Ethical Decision Making in Education Systems in Times of Transformation: Codes of Ethics and the Potential Benefits of Deontology, Consequentialism, and Mixed-Consequentialism

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Abstract

In times of transformation, the issues of equity, social justice and social change require careful review in educational institutions. Effective educational leaders need a firm understanding of ethics in addition to technical and administrative skills (Starratt, 2004). Personal values, including religious reasoning, may lead to decisions that cause conflict and are not in the best interests of all stakeholders. Clearly stated guidelines and a code of ethics that all stakeholders help to create can enhance the ethical decision-making process (Gordon & Sork, 2001). Teachers may be willing to follow guidelines if school leaders consult with teachers in the creation of a code of ethics. Educational leaders and teachers are role models for students and need to make decisions based on caring for the needs of all students (Gorman & Pauken, 2003). Moral reasoning alone is not sufficient for the decisions that educational leaders make in diverse communities. Three general approaches to ethical decision making are available to educational leaders. Deontology is a rules-based system of ethics that emphasizes the importance of duty and of respecting rules for moral conduct, regardless of the consequences (Beckner, 2004). A rules-based approach to ethics may help to create consistent guidelines for school leaders and administrators but might not be useful in unusual or complex circumstances. Consequentialism is an approach to ethical decisions that focuses on creating the maximum benefit for the largest number of individuals. Mixed-consequentialism provides a useful framework for educational leaders in increasingly complex and diverse communities and educational environments.

Keywords: ethics, deontology, consequentialism, guidelines, educational leaders

Introduction

Moral reasoning alone is not sufficient for the decisions that educational leaders make in diverse communities. Three general approaches to ethical decision making are available to educational leaders. Deontology is a rules-based system of ethics that emphasizes the importance of duty and of respecting rules for moral conduct, regardless of the consequences (Beckner, 2004). A rules-based approach to ethics may help to create consistent guidelines for school leaders and administrators but might not be useful in unusual or complex circumstances. Consequentialism is an approach to ethical decisions that focuses on creating the maximum benefit for the largest number of individuals. Mixed-consequentialism provides a useful framework for educational leaders in increasingly complex and diverse communities and educational environments.

Deontology

The branch of ethics known as deontology is based on the Greek word for obligation, *deon*, and promotes the assumption that reason can be used to determine duties and what is universally right (Micewski & Troy, 2007). Rather than a branch of ethics, deontology may be viewed as a transition between ethics and formal laws and legal codes (Dina, 2013). Kant created a rule-based deontological system in which good will was the only form of absolute good and an act was only good if good will was present (Beckner, 2004). However, good will may be difficult to define precisely in every situation. Kant created the term "categorical imperative" to describe a fundamentally good act that a person would wish to be made a universal rule (as cited in Beckner, 2004, p. 52). Unfortunately, reaching universal agreement with all of the stakeholders in an educational institution on what precisely constitutes a categorical imperative may be difficult. Deciding on what qualifies as a categorical imperative appears to involve a great deal of subjective judgment, which was Kant's main criticism of consequentialism (Beckner, 2004). Regardless of the ethical approach that educational leaders employ, leaders need to be aware of and evaluate their own subjective judgments and the reasons which lead to such judgments.

Deontology is a strict, rules-based system which requires individuals to obey the established rules of conduct regardless of the consequences (McNaughton, 1993). Deontological, rules-based approaches to ethical decision making might be more appropriate and effective in relatively simple situations involving a small number of students, staff members, or community members in which all participants are able to agree quickly on the most ethical decision to take. For example, punishing a student for committing a violent crime or stealing could involve a deontological approach. General agreement could likely be found among the majority of stakeholders that such conduct is wrong and should be punished. Few normal, intelligent people would wish stealing or violence to become universally acceptable. Therefore, school leaders can employ a rules-based approach when dealing with common disputes or crimes involving students or teachers.

Litwack (2003) notes the importance of an ethical code of conduct. Educational leaders can create a code of ethical conduct for a school after close consultation with all stakeholders, including members of the community. Leaders can identify a need to modify or change school rules related to ethics by keeping in close contact with the

ethics and values of increasingly diverse communities. The concept of ethics encompasses the customs and beliefs of a particular culture or group of people (Dina, 2013). In diverse communities, an ethical balance needs to be found between a wide range of practices and beliefs. Ethics and morals are often used as synonyms, but morals are more closely associated with clearly defined patterns of behavior, while ethics deals with general principles (Francisco, Maria & Maria, 2008). Administrators who adhere to a deontological approach in decision making believe that what is right in a particular case is more important than the consequences that may result from a decision (Propheter, 2012). However, responsible administrators need to consider the full range of potential consequences of their actions and not focus exclusively on a narrow set of predefined, inflexible rules in their decision-making processes.

Consequentialism

Consequentialism emphasizes the morality of the results of an action and is a branch of teleology (Beckner, 2004). In situations that require an ethical decision, a teleological approach focuses on the results of a decision. Teleology is a type of relativism and a branch of ancient Greek philosophy whose supporters believed that all lives have an ultimate purpose (Beckner, 2004). Decisions in an educational environment that require a teleological or consequentialist approach may include complex issues that involve large numbers of stakeholders, including staff, students, and members of the local community. The ethical issues may be too complex for leaders to address by simple rules-based approaches that require some universal agreement. Situations that involve a wide range of conflicting ethical viewpoints in a diverse community might require a focus on common goals and desired outcomes that a majority of community members would support. For example, getting school sponsorship and funding from a private fast-food company might be a complex and controversial issue that could generate a wide range of ethical questions in the community and among the teaching staff. In consequentialism, all alternative decisions must be carefully reviewed and only the decision which provides the greatest benefit to the largest number of people can be chosen (Roth, 1999). Extensive consultation with all stakeholders can lead to an agreement on common goals and objectives before school leaders make an ethical decision.

The utilitarian movement, a form of consequentialism, began in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and utilitarian philosophers such as David Hume and Jeremy Bentham believed that the means justified the end and that the maximum good for the largest number of people was the most important objective in decision making (Beckner, 2004). Bentham believed that a precise, scientific system of ethics could be created by calculating the amount of pleasure (positive effects and benefits) and pain (negative effects) resulting from a given action (Beckner, 2004). The assessment process in educational institutions often involves ethical decision making and positive and negative consequences for large numbers of students (Kienzler, 2004). One complex contemporary ethical issue with which educational leaders must deal may be the issue of standardized testing. Standardized testing may meet the needs of the majority of students, but ethical leaders must also seek creative solutions to address the needs of students who do not benefit from standardized testing.

Modern society has become increasingly complex and diverse, and rules-based systems of ethical thought do not seem capable of effectively classifying every

possible action in a useful and meaningful way. Democratic governments tend to employ utilitarian approaches in decision-making, focusing on consequences and creating benefits for a majority of citizens rather than for a small, elite class (Beckner, 2004). Ideally, educational institutions should seek to provide numerous, significant benefits for the largest possible number of students and stakeholders. The large amount of subjectivity involved in predicting consequences and potential benefits is a weakness in consequentialist schools of thought (Beckner, 2004). The poor judgment of unethical or heavily biased leaders may call the entire decision-making process into question and weaken trust between an educational institution and stakeholders.

Mixed-Consequentialism

An effective compromise between extreme forms of consequentialism and deontology may provide decision makers with the flexibility necessary to meet new challenges. Responsible managers of an organization need to consider the consequences of actions while referring to basic rules or guidelines. Numerous references to indirect types of consequentialism exist in the literature on the subject of ethical decision making (Mendola, 2006). Various frameworks which combine aspects of consequentialism with deontological approaches also exist in the literature (Helm, 2005). Strict adherence to rules may lead to undesirable outcomes, but a basic framework of rules can help to promote a consistent and well-balanced decision-making process. Some rules or guidelines can provide a useful framework for utilitarian approaches (Tomlinson, 1991). Decision makers must strive to identify all stakeholders and to consider the full range of potential consequences of decisions on various individuals and groups (Zakaria & Lajis, 2012). Mixed-consequentialism may be the most useful approach to ethical decision making for school leaders, providing basic rules and guidelines while also recognizing the importance of the consequences of decisions in educational institutions.

Conclusion

An organization or institution as a whole possesses ethical dimensions and responsibilities, and the needs of individual members require careful consideration in decision-making processes (Berg, Csikszentmihalyi, & Nakamura, 2003). The working environment of an educational institution may be highly ethical with a transparent, collaborative decision-making process or the environment may be dysfunctional, poorly managed and led, and subject to widespread unethical behavior. An ongoing dialogue between schools and the community can help to create an ethical environment.

An effective system of ethics values caring and empathy between individuals, and the views of scholars who value the importance of individual ethical choices are similar to the views of Aristotle. Aristotle based virtue ethics on the development of a strong individual character capable of independently making wise and ethical choices (Beckner, 2004). School leaders require training and experience to make wise decisions and a sense of empathy for the needs of all stakeholders. Stephan (2003) notes that in a survey of four hundred American college students, the vast majority of respondents believed that right and wrong depend on individual and cultural differences. Effective educational leaders would be wise not to rely exclusively on

either a rules-based or results-focused ethical decision-making process in diverse and complex educational environments.

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