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Principals' Moral Agency and Ethical Decision-Making: Toward a Transformational Ethics

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Abstract This descriptive study provides a rich portrait of moral agency and ethical decision-making processes among a sample of Canadian school principals. Using an ethical responsibility framework linking moral agency and transformational leadership, the researchers found that 1) modeling moral agency is important for encouraging others to engage their own moral agency in the best interests of all children; 2) despite efforts to engage in collaborative decision-making, principals are often faced with the reality that they are the ones to absorb the cost of decisions; and 3) moral agents need to become wide-awake to the ethical issues and challenges that permeate their day-to-day work lives.

Keywords Moral agency; Ethical decision-making; Transformational ethics

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Introduction

Despite their best intentions, people of good will are still capable of overlooking a moral problem, developing elaborate and persuasive rationalizations (trying to convince their minds about something that their spirits or hearts have said is wrong) to justify their action or inaction, giving priority to self rather than others with respect to moral concerns, and failing to do as they know is right, just, good, and virtuous, or perhaps tolerating ineffectual actions (Rest, 1983, 1986). School principals face this ethical reality as they engage in the often daunting task of serving as a moral agent on behalf of those they lead and teach. We know from research and practice that teaching and leading in schools is fundamentally a moral activity (Begley, 1999; Furman, 2004; Hodgkinson, 1991; Johansson, 2004; Langlois & Lapointe, 2010; Sernak, 1998; Starratt, 1994). As Greenfield (2004) asserts, "relationships among people are at the very centre of the work of school administrators and teachers, and for this reason school leadership, is, by its nature and focus, a moral activity" (p. 174). Given that each school and circumstance will provide a unique context for this moral activity, this article describes the agentic nature of school principals and their reflections on moral engagement.

The school leader is a moral agent in that she or he serves a master purpose or cause on behalf of numerous constituents: the children, their parents, the state (justice, social services, education, health), the community, and the employing educational authority. Of course, the notion of *agent* derives from Latin *agere*, meaning "one who acts" or "to do" (Garofalo & Geuras, 2006, p. 1). According to Garofalo & Geuras an agent is a "person who acts on behalf of another person, whom we will call, according to the current fashion in public administration literature, the principal" (pp. 1–2). In the case of school administration, the school principal acts in the agentic role. For Bandura (2001), the agent is the one who acts intentionally to make things happen on behalf of others. This certainly resonates with the work life of school principals.

It is well established in research that the school principal plays the role of agent in establishing and sustaining a moral and ethical climate in the school. For example, Campbell (1999) suggests that a central theme in much of the ethical leadership literature is that "educational leaders must develop and articulate a much greater awareness of the ethical significance of their actions and decisions" (p. 152). Bebeau (1999) and Bebeau and Monson (2008) have pointed out that moral sensitivity is an awareness of the ethical issues that constitute a professional context and situation. This sensitivity consists of the skills associated with a diligent and appropriate ethical response and an ongoing willingness to activate one's moral apparatus and agency. This article contributes to this greater consciousness or ethical sensitivity and provides insights into the moral agency of school principals. Starratt (1991) suggests that, ultimately, "educational leaders have a moral responsibility to be proactive about creating an ethical environment for the conduct of education" (p. 187). Proactivity is certainly more likely with a greater awareness and elaboration of the agentic role of the school leader.

This article is a part of a larger exploratory study that examined Canadian principals' ($n = 177$) perspectives of moral agency and trust; their perceptions of ethical

problems, challenges, pressures, and influences; and the grounds for their ethical decision-making and their recovery of trust in schools. In this article, we explore school principals' moral agency and ethical decision-making using Starratt's (2005) framework of moral educational leadership. We describe the issues and challenges of moral agency through the varied, and often routine, experiences of ethical decision-making from a sample of Canadian school principals.

Moral agency

If agency is understood as the capacity for acting on behalf of others, then moral agency is conceived as a person's ability or capacity to perform as agent in a moral way. Moral agency is a person's ability to make moral judgments based on some commonly held notion of right and wrong, to do so on behalf of others, and to be held accountable for these actions (Angus, 2003). Moral agency requires that a leader's ways and means be consistent with what is seen as ethical or virtuous living. Therefore, school principals who act as moral agents have given attention to their own development of moral character, have taken on the responsibility of following the principles of ethics, have committed to ethical care for others, and have a sense of stewardship of others or of a principal cause (Hester & Killian, 2011, p. 96).

As moral agents, leaders are bound to pursue the aims of their organization without violating the rights of others or doing anything immoral. In addition, moral agents are also bound to do right, to pursue the good, to be ethically excellent, and to foster ethical behaviour in others (Angus, 2003). Moral agency, then, denotes accountability to others for one's own behaviour, as well as responsibility for the behaviour of others. In this light, moral agency needs to be understood as a relational concept. As moral agents, school leaders must determine the best ethical course of action within a complex web of relationships that make up the school organization.

Leithwood (1999) noted that school administrators tend to have a solid set of personal ethics developed from their personal values and from their professional experiences as teachers prior to entering administration, and that they are, in general, ethically motivated individuals. However, Shapiro and Stefkovich (2001) highlighted the complexity of ethical leadership through the lens of the ethic of profession, where personal, professional, and community codes of ethics are called into play when making ethical decisions in the best interest of children. Therefore, ethical responsibility for enacting moral leadership relies on both individual and relational capacities and contexts. Although it is obvious that leaders are both implicitly and explicitly charged with being ethical, the moral tone of the school is often set through the relationships between principals and members of their school community (Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2011). In other words, one might say that the moral tone of the school is co-constructed.

Researchers have distinguished different ethical perspectives for understanding and interpreting ethical leadership in schools (Langlois, 2004; Langlois & Lapointe, 2007; Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2001; Starratt, 1994). Starratt (1994) outlined three ethical approaches for school leadership—the ethics of justice, care, and critique. An ethic of justice focuses on rights, law, and policies, and concepts such as fairness, equality, and individual freedom (Noddings, 1999; Shapiro & Hassinger, 2007). An

ethic of care is described as relational and aligns with ideas of respect, love, and regard for others (Noddings, 2005; Rucinski & Bauch, 2006), and an ethic of critique is rooted in critical theory and aligns with principles of social justice and human dignity (Shapiro, 2006). Furman (2004) described an ethic of community as an additional perspective that evokes further principles of relationship, such as collaborative and communal processes. Shapiro and Stefkovich (2001) distinguished an ethic of profession that attends to, for example, professional codes of conduct and actions taken in the best interest of children. Taken together, the ethics of justice, critique, care, community, and profession can serve as an interconnected model or framework for ethical school leadership.

Recently, increasing principals' moral literacy—habits, skills, and competencies toward greater moral agency—has become an important research focus (Tuana, 2007). Similarly, researchers have asserted that moral competence in leadership helps to seek understanding and build harmony and trust among stakeholders (Kohn, 1997; Paul-Doscher & Normore, 2008). Stefkovich (2006) advised that school leaders need to become aware of how they make ethical decisions so "that there can be common ground even in multicultural, pluralistic society, and that, rather than impose their own values on students and teachers, school leaders should strive to reach a higher moral ground in making decisions" (p. 4). Moral agency is a complex and layered responsibility that requires that school principals act in different capacities, at different times, and with different people. We know of no singular formula for establishing moral agency that can lift a school to a higher moral ground; however, in this article, we suggest that moral agency plays out to varying degrees and in a variety of ways as principals engage in decision-making processes in their daily work.

Moral leadership

Moral leadership can best be understood as a two-part process involving personal moral behaviour and moral influence (Brown & Treviño, 2006). This process has been described as holding much promise for "enabling school administrators to lead in a manner that can best help teachers develop and empower themselves to teach and lead in the context of external pressures to reform schools" (Greenfield, 2004, p. 174). We suggest that varying degrees of moral leadership play out as principals enact their moral agency in at least two ways—first, through their attitudes about decision-making and their acumen for processing issues in a fashion consistent with their professional ethics; and second, in how they act on behalf of, and in the interests of, others throughout their daily work.

As indicated, educational leaders are responsible for more than their own moral behaviour. They are also accountable for the actions of those whom they are charged with leading and so are required to establish an ethical environment in their schools. Additionally, leaders can serve as aspirational models of ethical behaviour for other members of the learning community (Campbell, 1999). As Starratt (1991) suggests, ultimately "educational leaders have a moral responsibility to be proactive about creating an ethical environment for the conduct of education" (p. 187). Conversely, leaders can become products of their own creative and moral acts, as "ethical climates promote the moral development of leaders as well as followers, fostering their character and

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improving their ability to make and follow through on ethical choices" (Johnson, 2004, p. xxi). Enacting moral agency contributes to establishing ethical climates that support and foster further ethical behaviour for both followers and leaders.

Transformational leadership

As a link between the concepts of moral agency and moral leadership, *transformational leadership* connects the social implications of the moral imperative that is at the heart of both of these concepts. Moral agency and transformational leadership are enacted in and through social relationships with the goal of attaining a higher moral ground. Transformational leadership has a long history in research going back to Burns' (1978) writing on leadership and organizations. In this conception of leadership, leaders act along and within a continuum, from transactional processes of bartering, building, and negotiating, to transformational ways of being that may empower others to act toward a higher collective purpose. Few leaders engage solely at one end of the continuum, but rather act within and along the spectrum of leadership depending on the needs and the contexts of the organization (Bass & Riggio, 2006). In the field of educational administration, the idea of engaging principals as transformational leaders has held the attention of researchers for several decades (Foster, 1989; Leithwood, Jantzi, & Steinbach, 1999) and has become an aspirational model for educational leaders. Burns' (1978) early conceptualization of a transforming leader incorporated notions of moral agency as a potential catalyst for shifting the roles of followers and leaders within an organization, so that those who follow may engage as leaders and vice versa. For Burns, transformational leaders tap into the highest needs of their followers and engage in a mutually stimulating relationship that can result in social change through moral leadership.

Transformational leadership has been linked to the moral imperative or purpose behind school improvement (Fullan, 2003). Starratt (2004) argued that school leaders have a moral responsibility to establish conditions in the school in which an authentic education can be provided for all students—one that is connected to real issues and gives students a chance to work through real problems in a way that allows them to make meaning out of their own lives and contexts. In this way, school leaders have the potential to be ethical role models who can motivate and empower others to act in an ethical way during daily routines and who can also inspire others to act in service of something larger than themselves.

Ethical leaders: Five domains of responsibility

In this article, we provide a descriptive analysis of moral agency and ethical decision-making using the insights and experiences of a sample of Canadian school principals. We use Starratt's (2005) five domains of ethical leadership responsibility for moral educational leadership as a framework for viewing and analyzing the data. The five domains are described as a leader's responsibility 1) to engage as an ethical human being; 2) to respect civil rights and to act in the public trust; 3) to understand, know how to use, and know how to appropriately apply curriculum; 4) to develop and manage organizational structures to enable the workings of the school; and 5) to transform the school into an authentic learning community. In this model, each do-

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main progresses to the next and is fully subsumed within the next level of responsibility, meaning that the final responsibility as an educational leader is a culmination of the four previous levels of ethical leadership and reflects a higher ideal of leadership within the school. Moreover, the responsibility to act as an ethical and respectful human being is evident in all the successive levels of responsibility, such that leaders must always be acting as respectful human beings even as they are acting as educators or educational administrators. Starratt (2005) explained that the first four domains are generally enacted through transactional arrangements, while the fifth domain provides the platform for transformational leadership. This model has been used to provide a conceptual description of moral leadership in times of crisis and of the potential for developing proactive moral agency in leaders during times of national duress (Paul-Doscher & Normore, 2008). By using this model as a lens through which to analyze the data in this study, we aim to give a research-based description of the more routine and daily actions and attitudes of Canadian school principals' moral agency as reflected through their decision-making processes.

Methodology

There are three basic categories of ethical discourse: descriptive, normative, and prescriptive. Descriptive ethics provides empirical data to observe or describe the "ethics-in-use" of a person or group. Normative ethics explores the meta-ethical concepts, theories, warrants, and grounds of ethics (giving attention to meanings and conflicts within the ethical domain). Prescriptive ethics is focused on providing "ought to's" or ethical demands for persons or groups. Whereas descriptive ethics is about what behaviour "is," prescriptive ethics is about what behaviour "ought to be." In this article, we report on our descriptive ethics study, wherein we aimed to go beyond superficial descriptions and to look, rather, at principals' internal understandings of their decision-making processes (Ladd, 1957).

The participants sampled in this study (see Table 1) were Canadian principals from the ten provinces and three territories, identified by harvesting email and mailing addresses of principals and schools from various public domain and online sources, including links to all of the school boards across Canada (e.g., Canadian Education on the Web, 2007). The participating principals fit into four different age range categories (31–40, 41–50, 51–60, and 61 or more), with the majority (79%) being in the 41–60 age range. Gender representation was almost equal, with a slight prevalence of male principals. More than half of the participants were experienced educators with extensive experiences in principalship and significant experience with formal training in ethics, made up of university graduate and undergraduate courses in ethics, philosophy, or religious studies; professional development workshops or seminars in ethical and moral decision-making and counselling; or a combination of both.

For this exploratory study, our primary data collection tool was a survey that consisted of structured questionnaires with open-ended questions and demographic data items. Open-ended questions for the instrument were developed by the researchers based on suggestions and recommendations from an expert panel of principals, the relevant literature and adapted items from related instruments (Centre

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Table 1. Demographics of Respondents (*n* = 177)

Age range	%	Province	%
31–40 yrs	14	Alberta	20
41–50 yrs	37	Saskatchewan	23
51–60 yrs	42	Ontario	20
61 yrs or more	2	Others	37
Gender	%	Years of professional experience	%
Male	53	10 years or less	3
Female	45	11 to 20 years	27
No response	2	21 to 30 years	52
		31 years or more	15
Years of experience as a principal	%	Formal ethics training	%
5 years or less	31	Yes	53
6 to 10 years	35	No	25
11 to 15 years	14	Unsure	22
16 years or more	19		

for Corporate Excellence, 2007; Tschannen-Moran, 2004). The survey was field tested with a group of principals prior to distribution in both mail-out and online forms. Hard copies of the survey were sent to approximately 2,000 principals; invitations to participate in online survey were sent to approximately 3,000 principals across Canada. Both hard copy and electronic samples were unique and there were no overlaps between them.

We were disappointed in the return rate (3.5% or *n* = 177); a response much smaller than expected after the timeframe of over two months. It is difficult to know how the low response rate may have affected our findings and whether or not those who did respond were of a particular subset of the population with respect to disposition relative to the ethical challenges of principalship. We believe the low response rate was indicative of principals' extremely busy professional lives, lack of personal contact between the researchers and participants, and technical issues (including spam filter blockage and outdated address data). While economies of online surveys are attractive, reports of blocked emails and ease of dismissal led to a regrettably poor response. The study design and resources did not afford follow up on either surface or online surveys, again reducing response rates. However, we considered the responses sufficient for the needs of this descriptive aspect of the study; but we are appropriately modest in our generalizations.

This article selectively discusses only those questions that pertain to the themes of moral agency in the ethical decision-making of selected Canadian school principals. We asked respondents to provide us with their insights, stories, experience, and advice in response to twelve open-ended questions broadly grouped into the following four categories: a) inclusion of others in ethical decision-making; b) their relationships with others when confronted with an ethical dilemma; c) personal characteristics for moral agency; and d) the role of influential relationships in decision-

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making. Responses to open-ended questions were received by the researchers and coded inductively according to the dominant themes recurring in the responses (MacMillan & Schumacher, 2006). Codes were then combined into categories, and categories into patterns or concepts (Lichtman, 2010). Analysis of open-ended responses provided rich descriptive data for the study.

Research findings

Overall, the types of ethical dilemmas described by the responding principals included issues such as dealing with gossip among staff; staff complaining about others or making unprofessional comments about students and or parents; the misuse of sick days for personal time, such as travel; some teachers not treating all children fairly; and teachers failing to deal with conflict in professionally appropriate ways. We used the five domains of ethical responsibility (Starratt, 2005) to analyze participants' responses and to provide a view into the daily and often routine decision-making processes of these principals as they negotiate multiple roles and social relationships in their work.

Responsibility as a human being

In this domain, leaders tend to act out of an ethic of care (Noddings, 2005). The principals in this study were generally concerned with acting with respect, care, and compassion to preserve the dignity of the others with whom they worked. Further, issues related to loyalty and trust were paramount for the principals as they enacted their responsibility to be ethical human beings.

This responsibility was most notably reflected in the questions principals answered about ethical characteristics that influence ethical decision-making. Participants' descriptions of their decisions reflected their general belief that honesty, integrity, care for others, and attending to equity and justice are essential in decision-making practices. For example, one participant highlighted the importance of being "honest, true, understanding, compassionate; doing what is right even under pressure; doing things for the good of others" and another stated that an ethical principal "follows through with commitments [and is] someone who is honest and trustworthy, listens to both sides of a story and is fair." In general, participants noted that they tried to be inclusive when making ethical decisions in their work and when making collaborative decisions. One principal expressed a desire to "treat everyone with respect, giving voice to all those involved."

Responsibility as a citizen and public servant

As citizens and public servants, school leaders act responsibly toward the achievement of common good and they uphold civic rights within the school and as part of a larger community. Moreover, leaders establish the school organization based on principles of democratic discourse and engage the larger community as part of the democratic processes in the school.

This domain of responsibility was the most evident throughout responses across the four categories. Analysis of the responses revealed an awareness of the role of the principal as a public servant and of the moral duties that accompany such a re-

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sponsibility. For example, in response to the question of how decisions were made in a school, one principal revealed that "decisions which impact the full staff and are not mandated from the district/department are generally made collaboratively." This response suggested an awareness of the limits of autonomy and the different levels of hierarchy in the leadership structures of a public institution. Principals' desire to generate a more democratic decision-making process was also evident, as expressed by one principal, who explained that "in areas where the opinions of all the stakeholders must be considered, [these must be] shared in order to get a win-win solution." However, respondents also expressed a need for discernment in their desire to develop a democratic culture. For example, one principal noted:

> I try to make all decisions as collaboratively as possible. In my experience, the more people know about an issue and see the reasons for things happening, the easier it is for them to accept it and feel good about being a part of it. Having said that, there are clearly instances where it is inappropriate and unprofessional to bring other people in on a decision. The key is knowing which decisions fall into which category.

Another respondent similarly described that collaborative decision-making often hinged on "realizing that some decisions can only be made by me—thus the importance of my colleagues' trusting my judgment."

Responsibility as an educator

The responsibilities in this domain are many: school leaders have a responsibility to ensure that teachers know the curriculum they are supposed to teach, that they are able to communicate this curriculum well and in various ways, and that they know their students well enough to provide authentic learning experiences that relate to their lives and interests. School leaders also have a responsibility to create opportunities for empowering teachers as curriculum leaders and to protect the ethic of learning as they engage with their community as professional and life-long reflective learners themselves (Starratt, 2005).

Analyzed in terms of principals' responsibilities as educators, many responses reflected the principals' awareness of their responsibility for ensuring that all students received high quality learning experiences and showed that teachers and other school leaders maintained a strong capacity for engaging as learners themselves. Many respondents noted that they often consulted with teachers about ethical decisions, because they saw teachers as the most equipped for making decisions related to classrooms. However, one principal described that this tendency for consultation was mediated in some instances:

> I think because we both have close personal contact with our students, and because we frequently talk about decisions to be made, my VP and I collectively attempt to make the best moral, ethical decisions within our school. The teachers, because they are involved with the students in a different role, often see the student in an academic role only and do not truly understand the students' deeper "stories."

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These comments reflected the leader's sense of responsibility to act as an educator who ensures that the students' best interests are served; for this principal, this can sometimes mean making decisions without teacher input. Some principals suggested that they were faced with ethical dilemmas when dealing with teachers who did not behave ethically or who did not act in a professional manner with respect to employee benefits. For example, one principal expressed a tension around making ethical decisions in relation to teachers who adopt "a union mentality in a professional association." However, in other responses, there was a perception that teachers were a valuable resource for making ethical decisions. For example, one principal noted that "senior teachers who had demonstrated high integrity" were beneficial to the decision-making process.

Responsibility as an educational administrator

In this domain, the ethic of justice comes into play, as the leader ensures equitable structures and practices to enable all students to learn. Interestingly, responses to questions about moral agency and decision-making were not readily attributable to the domain of responsibility as an educational administrator. Few respondents articulated their ethical dilemmas in a way that could be attributed to organizational structure. However, some organizational processes did resonate as ethical dilemmas for this sample. For example, the responsibilities of a principal were evident in respondents' roles in organizational decisions about safety, budget, or individual staff issues. Some principals who tried to establish more democratic structures for decision-making were sometimes faced with resistance from the teachers and staff. As one principal described:

> [W]herever possible, I try to involve the staff in developing protocols and procedures for making decisions. I am finding the staff reluctant to participate, viewing this as an administrative duty. As a result, I have started to develop a plan, present it to the staff for feedback, then revise the plan.

The one theme that did resonate throughout the respondents' answers was summarized by one principal: "I think all decisions are made according to what is best for the children." However, one caveat—which explained the role of the principal as an educational administrator—was expressed by one of the participants, who said, "Each individual staff member has that authority [to make a decision in the best interests of students]; each child is taught how to handle that authority, and when that authority is questioned, the principal must make the call."

Responsibility as an educational leader

At this highest level of responsibility, the educational leader "calls on students and teachers to reach beyond self-interest for a higher ideal—something heroic" (Starratt, 2005, p. 130). This is where transformational leadership is enacted and where leaders can begin to empower others to build greater moral capacity across the school, as teachers and others in the community engage as moral leaders (Starratt, 2005). In general, the responses analyzed for this article reflected a desire for a collaborative model of ethical decision-making, but the responses did not necessarily describe an

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intention of transformational leadership toward a higher moral ideal. The idea that the principal is the role model for supporting teachers in making good decisions was evident. For example, one respondent described how the principal "has to model, encourage, and support others to make good decisions in the best interest of children." Another respondent similarly expressed an understanding of the important agentic nature of role modeling:

> [M]y action or lack of action, my honesty or lack of honesty, my integrity or lack of integrity *often* provides others inspiration to uphold ethical behaviour or permission to act with less ethical integrity. It's the burden of the job, I believe.

Another respondent indicated that "the principal holds the most moral authority in the school. He sets the tone for staff and students. He/she is the person who creates the atmosphere of trust."

Many of the principals indicated the importance of modelling their moral agency as a means for encouraging others to engage their own moral agency in the best interests of all children. Although in general they described themselves as collaborative and inclusive of others in the decision-making process, there was a sense that, in the end, the principal should be the one to absorb the cost of decisions and must set the tone for the moral environment in the school. Some principals relied on their faith and religious upbringing as a way to establish their own moral code. Others turned to colleagues, professional resources such as magazines and books, and university professors and textbooks to develop their set of personal ethics that guided them in their professional decision-making. Ethics was an important focus for these principals, as captured in the statement, "I believe ethics are not optional—I rely upon my child-centered approach and the strength of interpersonal relationships when making decisions."

Discussion

In general, the principals in this study described aiming for collaborative and inclusive ethical decision-making processes in their schools; this required strong levels of trust and a foundation of goodwill among those in their school. Principals commented on how they were sometimes hindered by structures and processes beyond their control or by the need to make decisions that might be unpopular with staff, but that they had deemed were right. As documented in the extensive research on trust in educational leadership (Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Kutsyuruba, Walker, & Noonan, 2010, 2011; Tschannen-Moran, 2004) the principals in this study recognized that it was essential to establish and maintain trust among their staff to buffer those times when they had to make unpopular decisions or could not be as collaborative as their staff sometimes desired.

Our analysis of survey responses revealed that, as public employees, principals often have to walk a difficult line between developing a culture of collaborative decision-making among professionals and adhering to the rules and prescriptions that often characterize a public bureaucracy. The line between leader and manager is perhaps not so clearly drawn for school principals (Bush, 2011; Hessinger, 2003), and so the ways school principals in different contexts experience the ethical challenges

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nested within the many technical and managerial issues of school leadership (Starratt, 2004) is a rich area for further research.

Analyzing responses through the moral educational leadership framework accentuated the complexity of ethical leadership for school principals. The use of this framework confirms that ethical school leadership can be interpreted from the multiple, and often interconnected, ethical perspectives of justice, care, critique (Starratt, 1994), community (Furman, 2004), and profession (Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2001). The ethical responsibilities outlined in Starratt's (2005) framework were helpful for describing more concretely the complexity of the school principal's agentic role in the processes of ethical decision-making.

Moreover, we learned from the responses of the principals in this study that as a relational concept, moral agency is intertwined with the important role of the principal in establishing and sustaining school cultures that are built on trust (Noonan, Walker, & Kutsyuruba, 2008). As we have described (Kutsyuruba, Walker, & Cherkowski, 2014), developing solid ethical grounds on which to establish trust among stakeholders is an important aspect of the moral agency of school principals. From an organizational perspective, Watson, Freeman, and Parmar (2007) advance the conceptual argument that moral agency is socially constructed, relational and connected, and that "what determines our future is the morally imagined stories we can mutually create about what we want to be—an interactive virtue ethics … moral agency is an interpersonal project of self and community creation" (Watson, Freeman, & Parmar, 2007, p. 334). For school principals, then, moral agency can be understood as an ongoing communal creation with others about what kind of school is desired. Principals, and those whom they lead and teach, are engaged in an important relationship of constantly creating a shared vision of the school, and this often happens through the routine, daily decision-making processes that fall within the school principal's multiple responsibilities.

The principals in this study tended to describe themselves as ethically motivated individuals who work toward the best interests of children in their schools and whose personal codes of ethics aligned with many of the professional values of school leadership (Leithwood, 1999). However, the moral imperative of transforming school cultures for an engaged, authentic, and meaningful education for all students requires educational leaders to move beyond their own individual ethical behaviour and to influence others to serve a higher moral ideal (Sergiovanni, 1996; Starratt, 2004). As Starratt (2005) noted:

> [H]onoring of the ethical responsibilities of all domains creates the foundation for the leader's invitation to move beyond transactional ethics and engage in transformative ethics. When the community responds to that invitation, it begins to own a communal pursuit of higher, altruistic ideals. (p. 133)

Starratt's (2005) framework highlighted the agentic role of the principal within the multiple responsibilities of school leadership and the need for further research on how moral agency influences, cultivates, and sustains transformational ethical cultures in schools.

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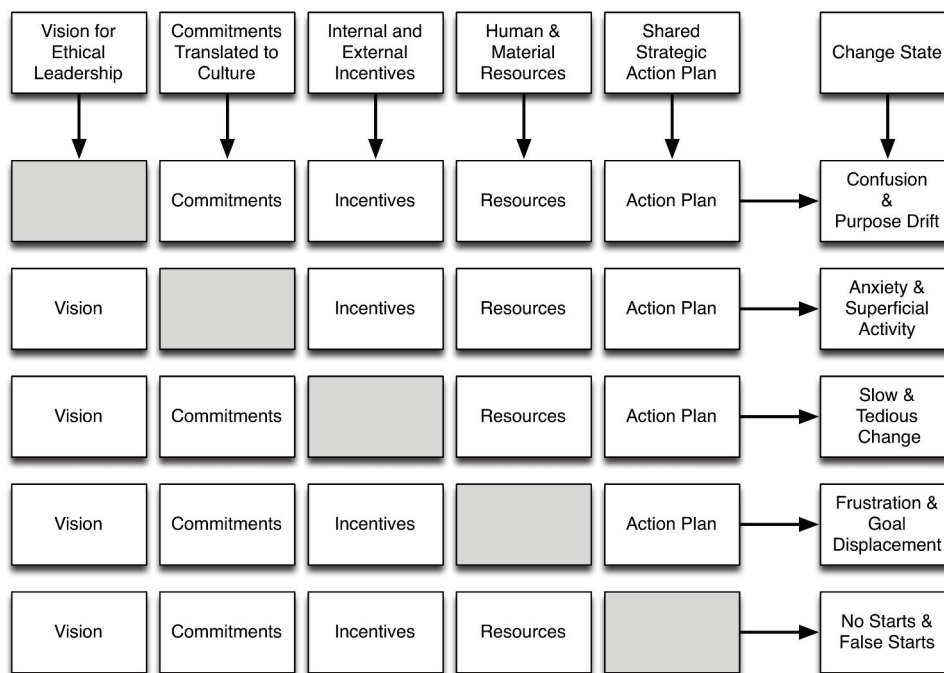
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In this study, responses indicated an awareness of the need for moral role modelling from the principal in order to establish a strong ethical culture in schools. A few comments hinted at principals' desires to find ways to empower teachers to take on greater moral leadership roles. Some of the principals indicated that there was a hesitancy, or even a resistance, on the part of teachers to becoming engaged as decision-makers and to exerting their influence as informal leaders in the school. Initiating and sustaining discourse about ethical decision-making at all levels of school leadership seemed to be a moral issue or challenge. Bird and Waters (1989) describe a moral muteness in organizations, where leaders do not initiate conversation and discussion about ethical issues with their employees. Begley (2006) noted that establishing a keen awareness of personal values and a sensitivity to the values of others is an important aspect of creating the space for dialogues about shared and competing values in schools. Understanding how to develop and sustain ethical capacities among aspiring and practicing school leaders remains an important aspect of research in ethics and educational leadership (Begley & Stefkovich, 2007; Normore, 2004; Rucinski & Bauch, 2006; Shapiro, 2006). Starratt and Leeman (2011) suggested that ethical preparation and ongoing development require a sustained attention to the complexity of the human interactions that make up the daily processes that principals negotiate in their work. Accordingly, we see the need for further research on how to support principals, at all stages of their career, in developing the capacities for the kind of moral agency that encourages the vision, commitment, incentives, resources, and action plan to transform school culture.

Although the daily decisions described by these principals could be assumed to be a routine part of the work of leading a school, the different levels of Starratt's (2005) model allowed us to see the complexity of the decision-making process. Walker (2011) depicted the generic elements required for the infusion of ethics throughout an organization's culture (see Figure 1). These elements are complementary to Starratt's five domains of ethical responsibility and they deepen the discussion of the complexity and multilayered nature of ethical decision-making for school principals. As shown in Figure 1, we have adapted a commonly used "elements of change" heuristic to suggest that it is both inappropriate and simplistic to place responsibility for the ethicality of a school environment entirely at the feet of the school principal. School lifeworlds are more complex than this. However, as principals use the best of their ethical intelligence, relational acumen, and trust-brokering skills, they exert a strong influence on whether the desired and envisioned ethical culture is achieved.

As a moral agent, the principal will charge her or his constituents with translating ethical values and practices into the fabric of the school culture. To sustain such commitments, both incentives and disincentives need to be developed, usually tacitly and through psychological contracts aimed at avoiding ethical weariness or letting integrity slip away. It is the principal's agentic responsibility to make space for and honour positive ethical attitudes and behaviour, as well as to provide or advocate for the material and human resources for the school learning community to do their work. The principal, as moral agent, needs to be the galvanizer and animator of intentional and practical strategies that ensure the development of a strong ethical cul-

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ture in the school. While the principal and his or her colleagues are inextricably linked to each of these elements (represented by the columns in Figure 1), there is a need for others to respond and do their part as well. The point is that it is both the agentic leader and the condition of ethical leadership that sustain an ethical culture in the school. The school principal is the principal moral agent responsible for actualizing this. Where particular elements (columns) fail, as depicted in Figure 1, there will be consequences for and distractions from the collective goal that aspires to achieve and sustain an ethical and transforming culture in the school.

Figure 1. Elements associated with achieving and sustaining ethical cultures (Walker, 2011)

Vision for Ethical Leadership	Commitments Translated to Culture	Internal and External Incentives	Human & Material Resources	Shared Strategic Action Plan		Change State
	Commitments	Incentives	Resources	Action Plan	→	Confusion & Purpose Drift
Vision		Incentives	Resources	Action Plan	→	Anxiety & Superficial Activity
Vision	Commitments		Resources	Action Plan	→	Slow & Tedious Change
Vision	Commitments	Incentives		Action Plan	→	Frustration & Goal Displacement
Vision	Commitments	Incentives	Resources		→	No Starts & False Starts

Conclusion

Moral agency, explored in this study as ethical decision-making, is a complex aspect of school leadership. In a fashion complementary to the quantitative work of Langlois, Lapointe, Valois, and de Leeuw (2014), we used Starratt's (2005) framework for moral educational leadership to analyze data on ethical decision-making processes among Canadian school principals. This provided a description of some of the daily, or routine, ethical challenges facing school principals and highlighted how principals relate to others in interactive processes of ethical decision-making in different areas of responsibility in their work. In part, this study responds to a need for more descriptive research that highlights the social relations among school leaders and others in their communities (Greenfield, 2004) and offers insights into the deliberative content of agentic work of school principals.

The framework we used provided a lens for analyzing the potential for principals to engage in transformational leadership, as played out through moral agency in different domains in their work. More research is needed to gain a clearer understanding of how principals' leadership can serve as a catalyst for building moral capacity in

school cultures. Furthermore, as Rest (1986) and Bebeau and Monson (2008) have indicated, ethical agents need to be encouraged to develop their dialogical competences and capacities for moral discourse, beginning with becoming wide-awake to the ethical issues and challenges that permeate their day-to-day work lives and for which they must assume significant subjective and objective responsibility.

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