discussion of my findings in the following chapter.

Opening Thoughts

Ethical leadership goes hand in hand with ethical decision-making but school leaders face more and more ethical dilemmas in the face of increased demands for school accountability and student achievement (Feng, 2013). School leaders must be sensitive to varying competing interests within the school community and by different educational partners and stakeholders, all who make the assertion that decision regarding students should be and are made in the best interests of the student. The challenge inherent to ethical decision-making is twofold. Firstly, school leaders must first be able to recognize

the presence of an ethical issue otherwise they do not have any chance to even begin solving the ethical issue (Johnson, 2011) but school leaders come from diverse backgrounds and experiences so how ethical decisions are made can be just as varied, which brings forth the second challenge faced by school leaders. Even when school leaders make their decisions, guided by an ethical framework that provides a sense of consistency, the knowledge remains that the decisions they make may not please everyone. However, under the guiding principle of making ethical decisions in the best interests of the student, educational leaders are more likely to be perceived as ethical leaders.

Statement of Problem and Purpose of Study

Schools are environments that are based on relationships that teachers, school leaders, staff, and students have with each other. Although relationships between school leaders and students can take time to develop due to limited interaction between them, school leaders do make decisions that are as student centred as possible. School leaders work to make a difference for their students and to create a positive atmosphere in their schools (Fullan, 2022) but how school leaders display their ethical behavior may not be perceived the same way by others.

My research was a replication study of Dr. William *C. Frick's Practicing a Professional Ethic: Leading for Students' Best Interests* (2011). Frick's empirical investigation not only examined secondary school principals' perspectives about the expression, "the best interest of the student" as a viable professional ethic for education leadership but he also looked at how school leaders interpreted their experience of leadership decision-making as a moral activity (Frick, 2011). The study did not

specifically investigate decision-making but rather, focused on the reflections of school leaders in their decisions made about a hypothetical situation and their ethical reasoning that reflected the expression, “the best interests of the student” (Frick, 2011). The intent of the study was also to determine whether school leaders experienced ethical decision-making in ways depicted in Shapiro and Stefkovich’s (2011) *Ethic of Profession and Its Model for Students’ Best Interests* framework. Although my research was a replication study of Frick’s work, Frick’s research was conducted in the United States whereas my study took place in Canada. Little empirical research has been done into this topic in Canada so my research adds to our understanding of the Canadian context. Much of the research done on the best interests of the student has been in the United States (Stefkovich and O’Brien, 2004; Frick, 2011; Stefkovich & Begley, 2007; Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2011; Mullen, 2017), one in Kenya (Ouma Jwan, 2011), and only one in Canada (Walker et al., 2011). My research also provided me with the opportunity to consider whether the differences in the Canadian and American education systems yielded divergent responses between Canadian and American educational leaders.

Need for Further Study

Related research literature on ethical leadership and educational leadership focuses on the following:

A. the need for ethical leadership in education (Starratt, 1994; Strike, 2007; Arar et al., 2016; Okanda et al., 2021; Berges-Puyo, 2022)
B. the role of an ethical leader in a school (Starratt, 1994; Winston, 2005; Gerstl-Pepin & Aiken, 2009; Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2011)
C. attempts to define ethical leadership by identifying virtues and qualities that ethical leaders should embody (Lashway 1997; Robicheau, 2011; Branson, 2014; Notman, 2014)
D. interactions between ethical leaders and teachers (Fullan, 2002; Ilgan & Ekiz, 2020)

E. how to resolve ethical dilemmas (Kidder, 1995; Arar & Saiti, 2022)
F. the best interests of the student (Stefkovich & O'Brien, 2004; Stefkovich & Begley, 2007; Frick, 2011; Walker et al., 2011, Ouma Jwan, 2011; Mullen, 2017)

Much of the literature stresses that ethical values must be modelled by educational leaders in schools, however the modelling is mostly in relation to how school leaders can build collaborative working relationships with teachers. Very little research examines the process by which educational leaders come to make ethical decisions and whether these decisions are made under the guiding principle of a specific conceptual framework.

Research Questions

My research questions were adapted from Frick's (2011) study but do reflect my interests to further study the decision-making processes of school leaders, especially considering the ethical nature of their work. I also wanted to explore the idea of how school leaders know whether they are making an ethical decision or not.

1. To what extent is there a guiding principle(s) that assists school leaders in making value-laden decisions? Does the notion of "best interests of the student" emerge as a principle? (Frick 2011)
2. What do school leaders mean by "the best interests of the student?" (Frick, 2011)
3. Do secondary administrators conceptualize "the best interests of the student" in a way that mirrors the Ethic of Profession and Its Model for Students' Best Interests? (Frick, 2011)
4. Are there any significant commonalities and/or differences between Canadian and American school leaders' perspectives on "the best interests of the student?"

Research Methodology and My Role as the Researcher

Cresswell (2012) states that one of the main factors that is important in deciding whether to use qualitative or quantitative research is that the research approach needs to match the research problem. Problems best suited for quantitative research are those that

attempt to establish cause and effect relationships whereas problems that involve exploration for deeper understanding are better investigated using qualitative methods (Cresswell, 2012). The aim of my replication study was to develop a deeper understanding of how school leaders make their decisions and how they determine whether their decisions are in the "best interests of the student" or not. My research intention was to replicate the qualitative work of Dr. William Frick's *"Practicing a Professional Ethic: Leading for Students Best Interests"* (2011) as closely as possible with my study being conducted in Canada and his research done in the United States. For these reasons, the use of a qualitative approach was both appropriate and necessary.

I chose to replicate Frick's (2011) study because his research questions mirrored some of my contemplations of what guides school leaders to make their decisions and how they determine that their decisions are ethical. In addition, I wanted to explore the commonalities and/or differences between Canadian and American perspectives of what the "best interests of the student" are.

Comparative Aspects of My Replication Study

A country's education system develops as a reflection of several converging factors such as geography, ethnicity, religious influence, economy, and demographics, to name a few. Education systems adopt the characteristics of the society in which they exist in their efforts to educate their children with the social values that that society deems to be important (Dede & Baskan, 2011). Comparative education serves to ponder educational problems by examining the similarities and differences between these problems that various countries may have. The findings and results of comparative education studies are particularly valuable for governing bodies of education systems

because through comparison with other education systems, policymakers and scholars can better reflect on the past and consider their present so they can plan a stronger future for their students (Dede & Baskan, 2011). Studying and comparing the education system of different countries allows for an increased understanding of one's own. Examining the educative values of foreign countries also creates opportunities to evaluate the educative view values of a person's own country (Kubow & Fossum, 2007), allowing for a more critical look at why an education system is organized the way it is.

Despite the close proximity of Canada and the United States, the education systems between both countries have significant differences, especially in how each respective education system is organized and administered. Canada's education system is fairly decentralized with each of the provinces and territories responsible for their respective education system within their own borders. Canada remains the lone country in the industrialized world without a national department of education (Wallner, 2012), meaning that on a national level, there are only a few federal education policies related to topics such as funding or curriculum that provinces are required to follow. The United States government in comparison to Canada dictates the educational policy through multiple levels of government, beginning at the federal level, moving all the way down to the local level. Washington firmly solidified and established their education policies under the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) in 2011 (Wallner, 2012), later replaced by the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) in 2015, which modified but did not do away with the provisions regarding standardized testing. As part of the NCLB, legislation mandated that each state establish goals and provide yearly progress reports to increase student testing and to provide accountability for schools to receive federal funds for

upcoming years. Schools that did not meet their goals could be subject to review and face restructuring which could possibly mean a loss of funding or even school closure. The ESSA gives more control to each state in setting the standards for their students than they previously had under the NCLB. While the amount of funding is voluntary and comparatively small (less than 10% of a state's total funding), it is politically challenging for states to turn down the funds in order to maintain their independence. The reality is, if states turn that funding down, they will have to find that funding elsewhere and if they are unable to, it could mean cutting school programmes or reducing teaching staff.

The purpose of my study was not to engage in a discussion about whether the different organizational ways of the Canadian and American education systems were contributing factors to the existence of similarities and differences but in how Canadian and American school leaders perceive what the expression the "best interests of the student" means to them. Although there are social commonalities between Canada and the United States, significant political structures are key determinants of how and what policies are shaped (Wallner, 2012), creating some contributing factors that could account for any number of similarities and differences. The purpose of my replication study was to build on Frick's (2011) work in looking at the decision-making process of school leaders as an ethical activity through their reflections of their past practice and consider if any of their decision-making might differ by national context.

Reasons for Qualitative Research

My research questions were adapted from Frick's (2011) study, however, I added the last research question reflecting the comparison between Canadian and American school leaders. I did my utmost to replicate as much of Frick's (2011) research protocols

as closely as possible and only made adaptations and changes to the original because of the human and contextual aspects of the study. The research questions are descriptive, interpretive, and explanatory in nature, necessitating the use of qualitative research methodology.

The interpretive nature of qualitative research focuses on discovering the meanings that participants have constructed for themselves as they make sense of their own experiences (Shulman, 1986). Through qualitative research, I was able to explore and interpret the participants' thoughts, feelings, and actions, allowing participants to describe their perceptions in their own words. Schools are a social reality that is not only constructed but constructed differently depending on the individuals within it (Gall et al., 1996). Although school leaders work in similar school environments, their perceptions and lived experiences are very different due to many factors including but not limited to age, gender, socio-economic status, etc., making it necessary to engage in qualitative research in order to discover in depth what those different perceptions may be.

The main goals of qualitative research are to try to understand human behaviour and experience in a better way, figure out the processes that people use to construct meaning, and try to describe what that meaning is (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998). To gain a better understanding about how ethical leadership is perceived by school leaders, my data collection was best done through interviews, allowing school leaders to share their perceptions. Although qualitative research can be time consuming in both the collecting and sorting of the data, interviewing school leaders was necessary for me to gain deeper insight into how school leaders come to their decisions.

Research Contributions of Replication Studies

Replication studies have long been the basis of scientific knowledge, especially when it comes to theory development. However, replication studies in social sciences do not garner as much attention in comparison to what is perceived to be original research. Replication studies are important in the world of research because research findings that are not or cannot be verified independently of the original study can simply be construed as opinion versus fact which can render the original research moot or worse, a waste of time. For opinion to become accepted knowledge, replication requires studies to be repeated under similar conditions in such a way that results of both the original and the replicating studies are comparable in their attempts to measure the same phenomenon (Porte, 2013). Not all replication studies are exact copies of the original studies, especially when conducting research involving people because there are certain human elements that cannot be copied. By simple definition, a replication study is a project that either precisely or in a large part repeats the same research methods that were used in an earlier project (Thomas, 2014). According to Thomas (2014), a replication study is typically designed to perform one of four functions:

A. assess the results of an earlier investigation in order to confirm or disconfirm the reported outcomes of that investigation
B. repeat an earlier investigation at a later date in order to judge how stable the results have remained with the passing of time and to estimate the causes of any changes that occurred
C. alter some aspect of the earlier methodology in order to discover what effect such an alteration on the outcome may have
D. apply the earlier method to a different group of people or a different set of events in order to learn whether conclusions derived from the earlier study apply equally well to these different people or events

One of the basic requirements of scientific integrity is the ability to replicate the results of research (Alm, 2010) to allow for the advancement of knowledge. Although the research

protocols from the original study are followed as closely as possible, there are elements, such as human participants that cannot be exactly replicated, making the research findings from replications that much more interesting. Replications can be viewed as the opening of scientific communication and feedback to an original investigation to strengthen the evidence of research findings, to correct limitations, and/or to protect the community against errors (Kugler et al., 2006). Despite what findings may come out of the replication study, the study itself holds the original study up to more academic inquiry which in turn, only serves to enhance and validate the original study.

Replication serves to validate research and is a key criterion for the acceptance of new theories and knowledge (Porte, 2013). The main purpose of conducting a replication study is not just to follow the same protocols and hope that the results will match up to those of the original. The essential element of a replication study is its comparability by actively acknowledging the differences and similarities between the original and the replication. If research findings between the original and replication are similar, the replication study explicitly reveals the generalizability and robustness of the original study (Porte, 2013) and if the findings are different, the research serves to reduce uncertainty. Replication studies are an important component of the scientific method, converting tentative belief into accepted knowledge (Berthon et al., 2002).

Berthon et al. (2002) suggest three categories of replication studies:

A. pure replication - the attempt to exactly duplicate the original study, keeping all aspects of the experimental design essentially the same between the two studies
B. replication with extension - a duplication of a target study in which certain parameters are held constant while others may be changed between the original and replication study
C. pure generation - a replication that is based on the prior study, but in which all of the key parameters of the experimental design are changed relative to the original study

A pure replication study is the most difficult to duplicate, especially within education sciences because not all aspects of the original study can be the same. Although the research protocols such as number of participants and interview questions can easily be duplicated, human participants cannot. Replication with extension is more common because the extension aspect allows for some of the original study's parameters to be changed or adapted to suit the researcher's purposes. Pure generation replications are not commonly done because the point of replication research is to faithfully duplicate all or as many aspects of the original study as possible and when the research strays too far from the original study, either in theory or method, the replicating study loses any meaningful connection to the original research (Toncar & Munch, 2010).

Research is about turning thought and opinion into knowledge and replication studies serve to do that. For any academic discipline aiming to legitimize itself as a discipline worthy of study, they must be able to hold any or all their academic research up to scrutiny. Replications are important in validating scientific knowledge. Science is not so much a discipline of study but rather, a process where research is used to problem solve, focusing on finding answers to specific questions and in doing so, acquiring knowledge. Knowledge comprises three components: *injunction* (follow a method - a specific sequence of actions), *observation* (observe and interpret), and *verification* (check if observations are repeatable and interpretations commensurate) (Berthon et al., 2002). Replication studies are important because they serve to address all three aspects of knowledge but particularly the need for verification so that conjecture can grow to be accepted as theory.

The lack of acceptance of replication studies actually highlights the need for more of them. Dismissing replication implies valuing novelty over truth (Makel & Plucker, 2014) and accepting one-time studies as factual evidence. Replication studies are an important part of the scientific process, whether in natural or social sciences, in testing the validity of research parameters to prove that research results are not due to chance or coincidence. Replication also serves to separate scientific and unscientific notions, addressing issues of internal and external validity. Perhaps, the most important aspect of replication studies is that replication broadens the scope of the research so that the research is not limited to a single time and place. Replicating a previous study using a different sample population allows for greater generalization to be drawn from the results, thereby, strengthening theories and/or frameworks.

Lack of Replication Studies in Education Sciences

Considering that replication evidence has long been the gold standard by which scientific claims have been evaluated (Bonett, 2012), surprisingly, educational research has not followed this similar vein in conducting more replication studies. Arguably, natural science replications are more common because their original research protocols are easier to replicate. However, despite a growing trend in business and social sciences calling for more replication studies (not without their own biases against replication studies), education researchers are still reluctant to pursue this particular research methodology. Replication research does not garner the same amount of academic attention and inquiry as original research which is evidenced by the fact that there are actually very few replication studies that are published in peer-reviewed journals. Makel and Plucker’s (2014) study into education publications discovered that over a 5-year

period, replication studies only accounted for .13% of all education articles in the top 100 education journals. Replication research is just as time-consuming as original research but with such a low likelihood of publication, there is little desire for researchers to engage in replication research (Evanschitzky & Armstrong, 2013).

A perceived lack of prestige and originality about replication studies combined with negative connotations about what a replication study actually encompasses also accounts for minimal interest in replication research (Lindsay & Ehrenberg, 1993; Neuliep & Crandall, 1993b; Easley et al., 2000; Makel & Plucker, 2014). If the goal of science is to explore and find universal truths, replication studies are necessary to engage in that exploration, regardless if the replication study is conducted in the natural sciences or the social sciences. The concern over replication studies is found across many research areas, including business, political science, psychology, sociology, and medicine, to name a few. Unfortunately, the bias against publishing replication research runs across several academic disciplines, where rejection rates of replication studies run up as high as 61% in national publications (Makel & Plucker, 2014) which again, reinforces to education researchers that replication studies offer very little academic reward. Replication studies tend to be highly scrutinized for their lack of creativity and often criticized for faulty data collection and manipulated data.

Strengths and Limitations of Replication Studies

The strength of replication lies in its ability to provide a bridge between past and present research. Traditional single-study designs may not be informative enough because they yield results for only one instance at a time. Replicating a prior study and comparing its results to the original study can provide a narrower, more informative and

deeper understanding into the effect under scrutiny, as well as, increasing the possible generalization of results (Bonett, 2012), which in turn only serves to enhance the original study. Replication ensures that there is an important connection between past and present research by synthesizing and integrating the old and the new research to gain more knowledge (Porte, 2013). A replication study is more than just duplicating the original study to an exacting standard. In some cases, aspects of the original study can be adapted to suit a researcher's purposes. Replication is necessary because it serves to establish the credibility of research findings by helping to identify potential biases in the original study and/or confirming that the original study was not an anomaly (Makel & Plucker, 2014).

Replication studies are not without their limitations. Replication studies do not always replicate so the burden of proof lies with the researcher (Easley et al., 2000) and sometimes that may not be possible, given the open-ended nature of research. Replication researchers must be objective and open to any methodological deviations that may have contributed to differing results, if such is the case (Toncar & Munch, 2010). Any changes that the replicating researcher chooses to make must be carefully considered because too many changes to the original research protocols may alter the nature of the study itself, thereby, negating the study as a replication study. In addition, the purpose of undertaking the replication study must also be weighed as to whether the goal of the replication researcher is to prove or disprove the findings of the original study. Replication studies are not conducted in isolation and so their results must be critically compared to the results of the original study (Brandt et al., 2014).

Choice of Replication Study

When I started to research ethical leadership in education, questions began formulating in mind that centred on how school leaders engaged in their decision-making processes and how they knew when they were making ethical decisions or not, especially when it came to students. My initial research opened me up to various topics including ethical leadership in education, the role of an ethical leader in a school, ways to define ethical leadership, how ethical leaders in schools interact with others, how to recognize and resolve ethical dilemmas, and what the best interests of students are. My research to gain a better understanding of ethical decision-making in schools led me to Frick's (2011) study which brought together several of the questions that I had been ruminating on. I made the choice to replicate Frick's (2011) study because I found that my research interests into ethical leadership were mirrored in his work in examining what guiding principles school leaders used in making decisions in the "best interests of the student" and how they perceived those decision to be ethical. I thought that the research protocols outlined in Frick's (2011) study were straightforward and could be replicated provided that I could obtain permission from a school district in which to conduct the study and recruit enough volunteer participants to interview. Doing a replication study also appealed to me because I thought that my replication study might provide a different context for Frick's work since my research would be conducted in Canada whereas his research was done in the United States, allowing for some comparability between Canadian and American school leaders.

Summary of Practicing a Professional Ethic: Leading for Students' Best Interests (2011)

I replicated Frick's (2011) empirical investigation that examined secondary school principals' perspectives regarding the expression the "best interests of the student" and delved into whether it was a viable professional ethic of educational leadership. Given the different experiences, age, and gender of school leaders, coupled with the diversity found in various school communities, Frick's (2011) study considered whether the expression the "best interests of the student" was simply a theoretical notion used by school leaders to provide a pat answer or whether the expression actually served as a guiding principle to inform their ethical decision-making. The study examined how secondary school principals interpreted their experiences of leadership decision-making through reflective practice, focusing on principals' post hoc reasoning about the decisions that they made or would have made, in a hypothetical situation in relation to a specific conceptual framework developed by Shapiro and Stefkovich (2011), the *Ethic of Profession and Its Model for Students' Best Interests* (hereafter, the "framework") (Frick, 2011). The framework recognizes that adults hold a great deal of power in determining the best interests of a student, making it even more vital for "school leaders to make ethical decisions that reflect the needs of students and not their own self-interests" (Stefkovich, 2006, p. 21). Shapiro and Stefkovich's framework was developed through their work with graduate students in university classroom and seminar settings. Frick conducted his study by applying the framework to American secondary schools.

Participants

Eleven participants from school districts central and southeast Pennsylvania were selected by a mixed sampling design to maximize variation along with predetermined

personal demographic criteria through means of "well situated" participant information (Frick, 2011).

Data Collection Techniques and Interviews

The primary data collection technique was through participant interviews, interviewer observations of the interview process, and analytical notations. Two semi-structured interviews were conducted where each participant was given a dilemma vignette and follow-up questions to answer, along with a protocol to elicit descriptions of personal and professional experiences and the meanings ascribed to ethical decision making and moral practice (Frick, 2011). The second interviews were guided by open-ended, prefigured questions with the average length of the first and second interviews, approximately, 40 minutes and 55 minutes, respectively (Frick, 2011).

Interview Design Rationale

The use of both a vignette interview and a personal reflection interview provided a more diverse methodological approach, allowing for continuous comparability (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998). The second interview explored the participants' professional experiences through recollections of past actions and current views about school leadership and introduced the framework (Frick, 2011). The framework was purposely not mentioned until the second interview in order to detect variation in the responses of participants and to elicit feedback based on the model's components of rights, responsibility, and respect through direct questioning (Frick, 2011).

Analysis of Data

Interviews were transcribed and formal analysis began by carefully reading the transcripts, corresponding observations, and analytical memos (Frick, 2011). Recurrent

patterns in participant records and cross-participant themes were identified with a focus on multiple perspectives on common experiences (Frick, 2011).

Below is a table to show a side by side comparison of the research protocols that Dr. Frick (2011) used and that I replicated in my research study up to and including my data collection:

Table 2 - Frick's Research Protocols versus My Research Protocols

Research Protocol	Dr. Frick's Study	My Study
Number of Participants	11 participants - mixed sampling design - from central and southeast Pennsylvania	11 - mixed sample design - drawn from one school district
Data Collection Method	- participant interviews - interviewer observations of the interview process - analytical notations - open-ended and prefigured questions were used to guide interviews	- participant interviews - interviewer observations of the interview process - analytical notations - open-ended and prefigure questions were used to guide interviews
Interview Design	2 interviews - 1 vignette interview - 1 personal reflection interview	2 interviews - 1 vignette interview - 1 personal reflection interview
Analysis of Data	- recurrent patterns or meaning units were clustered into common categories/themes - thematic categories emerged from the data	- common ideas, words, and phrases were coded using a combination of holistic, structural, and in vivo coding techniques - categories/themes emerged from the data

Findings

Overwhelmingly, participants revealed that their professional orientation leaned toward valuing what is good for children in their development as students, believing that their daily practice of school leadership was in their students' best interests (Frick, 2011). The responses of the participants were mostly similar, expressing support for

standardized testing but they were not uncritical about testing policies (Frick, 2011), recognizing that as school leaders, they were challenged with constantly balancing political and parental concerns surrounding issues such as student achievement and accountability practices. Serving the "best interests of the student" was generally viewed as providing a quality of education that not only benefitted students in the short term while students were in their schools but also in the long-term, instilling students with academic and intellectual skills, as well as habits of productive citizenry (Frick, 2011).

Methodological Discussion on Qualitative Research

Interviewing

The choice of research methodology is based on the features of the research problem. Interviewing study participants has grown increasingly common in qualitative research and is probably the most widely used methodological and research tool in social science (Edwards & Holland, 2020). In comparison to quantitative research where answers tend to be simplistic and short because of the larger amount of data collection, qualitative research is more interpretive in nature where the emphasis is placed on discovering the meaning behind the data collected. Interviews focus on individual experiences and perspectives on a given set of issues (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). Qualitative interviewing provides "an understanding of the value and importance of qualitative interviews to scientific understanding of social events and interactions in context in the social world" (Edwards & Holland, 2013, p. 89). Interviews can be of different types including semi-structured, lightly structure, in-depth, or vignette based but regardless of what type, interviews generally centre around a set of predetermined questions and may take place over more than one interview session, depending on the

nature of the inquiry. Because interviews involve such direct interaction between the interviewer and the interviewee, the relationship and the rapport that develops between the two is tantamount to the successful collection of data. Mason (2002) posits that whether interviews are face-to-face or in a remote context, interviews are an interactional exchange of dialogue, between two or more participants, that is thematic and topic-centred. For interviews to be successful, interview protocols must be clearly established to ensure there is an atmosphere of respect and professionalism so that the interview process does not become a simple conversation between colleagues. When interviews are conducted well, they give way to a wealth of information that informs a wide range of research questions.

Most interviews consist of the interviewer asking questions of the interviewee. Another form of qualitative interviewing is the use of vignettes in structured interviews which can yield data of interest beyond interviewees answering a set of preset questions. Vignettes are a more narrative-based approach of presenting findings, providing more interconnections between categories that are drawn from responses (Reay et al., 2019). Within the context of interviews, Bloor & Wood (2006) define a vignette as a fictional (or fictionalized) scenario given to respondents, who are then invited to imagine, drawing on their own experiences, how the central character of the scenario would behave. Vignettes use the scenario as the starting point for further discussion. Through the interviewees' interaction with the vignette, researchers gain a deeper understanding into how participants interpret their own lived experiences. To use vignettes effectively, the purpose of the vignette must be clear to both the researcher and the participant. The aim of vignette interviewing is not to predict an interviewee's behaviour but to attain further

insight into the participants' interpretative framework and thought processes (Jenkins et al., 2010). The intention of a vignette is to provide participants with the opportunity to reflect on their experiences in response to a scenario without having to be directly involved. The more plausible and "real life" a vignette is, the greater the likelihood that the interviewees will be able to put themselves in the character's place, thereby, producing richer data through their responses (Jenkins et al., 2010).

Interviews are essentially planned conversations to collect data and should be carried in a similar manner with all participants to ensure that the data collected accurately reflects the responses of the participants. Qualitative researchers must endeavour to be transparent in their interview protocols, making sure that the participants are fully aware of what data is being collected, how that data will be analyzed, and how that data will be used. Researchers must make sure to identify the theoretical underpinnings of their study and provide a description of the actual interview protocols (Knox & Burkard, 2009).

Strengths and Limitations of Interviews

The strength of using interviews to collect data in qualitative research lies in the interaction between the interviewer and the interviewee. Because of the interpersonal nature of the interview, there tends to be a higher response rate with interviews. If the purpose of qualitative research is to gain knowledge that is both conceptual and theoretical based on meaningful life experiences (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006), then using interviews as a form of research inquiry allows for that type of knowledge of be acquired. The knowledge produced through interviews is situated within the meaning and understandings that are constructed and reconstructed in the interview interaction (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015). Successful interviews are heavily dependent on whether a

rapport that is built on trust between the researcher and the participant can authentically be established. The willingness of the participant to share their experiences is indicative of that respectful relationship. If participants are comfortable with the researcher, their responses are more likely to be honest and genuine in terms of how they are reflecting on the questions asked. Polkinghorne (1994) asserts that in-person interviews provide more authentic and deeper descriptions of phenomena because of the interviewer's ability to facilitate trust and openness in the interviews which lessens the need for the interviewee to impress the interviewer.

Face-to-face interviews are the preferred method in terms of collecting data because they allow for the observation of verbal and nonverbal responses of the participants. People are naturally more expressive as they speak and through face-to-face interview, researchers are provided with the opportunity to observe nonverbal responses that accompany verbal responses. However, the technology of computer-based communication has considerably reshaped the practice of interviewing and the nature of interviews themselves. Online interviewing through web based programmes such as Zoom, Microsoft Teams, Skype, and FaceTime and telephone interviewing have provided new avenues for interviews to take place. Online interviewing is seen as providing access to those who are in hard to reach locations while also, being viewed as a subject of inequality due to limited access to computers and internet (Edwards & Holland, 2020). Throughout the Covid global pandemic, online interactions were the only ways that people could safely engage with one another and even post-Covid, there are many who continue to choose meeting online rather than connecting in person. Although

face-to-face interviews are still the most preferred method to conduct interviews, there is nothing to say that online interviews are any less fruitful than face-to-face ones.

Conducting interviews are not without limitations, mostly coming from an ethical standpoint. The first issue is how the interviewer listens and responds to the interviewees, making researcher bias and subjectivity major challenges for interviews. If researchers are not careful, their reactions and responses may result in unintended harm to the respondent (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). In addition, interviewers must be conscious of how they are asking their questions and how they are listening which can become a limitation in the interview process, if not carefully monitored. Interviewers must consciously remind themselves that they are meant to be objective listeners, recorders, and responders to the questions they are asking. Researchers need to be aware that their physical responses such as their body language and/or facial expressions to answers may inadvertently affect how their participants respond to further questions. To maintain the integrity of the interview, interviewers must manage their own reactions and respond in supportive ways to maintain the interview relationship to encourage further elaboration into their questions if needed (Knox & Burkard, 2009). Interviewers must also be aware that participants can often bring with them, a need for validation and that how much participants are willing to share may be dependent on the responsiveness of the interviewer.

The second ethical issue is confidentiality. During the interview, participants may reveal in their responses, information that may jeopardize their position in the system (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). Researchers must ensure the confidential nature of their data collection by making sure that there is no clear, identifying information of their

participants. Researchers are also under no obligation to report any of their data collection outside of their data analysis directly to anyone. Lastly, interviewers must make sure that their research intentions are purely for research and that interviewees are not exploited for personal gain (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). Research participants should be acknowledged in terms of their contribution to the data collection process.

Trustworthiness and Rigour

Research is defined by its methods and qualitative research is a means for knowledge production (Adler, 2022). Qualitative research takes a different approach in studying humans (Cope, 2014) by exploring the lived experiences of individuals to engage in that knowledge discovery. Qualitative research provides researchers with process-based, narrated, storied data that is more closely related to the human experience (Stahl & King, 2020). To undertake their qualitative inquiry, researchers must engage with their participants by collecting data to be analyzed and interpreted. Because the data collected is open to further interpretation, the trustworthiness of the research methods and the rigour in which the research study is to be conducted are of vital concerns for the qualitative researcher. To be relevant, all research must be trustworthy (Adler, 2022). Building trust with participants, the reader, and the researcher is imperative to the trustworthiness of the research that is being conducted. Rigour is also an important element in qualitative research with trustworthiness and rigour going together hand in hand. Trustworthiness refers to the degree of confidence in the data, interpretation, and methods that have been used to ensure the quality of a study (Polit & Beck, 2012) whereas the rigour of a research study is in the research design and the appropriate use of the method to answer the research questions (Cypress, 2017), all of which are determined by the researcher through the choices that they make.

Trustworthiness is the central concept in Lincoln and Guba's (1985) framework to assess the rigour of qualitative research. According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), trustworthiness in qualitative research is determined by these four criteria: (a) credibility, (b) dependability, (c) confirmability, and (d) transferability. In 1994, Guba and Lincoln added a fifth criteria, (e) authenticity:

(a) credibility - refers to the truth of the study (Polit & Beck, 2012), relies on individual judgements (Stahl & King, 2020), and provides accurate depiction and interpretation of a participant's over experiences by the researcher. Credibility is enhanced by the researcher describing their experiences as a researcher and through building trust and rapport with their participants (Cope, 2014; Cypress, 2017).
(b) dependability - refers to the consistent nature of the data over time and in similar conditions (Polit & Beck, 2012). Dependability is also the awareness that the study could be inspected by peers (Stahl & King, 2020).
(c) confirmability - refers to the degree to which the researcher is able to demonstrate that the data collected represents the participants' responses, free of any researcher bias or viewpoints. Researchers are encouraged to maintain a reflexive journal to keep their observations and ideas separate from the data collected (Cypress, 2017).
(d) transferability - refers to whether the findings can be applied to other settings and people (Polit & Beck, 2012) and seeks to expand understanding by applying findings from one context to another (Stahl & King, 2020). Transferability is achieved when readers can connect the results to their own experiences and if the results have meaning to individuals not involved in the study (Cope, 2014).
(e) authenticity - refers to the ability that the researcher is able to express the participants' experiences in a faithful manner (Polit & Beck, 2012).

Although Lincoln and Guba (1985) do not clearly state whether all criteria are necessary to establishing the trustworthiness of a study, they do provide a solid framework for qualitative researchers as they implement their research study. Rigour is the trustworthiness of that study (Koch, 1994) and the responsibility of ensuring rigour within a research study lies with the researcher (Rolfe, 2006) because every decision that is made throughout the research study is due to a choice that they have made. Any issues

that may arise from the research study must also be resolved by the researcher in order not to compromise the integrity of the study or the researcher.

Challenges to Trustworthiness and Rigour

Qualitative research is challenged by issues of trustworthiness and rigour due to several areas of concern. The first is that most of qualitative research is based on human participants and the data collected is focused on their beliefs and experiences which may lead to informant bias. Informant bias may be conscious where participants respond in ways to make things seem better or worse (Brink, 1993) than they are or they may provide answers based on what they believe the researcher wants to hear. Fatigue, motivation, anxiety, duration of recall, mood, attention span, and state of health are all factors uncontrollable by participants that can also contribute to informant bias (Brink, 1993). The social context under which data is gathered is important to establish trustworthiness within the study and it is important for researchers to not only note date, times, and locations of interactions with their participants, but they should also record general observations of their participants' behaviours.

In qualitative research, the researcher is often the principal research instrument (Dodgson, 2019) and because they tend to be the only one collecting data, their findings are more difficult to verify so it is vital for researchers to be transparent about their methods (Adler, 2022). Qualitative research relies on individual judgements on the part of the researcher (Stahl & King, 2020) and because qualitative research tends to be more explanatory (Cypress, 2017), researcher bias is the most frequent criticism of qualitative research. The main concern is whether the researcher's interpretations of the data has been affected by the researcher's own subjectivity making it imperative for researchers to present their research methods as clearly as possible. Qualitative research depends on the

ability and effort of the researcher. Researchers need to be aware of their own perceptions and opinions (Cypress, 2017) so that they do not inadvertently influence their research findings. Trustworthiness is established within a study when it presents descriptions that are faithful to the research methods outlined in the study and when the experiences of the participants can be recognized (Guba & Lincoln, 1989).

Ensuring Trustworthiness and Rigour

Research is undertaken with the goal of attaining new knowledge and acquiring deeper understanding into the topic at hand. However, if there is little confidence that the research was conducted with rigour, then the results will not be trusted to be accurate. Without trustworthiness, there can be no rigour and vice versa, creating an interesting complementary and circular relationship that does not seem to be found in any other method of research. Qualitative research methods are intended to describe the human experience through careful collection and analysis of narratives (Sharts-Hopko, 2002) and can be done in different ways, entirely at the researcher's discretion based on what the researcher believes will work best for their research study. The common criticisms of qualitative research are that it is subjective, anecdotal, subject to researcher bias, and lacking replicability and generalizability while focused on only one single phenomenon or setting (Koch & Harrington, 1998). Researcher subjectivity can be alleviated if qualitative researchers use specific strategies that make themselves aware of their own biases. When researchers engage in reflexive thinking throughout their research study, trustworthiness and rigour can be established.

Bracketing

Every person has their own thoughts, emotions, and opinions when approaching any given situation. Their responses are often a reflection of their own experiences and/or

due to factors such as their gender or age. However, because much of qualitative research involves the researcher interacting with their study participants to garner responses, qualitative researchers are faced with the dilemma of how to maintain a certain level of objectivity so as not to inject their own feelings and ideas into the study, rendering their research findings inaccurate. The need for bracketing has become increasingly more important as more researchers engage in qualitative research. Bracketing allows researchers to be aware of potential biases or preconceptions that they may have as they approach their research. By recognizing their preconceptions and making them known to readers from the onset, researchers establish trustworthiness in their study and demonstrate rigour in their research methods. Bracketing provides a clearer perspective as to why the research was undertaken a certain way and allows some permissibility as to how the data was ultimately interpreted. Bracketing is also important in that it provides unique opportunities through the different stages of the study for the researcher to engage in reflexive practice, thereby, enriching the study itself.

Qualitative research is subjective by nature, especially, where data collection is conducted by the researcher directly interviewing participants of the study. However, the issue is not with the subjectivity of the data but where the subjectivity is coming from. Conversational encounters between researcher and participant provide opportunities to better understand the perspective of the informant and their experiences (Tufford & Newman, 2012) so the subjective nature of the participant's responses are fully expected, however, the challenge is making sure that the researcher's own bias is not inadvertently interjected into the participant's response. Although the researcher's intention may be to pose questions and record responses in a neutral manner, doing so may not be as easy to

do since researchers may have unacknowledged preconceptions that do not surface until the research study is underway. In turn, what can happen is that the recorded responses or subsequent follow-up questions may be affected by the researcher's own experiences that they did not know would surface. Obviously, bracketing cannot anticipate all preconceptions that may arise but acknowledging some is better than none to demonstrate that the researcher is engaging in trustworthy research practices.

Although there is agreement by most researchers that bracketing is necessary in qualitative research and that the process of bracketing and how it is being applied must be part of the study (Tufford & Newman, 2012), the larger issue is how bracketing is defined, where bracketing should take place during the research process, and who should be bracketing. Transparency is important when conducting research so that the research process undertaken by the researcher and the decisions that they have made through the study make logical sense and can be followed in terms of how they arrived at their conclusions. Bracketing is the acknowledgement that the researcher plays an important role in qualitative research so bracketing is vital because it serves to protect the integrity of the researcher and their research protocols.

Bracketing is the recognition of how the researcher's own experiences, cultural factors, and assumptions may influence how they view the study's data (Fischer, 2009). The purpose of bracketing is not to eliminate or discount the personal experiences of the researcher but rather, to acknowledge that researchers cannot be completely objective in their research because they are humans with their own thoughts and feelings. The goal of a research study is not just for the study to make sense to the researcher who conducted the study but so that other researchers can understand the purpose and the process of the

study (Fischer, 2009). Bracketing allows for an increased awareness on the part of the researchers of their own perspectives so that they engage in ongoing reflexive practice throughout the research process. The purpose of bracketing is not to eliminate preconceived notions but more of a temporary suspension of previous beliefs on the part of the researcher so that the perspectives and the questions that emerge from the study will remain the focal point of the research (LeVasseur, 2003).

Where to engage in bracketing during the research process and who should bracket is not always clear. Some researchers advocate bracketing at every stage because preconceptions that come up during one stage may filter into other stages (Tufford & Newman, 2012) whereas other researchers believe that bracketing only needs to take place during specific stages at the discretion of the researcher. Ultimately, the researcher needs to recognize how deep seated their biases are and how much those preconceptions may affect their research before deciding whether or not bracketing is needed in any given stage of their research. Although bracketing by the researcher is deemed to be paramount, the question as to whether the participant should bracket is often raised. However, if the point of the research is to garner the participant's perspectives through questioning, having the participant bracket their responses seems to contradict the purpose of the study in the first place. Also, the researcher cannot ensure that the participant will bracket so expecting participants to bracket may prevent honest engagement in the study on the part of the participants.

Bracketing in My Research

My replication study of Frick's (2011) work involved conducting two sets of interviews at different times with the study participants in order to elicit their thoughts and perceptions of ethical leadership. The first set of questions was based on a scenario

provided to the participants. The second set of interviews was a series of open-ended questions that took place approximately two-three weeks after the first interview. To ensure that my study had the academic and research rigour that I wanted, it was necessary for me to consider my own preconceptions about what ethical leadership is and how I would respond to the scenario and the open-ended questions.

As the researcher of this study, I was aware that the school district in which I was conducting my study increased my need to bracket for my research. My replication study was conducted in the school district where I teach and because my school district only has eight secondary schools from where I was drawing my study participants, the likelihood that I would know several of my study participants or may have worked with them at some point during my education career could possibly play a role in how I recorded or interpreted their responses. Also, I am not without school leadership experience myself. During the regular school year, I am a secondary school classroom teacher. In the summer, I continue to work in my school district as a Site Supervisor of a secondary school summer session site. Although I do not hold the title of Principal, as a Site Supervisor, my job duties are essentially those of a principal, where I am in charge of the daily operations of the school which include resolving discipline issues concerning students, maintaining assessment and attendance records, addressing school concerns, and overseeing building maintenance. To make sure that my study maintained its integrity, I needed to bracket within my study so that I did not unwittingly insert my own experiences into the responses of my participants whether it was during the data collection or the interpretation stage. If I was not aware of my own preconceived notions before I began these two stages, I might inadvertently find myself leading my participants

during the interviews toward responses that aligned with mine or looking for responses that connected better to my experiences during the interpretation stage, which ultimately would have rendered my research useless and my study inauthentic.

Reflexive Bracketing

Reflexivity is the key to assessing trustworthiness in qualitative research (Dodgson, 2019). Reflexivity is the awareness that the researcher's values, beliefs, background, and previous experience can affect the research process (Cope, 2014). Reflexivity combats researcher bias because with this heightened awareness of their own preconceptions, researchers engage in critical self-reflection about their potential biases and predispositions (Cypress, 2017). I actively engaged in reflexivity to make sure that my personal values and background were as transparent as possible. Reflexivity is an honest realization on the part of the researcher that they are part of the social world that they study (Frank, 1997) and understanding that their own values and interests may or may not affect their research. Researchers cannot assume that they can automatically become objective just because they are engaging in research. By revealing my past experiences in the area of school leadership from the outset of my study and discussing potential areas where I might have preconceptions not only showed the sound nature of my research but more importantly, demonstrated my integrity as a researcher. Bracketing continuously forced me to consider how I was engaging with my data and whether I was inadvertently affecting how I was both collecting and interpreting my data. Reflexive bracketing begins before the study does and to facilitate my own reflexive practice, I asked myself what my preconceptions were and came back to them when I felt myself straying in my attempts to maintain objectivity. I became more comfortable over time with my data collection and interpretation and I found myself automatically beginning to

bracket as I engaged in my research more and more. I began by identifying possible preconceptions about my research study, whether those assumptions were about the nature of the study, the subject of the study, and/or the study participants.

What I Am Bracketing For

Having the opportunity to work both as a teacher and as a school leader in my school district has provided me with the experiences to be able to see situations from multiple perspectives. As a teacher, I enjoy the professional autonomy to create a classroom community that I feel works best for me and my students. However, as a school leader, the autonomy to run your own school is not as clear as it is within your own classroom. Often, the interests of community partners which include parents, teachers, school board, school trustees, and the Ministry of Education must also be taken into consideration when decisions are made. Having been a teacher for the past twenty-five years and a summer session school leader for the past fifteen years, I think my experiences in both areas has served to enhance my research but I was also aware that my work experiences could potentially hinder my research if I did not understand the preconceptions that I might have. There were three main areas that I identified as possible issues for which I had to bracket: (a) years of classroom and administrative/leadership experience of participants, (b) my personal and/or previous working relationships with participants, and (c) own personal experiences as a teacher and school leader where the best interests of the student had to be considered.

A growing trend within my school district has been to promote younger individuals to school leadership teams with only a few years of classroom teaching experience. When I first started out as a beginning teacher, twenty-five years ago, most of the school leaders that I worked with were clearly older, with many of them considered to

be “master” teachers, who had taught for at least fifteen-twenty years before making the transition from teaching into school educational leadership. As a new teacher, I saw these school leaders as mentors and people who I could go to for advice about classroom management, curriculum implementation, and lesson planning due to extensive classroom teaching experiences. Over the past fifteen years, I have noticed that teachers moving into leadership, have less and less classroom experience with many having taught for far fewer years than I have been a teacher. For me, this situation created potential for bias because I do tend to associate years of experience with leadership and I was concerned that for me as a researcher, I might weigh the responses of my participants differently based on their years of experience both as a classroom teacher and as a school leader. Also, given that the first interview was scenario based, due to the lack of experience of some of the school leaders, some may not have even encountered a similar situation upon which to draw from in terms of answering the questions.

As stated before, I conducted my research study in the school district where I currently work both as a teacher and a summer session school leader. My school district is best described as a medium-sized with eight secondary schools. Because there is a district wide policy to rotate school leaders within the district every three-seven years, there was a strong likelihood that I would either know or had previously worked with some of the participants. This proved to be true. Knowing my participants had its benefits and drawbacks. The benefit of knowing my participants were that the interviews went smoothly and there was not that initial awkwardness in speaking to a stranger. I was concerned that the drawback of having that familiarity with my participants could potentially lower the rigour of the interviewing process or that my participants would

want to give me answers that they thought that I wanted. However, after conducting my research, I felt that most of the participants were interested in my study and welcomed their participation in it. I got this impression because many of the participants engaged me in conversation post interviews, asking about my research area, how my research was going, and where I thought my research would lead.

My own experiences as a school leader also had the potential for me to bring in my own preconceptions into the study. Having been school leader for the past fifteen summers, I have my own breadth of experiences and as a result, I have formulated my own ideas and personal values around ethical leadership and how I deal with situations. What I had to bracket for here was to make sure that I engaged in my data collection as objectively as possible without comparing my responses to those of my participants. The purpose of my study was to delve into the ethical decision-making of my participants whether they aligned with my ideas or not so I had to be conscious that as I was collecting and interpreting my data that I was not looking for answers that connected to mine but rather, I looked for emerging themes that came out of the research.

Location of Bracketing

Although I recognized that bracketing is important to establish trustworthiness and rigour in my study, I did not think it was necessary to bracket at every stage of my research study. After careful consideration, I found that it was only necessary to bracket during the data collection and the data interpretation stages. Because those two stages were where I directly engaged with my research, I could see that those were the areas where my personal experiences, if I was not careful, could inadvertently, most impact the results of my study. Although my research was a replication study, it was the research protocols that I replicated. The purpose of the study was not to look to replicate the same

results of Frick's (2011) study but rather to see if the same research protocols would yield similar or diverging results, especially since, the original study was done in the United States and I conducted my study in Canada.

My Research Study

My research protocols followed Frick's (2011) as closely as possible. However, there were a few areas where I had to make adaptations to better suit my research purposes, making my study more of a replication with extension study. My intention was to maintain the integrity of Frick's (2011) original study. The most notable adjustments were regarding the sampling of participants and the vignette that was used in the first interview with participants. I also removed one of Frick's (2011) research questions because it did not align with my research interests and added one of my own.

Frick's study used eleven participants drawn from different school districts. In order to better focus my study, I chose to limit the sampling of my participants to only one school district where I am currently teaching. My choice to confine my study to one school district was an issue of access and familiarity. Because I have been teaching in this district for so long, I am familiar with the geography, the social and political aspects of this school district, and the secondary schools within it. I was able to get eleven participants, drawn from the eight secondary schools in the district. The schools are spread out throughout the district with great diversity in terms of cultural makeup and socio-economics. I believed that my research would yield findings worthy of discussion.

Initially, I thought that I might have to extensively adapt the vignette to make it more suitable for a Canadian audience but upon closer study, the vignette was generic enough that it was useable within a Canadian context with the exception of some

vocabulary changes to reflect a more British Columbia educational context. Another notable adaptation that needed to be made was in reference to Frick's (2011) original scenario which mentioned "yearly state accountability measures through achievement testing" (Frick, 2011, p. 537). In BC, we do not have yearly standardized testing that are comparable to that of the United States. At the time of my data collection, we did have Grade 10, 11, and 12 Provincial Exams which I referenced in the vignette that I used to better conceptualize the scenario for my study participants. We have, since my data collection, in British Columbia, replaced the Grade 10, 11, and 12 Provincial Exams with Grade 10 and Grade 12 Literacy and Numeracy Assessments. For the second interview questions, I did not see the need to make any adaptations because they were not directly tied to a situation response like the vignette. The second interview questions were used to delve deeper into each school leader's experiences and reflections about their own ethical decision-making so changes to the questions were not necessary and I felt any changes to the questions could possibly change the scope of my replication study.

Participants

I sent a general callout through our district email to secondary school vice-principals and principals to ask for volunteers to participate in my study. Initially, I only received four replies from volunteers to participate in my research study. To get more participants, I sent another email, targeting each school leader individually and was able to get another seven participants, bringing my total number of participants to eleven which was my goal. Each secondary school has one principal and two vice-principals so my participants reflected a mixed sampling design, considering factors such as age and gender. If I did not receive enough volunteers form the secondary school leaders, I planned to solicit volunteers by inviting elementary school leaders to participate. In my

school district, there are forty-one elementary schools, each with principal and either a vice-principal or a head teacher. I was able to get eleven participants, all from secondary schools. I was confident that I had enough participants for a robust study.

All participant information was kept private as participants were assigned pseudonyms as identifiers to maintain their confidentiality. Any references to specific participants during my research was through their assigned pseudonyms.

Data Collection Techniques and Interviews

The main source of data collection was conducted through two sets of semi-structured interviews for each participant. The first interview involved sharing a vignette adapted from Frick's (2011) study and shared with each participant with follow up questions directly related to the vignette. These questions too were adapted from Frick's (2011) original study. The vignette was geared toward secondary school leaders, however, if there were elementary school leaders participating in the study, I would have used the same vignette, adapted again for a more elementary context. At the elementary school level, there are two set so standardized tests that take place called the Foundational Skills Assessment (FSA) for students in grade four and in grade seven. Since all of my participants were from secondary school, the elementary school vignette was not needed and not included. (Please see Appendix A for the full secondary school vignette and the follow up questions.)

The second interview was conducted at another time and consisted of asking each school leader a series of questions that were meant to elicit their response on ethical decision-making. The seventeen questions were taken from Frick's (2006) doctoral thesis. As participants shared their responses, I recorded them through audio recording and took notes by hand with the recorded responses and my written notes to be

transcribed and triangulated at a later date. When I found it necessary, I tried to probe deeper into their answers if the opportunity arose and sometimes, I would relate my own experiences to build more rapport with my participant. As the researcher, I worked to maintain my objectivity during the interviews, especially, in cases where I knew the participant from previously having worked together. To keep myself objective, I made sure to dress more professionally for each interview and posed the scenario and questions after an initial greeting and a few minutes to set up my recording device. I did not engage in any personal conversations until after each interview was completed. Prior to each interview, I reviewed the vignette, the questions, and considered my preconceptions to make sure to bracket while I was collecting my data. (Please see Appendix B for the full set of open-ended questions).

Interview Design Rationale

Because the purpose of my study was to examine decision-making by school leaders as an ethical activity, using interviews was a solid methodological approach. Through the vignette and questions, I was able to elicit responses from the participants that allowed them to consider their past experiences to better reflect and then share the process by which they came to their decisions. In Frick's (2011) study, he did not introduce the framework until the second interview in hopes that the responses to his questions were answered authentically by his participants without the need to frame their answers in a specific way. I did the same during my data collection and did not introduce the conceptual framework until almost the end of the second interview so that I could see whether the participants' responses would fall within the confines of the framework.

Analysis of Data and Findings

Once, all the interviews were completed, I had the voice recordings professionally transcribed. I did not need to do anything with my written notes except print them out since my notes were taken using computer. Transcribing the voice recordings and printing out my notes allowed for closer examination of each participant's interviews. I relied on the voice recordings to provide me with exact responses that participants gave to my interview questions. My written notes were based on participant responses, somethings noting facial expressions and/or changes in speaking tone. The formal part of my analysis was several careful readings of each of the transcripts to code for themes or categories.

There are two approaches to analyzing textual data typically used in qualitative studies: the deductive approach and the inductive approach. Both approaches allow for deeper analysis and interpretation of the data that is collected with the intention of understanding the phenomenon that is being studied. Regardless of whether it is the deductive approach or the inductive approach that is taken, the goal is to gather and code the data, working toward expressing the analysis of data in terms of themes, subthemes, and categories that require reflection and purpose (Connelly & Peltzer, 2016). The deductive approach tends to be used when researchers are already aware of how participants will respond, making for faster analysis. However, this approach can be rigid and potentially biased as researchers may fall into the trap of looking for or guiding participant responses in a certain direction. In addition, because the analysis process has already been decided ahead of time, with the deductive approach, there is no real place for a new theme or theory development (Burnard et al., 2008). The inductive approach involves analyzing the data with very little to no predetermined theory or structured

framework. The goal of the inductive approach is for the structure of the data analysis to come from the data itself, where the themes and categories emerge from close readings of participant responses.

I used a combination of both the deductive and inductive approaches, leaning more toward the inductive approach to analyze my data, once it was collected. Frick's (2011) study findings came up with the following five themes: (a) students' best interests and vignette responses, (b) nuances of "best interests" beyond the vignette - responding with personal investment, (c) "best interests" as a principle and maxim for decision making, (d) one student versus the student body, and (e) the meaning of "best interests" and the 3R's - theoretical definitions and variations. I considered the possibility that some of my findings might align with his which is more deductive but I took a more inductive approach by setting aside my knowledge of Frick's findings and analyzing my data with little to no predetermined ideas.

My role as the researcher was to make sense of and interpret the data that I collected. Although I was replicating Frick's (2011) study and employed the same data collection protocols, I did not intend to analyze my data based on the themes used in his findings because I felt that by using his categories, I would hinder and bias my own analysis. Although I had familiarized myself with Frick's (2011) study to implement my study, my research intention was to replicate his research protocols as closely as possible to see what findings my data results would yield. One of the goals of my study was to look at whether there are commonalities and/or differences in American and Canadian school leaders' perspectives on the "best interests of the student" and if I based my

findings on Frick's (2011) themes, I do not believe that an authentic comparison could be made between American and Canadian perspectives.

In qualitative research, the process of thematic content analysis is most commonly used where themes are discovered through verifying, confirming, and qualifying the data that has been collected (Burnard et al., 2008) which is how I approached my analysis. The point of open coding is to look for key ideas and phrases that seem to be common within several participants' responses with the hope that these key ideas can be grouped into categories that can be further refined to become themes to structure how the research findings will be shared.

As I analyzed my data, my challenge as a researcher was to make sure that my themes clearly emerged from my findings and that the themes were fully developed. According to Connelly and Peltzer (2016), qualitative research can suffer from underdeveloped themes due to the following issues: (a) a lack of clear relationship to the underlying research method, (b) an apparent lack of depth in interviewing, and (c) lack of depth in the analysis. I made sure to address each of these three issues throughout my research study so that both my data collection techniques and my data analysis protocols provided me with ample information from which to draw my findings. The research method of conducting interviews and my ability as an effective interviewer were paramount to the success of my study. Interviews in qualitative research are participant based, relying heavily on the personal experiences that respondents are willing to share so developing a strong rapport between myself and my study participants was vital. I had to make sure that I had a clear understanding of each question so that I was able to ask follow-up questions that built upon the respondent's answers, if needed. As I asked the

interview questions, I had to be aware of the tone that I used when I posed my questions and my physical responses such as my facial features as the study participants responded.

To simply report what was said by the participants of a study would show a lack of depth in the analysis of the data. My job was to interpret the responses and bring meaning to the data by exploring the relationships between ideas and offering insight into why these relationships existed (Connelly & Peltzer, 2016). As I analyzed the data, I looked closely at what responses were given through the interviews and contemplated why these responses were given while at the same time, noting significant differences and commonalities in the phrasing of the responses. Through in-depth analysis, my findings and the themes that emerged should be as closely linked to the data as possible. As I developed my themes, I looked for topics that occurred and reoccurred, using the data as my support that these emergent themes were significant. As I began to share my findings, I needed to carefully consider the wording of my themes so that they would be clear and reflective of the study. One of the main challenges to developing themes is making sure that the meaning of the theme is clearly conveyed and defined in terms of the study (Connelly & Peltzer, 2016).

Coding Techniques

I used Saldaña's Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers (2013) to guide me through the coding of my data. As a beginning qualitative researcher, I was overwhelmed with trying to understand where to start and how to code my data once the participant interviews had been transcribed. Dr. Laitsch suggested that I use Saldaña's manual to guide me through the process. Saldaña's manual discussed the function of codes and coding, in addition to providing an array of coding methods with descriptions, recommended applications, and examples of how to use the coding method. I chose the

three coding methods that were best used for qualitative research that was conducted through interviews.

My data collection consisted of two sets of interviews that consisted of twenty-one questions posed to each of the eleven participants. There were varied responses in terms of length to the questions depending on how much each participant answered each question. To understand my data, I had to read each transcript with purpose so that the data could be analyzed in meaningful ways. To do so, I used a combination of the following three coding techniques to organize my data into categories that emerged from the data itself: (a) holistic coding, (b) structural coding, and (c) in vivo coding. There was not one specific method of coding that I strictly adhered to because I wanted my data analysis to be data driven and kept my bracketing and limitations in mind so as not to bias or prejudice my study.

In the bracketing of my research, I was cognizant of not applying Frick's (2011) themes to my data because I wanted my research to stand on its own. I did not go into my data analysis with any established categories or themes so using holistic coding as a coding technique on my first read through of the interview transcripts was very useful. Holistic coding involves identifying key ideas or issues by chunking them, thereby, coming to recognize emerging categories and is applicable when the researcher has a general idea of what to investigate in the data (Saldaña, 2013). Because I was new to coding research data, holistic coding was a good introduction for me into the coding process, as well as allowing me to become more familiar with my data since so much time had passed since I had conducted my interviews. Utilizing holistic coding during my first read through prepared me for more detailed coding on subsequent readings of the

interview transcripts. Through holistic coding, I was able to see early signs of emerging categories across the participant interviews.

Structural coding is question based and extremely suitable for interview transcripts because it allows the researcher to use the transcripts as the key data of study. Structural coding uses codes and categorizes data to examine comparable segments, commonalities, differences, and relationships (Saldaña, 2013). In addition, this method of coding can be used when applying a content-based or conceptual phrase to the data to see if they relate to a specific research question (Saldaña, 2013). Because my research subsections were guided by a conceptual framework and the phrase the “best interests of the student,” structural coding was also applicable. Structural coding was especially helpful during my data analysis as I was looking for data that had commonalities that I could group together as I was forming my categories.

As a beginning qualitative researcher, using In Vivo coding made my data analysis less daunting than I initially anticipated and alleviated my nervousness about whether I was going to analyze my data “correctly” or not. In Vivo coding is appropriate for all qualitative studies because the codes are participant generated, not researcher generated, which helps to preserve participant meaning (Saldaña, 2013). I wanted my study to be driven by the data and even though mine is a replication study, I did not want my research study to be a mere copy of Frick’s (2011) work. The participant generated codes aligned with my data analysis. When something in the data appeared to stand out, I applied a code (Saldaña, 2013).

My Coding Process

I decided to consider each set of interviews, the vignette interviews and the open-ended question interviews, separately, because I was not sure if there would be common

categories that would emerge from both interview situations. I approached the vignette interviews as phase one and the open-ended interviews as phase two of my coding process. In phase one, my coding procedure involved reading each transcript from the vignette interview several times to fully engage with my data with the understanding that through the coding process, categories would emerge from my analysis for deeper discussion. Through my transcript readings, I looked at what responses were given and contemplated why these responses were given. On my first read through of each interview, my intention was to simply familiarize myself with the data. I began to note common phrases and ideas in the responses during my second reading of each of the interviews. By the third reading, I looked for topics that occurred and reoccurred and began grouping similarly expressed and reappearing ideas which I saw as possible emerging categories. Once these categories were developed, I colour-coded them, assigning a specific colour to each of them. With each subsequent reading of the transcripts, I focused on only one of the categories at a time and coded them with the associated colour, looking for responses that directly connected to that category. By focusing on analyzing only one category at a time, I was able to refine the categories with the intention of them being developed into themes. Once I completed coding the vignette interviews, I repeated the same coding process for phase two, the open-ended question interviews.

Emergent Categories

Through my analysis of phase one, I established the following five categories based on the responses to the vignette: (a) student success through student centred practice, (b) accountability, transparency, and measurement, (c) building consensus, (d) school leaders as agents of the school board, and (e) influence of school leaders' own

beliefs. From the data analysis of phase two, the following categories emerged: (a) student success and student centred decision-making (b) role of school leader - making decisions, building relationships, and experience, (c) ethical practice as a school leader, (d) duty bound decision-making and acting as agents of the school board and, (e) rights, responsibilities, and respect – what is valued? Establishing the categories was challenging because I wanted to make sure my wording of the categories was reflective of my research study as a whole and that they were clearly data driven. Although there are similar categories that emerged from the first and second interviews, there were some notable differences. I attributed these deviations to the different interview protocols, where one was vignette based, making the participant responses more contextual to the vignette scenario compared to the second interview where participants were encouraged to be more self-reflective and respond based on their own lived experiences. I eventually merged the categories of both sets of interviews into five overarching themes which will be discussed in subsequent chapters.

The last part of my data analysis was to compare Frick's (2011) findings to mine which brought me back to the deductive approach of analyzing data. At this point, I looked at Frick's (2011) themes and compared them to the themes that emerged from my findings. Frick found that the professional orientation of his participants heavily valued what they believed was good for the development of their students, believing that their daily work as school leaders was in the best interests of the student (Frick, 2011). He also noted that school leaders admitted to facing the continuous challenge of balancing political and parental concerns, especially with regard to student achievement and accountability (Frick, 2011). In these respects, I concluded that there were similarities

between experiences of Frick's participants and mine which were not surprising because I think educators, regardless of place, for the most part make decisions with our students in mind.

Below is a table summarizing the emergent categories from both sets of interviews, drawing some preliminary comparison to Dr. Frick's (2011) research themes.

Table 3 - Frick's Themes vs Mine

Dr. Frick's Study	Coded from the 1st Vignette Interview	Coded from the 2nd Open Ended Interview
Students' best interests and vignette responses	A desire for student success through student centred practice	Student success and student centred decision-making
Nuances of "best interests" beyond the vignette – responding with personal investment	Accountability, transparency, and measurement	Role of the school leader - making decisions, building relationships, and experience
"Best interests" as a principle and maxim for decision-making	Building consensus	Ethical practices as a school leader
One student vs student body	School leaders as agents of the school board	Duty bound decision-making and acting as agents of the school board
The meaning of "best interests" and the 3R's – theoretical definitions and variations	Influence of school leaders' own beliefs	Rights, responsibilities, and respect - what is valued?

Summary of Methodology Chapter

This chapter opened with some of my thoughts about ethical leadership to lead into the purpose of my study. I also explained the function of replication studies and their

place in qualitative research. From there, I referenced Frick's (2011) study to state my research intention to replicate his study. I discussed the different types of replication studies and how my research study fit into the scope of replication studies. I provided an overview of the qualitative approach to research in my study and how interviews were used for my data collection. I also discussed the need for bracketing and reflexivity as a researcher to ensure trustworthiness and rigour in my study. My research methods and protocols were outlined in this chapter so that it was clear how my research was conducted. I ended my chapter by discussing the coding techniques that I used to interpret my data and identifying the categories that emerged from coding my data. The findings of my data will be discussed in the next chapter.

Chapter 4 - Findings

Introduction

In this chapter, I will present my findings from the interview-based part of my research study. The coding process was done in two phases with phase one, focusing on the vignette interviews and phase two, examining the responses of the open-ended questions interview. This chapter will unfold in three parts: (a) part one will be the discussion of the findings based on the interview responses to the vignette, (b) part two will be the analysis of the findings based on the interview responses to the preset open-ended questions, and (c) part three will be the examination of the merged themes from both the vignette and open-ended interview responses. Initially, I was going to combine my discussion of the vignette responses and the open-ended responses together where the themes overlapped after coding the interview transcripts. However, due to the nuanced differences in the responses, examining the two interview responses separately first, made my findings easier to understand. With the open-ended questions, the participants had more to say in response to the questions posed, perhaps due to the less structured nature of the questions themselves, or because it was the second interview and participants felt more comfortable sharing their responses. Because of increased openness in the responses to the open-ended questions, I felt that discussing the findings for the vignette interview and the open-ended questions separately provided more detail to my findings.

The themes of my findings surfaced from multiple readings of each of the interview transcripts in their respective phases. The themes in parts one and two will be introduced with a brief descriptor to demonstrate how the themes emerged from the data

and then, will be further contextualized using quotes from participant responses. In part three, the themes from both sets of interview responses were combined into overarching themes based on areas where the responses overlapped. I chose to combine the themes at this time to facilitate a fuller discussion of my findings. Each of the merged themes will be introduced with a brief descriptor to show where the ideas of the vignette and open-ended interview responses came together.

Opening Thoughts

Achieving student success is not without obstacles, especially, given the fact that school leaders recognize that when it comes to educating children, there are many stakeholders such as school board trustees, parents, teachers, students, and community partners, who each may have their own ideas of what student success is and what needs to be done to attain it. There is a clear understanding that student success is the goal but a question that often arises is how to determine individual student success while also supporting success for the maximum number of students. School leaders are aware of both their personal and professional obligations to provide the best learning community possible for their students but at the same time, they are engaged in a system that can be unyielding, where students are viewed more as a large mass than being seen as the individuals that they are. The challenge is finding ways to be flexible in a system that can be rigid at times. Participants consistently stated that by keeping the student at the centre of their decisions, regardless of surrounding circumstances and outside pressures, they were able to find workable solutions within that inflexibility.

Table 4 - Participants in Study

Name of Participant	Gender	Position at the Time of the Interviews
(A) Arthur	Male	Vice-principal
(B) Benjamin	Male	Principal
(C) Calvin	Male	Principal
(D) Dylan	Male	Vice-principal
(E) Elliot	Male	Vice-principal
(F) Fiona	Female	Vice-Principal
(G) Gene	Male	Vice-Principal
(H) Henry	Male	Vice-Principal
(I) Ivy	Female	Principal
(J) Jack	Male	Vice-Principal
(K) Knox	Male	Principal

* participants are listed based on the order of when the interviews took place
* all participants have been assigned a pseudonym for confidentiality
* please see Appendix C for expanded participant profiles

Part I - Responses to the Vignette

Overview

As a reminder, the vignette was based on a scenario where Charlie, a principal of secondary school, was expected by the school board of his school district to implement curriculum changes within his school. The courses to be carried out were designed to improve student performance on provincial exams, not just within his school but across the entire school district. Charlie did not entirely agree with this approach and was also concerned with how to inform his teaching staff about these new courses that they would be expected to teach. After reading the vignette with the participants, I asked them

questions designed to elicit their perspectives on Charlie's dilemma. Participants' quotes referred to the vignette and the protagonist, Charlie, and the decisions he had to make. The vignette was adapted from Frick's (2011) study to reflect a British Columbian context. (Please see Appendix A for the complete vignette and questions)

Student Success Through Student Centred Practice

A major theme in participant responses to the vignette was ***student success*** and specifically, a ***student-centred approach*** to making decisions. Participants shared that student success was not just a goal but a ***responsibility*** that carried through with providing students with a safe learning environment, in addition to educating them. Participants also used terms such as students ***reaching their potential*** and ***opportunities for students*** to further demonstrate their focus on student success. Student success was viewed as individual to the student and could not easily be measured just through testing and outcomes. The participants conceptualized student centred decision-making as ***advocating for students***, recognizing different outcomes for different students, and understanding that fair is not always equal.

All participants felt that the school community, encompassing both students and teachers, were at the centre of the vignette and that school leaders worked to "look out for kids, to educate them, to make sure they're safe and learning in the classroom" (Jack) with a "responsibility for student outcomes (Jack). Questions were raised by a few participants as to the intent of standardized testing and whether standardized testing was a true measure of student success which has been an ongoing discussion in education. Although several participants understood and saw the need for standardized testing, Arthur noted that "student outcomes are being defined very narrowly in terms of a test score" and questioned whether that is a true indicator of student success because that

single test is only one form of measurement. Benjamin stated that “ultimately, student success was his responsibility but it was also tied to what the School Board wanted” and so his “decision-making had to be within the interest of the School Board and the kids” (Benjamin), a balancing act that proved to be challenging at times because both the School Board and the school leader feel they know what is best for students and they are not always in agreement with one another.

“Teachers, principals, and the system are trying to give students, one at a time, what they want at that time” (Calvin) but that is not easy to know in the moment. Many of the participants emphasized that their job was also about providing students with “choice and opportunity, not limiting them” (Knox). According to Dylan, “Charlie’s ultimate responsibility is to do what’s best for kids” and a school leader’s role is to advocate for their school and their students. Even among the participants, responses varied on how they viewed student success despite agreeing that student success and student centred learning was the focus of their school community because as stated by Dylan, “success can look differently for different people” and educators need to “adapt and modify the curriculum in order to meet kids where they are” (Jack).

Calvin was adamant in that “he refused to allow what we need to provide at the end to drive what our practice needs to be all the way through” with direct reference to Charlie’s dilemma in asking teachers to change their practice to match the standardized exam. If school leaders were “asking their teachers to be authentic leaders and use best practice with their students, then the same has to be true of [school leaders]” (Calvin), recognizing that school leaders have to be aware of how they make decisions so there is transparency in what they are doing. School leaders also have to balance the interests of

stakeholders without compromising student centred learning and with Charlie's situation where he is being asked to implement curriculum changes that specifically address provincial standards, the concern is whether student centred practice will become lost if teachers are being asked to adopt a "teach to the test" mentality. The reality that is faced by Charlie and his teachers is that provincial exams are mandatory and there is increased pressure that funding may be tied to exam results. Without enough financial resources, how is a school expected to operate and provide the best learning environment for their students? Dylan posed the question, "if we're not striving to be better, then what are we doing?" Asking teachers to adapt their teaching practice to a specific exam is neither "striving to be better" nor making students the centre of that decision, especially when student success can be determined in so many varied ways.

Most participants agreed that "being responsible and looking at professional standards is always important, but it should not be tied to student outcomes" (Elliot). The "ultimate responsibility is to students" (Fiona) and when considering standardized tests such as provincial exams, Fiona further stated that education can "have the goal of students having the same outcome but you're not always starting at the same starting point" so it is "not fair to have the same outcome expectations" (Fiona) for every student which is what standardized testing seems to push for. Student success is about the student and there is the "need to understand that fair is not equal" (Gene), especially when considering that there are some students that need accommodation to their education to increase their changes at success. Henry pointed out that "every student can meet their potential" but education should "teach them skills to deliver the content in the curriculum rather than teach the content to drive the skills" (Henry). If teachers are only focused on

"teaching to the test," student learning becomes limited to a specific set of skills that only pertain to one place, time, and situation.

In response to the vignette, most participants expressed that "if they are true leaders, they need to understand and have very strong convictions" (Gene) about what drives their student centred decision-making and school leaders cannot "push an agenda that they don't believe in" (Henry). As Arthur stated, they need to "stick to their core beliefs about what they know about education and what they know is best for students" However, that is not always easy when there seem to be competing interests between different parties in what they think is best for students. Many participants understood the need for provincial exams. In fact, Knox shared that he "liked accountability and standards but he wanted to make sure that his students were benefitting from it" but the challenge is how that can be gauged. Several participants saw Charlie's situation as one about compromise and merging the two interests of what is currently working in the school and looking at the curricular standards of the provincial exams to find common ground between the two. In situations such as this, school leaders "need to use their judgement in making good educational decisions" (Benjamin) and recognize that "the job of an educator is to find ways to get everybody what they need within the system" (Ivy).

Accountability, Transparency, and Measurement

Another theme that emerged from the data was ***accountability*** and what that meant for school leaders. Participants were cognizant of the ***political aspects*** of their daily work which included being ***accountable to stakeholders*** such as the school board, the parents of their students, and the community. Taking ***a collaborative approach***, ***balancing different agendas***, and ***transparency*** were concepts that participants expressed in relation to understanding that accountability was part of their job. However,

participants viewed involving stakeholders to be ***challenging*** at times, not only because of their ***differing opinions*** but also because many stakeholders are ***not actively involved*** in the education system. Participants conveyed their concerns with how and what was being measured in the name of accountability.

Stakeholders in education provide varied perspectives in the education system. However, these viewpoints can sometimes come into conflict as each stakeholder group believes they know what is better for students than others. Stakeholders serve a purpose in what they bring to the education, whether it is curricular expertise, providing ethical standards for the teaching profession, financial governance, or advocating for students. Although stakeholder input is welcomed and well intentioned, sometimes there is a lack of understanding on the part of stakeholders as to what can and cannot be possible within the school system because many stakeholder groups do not work within the education system. As Benjamin pointed out, there are times where “we’re letting people who aren’t in education define what the standards are saying” which is not always in the best interests of students.

School leaders work with three main stakeholder groups, the school board trustees, the parents of their students, and community partners through industry collaborations and sponsorships, each group with their own agenda and belief in what is best for the school and its students. Aside from being students themselves, many of the stakeholder groups do not have very much knowledge as to how the education system works within the context of a school and yet, schools are held accountable to them whether through curricular, educational, or financial matters. “Administrators walk a fine-line balancing different priorities” (Dylan), especially when there is perceived

conflict between what the stakeholders believe to be best for students and what school leaders and teachers believe what is best for students. School leaders are often placed in the middle of various relationships that can be marked by significant philosophical differences in both theory and practice.

Accountability gives stakeholders some oversight of education and the best way to hold education accountable is often seen in exam results, making standardized tests such as the provincial exam more high stakes than they need to be. Most of the participants acknowledged that accountability is needed and serves a purpose within education but the question remains as to "how is accountability defined" (Dylan) in education and by who. Dylan felt that "accountability can become a very dangerous thing if students' standardized test scores are the only things used to create uniform standards for all students." Using data from standardized tests can provide information but it also depends on how the data is interpreted and for what purpose. Fiona expressed that "certain things cannot be easily measured" and sometimes what is being measured is not "necessarily what is important for students' futures" (Fiona). Jack stated that "measuring the quality of education is not from a standardized test" which again raised the questions as to what the purpose of standardized tests are and whether they are a true measure of student success. Benjamin noted that parents as "taxpayers want to understand that their money goes towards a strong education system" and an easy way for them to determine that is by looking at test scores.

The majority of participants clearly shared Gene's viewpoint that they "don't make unilateral decisions without a consultative approach" and there is a "need to involve and engage other stakeholders" (Gene). Listening to people is important and

several participants emphasized the need to be inclusionary in their practice and the more open they were about the process, the more accountable they were being to all parties involved. School leaders work with "lots of people, groups, and organizations that they are responsible to" (Jack) which made communication and transparency even more important so that every stakeholder group feels that have been heard.

Building Consensus

The importance of establishing ***unity*** in their teaching staff was a theme that came through in the participants' responses to the vignette. This idea was conveyed through the participants' repeated references to maintaining ***open dialogue*** and ***transparency***, engaging in ***collaboration***, and taking the necessary time to do ***share ideas***. Participants perceived themselves to be the buffer between their teaching staff and the school board and working to meet the needs of both. Their conception of building consensus was to be ***accessible***, to ***advocate*** for their staff, and to ***validate*** the work that people do.

Much of a school leader's job requires them to liaise between the school board and the teaching staff of their school, especially whenever there are curriculum and assessment changes which typically occur every five to eight years. School leaders are not just responsible for the daily operations of their school, they are also instructional leaders expected to implement changes in curriculum and assessment as per the Ministry of Education's directives. Having been teachers themselves, most of the participants understood the demands of classroom teachers and had no intention of adding to the workload of what teachers are already doing for students. All the participants agreed that building consensus was the best approach to Charlie's dilemma because when everyone has the same intention and goal, it is much easier to make the changes necessary to get there. However, building consensus takes time because "you don't want to be counter-

productive in terms of the outcome" (Gene) and as stated by Benjamin, "if you rush things like that, it's just destined to fail."

A strong belief held by all the participants was the need for open communication and that the "best thing to do was to be transparent" (Calvin), especially about "things that they can't address or can't change or are non-negotiable" (Calvin). For Calvin, "putting those out there in the beginning" will better inform teachers of what parameters they are working with and for him, "if you're true and genuine, people give you the benefit of the doubt." Charlie's dilemma was one that appeared to have competing interests between what teachers were currently doing and what the exam was going to require them to do. However, upon closer study, that might not necessarily be the case. Teachers need to "have time to reflect" (Benjamin) so that school leaders and teachers can "find common ground and try to find a solution together" (Arthur). Calvin acknowledged that "effective practice and implementing strategies drive the day to day work in our schools." Teachers need to feel that they are part of the decision-making process in how things are to be carried out because at the end of the day, they are the ones that are tasked with adjusting their daily teaching practice.

Dylan felt that they "have to do a much better job of informing people of what we value as a system" because there are "tug of wars in our system and we do our best within the confines of what we have to deal with" (Dylan) to educate our students. Implementing curriculum changes mean "understanding where that fits in conjunction with the new realities of learning" (Fiona) and to do that, people need to be able to "see value in both systems to try to come up with a blend of both" (Elliot) and that takes collaborative effort on the part of school leaders and teachers. Collaboration is important

so that teachers do not feel as though they have not been included in the decision-making or that they have to completely change their teaching practice.

A collaborative approach was favoured by all the participants with a strong desire to “acknowledge and validate people in schools for the work they’ve done” (Gene) by “using what teachers have already done and tie that into changes that are needed” (Gene). This way, teachers do not feel that the work they have already done has been discarded or negated. According to Henry, “thoughtful discussions start with asking as many people as possible” because building consensus is also about establishing trust, not just in the working relationship among colleagues, but also about trusting that the process was transparent and open.

School Leaders as Agents of the School Board

A significant theme that surfaced from the data was how strongly school leaders felt about their ***responsibility to the school board.*** Participants understood their ***obligations*** as ***agents of the school board*** and expressed this in terms of ***executing mandates*** and acknowledging the ***hierarchal structure*** of the school district and their place within it. Participants expressed both ***frustration and acceptance*** in having ***little choice*** at times except to ***follow school board decisions***.

More than one participant made the comment that they were agents of the school board in their response to the vignette. Despite being given the freedom to make decisions regarding the daily operations of their school, the participants were cognizant that their decision-making had to be guided by and in accordance with established school board policies. Fiona stated that she has a “fiduciary responsibility to the school board” as her employer, just as Charlie does in the vignette. The majority of participants accepted this reality of their job and understood that when they were “directed to do

things, they kind of have to do it" (Elliot). They did acknowledge that there were opportunities for open dialogue depending on the situation. However, many of the participants saw Charlie's situation as one where he had very little option except to do what he was directed to do and it was up to him to figure out a way to implement the new curriculum despite any opposition that he may face and as a principal this was "one of those times where really, this is put up or shut up" (Henry).

Most of the participants felt that "Charlie's ultimate responsibility was to the students and the teachers and everybody in these school community" (Gene) and "it came down to student learning and how to support teachers in that" (Gene) which is at the forefront of their work as school leaders. However, school leaders work within a system and as Benjamin clearly stated, his "job is to execute what the school board mandates" and "whether [he agreed] or not, that is not [his] choice" (Benjamin). Calvin concurred by stating that school leaders are "hired with the responsibility to implement the mandate of the Board, non-negotiable" so there are times when the choice is not about agreeing with what the school board wants to do but rather, the "choice is to be able to execute what the school board wants" (Benjamin).

What was hoped for by most of the participants was that before a school board mandate was pushed ahead, there would have been "lots of dialogue and conversation about how they're moving forward in the district" (Dylan). Typically, school boards are not making decisions without consulting with school leaders who have a better understanding about the demographics of their school community just as school leaders would not presumably make decisions about curriculum changes without consulting teachers. Calvin noted that he how chooses "to implement change is sort of the artistry of

the job" and that "working conditions for teachers and learning conditions for kids can be mutually beneficial but they're not automatically beneficial" (Calvin) which is one of many challenges that school leaders face when trying to balance the mandates of the school board and the needs of their school community.

Influence of School Leaders' Own Beliefs

Considering their ***own beliefs*** was a theme that was generated from the participant responses. Participants recognized the ***ethical nature*** of their work and the notion of having their ***own core beliefs*** was mentioned several times but none of these beliefs were definitively stated by any of the participants. The words ***moral and ethical*** were used repeatedly by participants but more as ***concepts*** to refer to rather than using them to connect to their decision-making or behaviour. Participants expressed ***trust in their own judgement*** as educators but with ***little explanation*** as to how their decisions related to their values.

Despite having to make decisions that acknowledged they are agents of the school board, all the participants expressed that their decisions were made through "reflecting on their core beliefs as a person and as an educator and trusting them" (Arthur). Arthur insightfully pointed out that "where you are in your career as a leader might impact how strong your decision is" and that "your ethics become stronger and clearer over time" (Arthur), noting that experience as a school leader makes some ethical decisions easier than others. As with most of the participants, Benjamin felt that "change in education takes time," and observed that in most cases, their school board did not typically rush to implement new things, aware of long-term impacts that sudden changes can bring. However, the school board still answers to the Ministry so time is not always on the side of educators.

Because education involves a school community made up of people, the ability of school leaders to be able to “separate what their personal opinions are from their professional responsibilities” (Benjamin) is important, making their own core beliefs even more vital to the role. Benjamin shared that “moral dilemmas happen all the time” because he deals with “a lot of grey areas in his day-to-day business” (Benjamin). Benjamin clearly pointed out that “something can be ethically correct and educationally impossible” and that is another aspect that school leaders have to balance to ensure the best learning environment for their students. “Most of what we do in education is imperfect” (Arthur) so school leaders must make do with what they have to work with and more often, than not, they do so by “maintaining their own moral compass” (Calvin) A few of the participants agreed with Calvin that they “couldn’t stay in a job if they felt they were being asked to do something they didn’t believe in.”

Along with other participants, Dylan said that there were “some principles that they wouldn’t budge on” and that was mostly in relation to students and what was best for them. An “educated person is not so much somebody who knows a lot, it’s somebody who has a whole bunch of different type of skills to be successful” (Dylan), emphasizing again that student success is not the same for all students and that the school environment is there to provide a safe place for students to learn and develop skills to take them forward. School leaders, teachers, and students have to come together collaboratively for student success to happen.

Part II - Responses to Open-Ended Questions

Overview

The second interview was based on seventeen prefigured open-ended questions. Every participant was asked each of the questions to extract their responses. The questions were reflective in nature, providing participants with the opportunity to contemplate and share their lived experiences. Participants' quotes were drawn from their interview responses. (Please see Appendix B for the complete set of questions)

Student Success and Student Centred Decision-Making

An important theme that emerged was the strong sense of ***obligation*** that participants felt to make s***tudent centred decisions*** based on what is ***best for students***, however, there were ***no clear indicators*** of what was best for students. Participants acknowledged that they continuously had to ***balance the needs*** of the ***individual versus the group***, noting that the ***best for all*** may ***not be the best for one*** and vice versa. Participants strived to be ***consistent*** and ***fair*** in ***holding students accountable***, understanding that their decisions have ***short and long-term impact*** on their students.

All the participants want what is best for students and this idea was expressed in varied ways in their responses to both the vignette and the open-ended questions. As stated by Arthur, "what's best for kids is always sort of the bottom line" with the "purpose of schools to create opportunities for kids" (Arthur). Most participants held the belief that "they are here because of kids and if they don't support kids, they aren't doing their job" (Benjamin) and that "good moral practice is what they believe is best for kids" (Benjamin). These key ideas were the basis of participants' decisions, although none of the participants provided a clear definition of what was considered best for students.

Many participants did raise the issue that when they are making student centred decisions, one of the dilemmas faced is how to mitigate between the individual student versus the entire student community because what is best for one student may not be what is best for all students and vice versa.

Calvin indicated that he starts with what he believes "to be best for all and then makes exceptions based on what's best for one" and what school leaders have to look for according to Dylan is "what is the biggest effect for the least amount of negative consequences" and this is where school leaders have to "balance looking out for the needs of the whole school with the individual" (Dylan). Many participants felt they had "a responsibility to all members of their community with the goal of education for kids because that is the business we're in" (Calvin) so if decisions are not being made that are student centred, then what is the purpose of education? Often, school leaders go back and forth between the community and the individual but sometimes, there is no clear decision that can be made. Elliot stated that "early on, [he] realized how many students did not fit into the box" which allowed him to develop creative decision-making skills. However, Elliot also noted that "the best interests of the student does not mean whatever the student wants." For Elliot, best interests of the student "means consistent, fair, and caring decisions that consider the student's future, not serving their comfort in the moment" but there was no consensus among participants as to what students' futures should entail.

Fiona shared that "moral and ethical decisions come down to what's in the best interests of the student and trying to apply a principle of fairness to that" which means "advocating for students" (Fiona) when necessary but making students accountable as well. Most participants felt the "ethical responsibility to make sure that kids are learning"

(Gene) and as school leaders, they wanted to create the best learning environment that they could for students to maximize their potential. Gene saw that the key to student centred learning was to help "students establish for themselves, the idea that they can be successful and have some ethical grounding themselves in the work that they do," meaning that it is not enough that school leaders are ethical in their decision-making but they transferring and modelling these ethical ideas and behaviours to their students.

For several participants, there was never a clear right or wrong to the decisions that they make because choices are made considering many factors. However, many of the participants felt like Henry, that when making a decision, "if you're acting straight up and you're making the decision based on the student, you can't go wrong." In many instances, decision are made due to individual cases because "what's in the best interest of a student isn't the best interest of all students" (Ivy) and in those cases, several participants noted that they had to rely on their knowledge and experience and perhaps, even their own ethical ideas to determine what the right decision was in that moment. Decisions that pertained to individual students had to be thought out as Ivy stated, "because they deal with kids and when you deal with kids you really have to think about the fact that you are having an impact on someone who's developing and that your words and deeds can have a profound impact on them and can honestly change their lives." Jack pointed out that there is the "very real possibility that you are the most positive adult in this kid's life", adding to the ethical and long-term implications of the decisions that school leaders make.

Role of the School Leader - Making Decisions, Building Relationships, and Experience

How participants saw their ***role as a school leader*** was a notable theme. Participants acknowledged the ***complexity*** of their jobs, ***balancing the needs and***

expectations of many ***different groups*** of people. However, the ***people-oriented nature*** of education did take precedence and participants recognized that what they do was ***relationship based***. Engaging in ***communicative and respectful interactions*** was emphasized as well as understanding ***different perspectives.*** Many of the participants drew on their ***past experiences*** before taking action.

When it came to decision making, Jack pointed out that "sometimes there isn't right or wrong decision" but it is about "making a decision and then making it the right one" (Jack). School leaders have to make several decisions, some more impactful than others so, as Fiona noted, they "have to kind of decide which things are most important." Calvin stated that along with "finding that balance of when's the right time to take that on or have that done," school leaders also have to figure out how "they can give everybody what they need but not necessarily what they want" (Fiona). Many participants stressed that decisions did not always need to be made on the spot and that "best practice is always making those hard decisions thoughtfully" (Henry) and not to rush into reactive decision-making. However, Benjamin, interestingly stated, that for him, "decisions do have some personal prejudice to them" but did not go into how he might mitigate this.

Relationship building was important to several of the participants with the need to "build relationships to establish transparent, hopefully positive connections" (Dylan). According to Dylan, "people's expectations of you are different based on what they see your job as" so establishing open communication helps people understand that decisions are made through an open process. Arthur clearly stated that he had to make "decisions based on not what's best for him but for the people around him" while Elliot noted that "good practice starts with knowing the people in your building and cultivating a trusting

relationship with them" because "anyone who wants to be effective in this job needs to be fair and needs to look at a situation and care for the people in the building" (Arthur), implying that the best interests of students was not their only concern. Most of the participants recognized that they did not make decisions in isolation and often, sought out their colleagues for help because it is "important to go through the process for people to feel heard and for you to follow up and explain your decision" (Elliot). Participants such as Gene, found it helpful "to consider a wide range of different approaches" and that "gathering information, understanding different perspectives before making a decision was good process" (Benjamin).

A few of the participants expressed that their comfortability with making decisions came from their years of experience and the professional reputation they had built for themselves, with Calvin saying that they "get treated differently the longer they've been doing it." Arthur revealed that "the longer that he was in the job, the less pressure he felt" when he had to make decisions. Calvin further shared that "having been a principal for ten years, he knew the rules well enough that he was more comfortable making decisions." He no longer felt the need to always check with his superiors and spent less time second guessing his own decisions.

Ethical Practice as School Leader

A theme that developed was how participants ***perceived*** the ***ethical component*** of their job. Participants expressed themselves to be ***mindful***, ***reflective***, and ***thoughtful*** in daily work. In their decison-making, they used terms such as ***driven by morals*** and ***good moral practice*** to guide their choices. For participants, decisions were ***not about right and wrong*** but based on ***what is best*** for students. Participants shared that

community values such as ***equity*** and ***inclusion*** were important but very few participants expressed what their own values were.

For most school leaders, “a huge part of their job is moral and ethical in nature” (Calvin) and there are definite challenges unique to education because in most situations, what school leaders deal with “don't fit that nicely into black and white” (Calvin), which makes decision-making that much harder. Calvin stated that “the difficult decisions are ones where there might well be two ethically or morally correct decisions.” Many decisions that school leaders face will have long lasting impact not just on individual students but the larger school community and that can be a very daunting prospect. School leaders such as Benjamin, “never want to tell someone that they're right or wrong” but they do feel that “a lot of their responsibility is to be able to make those moral decisions of what's right” (Benjamin) for students. Ivy, like many of the participants felt a “higher moral accountability” in their profession as they are both, educators and advocates, for their students. The challenge remains as to how school leaders are able to make those ethical decisions when they are called to do so.

“Good moral practice is the goal of trying to do the job effectively,” according to Dylan but with no further elaboration as to what he considered “good moral practice” or what doing the “job effectively” entailed. Dylan did point out that there is no handbook for school leaders when it comes to decision-making so school leaders have to draw on their past experience or seek advice from those with more know-how. How school leaders do their job effectively depends on what they “value in terms of how they do their job” (Calvin) and that significantly impacts their decisions. Calvin went on to say that “if your values of equity and inclusion and care and relationships … are driving your

practice all the time, to me that is good moral practice regardless of context." Because schools are embedded into their communities, Elliot conveyed that "good moral practice is looking at values that we hold dear in our community" with the idea that school is a reflection of our society. For educators, it is important for them "to come together as team of stakeholders and define what our morals are, what our ethics are, and how we make decisions based on those beliefs" (Elliot) to provide the best learning environment for our students. "The big picture of morals and ethics would be that in a school we're trying to create good human beings who are productive in society, who look out for each other, who are good people" (Jack) and because students are at such an impressionable age, how school leaders make their decisions serves as role modelling for their students.

Duty Bound Decision Making and Acting as Agents of the School Board

A compelling theme that came through the data was the ***duty to authority*** that directed school leaders to act as ***agents of the school board*** and how they saw their jobs. Participants repeatedly referred to ***managing rules and policies*** that they were ***duty-bound*** to follow. Some participants saw school board mandates as ***guidelines for decision-making*** that ***set boundaries*** while others saw directives as ***open to interpretation***, allowing school leaders more leeway in their ***implementation***.

As agents of the school board, school leaders accept that they work within a hierarchal structure so much of their work is to follow the policies and procedures that have been set forth by the school board with the belief that school board mandates are guided by the School Act. Most participants felt that they are "bound by the rules in terms of things that they could and could not do" (Calvin) because they "have a fiduciary responsibility" (Gene) and are "expected to operate within set of rules and boundaries (Henry). However, as individuals who are given the authority and the trust to run their

schools, they are also given the autonomy to interpret school board guidelines and apply them as needed. According to Dylan, navigating the “balance of looking out for the needs of the whole school with the individual” is the challenge and the school board’s expectation is that “somebody has to make a decision and their job is to implement it” (Arthur). At the end of the day, “no one is going to direct you to do something that is against the School Board” (Dylan).

Benjamin saw school board policies as “pathways to make decisions” and that a substantial part of their “job is how to interpret” (Benjamin) and apply those guidelines when the situation calls upon it. Calvin did not “feel bound by [the school board] so much because, generally speaking, most of the policies, practices, and expectations are driven by ethical and moral practice.” Calvin further expressed that “part of the leadership side is just how you manage the policies to the point where you're still following them but you’re softening them enough” to avoid potential conflicts between what people want and what is best practice. This was not to say that participants automatically agreed with all school board policies but they did look for ways to work within specific parameters. There were avenues for disagreement but by having school leaders follow the same guidelines, “people can have the expectation of consistency” (Fiona). As noted by several participants and stated by Jack, the “hard part is sometimes you have to respect the fact that there are polices and decisions that are above your pay grade.”

Rights, Responsibilities, and Respect - What is Valued?

The theme of ***rights, responsibilities, and respect*** and how they are ***conceptualized*** directly emerged from the following questions that were asked of all participants: (a) *How do you define rights, responsibilities*, and, respect and (b) *Are any*

*of the three principles more important than the othe*r? Participants all agreed that these three concepts were important and ***intertwined*** but they differed in their determination as to which one was more important than the other. Participants considered ***rights*** to be ***concrete***, ***non-negotiable***, and what people were ***entitled to*** such as safety and respect in schools. The idea of ***responsibilities*** was expressed through considering what each individual should be ***accountable*** for within a school. ***Being mindful*** of other people and ***treating people with dignity was central to how participants perceived respect.***

All the participants held rights, responsibilities, and respect as values that co-exist and were important to who they are and how they viewed themselves in their roles as school administrators. Most participants saw rights as the value that stood out the most because for many participants, rights are basic, concrete, and "non-negotiable that apply to everybody all of the time" (Calvin) such as food, shelter, clothing. In a school setting, Elliot stated that staff and students have the "right to a safe working and learning environment" with students having the "right to a public education" (Elliot) in addition to being "treated with dignity (Henry).

Responsibilities proved to be an interesting topic because several participants saw that responsibility was multi-layered. School leaders accept their responsibilities to their staff and students to provide a safe, learning environment seeing themselves as "both an educator … and a professional" (Elliot). However, they also recognized that there are other dimensions of responsibilities to consider such as developing personal responsibility within students. Arthur stated that "there's a responsibility piece on all people's ends, personal responsibility [is for students] to be in class and not negatively affect other people's learning, there's responsibility for the staff to be here on time and to

assess appropriately and be up to date with pedagogy." Responsibility is not just for school leaders, it is also for students to develop an understanding of what they "owe everyone around them" (Benjamin) and for them to be here and put some sort of effort into their learning and attending and also working" (Elliot).

Respect is about how people treat each other. In a learning community, respect is centred on interpersonal interactions and relationship building so how people choose to engage with each other is tantamount to avoid conflict. Fiona shared her belief that "respect speaks to being mindful of other people's rights and other people's responsibilities," making rights responsibilities, and respect completely intertwined with one another. Elliot clearly stated that respect is "making sure that the environment of those around us is respected in such a way that learning and safety and feeling good about being here can take place."

Part III - Overarching Findings

Overview

In this section, the themes from both sets of interviews were merged to provide a fuller analysis of the entire data set. Each of the merged themes will be discussed by bringing overlapping ideas together. The four merged categories are: (a) student success and student centred decision-making, (b) complexity of being a school leader, (c) duty bound decision-making, and (d) beliefs in rights, responsibilities, and respect.

Below is a table that compares Dr. Frick's themes to the themes that emerged from my research through the different phases.

Table 5 - Frick's Themes versus My Research Themes

Dr. Frick's Study	Coded from 1st Vignette	Coded from 2nd Vignette	Overarching Themes
Student's Best Interests and Vignette Responses	Student Success Through Student Centred Practice	Student Success and Student Centred Decision-Making	Student Success and Student Centred Decision-Making - merged from "a desire for student success through student centred practice" and student success and student centred decision-making"
Nuances of "Best Interests" Beyond the Vignette – Responding with Personal Investment	Accountability, Transparency, and Measurement	Role of the School Leader – Making Decisions, Building Relationships, and Experience	Complexity of Being a School Leader - merged from "accountability, transparency, and measurement, "role of the school leader – making decisions, building relationships, and experience," and "building consensus"
"Best Interests" as a Principle and Maxim for Decision-Making	Building Consensus	Ethical Practice as a School Leader	Duty Bound Decision-Making - merged from "school leaders as agents of the school board" and "duty bound decision-making and acting as agents of the school board"

Dr. Frick's Study	Coded from 1st Vignette	Coded from 2nd Vignette	Overarching Themes
One Student vs Student Body	School Leaders as Agents of the School Board	Duty Bound Decision-Making and Acting as Agents of the School Board	Beliefs in Rights, Responsibilities, and Respect - merged from "reflecting on the influence of school leaders' own beliefs," "ruminations on ethical practice as a school leader," and rights responsibilities, and respect – what is valued?"
The Meaning of "Best Interests" and the 3R's – Theoretical Definitions and Variations	Reflecting on the Influence of School Leaders' Own Beliefs	Rights, Responsibilities, and Respect – What is Valued?	

Frick's two themes "Student's Best Interests and Vignette Responses" and "'Best Interests' as a Principal Maxim for Decision-Making" aligned closely with the theme "Student Success and Student Centred Decision-Making" that was generated from my findings. Across these themes of both studies, participants expressed that their decision-making processes were guided by the expression the "best interests of the students." In addition, my participants shared their strong "Beliefs in Rights, Responsibilities, and Respect" which connected to Frick's participants and their shared "Meaning of 'Best Interests' and the 3R's." However, where our findings greatly diverged was that Frick's other themes, "Nuances of 'Best Interests Beyond the Vignette'" and "One Student vs Student Body" were still student centred whereas my study's themes of "Complexity of a

School Leader" and "Duty Bound Decision-Making" shifted the focus towards the more political aspects of being a school leader.

Student Success and Student Centred Decision-Making

Participants talked a lot about prioritizing student success and their responsibility to make student centred decisions, realizing that student-centred vastly limited their ability to make one-size-fits all decisions. Without a doubt, students are at the centre of the work of school leaders and the decisions they make reflect that but what is best for one student may not be the best for another and therein lies some of the ethical dilemmas that school leaders face. The majority of participants expressed this concern at one point or another in both the vignette and open-ended question responses. Throughout my data collection, the expression "the best interests of the student" was used and made reference to by the participants and myself. In their responses, several participants spoke about "student centred decision making" and "prioritizing student success" to mean the same as "the best interests of the student" and in some cases, a few participants used all three expressions interchangeably.

The majority of the participants felt a strong sense of "responsibility for student outcomes" (Gene), that "what's best for kids is always sort of the bottom line" (Arthur), emphasizing "they are here because of kids and if they don't support kids, then they aren't doing their job" (Benjamin). There was a general consensus among participants that although student success and student centred learning are the focal points of their school, Dylan noted that "student success could look differently for different people" so it is not just about what mark a student is getting in a particular class that determines how well a

student is doing. Because students come from such diverse backgrounds and home situations, for some students, getting to school is the achievable outcome.

Most participants agreed with Elliot that “being responsible and looking at professional standards is always important but it should not be tied directly to student outcomes” because “the ultimate responsibility is to the students” (Fiona) which adds to the challenge of making ethical decisions. If student success is not based on academic achievement but the overall well-being of a student, then educators need to realize that education can “have the goal of students having the same outcomes but [they’re] not always starting at the same starting point” (Fiona) so it is “not fair to have the same outcome expectations for all students” (Fiona). According to Jack, educators need to “adapt and modify the curriculum in order to meet kids where they are” because that is what student centred decision-making is about. Elliot did note that “the best interests of the student does not mean whatever the student wants.” The best interests meant making “consistent, fair and caring decisions that consider the student's future, not serving their comfort in the moment” (Elliot).

One of the biggest challenges around decision-making is mitigating individual and communal interests, recognizing that education is not “one size fits all.” Calvin expressed that “teachers, principals, and the system are trying to give students one at a time, what they want at the time” but what students want or what they need is not always clear in the moment. School leaders aim for the best possible outcome but depending on the student’s situation, their background, and school policies, ultimately, what decision is made can greatly differ between students. Too much variance in decision outcomes can cause conflict, whereas not allowing for exceptions, can demonstrate a lack of empathy

and understanding. To alleviate this clash of interests, several participants expressed that they “start with what they believe to be best for all and then make exceptions based on what's best for one” (Calvin), looking for “what is the biggest effect for the least amount of negative consequences” (Dylan).

Complexity of Being a School Leader

School leaders are responsible for the day-to-day operations of the school to which they are assigned which includes ensuring a safe learning environment for their staff and students, in addition to, managing the maintenance of the physical structure of a building. Participants expressed that dealing with issues around accountability to stakeholders, transparency in communication, and building strong working relationships with teachers, all added to the complexity of their job. Benjamin shared that “administrators walk a fine-line balancing different priorities” and that school leaders are careful that they are not “letting people who aren’t in education define what [educational] standards are” (Benjamin). School leaders “don’t make unilateral decisions without a consultative approach” (Gene) and there is a “need to involve and engage other stakeholders” (Gene) when the situation calls for it. Jack pointed out the “multiple layers of bureaucracy” that school leaders have to work within and that there are “lots of people, groups, and organizations that they are responsible for” (Jack), emphasizing the importance of transparency in their communication with all of those around them.

For most participants, much of their work was “finding the balance of when’s the right time to take that on or have that done (Calvin) and trying to figure out “how they can give everybody what they need but not necessarily what they want” (Ivy). School leaders strive to “build relationships to establish transparent, hopefully positive connections” (Dylan). Participants found it helpful “to consider a wide range of different

approaches" (Gene) and that good process involved "gathering information, understanding different perspectives before making a decision" (Benjamin).

Calvin shared that the "best thing we can do [is] be transparent," especially about things they can't address or can't change or are non-negotiable" (Calvin). In a school environment where trust relationships are tantamount to sustaining development and creating opportunities for inclusion, teachers need to feel that they are being consulted when key decisions have to be made, especially when it affects their daily teaching practice. School leaders do not wish to add to the workload of teachers but "effective practice and implementing strategies is what drives the day to day work in schools" (Calvin). School leaders are expected to implement changes in curriculum and assessment practices as per the Ministry's directives when they occur. Participants acknowledged that "change is hard for people" (Gene) and Benjamin stated that "if we rush into things, it's just destined to fail."

As expressed by Dylan, school leaders face "tug of wars in [their] system, [so they] do the best within the confines of what [they] have to deal with to provide the best learning environment for their students." Implementing changes to the curriculum and assessment requires a collaborative approach. All the participants had a strong desire to "acknowledge and validate people in schools for the work they've done" (Gene). "Using what teachers have already done and [tying] that into changes that are needed" (Gene) goes a long way to creating strong working relationships with teachers. Henry felt that "thoughtful discussions with as many people as possible" was important but admitted that it was also is time-consuming in a school environment, given all the different job duties

that school leaders and teachers are actively engaged in. Building solid relationships require a concerted effort by school leaders to establish trust.

Duty Bound Decision-Making

Participants consistently referred to themselves as agents of the school board and repeatedly conveyed the "fiduciary responsibility" (Fiona) they had to the school board as their employer. School leaders have the autonomy to make decisions for their students, with the understanding that if they "make a decision about a kid, it needs to be in line with what the school board is looking for" (Benjamin). Tasked with following school board mandates, Dylan noted that "there's definitely a chain of command on certain things in terms of responsibility." Interestingly, Calvin expressed that at the same that school leaders are "bound by the rules in terms of things that [they] can or can't do," he also shared that he "did not feel bound by [the school board] so much, because generally speaking, most of the policies, practices, and expectations were driven by ethical and moral practice" in his belief that the school board does want what is best for students. Several participants shared that they do have choice in how they interpret and implement school board mandates within their schools. Many participants recognized that "part of the leadership side is just how you manage the policies to the point where you're still following them" (Calvin) and the "practice of how we work in those would vary from person to person" (Knox).

Whether participants agreed or disagreed with school board policies was not the issue and surprisingly only came up once with one participant stating that when there is conflict with the board, "you should be able to challenge it behind closed doors" (Arthur) but with no further elaboration. Most of the participants expressed that there was enough "dialogue and conversation … moving back and forth" (Dylan) between the school board

and school leaders before major decisions were made so they did feel that they were part of the process for policy decisions. Participants felt that their "values have to match that of the school board" (Gene) to be "on the same page as the people that you work with" (Henry) and most participants perceived this to be true. Most of the participants did not view following school board mandates to be at odds with their daily practice as a school leader. With the prerogative to enact school board polices in their own way, most of the participants still chose to follow school board policies as closely as possible.

Beliefs in Rights, Responsibilities, and Respect

All the participants held rights, responsibilities, and respect as values that co-exist and important to who they are as individuals and as educators. Many of the participants shared that their decisions were made through "reflecting on their core beliefs as a person and as an educator and trusting them" (Arthur), indicating how their own values did indeed, guide their decision-making. Benjamin stated that school leaders still need to be able to "separate what their personal opinions are from their professional responsibilities." Rights were considered to be "non-negotiable that [applied] to everybody all of the time" (Calvin) and in a school, that included the "right to a safe working and learning environment" (Elliot) for everyone in a school community in addition to being "treated with dignity" (Henry).

School leaders accept the responsibility to "conduct themselves in a professional way" (Elliot). They engage in continuous self-reflection to understand their own values and recognize how their personal values influence their decision-making processes. Calvin noted that "the difficult decisions are the ones where there might well be two ethically or morally correct decisions." Benjamin concurred, stating that they "never want to tell someone that they're right or wrong" but they do feel that "a lot of their

responsibility is to be able to make those moral decisions of what's right" (Benjamin) and they do so based on their experience as an educator and their own values.

Respect is about how people choose to interact with one another and treat each other. Arthur stated that “everybody has the right to be respected.” For a few of the participants, respect was number one because demonstrating respect means “that you are mindful of other people’s rights and other people’s responsibilities” (Fiona).

Educational leaders juggle their roles as school leaders and educators. Many participants felt a “higher moral accountability” (Ivy) and that it was important to “[follow] their own moral compass” (Fiona). Benjamin shared that “a lot of [his] responsibility is to be able to make moral decisions of what’s right” but school leaders “don’t always realize at the outset, the moral or ethical” nature of a situation (Calvin). Participants were cognizant that their decisions can have long-term impact on their students but despite extensive literature on different leadership models, there is no handbook or a how to manual for school leaders, especially when working with students that have circumstances unique to them as an individual. There are general rules that can be applied but, they do not always serve that student well because as Knox stated, “most situations we deal with don’t fit that nicely in to black and white” because “schools don’t teach subjects, they teach human beings” (Gene). Jack, ultimately, summed up educational leadership in schools as “the big picture of morals and ethics … [where] we're trying to create good human beings who are productive in society, who look out for each other, who are good people.”

Summary of Findings Chapter

In this chapter, I contemplated the results of the interview-based components of my research study. I engaged in a line-by-line textual analysis during the coding process of each of the interview transcripts from both the vignette and open-ended question interviews. The themes emerged through multiple readings of the interview transcripts. The vignette and open-ended interview responses were analyzed and discussed in two phases due to the different interview protocols. In parts one and two, each of the themes were introduced with a short description to show how the theme emerged directly from the data. Throughout my discussion of each of the themes, quotes from participant interviews were incorporated to delve into deeper discussion of that topic. In part three, I merged the themes from the vignette and open-ended question responses into overarching themes based similar ideas to provide a deeper and fuller discussion of my research findings.

Chapter 5 - Discussion

Introduction

In this chapter, I will return to the purpose and rationale for my study. I will engage in answering my research questions based on my findings. In addition, I will also deliberate on where my research and the work of Frick (2011) intersect and where they deviate. My first three research questions will be discussed using my data and then, I will juxtapose my findings from the first three research questions with those of Frick's (2011) for comparison. I will then answer my final research question to engage in a cross educational contextual analysis to see if the similarities and differences between my research and Frick's (2011) are due to educative differences between Canada and the United States. I will also reflect on how my research fits into the *Ethic of Profession and The Model for Students' Best Interests* framework (Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2011) and discuss any theoretical and practical implications. I will discuss key aspects of my findings that did not fit the research questions and how they fit into the current literature. I will end the chapter with a summary of my research and its possible impact on the theory.

Opening Thoughts

Making decisions of any kind has its challenges. However, for school leaders, decision-making has its own unique circumstances because on a day to day basis, they consider multiple factors to make their choices, especially when it comes to their students. School leaders acknowledge that the decisions they make regarding their students have both short and long-term consequences. Because decision-making for

school leaders involves the well-being of others, they have a heightened awareness that their decisions are ethical in nature. The challenge that school leaders often face is that, there are no easy answers and each decision they make is surrounded by nuances and influences that they may or may not have much autonomy over.

My research intention was to explore how school leaders make their decisions and when doing so, how they know they are being ethical and what ethical decision-making looks like. I replicated Frick's (2011) study so that I could attempt to answer those questions.

Purpose and Rationale of my Study

My study was a replication of Frick's *Practicing a Professional Ethic: Leading for Students' Best Interests* (2011) empirical investigation that examined secondary school principals' perspectives about the expression, "the best interests of the student" and how school leaders understand their decision-making as an ethical endeavour (Frick, 2011). The study concentrated on the observations of school leaders on their decision-making through both a hypothetical scenario and a set of preset open-ended questions. The purpose of the study was also to consider whether school leaders approached their ethical decision-making in ways shown in the *Ethic of Profession and Its Model for Students' Best Interests* framework (Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2011). My replication study was conducted in Canada whereas Frick's study was completed in the United States.

Little empirical research has been done in this topic in Canada so my research will add to our understanding of the Canadian context. Much of the research on "the best interests of the student" has been undertaken in the United States (Frick, 2011; Mullen, 2017, Stefkovich & Begley, 2007; Stefkovich & O'Brien, 2004; Shapiro & Stefkovich,

2011), in Kenya (Ouma Swan, 2011), and only one in Canada (Walker at al., 2011). Previous research literature has focused on the need for ethical leadership in education, often emphasizing ethical values needed for ethical leadership. Very little research has explored the ethical decision-making processes of school leaders and whether there is a specific conceptual framework that they use when making their decisions.

Research Questions

My research questions were adapted from Frick's (2011) study. Because my research was done in Canada and Frick's (2011) in the United States, I added a research question to provide an avenue for educative analysis between my findings and those of Frick's (2011) to examine whether there were commonalities and differences in our respective findings due to where the studies were conducted. My research questions are as follows:

1. Is there a guiding principle(s) that assists school leaders in making value-laden decisions? Particularly, does the notion of "best interests of the student" emerge as a principle? (Frick 2011)
2. What do principals mean by "the best interests of the student?" (Frick, 2011)
3. Do secondary administrators conceptualize "the best interests of the student" in a way that mirrors the Ethic of Profession and Its Model for Students' Best Interests?" (Frick, 2011)
4. Are there any significant commonalities and/or differences between Canadian and American school leaders' perspectives on "the best interests of the student?"

Each of the research questions will be discussed within the context of my findings, using quotes from participant responses for further support. My discussion of the research questions combined details from both the vignette and open-ended question interviews. Because my research study was a replication study of Frick's (2011), to complete my

analysis of the research question, I will also explore where my findings intersected or diverged from Frick's (2011).

Guiding Principles for Value-Laden Decisions

The results from my interviews confirmed that the job of school leaders is both complex and replete with ethical considerations. Although they may not ascribe to any specific framework or theory in their decision-making, the participants revealed throughout their responses that they are guided by certain principles when it comes to making decisions. Because of the people-oriented nature of their work, there are very few simple decisions for school leaders. The majority of their decisions are multi-faceted with both short and long-term consequences that have to be considered before being able to move forward. Participants overwhelmingly acknowledged the intricate nature of the choices they make on a daily basis and the need to balance various interests in making those decisions. Three key areas were identified through participant responses as having significant influence on their decision-making processes: (a) responsibility, (b) standardized testing, (c) student success.

In response to the vignette, participants similarly conveyed that Charlie's "ultimate responsibility was to his students" which echoed their own feelings in how they perceived themselves as school leaders. The notion of responsibility carried through to the open-ended question responses as well. Responsibility to students was characterized by several participants as doing "what is best for kids" and prioritizing student success was widely referred to as the main goal for their students. Even without any previous mention of the expression, "the best interests of the student," participants used it to support decisions that they made. Placing students at the centre of their decision-making

was considered to be “good moral practice.” Participants generally agreed that the purpose of schools was to provide a safe environment and create learning opportunities for their students to enable them to reach their maximum potential. Some participants expressed the viewpoint that acting in the best interests of students was also to advocate for them and to engage with students in fair and consistent ways.

Standardized testing was at the core of the vignette and several participants extensively questioned the purpose of them, expressing their criticism of standardized tests as a measurement tool. Although school leaders understood the need for accountability practices, they expressed their frustration with how students were being measured, with one participant strongly stating that “student outcomes [were] being narrowly defined in terms of a test score” which is not student centred practice. Only one participant stated that they “liked accountability and standards” but did note that they wanted to know how students were benefitting from them. Participants acknowledged that having to balance external and internal pressures could have detrimental effects on authentic learning in their schools. External pressure was felt from the school board to increase student performance and to change curriculum and assessment practices. Internal pressure was enacted within teachers and students as teachers were pressed to adopt a “teach to the test” mentality to better “prepare” students for the test. Several participants expressed concern that if the focus of curriculum was shifted to “teach to the test,” student learning would become a limited set of skills, tailored to a specific place, time, and situation. One participant asked, “if we’re not striving to better, then what are we doing?” Asking teachers to adapt their teaching practice to a specific exam is neither

“striving to be better” nor acting in the best interest of the student, expressed by several participants.

For all the participants, the best interests of the student, was prioritizing student success. However, there was no clear consensus as to what student success looked like. What participants did agree on was that student success could look very different from one student to the next. As one participant shared, it is “not fair to have the same outcome expectations for all students” because students are “not always starting at the same point” so what is best for all students may not be best for one student and vice versa. Some students need accommodations to better their chances for success while others need enrichment to motivate them further. One participant pointed out that for “some students [who] come from diverse backgrounds and home situations, getting to school is the achievable outcome” so holding them to a standard that they cannot meet is setting them up for failure which certainly is not in the best interest of the student. Several participants emphasized that their job is to provide students with choices and opportunities, not to limit them.

Perceptions of the Best Interests of the Student

The results from the vignette and open-ended question interviews revealed varied impressions that participants had of the expression “the best interests of the student.” Through responding to the vignette and direct questioning, participants perceived the best interests of the student to be the driving force behind their work as school leaders. Participants also used the phrase, “student centred decision-making” interchangeably with the best interests of the student. The participants’ perceptions of the best interests of the student were expressed by sharing their personal beliefs and describing lived

experiences where they felt they had engaged in student centred decision-making. In their responses, the best interests of students were revealed in three ways: (a) discussing their personal values, (b) caring for students, and (c) understanding students as individuals.

Each participant conveyed their own understanding of “the best interests of the student.” Participants embraced a student centred approach to their decision-making by expressing that they engaged in “best practice” to “do the right thing for each individual student” and held a strong belief that they know “what is good for kids.” Although none of the participants provided a clear explanation or definition of the expression, participants spoke about the best interests of students with confidence as to their understanding of it. They viewed their choices as “good” and “authentic,” positive that they were “making good education decisions” for their students. However, none of the participants delved any deeper into the expression other than stating it and referring to it. Participants relied on their “general beliefs” and “core principles as a person and as an educator” to guide their decisions, trusting in their own judgement that they were acting in the best interests of the student. However, no specific “beliefs” or “core principles” were shared. It was apparent that participants approached their decision-making with careful deliberation for their students even when participants were faced with constraints that limited the options they had for their students.’

Participants expressed a genuine concern for the well-being of their students which encompassed “spending time with them, listening to them, and helping them to grow,” taking all aspects of their well-being into consideration, including their mental, emotional, and physical health. Caring for students not only entailed providing an education for them but also involved creating a safe space for them that embodied

communal values of equity and inclusion, giving students a sense of belonging. Participants frequently shared that their job involved supporting their students in meaningful ways for success. However, one participant stated that "the best interests of students does not mean whatever the student wants." Supporting students means "advocating" for them but also "holding students accountable" when the situation calls for it.

Every participant recognized the constant clash between the needs of the individual versus the needs of the community but as educators, they looked for ways to be as inclusive as possible to ensure the best interests of the student. "Students can have different paths," in fact, some students need a separate one to be successful. One participant saw it as a responsibility to students to "adapt and modify the curriculum in order to meet kids where they are" because as another participant put it, you need to "individualize for the people who [the system] doesn't work for" so that those students do not get left behind. The "system is trying to give kids one at a time what they need at that time" but most participants did convey that this was challenging due to guidelines that they sometimes had no choice but to follow.

Best Interests of the Student Framework

Admittedly, separating professional and personal ethics is not easy because they can be extremely intertwined or conflictual. Shapiro and Stefkovich (2011) identify a moral imperative in education for school leaders to work for "the best interests of the student." The ethic of profession calls on school leaders to form their professional ethics by merging their personal ethics with professional standards and once combined, using their newly shaped professional ethics to make student centred decisions (Shapiro &

Stefkovich, 2011). Stefkovich & O'Brien's (2004) Model for the Best Interests of Students uses the three R's - rights, responsibilities, and respect - as the guiding principle to make decisions for the best interests of students. In Dr. Frick's (2011) study, he interpreted his findings using the *Ethic of Profession and Its Model for Students' Best Interests* (referred to as the framework) which ties Shapiro and Stefkovich's (2011) the Multiple Ethics Paradigm and Stefkovich and O'Brien's (2004) Model for the Best Interests of Students together. I also interpreted my findings using the framework where applicable.

At the end of the open-ended questions interview, participants were asked a series of questions to specifically elicit their responses regarding how important they considered the three Rs (rights, responsibilities, and respect) to be in making ethical decisions that affect students, how they define the three Rs, and how they ranked each of the three principles. These questions were based on Stefkovich & O'Brien's (2004) model for determining what is in the best interest of students when making ethical decisions in schools.

The results of the interviews indicated that all of the participants considered rights, responsibilities, and respect to be values that were critical within a school setting with the "three terms super tied together" and "you can't have one without the others," attesting to how intertwined the three concepts are. Participant responses were quite varied in their definitions of the terms and in which value they held to be more important than the others. Participants shared responses that related rights, responsibilities, and respect to both themselves and their students.

Rights were viewed by several participants as being “concrete,” “non-negotiable,” and “universal” with rights equally applicable to everyone. As one participant stated, within a school community, “everybody has the right to feel safe, to be respected, to be treated with dignity, and to be given the opportunity to be successful.” For students, that includes their right to an education.

Responsibilities were expressed by participants to apply to students and adults, alike, with everyone having personal responsibility for themselves and responsibility to those around them. Participants saw themselves as having the most responsibilities in that they had responsibilities for themselves, to their staff and students, and then the added layer of developing personal responsibility within their students. As educators and school leaders, participants accepted the responsibility to “conduct themselves in a professional way” and to “make sure that everybody was learning,” by providing an open learning environment for both staff and students. Developing personal responsibility within students was expressed by participants to be important so that students would learn to take ownership of their own education by accepting the responsibility to be in “class not negatively affecting other people’s learning” and “be ready to learn to the best they can.”

Participants all shared the view that that “every single person in this community needs to be treated with dignity” because respect is based on how people choose to engage with and treat one another. Within a learning community which is built on trust relationships, the expectation to engage in respectful interactions falls on both students and adults. One participant noted that “respect speaks to being mindful of other people’s rights and other’s responsibilities,” suggesting that respect should be considered the more important one because respect gives way to the other two.

Comparative Analysis

Replication studies serve to corroborate research. The fundamental purpose of a replication study is not to undertake a research study only to get the exact same results but rather to, actively acknowledge differences and similarities between the original and replication. I replicated Frick's (2011) study to investigate how school leaders engaged in ethical decision-making and whether they used a guiding principle in their decision-making processes. My findings revealed that there were both similarities and differences in how participants in both studies perceived aspects of ethical decision-making and how they conceptualized the expression "the best interests of the student." My findings will add to the existing literature by furthering the discussion of ethical decision-making processes and examine whether "the best interests of student" effectively works as a guiding principle when school leaders make ethical decisions. My research will also broaden this discussion be placing my results within a Canadian context.

In this section, I will engage in my comparative analysis of Frick's (2011) work and my research study to discuss where our research results intersect and diverge. The educative analysis will discuss our findings further. The expression, "student centred decision-making," was used by several participants in my study. That expression was used interchangeably with "the best interests of the student" in their responses to mean the same thing.

Intersections

I will start my comparative analysis by discussing two significant areas where my findings intersected with Frick's (2011). The first commonality was the perceptions of the best interests of the student that the participants of Frick's (2011) and my study

(hereafter referred to as both) revealed through their interview responses. For this topic, there were several points of comparison which were strikingly similar. The second commonality that will be discussed is the challenge faced by school leaders when they have to make decisions that pits the needs of the individual against the needs of the group.

Perceptions of the Best Interests of the Student

Both had startlingly similar results in participants' perceptions, understanding, and enactment of the expression "the best interests of the student." Similarities between the two studies were expressed in the following areas: (a) purpose of the school leader, (b) responsibility for students with a vested interest, (c) awareness that decisions were contextual and situational, (d) expression used as a rationale for decision making, (e) personal values of school leaders, and (f) education for the well-rounded person.

Participants of both shared a strong conviction that their purpose as school leaders was to serve the best interests of the student. Looking out for students, educating them, and providing them with a secure learning environment is the bottom line for students in education. Doing what is best for students is central to the work of school leaders and both expressed the desire for students to be successful. Both participants felt a keen responsibility to present their students with as much choice and opportunity as possible with Frick's (2011) participants becoming personally invested in the success of their students. Advocating for the needs of their students was expressed in my study as another contributing factor to that success and a way to demonstrate genuine concern for the students' well-being. Participants of both recognized the situational nature of what was in the best interests of the student and understood that more often than not, decisions were made based on circumstances, specific to a particular time and place.

The expression the best interests of the student, was often used as the rationale for decision-making with both participants expressing their morality through a blending of their personal values with professional ethics. True leaders have strong convictions and that is what drives their student centred decision making. My participants shared the view that school leaders need to stick to their core values and what they know about education to inform their decisions. Frick's (2011) participants expressed that the best interests of students meant looking at them as a complete person comprised of social, emotional, and intellectual aspects. My participants concurred that a student's well-being encompassed several factors and that student success was not solely based on academic achievement. Students excel in multiple areas and giving them options to explore their different interests is placing students at the centre of decision-making.

One Student versus the Student Body

Both demonstrated that participants, when faced with making student centred decisions, often encountered the challenge of having to balance between what was in the best interests of one individual student versus what was in the best interests of the entire student body. Participants from both provided similar responses to how they mitigated these situations by focusing on individual student success and acknowledging that what is best for all is not always best for one in resolving these ethical dilemmas.

School leaders want students to reach their potential and are willing to support their students in any way that they can. However, participants of both recognized that student success is unique to each student and can look quite different from one student to the next. Several of my participants pointed out that some students need adaptations and modifications in the curriculum to increase their chances of success while others need enrichment to keep them motivated. Student success is about the student so sometimes,

fair is not equal, an idea that was also shared from my study. Education is not one size fits all and the system tries to give students what they need. Frick's (2011) participants expressed more frustration with trying to balance the best interests of all students and felt constrained by the bureaucracy to be able to ease that tension. However, both participants tried to achieve the balance needed to meet the interests of both, individual students and the student body, by either engaging in creative problem solving or simply, meeting the interests of one group at the expense of the individual or vice versa. In most cases, participants of both were able to resolve the dilemma by using similar techniques; Frick's (2011) participants adjusted their perspective to focus on unique, individual student needs whereas my participants started with what they believed to be best for all and then made exceptions based on what was best for one.

Distinctions

In this section, I will explore the differences between my research and Frick's (2011). There were considerable contrasting opinions that my participants had about standardized texting compared to those of Frick's (2011) participants which may have contributed to some key differences in our findings. Although there were similarities between both studies regarding their perspectives of the best interests of the student and the need to constantly balance the needs of one student versus the student body, my findings did diverge into different areas of educational leadership.

Standardized Testing - Who Does it Benefit?

The participants of both had differing views regarding standardized testing which revealed nuanced differences in Frick's participants' expression of the best interests of the student compared to those shared by the participants of my study. Responses from both were based on the vignette interview where standardized testing was at the centre of

Charlie, the protagonist's dilemma. There were four areas where our findings differed in relation to standardized testing: (a) views about standardized testing, (b) accountability, (d) teaching to the test, and (d) political aspect of the job.

The participants of our students had very different opinions about standardized tests. Most of Frick's (2011) participants responded favourably to standard testing and believed that having uniform academic standards was in the best interests of students. My participants understood their responsibility for student outcomes and saw the need for standardized tests but in a limited way. Several of my participants questioned standardized testing on several fronts such as: what the intent is, who collects data, what is done with data, what's actually being measured, and ultimately, what purpose do they serve for students. Most of my participants expressed a sense of wariness for standardized testing, in general, and regarded standardized tests as a task that they had to take care of whenever they were scheduled. Even the one participant who claimed to like accountability and standards wanted to make sure that the tests would benefit their students. Frick's (2011) participants did not seem to question the need for or the intent of standardized tests and welcomed their use to set academic expectations for their students.

Frick's (2011) participants felt that standardized tests provided clear accountability for how students were doing and helped to raise achievement levels. However, my participants questioned whether standardized tests were a true indicator of student success because that single test is only one form of measurement with one participant noting that "student outcomes were being defined very narrowly in terms of a test score." Frick's participants believed that they were meeting the needs of different learners through accountability requirements but did not provide ways to show how that

was being done. One of my participants stated that it is "not fair to have the same outcome expectations" for every student because students do not start at the same point and there are certain things that "cannot easily be measured." Any tension between accountability requirements and the best interests of the students for Frick's (2011) participants were resolved in favour of accountability practices which seems to contradict what is in the best interests of the student.

For Frick's (2011) participants, teaching to state academic standards was necessary and an important aspect in serving the best interests of the students. They saw no problem with adjusting the curriculum to fit the test. My participants felt quite differently and expressed concern that student centred teaching practice would be lost if teachers were asked to adopt a "teach to the test" mentality. One participant was adamant in that "he refused to allow what we need to provide at the end, drive what our practice needs to be all the way through," clearly against wholesale changes to curriculum for just a test. Several of my participants reiterated that student success can be quite different for each student. If teachers are only focused on "teaching to the test," students will learn a very limited set of skills.

Although, Frick's (2011) participants were not wholly uncritical of testing policy and recognized the political aspects of their job, for the most part, they embraced standardized testing and saw it as being in the best interests of students whereas my participants saw little value in standardized testing. My participants also acknowledged they walked a fine line in balancing priorities between different groups. Admittedly, my participants did indicate that there were times where they had little choice except to

execute the mandates of the school board so participants of both studies were closer in line with each other on this point.

Divergent Findings

Because I was new to academic research, I had very few preconceived ideas about what the results of my study would be. I followed Frick's (2011) research protocols and made very few adaptions for my research study. I only made three adaptations, one was to change some aspects of the vignette to reflect a British Columbian context and those changes were superficial, such as changing some vocabulary and the name of the test referenced in the vignette. The other adaption I made was eliminating one of Frick's (2011) original research questions so the study was more in line with what I wanted to investigate and I added a research question to allow for a cross cultural comparison between our studies.

In this section, I will discuss where my research deviates from Frick's (2011) and provide some reasoning as to where and how it happened. Reflecting on my research journey, my research plan did not change very much from when I started. I followed Frick's research methods up to and including interviewing my participants. Although I had read Frick's (2011) several times to familiarize myself with his research protocols prior to my data collection, I made a conscious effort not to reference his study again until well after my coding process. I wanted my findings to be independent of his and I wanted my results to be driven by my data. I did not want to subconsciously be "looking" for his themes in my data. In my lack of academic research experience, I did have the thought that perhaps, a lot of my findings would come out to be similar to Frick's (2011). Much to my surprise, they did not. Our findings overlapped in some areas but did not in several. The most significant deviations were in our themes.

I reflected on where my findings could have diverged from Frick's (2011) and considered the responses expressed by both participants, especially those about standardized testing. I saw the following as possible factors that may have contributed to the deviations:

A. the vignette - The vignette centred around Charlie's ethical dilemma regarding standardized testing.
B. the vignette interviews - Most of the responses were focused on the standardized testing part of the vignette and less on ethical decision-making process. Participant response were more attuned to the political aspects of being a school leader and the internal and external pressures they faced in their decision-making
C. my inexperience as an interviewer - I may not have asked enough probing questions outside of my scripted questions.
D. difference in viewpoint about standardized tests - Standardized testing is not as prevalent in Canada as in the United States. Much of the response to the vignette focused more on the standardized testing part and less on ethical decision-making processes.

My participants discussed the internal and external pressures they faced in their decision-making processes which included dealing with accountability requirements and facing school board and stakeholder influences on their decision-making. Although my participants did consider the best interests of the student in their decision-making processes within the context of my study, that aspect of their decision-making did not come through as strongly as other factors in their responses. My findings showed that participants did consider the best interests of the student which they saw as an important part of their job. However, my findings also revealed how aware my participants were of the political aspects of their jobs which included juggling the multiple interests that challenged their ability to always put students at the centre of their decision-making.

Comparative Analysis - Canada and the USA

Canada and the United States are neighbouring countries who have education systems that often draw comparison. In this section, I will discuss whether the similarities

and differences of mine and Frick's findings can be attributed to the different education systems of each country. Canada and the United States have three areas of comparison in education: (a) educational administration, (b) education finance, and (c) curriculum policies. My comparison of mine and Frick's (2011) work will be analyzed within the context of those three areas.

As I began comparing my findings and Frick's (2011) from an educative perspective, I noted that our studies had complementary ideas in how our participants perceived the expression, "the best interests of the student." Both recognized the continuous challenge to balance the needs of the individual student versus the needs of the student body when the situation called for it. In addition to using that phrase, my participants also expressed the same notion using the phrase, "student centred decision-making" in place of and in tandem with "the best interest of the student," often using both expressions in place of each other. I attributed the phrase "student centred decision-making" to be more of a Canadian expression than an American term and the phrase does seem relatively new to the landscape of academic research.

Participants from both studies clearly stated that the best interests of the student is at the forefront of their work but how they enact the best interests of the student was quite different. Frick's (2011) participants welcomed standardized tests and felt that the tests provided uniform academic standards for all students. In addition, they also determined that meeting accountability requirements were also in the best interests of the students because the requirements provided a clear picture as to how students were at the time. My participants, however, saw very little value in standardized tests and questioned the purpose and intention of them. They expressed concerns that standardized tests did not

account for the individuality of students, especially those who may need accommodations to be more successful.

In considering this contrasting viewpoint of standardized testing between Frick's (2011) findings and mine, I posit that this difference of opinion may be connected to where each study was conducted. In Canada, education is decentralized to each of the provinces and territories with no federal oversight because no national department of education exists. Within each province is a Ministry of Education that sets educational policies as well as funding for education for the province. In the United States, their National Education Department (NED) is the federal body that mandates education policies for the entire country. Executing educational directives is offset to the state and local levels, with educational funding coming from those two levels, and then topped up with federal funding. Because education is federally mandated in the United States, they have more standardized testing and school performance is measured by tests scores with the risk of losing funding. In Canada, specifically in British Columbia (BC), where I conducted my research, we have far fewer standardized tests. In fact, BC provincial exams were replaced in 2016 with literacy and numeracy assessments that do not count toward students' overall grades. Certainly, in BC, school performance is not based on test scores and funding for schools is not tied to school performance but based on a funding formula of $$/student.

These significant differences within each country's education system could very well account for the conflicting attitudes that the participants of each study had about standardized testing. My participants saw very little benefit that standardized testing had for their students and felt that it was neither a true nor accurate measure of their students.

If student centred learning is the goal of education, my participants did not see how standardized testing aligned with that idea. For Frick's (2011) participants, their support for standardized testing was demonstrated in their belief that adapting the curriculum to match the test was in the best interests of students because it would better prepare their students to do well when it came time take the test.

Diverging Away From Students

In this section, I will identify two overarching themes that emerged from my findings that significantly diverged from Frick's and discus them within the context of current literature. The objective of my study was to delve into the decision-making process of school leaders and explore whether they used the best interests of the student as a guiding principle to make their decisions. Much of the participant responses in my study were related to their decision-making processes and the best interests of the students. Participants consistently expressed that "good moral practice is what … is best for kids" and what they "try to base all of their decisions on" because "the education of kids … is the business [they] are in." Although, students are at the core of education they are not always at the centre of education related decisions. As much as school leaders want to focus on the best interests of students, the reality is that they are not always able to do so. Participants acknowledged the political aspects of their job that emerged into the two following overarching themes that diverged from Frick's findings: (a) the complexity of being a school leader and (b) duty-bound decision-making.

Complexity of Being a School Leader

School leaders balance the different interests of multiple stakeholder groups and having to do so can impact their decision-making processes. Due to constraints related to

power play, organizational culture, ethics, emotions, employee motivations, rules and procedures, and access to information (Korzynski et al., 2021), school leaders juggle a variety of different perspectives before they can make their decisions. Participants engaged in boundary-spanning to maintain good relations with stakeholders as "administrators walk a fine-line balancing different priorities" (Benjamin). Boundary-spanning is a concept in organizational research which refers to the activity of leaders and their need to maintain and manage relationships between different organizations and/or groups (Barner-Rasmussen, 2017). Individuals who work within organizations that connect their own institution to different communities are known as "boundary-spanners" (Gauntner and Hansman, 2017). Boundary-spanning leadership does not focus on the role of the leader or specific characteristics that leader should embody (Sims, 2010) but instead, boundary-spanning centres on the idea that leadership requires leaders to navigate constraints to their decision-making that may come from both internal and external factors. Therefore, a leader's functioning and effectiveness has more to do with their ability to cope with the different constraints than on what their personal attributes are (Zare et al, 2022). Although stakeholder input is appreciated, school leaders make sure that they "are not letting people who aren't in education define what [education] standards are" (Benjamin).

Boundary-spanning has increased as educational leaders continually adjust and respond to changing curricular needs and assessment practices that often come as directives from the Ministry. Boundary-spanning leadership also encompasses a leader's ability to direct and align various viewpoints across boundaries to serve an organizational vision, mission, and/or goal (Ernst & Yip, 2009). To build stronger connections so no one

feels left out, school leaders try to take a more “consultative approach” (Gene). Principals perceive themselves to have the greatest influence in school decisions but recognize that stakeholders also exert significant influences that support or inhibit their decision making, depending on the decision area (Ni et al, 2017). Leadership is increasingly conceptualized as an organization-wide and collective phenomenon (Ogawa & Bossert, 1995) so gone are the days where educational leaders can make arbitrary decisions behind closed doors with no explanation. School leaders work to “build relationships to establish transparent … [and] positive connections” (Dylan) so that “people feel heard” (Elliot).

Duty Bound Decision-Making

School leaders are given the autonomy to run the school, however their authority can be stymied depending how their school district is organized. Within the school district that I conducted my research, all of the schools, both elementary and secondary, fall under the jurisdiction of the district school board, consisting of educational leaders who have been hired by the school board trustees, who in turn have been elected by the public with the understanding that they will make sound educational choices for the students of the district. Due to this hierarchal structure, key decisions are centralized at the school board level. Advocates for centralizing decision-making power argue that centralization is a tool for equity creating coherence and reducing uneven and fragmented learning opportunities for students (Anderson et al., 2012). In this school district, having one school board oversee all of schools does make sense due to the socio-economic disparities that exist throughout the school district. One governing body is necessary to make sure that resources are distributed based on what the needs of each individual school are. As a result of this centralization, several participants expressed themselves to

be "agents of the school board" with a “fiduciary responsibility to the School Board" as their employer and shared that when it came to certain policies, they did not have the autonomy to make their own decisions.

School leaders exercise their power to varying degrees with some school leaders using their autonomies selectively for specific goals while others use very little of the autonomies they are given (Hasim et al., 2021). School leaders overwhelmingly make decisions that are consistent with district office preferences (Wong et al., 2020). Several participants noted that the school district operated with a “corporate element and a chain of command” (Dylan) and as a school leader, they are “hired with the responsibility to implement the mandate of the Board, non-negotiable” (Calvin). Even when school district leaders acknowledge that a decision is the school leader’s choice, they are influenced to decide in a way that coincides with what the district wants (Wong et al., 2020).

The challenge for school leaders is to create a “balance of looking out for the needs of the whole school, with the individual,” (Dylan) and the expectations of the school board. After all, once the decision has been made by the school district, school leaders are duty bound “to implement it” (Arthur). One participant did not see school district decisions as mandates but as "pathways to make decisions" (Benjamin) and that a large part of their “job is how they interpret” (Benjamin) and then develop ways to dispel that information to their school. In this capacity, school leaders become implementing agents (Spillane et al., 2002b) or mediating agents (Louis et al., 2012), tasked with helping teachers “make sense” of these new policies by connecting them to goals and values that are already important to their staff (Louise, et al., 2012).

Ethic of Profession and the Model for Students' Best Interests

Overview

In this section, I will explore how my findings fit within the context of Shapiro and Stefkovich's (2011) *Ethic of Profession and the Model for Students' Best Interests* conceptual framework. I will discuss the theoretical implications and I will conclude by examining the practical implications of the framework

Theoretical Implications

Shapiro and Stefkovich's (2011) conceptual framework is presented as a tool for school leaders that acknowledges that there are ethical aspects unique to education. Educational leaders have a moral imperative to put students at the centre of their decisions. To do so, school leaders need to consider what is in "the best interests of the student" as they go through their ethical decision-making processes so that they are making the best choices for the students.

The findings of this study both support and oppose the framework by analyzing how the expression "the best interests of the student" is used as a guiding principle for school leaders as they engage in their ethical decision-making process and enact ethical behaviour. There were three motifs that surfaced from my findings in relation to the expression, "the best interests of the student" which had theoretical implications for the framework: (a) a lack of theoretical connection, (b) understanding the best interests of the student, and (c) attempts to define the best interests of the student.

Supporting the Framework

My findings revealed that the concept of "the best interests of the student" was perceived as and used like a guiding principle for decision-making but was not referred to

as such. All the participants were familiar with the phrase and when asked directly about it, participants either shared that they knew of the expression or that they had used the expression in their own decision-making at one point or another. “The best interests of the students” was not a new concept to any of the participants. However, only one of my participants expressed that they used the phrase all the time to guide their decision-making and a few others stated that they consistently used it to guide their behaviour when working with students. There was no reference to “the best interests of the student” being part of a larger conceptual framework or a theory. The expression was not considered to be theoretical in nature so there was no conceptualization of it by the participants as anything more than a phrase that they used in their work as school leaders.

Most of participants perceived “the best interests of the student” to be student centred, which should be the focus of schools. Participants understood that “the best interests of the student” was not just about academic achievement but also looking after their social and emotional well-being. Several participants acknowledged the contextual and situational aspects in their decision-making and that they often had to mitigate between the best interests of one student versus the bests interests for all students which added to the complexity of their work.

Opposing the Framework

The findings revealed that there was no consistency of use or application of “the best interests of the student” expression in the daily life of the participants. Several participants revealed that they used the expression as a reference point but did not necessarily use it to make decisions. One participant shared that it was a convenient phrase to use with colleagues because it was a familiar phrase used frequently within a

school setting. A few of the participants voiced that “the best interests of the student” did help them make ethical decisions but did not explain how it was applied.

Although participants used “the best interests of the student” as a guiding principle in some aspects of their work life, there was no clear definition by any of the participants as to what the expression actually meant or what “the best interests of students” actually are. “The best interests of the student” was consistently explained through descriptions of experiences where participants felt they had engaged in behaviour that they perceived to be in the best interests of the student such as helping a student resolve a conflict or making sure that a student with anxiety had a safe space in the school. A few participants leaned towards giving students what they wanted as “the best interests of the student” with only one participant clearly stating that “the best interests of the student does not mean whatever the student wants.” Several participants seemed to define “the best interests of the student” through their own behaviour such as being “consistent, fair, and caring” and “trusting in their own decisions.”

Practical Implications

My findings show that Shapiro and Stefkovich’s (2011) framework, although well thought out, lacks practical application for school leaders in the following two ways: (a) “the best interests of the student” is seen as just an expression and (b) the lack of definition of what “the best interests of the student” actually are. Although “the best interests of the student” is meant to be used as a guiding principle that school leaders can use in their decision-making processes, my findings suggest that the expression is not perceived to be more than an idea. Participants understood the phrase and conveyed that it came up a lot in their daily work but only a handful of the participants stated that they used the phrase consistently. The other issue is that “the best interests of the student” is

not clearly defined. When pressed to explain their perceptions of what “the best interests of the student” are, participants either described previous interactions with students where they believed they had served “the best interests of the students” or they referenced the values they used to interact with students such as “fairness” and “responsibility to students.” Conceptually, the framework serves its intention in providing a guiding principle and an approach for school leaders to engage in ethical decision-making processes. However, it lacks practical application because school leaders cannot conceptualize “the best interests of the students” as more than just an expression to be used when it suits them to.

Summary of Research Findings

The purpose of this study was to explore how school leaders engaged in their decision-making processes and when they did, whether they used the expression, “the best interests of the student” as a guiding principle. I replicated Frick’s *Practicing a Professional Ethic: Leading for Students’ Best Interests* (2011) for comparison. The study also considered whether school leaders approached their ethical decision-making in ways shown in the *Ethic of Profession and Its Model for Students’ Best Interests* framework. Data was collected through interviews. My findings revealed that the expression, “the best interests of the student” was used by school leaders when making decisions but not consistently. The expression was used like a guiding principle but was not referred to as such. Because “the best interests of the student” is not clearly defined, the framework lacks practical application. Participants described their understanding of “the best interests of the student” through their own actions or values associated with it but were unable to articulate what “the best interests of the student” are. Some of my

findings diverged from Frick's (2011), with participants revealing the complexity of school leadership due to balancing stakeholder interests and acting as agents of the school board. The findings of my study did not seem to support framework as theoretical model for decision-making.

Summary of Discussion Chapter

In this chapter, I reviewed the intention of my study and answered my research questions in light of my results. I engaged in a comparative analysis of my findings with those of Frick's (2011) to analyze where our studies intersected and where they diverged. After the comparative analysis, I completed a cross educational contextual analysis to discuss where mine and Frick's (2011) to further investigate our work. Finally, I evaluated my findings using Shapiro & Stefkovich's (2011) framework and explored the theoretical and practical implications of the framework.

Chapter 6 - Conclusion

Introduction

In this chapter, I will begin with an overview about my study. I will look at further areas of research that could be done and implications in ethical leadership and decision-making, the best interests of the student, and the need for more ethics classes in graduate programmes, especially those in educational leadership that arose from my findings. I will then move to a discussion about recommendations. The limitations of my study will be shared after that. I will end the chapter of my dissertation with where my research has led me and my closing thoughts about my research journey.

Overview

The purpose of my research was to engage in further analysis of ethical leadership in education, particularly in school-based leadership. School leaders make decisions every day regarding matters such as curriculum implementation and student discipline that have short and long-term effects on their school community. However, how school leaders come to their decisions and how they know whether they have made the right decision or not were questions that led me to my research.

My replication of Frick's (2011) work followed his protocols to investigate whether school leaders use "the best interests of the student" as a guiding principle for their decision making. I also wanted to see if there were key similarities or significant differences between Frick's (2011) data from the United States and my data, collected in Canada. My interviews with the participants of my study were illuminating and provided

me with deeper insight into and furthered my thoughts on ethical leadership and decision-making in education.

Implications

My findings yielded the following implications that are quite varied in their scope but speak to the need for further areas of focus and research into ethical leadership in education:

A. Defining ethical leadership in education
B. Best interests of students as more than a concept
C. The relationship between the school board and school leaders
D. Context matters – time and place

Ethical Leadership and Decision-Making

Leadership comes with high expectations and demands high standards of conduct and ethical behaviour because how leaders act can greatly impact those around them (Okanda et al., 2021). Therefore, ethical leadership is necessary to ensure that the values of individuals and organizations are understood and considered in relation to professional values that maintain the dignity of individuals (Gallagher & Tschudin, 2010). Although, there is a general consensus that ethical practices are needed to help guide leaders in their decision-making, there is no definitive way to describe all that ethical leadership entails. Ethical leadership is often conceptualized as a set of principles that regulates behaviours with more theoretical and philosophical elements than practical applications. How to apply ethical leadership to a particular setting largely depends on the way that the ethical component is defined (Dion, 2019). Ethical leadership has given way to many different theories including, authentic leadership, democratic leadership, values-laden leadership, responsible leadership, moral leadership, and strategic leadership, just to name a few.

Although these theories are used to explain what ethical leadership should be and the qualities ethical leaders should inhabit, these theories often do not provide guidance on how they can be applied to actual decision-making.

Leadership is a moral task but even more so for educational leaders because education is primarily about relationships between people (Quick & Normore, 2004). Educational leaders face numerous ethical dilemmas (Arar & Saiti, 2022) that can impact the wider school community. School environments are dependent on the values that are adopted and modelled by school leaders. Ideal leadership behaviour does not exist but rather, it requires school leaders to be self-aware and understand that their beliefs and values are carried through in their interactions with students and staff, alike. Within an educational context, following bureaucratic policies and procedures are not considered enough to make someone an ethical leader but rather, empathy and ethical values are more important (Quick & Normore, 2004). Ethical leadership in education seems to focus more on care and support than it does on following a specific set of prescribed rules.

Researching ethical leadership is challenging and within education, even more so. There are several ethical leadership theories that have been used in an educational context but there is not one that applies more than another and very few of them provide guidelines to decision-making. Ethical dilemmas cannot be solved by using only a single perspective. A multiple ethical approach allows school leaders to use different ethical perspectives in their work (Arar et al., 2016). Starratt's (1994) Multidimensional Ethical Framework and Shapiro & Stefkovich'S (2011) Multiple Ethical Paradigms focus on the ethics of critique, justice, care (Starratt, 1994), and profession (Shapiro & Stefkovich,

2011) and have been used increasingly by educational researchers to explore ethical dimensions that are unique to education. Studies (Eyal et al., 2011; Arar et al., 2016; Arar & Saiti, 2022; Berges-Puyo, 2022) show that the multiple ethical paradigms do help school leaders in solving their ethical dilemmas but more research could be done to demonstrate how that theory can be applied and if the theory works in different locations, both geographic and education level, such as both elementary and secondary schools.

Is Best Interests of the Student More Than Just as a Concept?

The best interests principle is most often used in regards to children, especially in educational matters, but the expression itself is used quite broadly (Walker et al., 2011). Although previous studies have been done to theorize "best interests of the student" as a guiding principle in ethical leadership and decision-making in education, results have not been definitive (Frick, 2011, Walker, 2011, Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2011). For most of the participants in my study, the expression, "best interests of the student" was indeed referenced in their decision-making. The expression was used throughout the data collection process, however, several participants also used the expressions, "student centred decision making" and "prioritizing student success" interchangeably with "the best interests of the student."

The expression the "best interests of the student" was understood by all the participants but the expression was used more as a reference point, rather, than being grounded in educational theory (Frick, 2011). None of the participants referred to "the best interests of the student" from any theoretical perspective but mentioned following their "moral compass" and holding to their values when making decisions. Further research could be conducted to theorize the concept of "the best interests of student" because for a lot of educators, the expression is more than just a guiding principle.

However, this was not clearly demonstrated through my research. The expression the "best interests of students" lacks a clear definition and remains open to interpretation by each school leader who brings with them their own personal values when engaging in ethical decision-making.

As several of my participants shared, what is in the best interest of one student may not be in the best interest of another. Even the context of what is the best interests of the student has greatly changed over time. At one point in education, students were separated not just by grade level but also based on their physical and intellectual capabilities because it was believed that students would do better separated based on ability. However, the current model of education is focused on inclusion with the recognition that isolation is not in the best interests of any student and that students have different targeted needs and interests. Another change in focus is that the idea of an educated person is no longer just centred on knowledge acquisition and attaining the highest mark possible. Schools now provide more avenues for success by providing different learning opportunities to students that are geared toward their individual interests.

Relationship Between the School Board and School Leaders

School boards and school leaders have a complex relationship which can affect the decision-making processes of school leaders. My research revealed a very hierarchical structure within the school district. Several of my participants commented that as "agents of the school board," they felt a responsibility to carry out the mandates that were set out by the school board, regardless of whether they agreed with the policies or not. However, if school leaders claim that the best interests of the student is at the centre of their decision-making but also recognize that they have to follow school board

policies, what happens when what is in the best interests of the student is at odds with a particular school board policy?

My participant responses to this question differed based on their years of experience as a school leader. The more experienced participants expressed their comfort with speaking openly and directly with the school board regarding policies which they had concerns about whereas less leadership experienced participants were more likely to look to the school board for guidance in some of their decision-making. One participant, with fifteen years of leadership experience, commented that despite having a responsibility to the school board, they did have choices in how they interpreted and then implemented school board mandates, implying that there were ways that both the best interests of the student and school board policies could be met, even when they clashed. How to do so was not clearly stated which further demonstrated the nuanced relationship that school leaders have with the school board. Although school leaders have autonomy over most school-level decisions, they generally make decisions that align with school board policies (Wong et al., 2020). If that is the case, when do the best interests of the student supersede the mandates of the school board?

How Context Matters - Place and Time

When I conducted my study, the political and educational landscape of British Columbia was quite different as I previously discussed. Since my data collection, BC no longer has any standardized testing at the secondary school level. If I to conduct this study today, the vignette would need to be changed to reflect a standards based assessment scenario. Given the strong opposition that my participants had toward standardized testing (which were considered high stakes testing because the provincial exams factored into student marks), it would be interesting to see if participants would

have the same view towards standards based assessment considering they are viewed as low stakes because the results do not contribute to student marks.

Recommendations

Throughout my research, I endeavoured to understand the decision-making processes of school leaders. Educational leadership is challenging in that school leaders do have to carefully consider the choices that they make due to the short and long-term impact that their decisions may have. With that in mind, I have come to these recommendations:

A. More ethics content in educational leadership programmes
B. Ethics content workshops for school leaders, school board employers, and school board trustees
C. Vignette/scenario-based ethics content

More Ethics Content in Educational Leadership Programmes

There is more to becoming a successful school leader than knowing how to follow policies and enforcing accountability measures (Gerstl-Pepin & Aiken, 2009). There is a growing need for educational leaders to be ethical and more conscious of their ability to make sound decisions and the best way to do that is for better educational preparation (Winston, 2005). Educational leaders must be more adaptive and have an increased awareness of their school community. However, currently, there are not enough ethics components in educational leadership programmes. Most graduate programmes in educational leadership have one required ethics class, mostly centred on theories with very little practical application. To better prepare educators for leadership positions, course on ethics should focus more on case studies to allow students to actively engage in ethical dilemmas (Gerstl-Pepin & Aiken, 2009). Curricula should also draw from other

fields of study so that potential school leaders can develop a comprehensive understanding of ethics that will better prepare them for the ethical dilemmas they will eventually encounter as a school leader (Gerstl-Pepin & Aiken, 2009).

Winston (2005) states a need for a multi-faceted approach to ensure the development of ethical leaders by including the following components:

- internship experiences
- mentorship from other school leaders
- modeling of practices
- ongoing professional development and training

The key criticism is that current graduate leadership programmes have not devoted enough of their curriculum to ethical leadership. Ethical dilemmas that educational leaders encounter can be challenging and complex, highlighting the need for more well-informed education preparation.

Ethics Content Workshops for School Leaders, School Board, and School Board Trustees

School board trustees are locally elected citizens who make up the board of education for the school district. School boards in British Columbia are intended to reflect the needs, values, and priorities of their community in educational matters. However, school board trustees can come from diverse backgrounds with little to no experience within the education system aside from being students once themselves. The school board is represented by the senior management, hired and appointed by the school board trustees, including the superintendent for the school district and other management personnel, many who have not worked in a school for several years. School leaders move into leadership without much experience or training in the actual job and are often, unfamiliar with the ethical situations that they may encounter.

Because each group has limited exposure and experience with ethical leadership in education, it is recommended that school districts provide workshops or professional development with ethics content for all three levels of district leadership. For school board trustees who are not in the education system, they lack the understanding of how a school runs on a daily basis and the ethical decisions that school leaders have to regularly make. With the school board upper management, many of them have not worked in a school for a long time and may not understand the decisions that school leaders have to make for each individual student whereas for new school leaders, it is simply a matter of exposure and experience. For all three groups, having workshops with ethics content would be helpful to increase their understanding of the challenges of educational leadership at the school level.

Vignette/Scenario Based Ethics Content

For both educational leadership programmes and workshops for current school leaders, using vignette-based scenarios based on ethical decision-making and ethical dilemmas as a teaching tool would provide context and opportunity for leaders in training and practicing school leaders to consider their own decision-making processes. From my own experience as a site supervisor, a lot of it was on the job training. Although I was made aware of school board policies, there were no dictates as to when, where, and how the policies would be applied, especially where students are concerned. Using vignettes would provide exposure to potential scenarios that school leaders may possibly encounter, giving them the opportunity to better prepare for future situations.

Limitations

My study consisted of eleven participants, with two females and nine males. All the participants were school-based leaders, either principals or vice-principals with varied years of experience as school leaders, ranging from one year to fifteen years. The study was conducted in the school district where I am both a teacher and summer school site supervisor. The school district is medium sized with eight secondary schools.

The number of participants matched the number of participants of the study that I replicated so I do not see the number of participants as an issue. However, the lack of female representation in my study did give me pause for thought. I would have preferred a more diverse mix of gender in my study but the reality is that in my school district, the ratio of male to female secondary school leaders is approximately 3:1. The gender disparity speaks to different issues such as whether fewer women are entering school leadership at the secondary school level or whether fewer women are being promoted to leadership positions. Although these issues are outside of the scope of my study, it is an interesting point to note. Because there were only two female participants in my study, there were no clear indicators as to whether female school leaders would provide a wider range of responses to the vignette and questions. If I were to undertake this study again, I would look for ways to increase the number of female participants for the study in order to provide comparative analysis based on gender.

The school district where I teach is where I conducted my study. My data collection consisted of interviewing my participants, many of whom I had worked with either as teacher colleague or with them as part of the school leadership team of my school. Having a previous working relationship with several participants made the

interviewing process easy in that there was already a comfort level between us. However, to uphold the integrity of my data collection, I had to make sure that I maintained a professional and neutral stance both for myself and my interviewee so that I did not inadvertently bias or taint my data. I also engaged in reflexive bracketing throughout the data collection process.

In addition to ensuring my own integrity as a researcher, I had to rely on the authenticity of my participants in their responses. I do not question the trustworthiness of their responses but I did become increasingly aware of the hierarchical nature of the school district's organizational structure due to the many references by my participants to being agents of the school board. Due to their consistent mention of the school board as their employer to which they had a responsibility, there were moments where it was difficult to determine whether participants were expressing their individual values or maintaining the party line in their responses. I am not sure this idea could even be explored because it is a complex relationship that exists between the school board and school leaders. I reflected on this but in the end, I had to trust in the process of my data collection and in the truthfulness of my participants' responses.

My school district is medium sized with eight secondary schools. The small number of secondary schools limited my sample pool to those schools where several of my participants were currently working together or had previously worked together. It would be interesting to see if the results of my study would be different in a larger school district where I had a larger sample pool to draw from and whether the size of the school district and the number of schools makes it more or less hierarchical in nature.

Where Am I Now?

After completing my study, interpreting my data, and considering my findings, I have the same thought now that I had when I started and that is that ethical decision-making is complex, especially when involving students. My study highlighted some of challenges that school leaders regularly face as they engage in ethical decision-making. Although the best interests of the student is a strong guiding principle for making ethical decisions, it is far from a theory because every school leader defines it differently and for each student, the best interests for them can be quite different.

For myself, I have become more present in my own practice as a teacher and as a school leader. I often find myself defaulting to the best interests of the student, especially during the summer when part of my job involves issues of student discipline. I found this tension interesting for myself. As a classroom teacher, I am able to hone in on what is in the best interests of my student because I have spent time with them and have gotten to know them over a period of time. Also, because I am dealing within the parameters of my classroom where I set the guidelines, I have more autonomy to deal the student in my own way. However, as a site supervisor, I often have to weigh the best interests of one student against the best interests of all students which sometimes are not in line with each other. In those situations, I do not make my decisions in isolation but work with the leadership team to come up with viable solutions so that hopefully, we can find a resolution where both the individual student and the larger student population get what they need.

Closing Thoughts

I started my research journey twelve years ago and as I look back, I wonder at the time it took me to get here. As I am about to cross the finish line, I am glad I did not give up, even though there were times, I seriously thought about it. Pursuing a doctorate degree is on a totally different level of what, I honestly could not tell you. There's really nothing that I can compare it to. I love learning but academic research is a whole other thing. I think it is going to take some more reflection to fully realize what I have done here. It has not been an easy journey but in the end, I am glad that I stuck with it. I would have felt some serious regret if I had not finished what I started.

Here are some of my realizations so far. I am not a theory person. I have always found theoretical ideas interesting but lacking in practical applications. I want my knowledge acquisition to be useful and applicable, especially in my daily teaching practice and that has not always been the case with educational theories. After having been a classroom teacher for the past twenty-five years and summer session site supervisor for the past fifteen, I felt that I already had a lot of experience in education. However, through my research, I realize that what I think I know about education is actually, not very much. There is way more educational theory out there than I could have thought possible. Being a classroom teacher has been extremely fulfilling but I have come to see that my school based educational experiences have also been very limiting so having had the opportunity to engage in this type of research, has broadened my viewpoint of education.

My research journey has led me to really delve into one specific area of educational research and immersed me in theories, frameworks, models and principles. I

am still not a theory person, their practical applications still challenge me but I will keep working at it. Through my doctoral studies, I have had the opportunity to engage in education in ways that I had not in a long time, as an educator, a school leader, and most challengingly, as a student again. I stepped outside of being a classroom teacher and school-based leader to analyze education from a wider and different perspective and became a researcher along the way. I gained deeper insight into ethical decision-making processes and will have more things to consider as I continue to move forward. I am happy and find great satisfaction with what I have been able to accomplish through this experience.

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Appendix A

INTERVIEW 1 – VIGNETTE

The meeting could have been worse. That though provided Central High School principal, Charlie Franken, little solace as he sat in his office reflecting on the discord created in the just concluded meeting with his department chairs. Their responses to the proposed curriculum changes approached open revolt, and Charlie felt trapped with few good options.

Central High students always performed well on the provincial exams by maintaining scores that were equal to or above provincial averages. The school continued to meet provincial defined adequate yearly progress targets. Unfortunately, it was the school's future performance that most concerned the School Board Trustees. With each passing year, the province's goals for acceptable scores became more aggressive. Due to such high expectations, it appeared that a large number of districts would not meet provincial goals in the coming years. The school board trustees wanted to ensure that their district would not be among them.

If the number of Central High students achieving acceptable scores increased at the current rate, the school would be placed on the province's "at risk" list in two years. Such an action would eliminate provincial funding incentives for good performance and open the door for a provincial takeover of the school district. With such dire consequences looming in the future, the school board trustees thought it prudent to increase student performance on the provincial exam. The board charged the district superintendent, Dr. Carl Horne, to design and implement a curriculum that specifically addressed provincial standards. Appreciating the gravity of the situation and the serious concerns of the board, Dr. Horne developed a plan that he presented to Charlie Franken.

In the meeting with Charlie, Dr. Horne presented an outline of the curriculum changes that the school board trustees agreed would address their concerns. Courses, specifically designed to address the provincial standards, would be created in each of the four core disciplines for grades nine through twelve. These new courses would provide intensive training in test-taking skills. The curriculum would be centered on the material covered by the provincial standards and would be mandatory for students who failed to meet acceptable levels of achievement on the provincial exams. Since there was no federal or provincial funding provided to support such an initiative, these changes were to be implemented utilizing current staff.

Charlie's reaction to the proposal was less than enthusiastic. Sensing his opposition, Dr. Horne explained how such a curriculum was in the best interest of the school district. The community respected the accomplishments of the district and was proud of its standing in the state. The threat of falling below provincial expectations and being placed on an "at risk" list would undermine the trust and support of the community. The turmoil that would result from such a situation would be unthinkable; consequently, it was necessary to take

action before problems developed. Dr. Horne's parting words were clearly etched in Charlie's memory. He stated, "You're either part of the problem or part of the solution. Keep me informed of your progress."

Now that he had his "marching orders," Charlie's first action would be to meet with his department heads. Because of their previous work on developing the curriculum, he knew the meeting would not be pleasant.

Under Charlie's collegial style of leadership and the notable support of the department heads, especially the respected English Department Head, Alicia Weston, the departments developed a curriculum that best served the needs of all Central High School students. They researched and worked with a strong sense of purpose nurtured by an altruistic desire to give their students the best. Developed and implemented over a five-year period, the curriculum identified three "directions" of academic preparation based on students' post-graduation plans. Each discipline offered courses designed to prepare students for college, vocational/technical school or direct entry into the workforce. At each grade level, an interdisciplinary relation among the four core subject areas was established. Students were free to choose among the offerings in order to create an individualized plan that best suited their needs. Although subject to ongoing evaluation and revision, the current curriculum appeared to be successful in achieving the desired objectives and was highly regarded by the staff. It was with this in mind that Charlie presented the new curriculum revision plan to the department heads.

As anticipated, the department heads were not receptive to the proposed change. The impact on the current curriculum would be significant. The discussion began with a practical consideration. With no new staff, the courses offered for vocational/technical school students and those desiring to enter the workforce upon graduation would be virtually eliminated since many of those students would most likely be candidates for the new courses. This trend would be exacerbated in future years with the relentless raising of provincial expectations for successful achievement.

The discussion then took a more philosophical turn. The validity of teaching test- taking skills was questioned. How were such skills useful in the real world?

Additionally, the practice of "teaching to the test" was anathema to educators interested in providing their students with the knowledge and skills necessary for success in their chosen areas. Also, by identifying which students were assigned to the new courses, the school would be eliminating students' and parental choice by subjecting them to mandatory tracking. It was no surprise that Alicia Weston was particularly vehement in her objections by suggesting that teachers were not needed to fulfill the processing demanded of the new curriculum; trainers would be sufficient.

What did surprise Charlie was Alicia's threat to resign her position as department head and return to the classroom as a teacher if such curriculum changes were mandated. She did not want to be in a leadership position for the implementation of a program that she considered to be unethical. Charlie knew Alicia well enough to know that this was not a

mere bluff. Trying to gauge the reactions of the other chairs to her pronouncement, Charlie could not discern if any were inclined to follow her lead.

Sitting in his office, Charlie considered his dilemma. He knew he was bound to carry out the mandates of the school board and the superintendent, but what if he thought that a particular directive was not in the best interests of students? Then he paused to reflect: Who is the ultimate judge of what is in their best interests? The authority certainly resides with the board, but are the school board trustees the best qualified to make curricular and pedagogical decisions? What would be the effect on the school's students, morale, and culture if the curriculum changes were unilaterally mandated? Would siding with his department heads in a unified front delineating the shortcomings of the proposed changes influence Dr. Horne and the board to reconsider their position? These questions preoccupied his mind as Charlie tried to formulate the first report of progress to Dr. Horne.

Protocol:

1. If you were Charlie, how would you deal with this situation? How would you go about making a professional decision?

2. Why is accountability so important in education today? Who benefits from the accounting of students' standardized test scores and uniform standards?

3. What is Charlie's ultimate responsibility? Is there a difference between strict accountability and a broader notion of responsibility for student outcomes?

4. What would the profession expect Charlie to do in this case? Can something be educationally right but morally wrong or vice versa? Can something be morally true or ethically correct and educationally impossible or inappropriate?

Appendix B

INTERVIEW 2 – QUESTIONS

1. In what ways do you consider your work as a school leader to be moral and ethical in nature? What is good moral practice?

2. What kinds of difficult moral and ethical decisions are you faced with in your work? How often?

3. Would you say that you feel "duty bound" to rules, policies, institutional practices and professional expectations set by those you work with and others within the profession?

4. Have you experienced a standout, salient event in your life that has changed or shaped the way you approach your professional decision making? How has that experience guided your moral choices as an educational leader? (Probe to question 4).

5. Can you recall an instance in your professional experience that obliged you to reflect on a situation and make a decision that involved important moral and ethical consequences? Tell me about that experience. (Probe to question 5).

6. Have you ever experienced a conflict over following a school law, policy, institutional procedure or professional expectation that you believed was morally questionable? (Probe to question 6).

7. Has there been a time in your career when what you believed was right personally was different from what you thought was expected or the right thing to do professionally? Tell me about that.

8. How did you resolve the discrepancy? Do you believe you acted for the best? (Probe for tension, clash and internal conflict.)

9. What assisted and guided you in making your decision? Do you have a particular approach or a principle you try to follow? (Probe race, gender, community type, school size, religion, etc.)

10. Are you familiar with any particular set of professional codes of ethics?

11. Are there moral considerations and judgments unique to this profession?

12. If you were to give advice to a beginning administrator about the essential ingredients of right, true, and good practice, what would you say? Is there such a thing as right, true, and good practice?

13. Have you ever heard of the expression, "The best interests of the student?" What does that expression mean? Could your interpretation and understanding of that expression help you in making ethical choices in your work? Why and how?

14. What is the difference between being responsible to teachers versus being responsible to students?

15. Is there a difference between the best interests of the student (one) and the best interests of the student**s** (all or most) in your mind?

16. How important is the consideration of rights, responsibility, and respect in making ethically sound educational decisions that affect students? How do you define rights...responsibility...respect?

17. Are any of the three principles more important than the other? If so, how would you rank them?

Appendix C

EXPANDED PARTICIPANT PROFILES

Arthur was a vice-principal for the past four years at Zephyrus Secondary, at his current school for the past three. Prior to his move into school leadership, Arthur had been the Literacy Programme Consultant for the school district and had also provided feedback to the Ministry on the redesigned curriculum in English Language Arts. Zephyrus Secondary is a semestered school with a population of about 1100 students that also offers French Immersion. Arthur's response to the vignette was generally sympathetic to Charlie's dilemma but also felt accountability was necessary in education to provide schools and parents with information to better serve the needs of students. His perception of the best interests of the student was to "help kids realize the best version of themselves." Interestingly, he was the only participant to directly ask if his interview was going to be confidential.

Benjamin has been the principal at Chronos Secondary, the smallest school in the district with about 675 students for the past five years, back at the school where he had his first assignment as vice-principal. Before becoming a school leader, Benjamin had been a Physical Education teacher. His school has suffered from low enrolment due to having only two feeder elementary schools. However, since he has been there, several district programmes have been implemented there including French Immersion, sports academies, industry certification, and the district's online programme which have helped to maintain a steady school population and increase the use of the building. Benjamin considered himself to be an "agent of the Board" but used "what's in the best interest of students to guide his decision-making." He understood the political aspects of his job recognizing that sometimes, school leaders "get lost in the politics of the situation" but "going back to what's best for a kid" is what grounds his decision-making.

Calvin was the principal of Niobe Secondary, the largest school in the district with about 1800 students, having been there for four years. Prior to school leadership, he was a Social Studies teacher. Niobe Secondary is an academically driven school with the highest number of students in Canada registering for Advanced Placement exams. His school also offers the AP Capstone programme, one of only four schools in British Columbia to do so. Calvin believed that schools can "provide evidence of student learning in a way that's data friendly" so that there is accountability in education but not to the point where there is only one form of measurement that is being used. Calvin expressed the best interests of the student to be "almost always ethically and morally driven" but also that it was contextual to the school, to the classroom, and to the students' own life.

Dylan was in his first assignment as a vice-principal at Sparta Secondary, having been there for three years. Before moving into school leadership, Dylan had been both a Physical Education teacher and Athletic Director at his previous school. Sparta Secondary has diverse community of students and provides students with many curricular

and extracurricular opportunities that include the AP Capstone programme and courses in television production. Being new to school leadership, Dylan considered his role was to "ensure that everybody feels heard" and he was learning to "balance [his] own personal educational philosophy with the confines of the system." When it comes to the best interests of the student, Dylan stated that he could "easily answer this one" because if he "had to choose between kids" and anything else, he "[would] go with the kid answer."

Elliot was new to school leadership as vice-principal, at Boreas Secondary for the past three years. Elliot had been a school counsellor and a Social Studies teacher for several years before. Boreas Secondary is the only secondary community school in the district, situated in one of the lower socio-economic areas of the school district with about 1000 students. The goal of a community school is to have the school at the centre of the community by providing access to resources and programmes for both the students and their families and to strengthen engagement and communication. Elliot felt that his experiences as a counsellor provided him with a strong foundation to work with the students of this school, given the diverse backgrounds that they come from. Student achievement and student success is a focus at the school because many of the students do not have grade level numeracy and/or literacy skills. For Elliot, the best interests of the student "means both holding them accountable and being flexible when [school leaders] need to be to allow for their success."

Fiona was in her first full year as a vice-principal at Chronos Secondary, having previously been a school counsellor for several years. She liked that she had been placed at a smaller school as she was getting to know the duties related to her new role. Initially, Fiona was hesitant to volunteer to be a participant because she did not feel that she had enough school leadership experience to respond to potential questions. However, after the second call out for volunteers, she was encouraged by Benjamin, the principal, to do so. Fiona expressed that the best interests of the student was "whatever could be the best for their futures" and that maxim "helps [her] everyday … make ethical choices in the work [she] does."

Gene was vice-principal at Memphis Secondary for the past three years in his first school leadership assignment. Before school leadership, he had been a Social Studies teacher and Careers Coordinator, responsible for work experience placements for students. Memphis Secondary has about 1400 students living in a densely populated area that has limited transit accessibility. Students are actively involved in both curricular and extracurricular activities. Gene believed in a "consultative approach" to things. He shared that "the best interests of the student [was] to recognize the personal stories of every kid" and "not just from an academic perspective but also from a social and emotional point of view."

Henry was the longest serving vice-principal out of all the participants at fifteen years. He has been at his current school, Minos Secondary for the past five years. He had been a Physical Education teacher and department head prior to becoming a school leader. Minos Secondary has about 1400 schools and is the largest French Immersion secondary school in the district. Having been there for so long, Henry felt firmly embedded in the

school community. Henry conveyed that "what's best for kids, what's best for their learning, what's best for their well-being, what's best for them to be safe" is what "drives a lot of [his] decisions" when asked about the best interests of the student. He further stated that school leaders "can't go wrong" when a "decision is based on the student."

Ivy had been a principal for the twelve years, three being at Sparta Secondary. Ivy was one of three participants who had not been a teacher in this school district before moving into school leadership. In her previous school district, Ivy had been an English teacher. Sparta Secondary also shares space with the British Columbia Provincial School for the Deaf (BCSD), operating as two schools within one building. Although BCSD has their own leadership team and teachers, deaf students are integrated into hearing classes where possible. Ivy's first two years were challenging because she was asked to be the principal for the BCSD, in addition to her duties as the principal for Sparta. She spoke of tensions working with the BCSD teachers due to different expectations and because she was a hearing person while most of the BCSD teachers were not. Ivy shared that the best interests of the student is "what's better for students because … that's who [she's] supposed to be making decisions for" and she works to balance and "give everybody what they need but not necessarily what they want."

Jack was vice-principal at Sparta Secondary. He had been a vice-principal for the past seven years and the past two at Sparta. Jack was another participant who was not formerly a teacher in the district before becoming a school leader. Jack came from a Physical Education background and had moved from Vancouver Island. Jack had also spent some time overseas as a school leader in a BC certified offshore school in China. For Jack, the best interests of the student is "understanding how the expression helps [with making] ethical decisions" and what school leaders have to do is to "look at the bigger picture, in terms of how things can affect students."

Knox was principal at Minos Secondary. This was his second assignment as principal, having been at Minos for the past four years. Knox started his teaching career as a Mathematics teacher and came into school leadership from outside of the district. Knox stated that he liked accountability and standards but he also wanted to "make sure that students were benefitting from it." He felt that "there's something morally wrong, forcing kids into something that isn't going to help them benefit in their learning in the long run" and taking on the "responsibility of student success" is what the best interests of the student is about.