

Ethics Study Team Report

Paul T. Begley
Liza Conyers
Nancy Tuana

March 31, 2008

Ethics Study Team Report

The Charge to the Ethics Study Team:

The members of the Ethics Study Team were invited to provide leadership for a component of the College's Strategic Planning effort. The charge to this team was to explore what might be done in the area of professional ethics over a five year time span. As background, the steering committee provided the following information:

- there is an ethical / normative dimension to every educational practice and policy
- policy makers as well as practitioners need to understand ethical standards and their application
- researchers also deal with ethical questions in the design and conduct of studies
- cutting edge work on professional ethics is already taking place at Penn State
- the Spencer Foundation has indicated an interest funding research on professional ethics

Study Team Process and Timelines:

The members of the originally recruited study team included Paul Begley, Liza Conyers, Ken Strike, and Nancy Tuana. Because of the infrequency of Ken Strike's attendance here on campus this semester, he requested to be reclassified as a resource to the team and that request was granted.

The remaining three members of the team met on Wednesday February 6 to discuss the project and make specific plans for collecting the required data. Ken Strike was personally briefed on the outcomes of this meeting by the lead member of the study team. The following action items were identified and subsequently carried out:

- The study team members developed a protocol for collecting input on professional ethics from interested parties. This took the form of an on-line survey instrument that was disseminated to the College of Education community via e-mail along with an invitation to participate. Forty nine individuals completed the on-line survey. Almost 60% of respondents were members of faculty. See appendix A for a display and analysis of the data subsequently collected.
- An open meeting was scheduled for Wednesday afternoon February 27 in Rackley 303. Invitations to participate were distributed via e-mail to all members of the College of Education community. Twelve individuals attended the open meeting. The data collected through the on-line survey was presented during meeting as a stimulus for discussion.
- A "five page report" (this document) was to be developed by the end of March. This report was to include: a definition and elaboration on the nature of professional ethics within the generalized context of moral literacy, a summary of the data collection processes employed, a summary of the people, resources and existing projects within the college community, and a proposal outlining specific strategies for the pursuit of scholarship on professional ethics across the college and university during the next five years and including a budget.

Discussion of Findings:

Moral Literacy.

“The absence of moral literacy is a glaring omission from our national efforts to strengthen education. U.S. Secretary of Education, Margaret Spellings, referring to the *High School Reform Initiative*, explains that enhanced education is not just an “education issue”. It is also an economic issue, a civic issue, a social issue, and a national security issue” (2006, p.1). If we have learned anything at all from the economic impact of the ethics violations of companies like Enron (Brewer, 2004) or the social and civic impacts of the recent Congressional ethics violations (Feldmann, 2006), we should certainly have learned that to fully answer the challenge of a changing world, *we cannot ignore the essential role of moral literacy in our children’s education.*” (Tuana, 2007, p. 365)

“Moral literacy should be no different than math or reading literacy. Since all of us as individuals, as professionals, and as citizens will need to make numerous moral decisions throughout our lifetime, what stronger argument can there be for making moral literacy a component of our formal educational experience? What better way to help strengthen education for the 21st Century? ...An overview of the fundamental elements of moral literacy. These involve three basic components: ethics sensitivity, ethical reasoning skills, and moral imagination. It is important to realize that all of these abilities interact and mutually reinforce one another. The development of an understanding of ethical reasoning skills can serve to heighten ethics sensitivity, and so on. While there is no fixed formula for the order in which these traits are taught, what is fixed is that *moral literacy requires the development of all three of these competencies.* Hence, education for moral literacy must include them all.” (Tuana, 2007, p. 366) For a more detailed discussion of the concept of moral literacy, see Appendix B of this report.

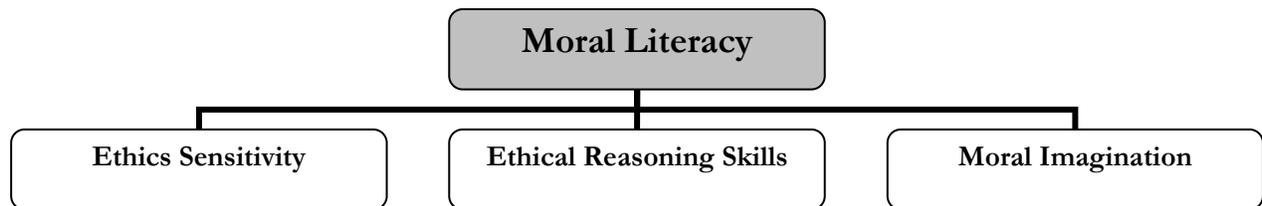


Figure 1: The Elements of Moral Literacy (Tuana, 2007, p. 366)

Values, Ethics and Valuation Processes.

Values, ethics, and valuation processes relate to education and educational leadership in several important ways. These relationships have important implications for teaching about values and incorporating moral literacy frameworks into university level teaching. Perhaps the most fundamental way in which values relate to education and educational leadership is as an influence on the cognitive processes of individuals and groups of individuals. It is important, perhaps essential, for persons in teaching and educational leadership roles to understand how values reflect underlying human motivations and shape the subsequent attitudes, speech, and actions of personnel (Kohlberg and Turiel, 1971; Hodgkinson, 1978; Begley, 2006). Begley’s

conception of authentic forms of leadership (2006), emphasizes this capacity as something that begins with self-knowledge and then becomes extended to a sensitivity to the perspectives of others.

A second way in which valuation processes relate to educational practices is as a guide to action, particularly as supports to resolving ethical dilemmas. Ethics and valuation models are highly relevant to educational leadership as rubrics, benchmarks, socially justified standards of practice, and templates for moral action. These may be used by the individual leader or in more collective ways by groups of people. A typical application for ethics in this administrative context is as a personal guide to action, particularly as supports to resolving ethical dilemmas. A number of other scholars have also conducted research and published in this area. These include Begley and Johansson (1998), Stefkovich (2006), and Branson (2006). These scholars have each developed well documented processes for the analysis of dilemma situations and development of ethical responses.

A third and more strategic and collective application for ethics. It is common in organizational settings, including universities, for ethical postures to be adopted with a strategic organizational intent—for example, as a focus for building consensus around a shared social or organizational objective. To illustrate, a school district superintendent might choose “ethic of community” (Furman 2003) as a rallying meta-value to focus the energies of personnel on collective action. Or, ethical notions such as “due process” (Strike, Haller, and Soltis, 1998) or “social justice” (Shapiro and Stefkovich, 2005) might be used as the objective for focusing the reform of school district processes in support of students with special needs. These more collective and strategic applications of ethics may very well be the more common manifestation of this value type in the administration of schools and school districts, at the government level, as well as in the corporate sector. In this sense leaders literally use ethics as leadership tools to support actions taken, model ideal practice, and / or promote particular kinds of organizational or societal activity. However, as will be argued, these strategic adoptions of ethical postures may or may not be ethical.

Begley (2006) describes the influence of values within individuals as the internal psychological reflections of more distilled levels of motivation (e.g. a concern for personal interests, consequences, or consensus) that become tangible to an observer in the form of attitudes, speech, and actions. Thus, values in their various forms, including ethics, can be thought of as conscious or unconscious influences on attitudes, actions, and speech. However, it is important to note that valuation processes can involve more than ethics. Values can take different forms and can be best categorized according to their motivational grounding. Ethics, as a particular form of values, as opposed to the scholarly discipline, are normative social ideals or codes of conduct usually grounded in the cultural experience of particular societies. In that sense they are a sort of *uber* form of social consensus. Most societies have core ethics equivalent to the American notions of democracy, freedom of speech, and the priority of individual rights. Those of us steeped in the traditions of such classic Western philosophical thought can easily make the mistake of assuming that our most cherished ethical postures are universal. However, they seldom are, especially as interpreted from culture to culture. Ethics in their purest forms tend to be expressed in a relatively context-stripped form that conveys the essence of the normative behavior. Indeed, in some forms and social applications they are treated as absolute values. This

inclination to view ethics as some sort of absolute value is sometimes exacerbated by evidence of consensus across cultures on certain ethics like respect for human rights, honesty, and democracy. And, indeed there are probably some ethics of the human condition that approach a condition of universal relevance. However, the devil is literally in the details when it comes to ethical postures. The interpretation of meaning associated with an ethic can vary greatly from society to society. Simply pondering the contrasting notions of what constitutes democracy in countries like Sweden, the United States, and China illustrates this point. Using ethical postures as a basis for making social choices requires the inclusion of a dialogic component, except perhaps in the most culturally homogeneous of contexts. This is because of our increasingly culturally diverse societies and a more globalized world. This is not to argue against the relevance and importance of ethics to leadership actions. It is more a caveat to their proper use.

Ethics based postures are highly relevant for guiding appropriate responses to complex organizational situations, but they may not be sufficient in themselves for a comprehensive analysis and understanding of human motivations. In the practical professional context of educational administration, school leaders need more than just normative ideology, as relevant as that may be to educational situations. They require frameworks and ways of thinking that will encompass the full range of human motivations and valuation processes encountered in school settings. To understand and accommodate the full range of human motivations, which are understood to be an important influence on the adoption of particular values (Begley 2006), one must think in terms of *values* and *valuation processes* where ethics (as opposed to the field of inquiry called Ethics) are one category or component within a broader spectrum of value types. Furthermore, a full appreciation of ethics should include more than just a concern for the high ground of ethics-motivated action. The study of ethics should be as much about the life-long personal struggle to be ethical, about failures to be ethical, the inconsistencies of ethical postures, the masquerading of self-interest and personal preference as ethical action, and the dilemmas which occur in everyday and professional life when one ethic trumps another.

The application of any ethic occurs within a normative and cultural context. Ethical postures and frameworks are often presented as abstract concepts stripped of the contextual details that would give them relevance and specificity in particular settings and in support of particular roles. This can result in a number of problems for those that are interested in promoting moral literacy and teaching about values and ethics. The most obvious problem is that an ethic stripped of context requires interpretation as it is applied to a particular social or cultural context. This can be a serious challenge in culturally diverse societies where, for example, headgear (e.g. Sikh turban) is sometimes more than just a hat, or daggers are religious symbols and not so much a weapon. Or consider how a “focus on mission” as a professional ethical posture would mean radically different things to a school principal as compared to an infantry officer. Moreover, human nature being what it is, individuals, groups and societies are more often than not inclined to interpret ethics in ways that are appropriate to their preferences and traditions rather than any commitment to the social inclusion of minorities. In extreme forms, these interpretations can extend to preserving self-interests at the expense of the freedom of others. If the moral deliberation is being carried out by a person in a professional role, the process becomes even more complicated because professionals are also expected to be agents of society or of their profession. So, their pursuit of moral literacy involves more than addressing their own belief systems.

There is a lot of merit in speaking of ethical actions within a specific professional context or through the use of heuristic applications of ethical postures appropriate to a professional or personal context. There are several examples of this that can be used as illustrations. Furman (2004) uses the “ethic of community” as a focus point for ethical educational practice in North American schools. Stefkovich (2006; Stefkovich and Shapiro, 2003) adopts the notion of “best interests of students” as a focus for her professional ethics in education. Begley (2006) speaks of “authentic leadership” as an approach to presenting ethical leadership practices and moral literacy in a manner that has relevance for people working in school leadership situations. However, even these context grounded heuristic applications require definition and the establishment of consensus on meaning. The innovative dimension being proposed here for college and university teaching is the advisability of careful selection and adoption of professionally and contextually relevant metaphors to make the objectives of moral literacy and ethical leadership more understandable, compelling, and achievable.

A final caveat: One has only to survey the newspaper or work in an organization or live in a community for a few years to readily detect situations where ethics based postures can be unethical and socially unjust. For example, ethical postures may be *unethical* when a cultural ethic is imposed on others, an ethic is used to justify otherwise reprehensible action, an ethical posture veils a less defensible value, or when an ethic is used to trump a basic human right. The implication is that using ethical postures is not always *ethical* action. Such is the nature of ethics when they are adopted as guides to action. Trans-rational values of any sort, and ethics in particular, are rather vulnerable to multiple interpretations in application from one social context to another. When unexamined values are applied in arbitrary ways, they can be anything but ethical. The essential, and often absent, component that makes adherence to a value genuinely ethical is dialogue. For these reasons unexamined ethics or values accepted at face value without prior deliberation of meaning represent a particular category of social or collective values of a trans-rational nature that may not be consistent with moral leadership processes. It should be apparent that in order to cultivate the ability to distinguish the difference between using ethics and being ethical, we need the capacity to discriminate actual intentions within ourselves and among others. This is not moral relativism, nor is it value absolutism, it is critical thinking and moral literacy. For a more detailed discussion of these issues please see Appendix C of this report.

Existing Expertise: People, Resources and Projects.

Appendix A to this report provides a detailed display and analysis of the survey data collected from 49 members of the College of Education community. The responses to questions 5, 7, 8, and 9 provide information on the existing resources in terms of people, resources and ongoing projects within the College of Education. The *Willower Center for the Study of Leadership and Ethics* and the *Rock Ethics Institute* were frequently identified as primary sources of information and expertise on the subject of professional ethics. The individuals identified as resources included Paul Begley, Nancy Tuana, Jacqueline Stefkovich, Kathy Bieschke, Susan Hunt, Jim Nolan and Brandon Hunt. The Values and Educational Leadership Conference sponsored annually by the Willower Center was identified as a resource by several respondents. Respondents also made reference to the special events (workshops and seminars) sponsored by the Rock Ethics Institute throughout the year. Finally, several respondents made reference to specific courses taught by Paul Begley and Jacqueline Stefkovich.

Recommendations for Strategic Action:

The study team is proposing a six tiered strategy for scholarly inquiry on the subject of ethics and moral literacy within the College of Education community. The six tiers of this proposal integrate existing projects and expertise and funding in combination with several new initiatives and new funding allocations. The intent is that these initiatives will be interdisciplinary in focus, providing the opportunity for involvement across all departments within the College of Education as well as the building of connection with other university-wide units, departments and faculties.

1. Responsible Conduct of Research Project

Penn State Dean Eva Pell has been quoted as stating that we cannot expect to teach compliance. The implication, with which we heartily agree, is that we most actively promote and develop moral literacy in relevant professional contexts. One of the most obviously relevant contexts for a university is the conduct of research. The intent of this proposed project is the establishment and funding of a graduate assistantship position for five years within the Willower Center for the Study of Leadership and Ethics. The role of this new GA would include the following: the identification and collection of resources and information relevant to the responsible conduct of research, the development and delivery of curriculum and presentations for faculty and students focused on the responsible conduct of research, the collection of base-line data on research practices at Penn State, and the development of a Spencer Grant proposal for further research on this subject.

New Funding: \$25K per year for five years.

2. Community and College Based Small Scale Research Projects on Ethics and Moral Literacy

A second new initiative we are proposing involves the establishment of annual funding in support of small scale research projects relating to ethics and moral literacy to be carried out within the College of Education and local school districts. The management of this fund would be carried out by the Willower Center. We envisage five grants annually of \$5000 per year for five years. Both students and faculty would be eligible to apply for these grants.

New Funding: \$25K per year for five years.

3. Annual Moral Literacy Colloquium

The third tier of our proposed strategic response involves the continuation of an existing pattern of activity. The Rock Ethics Institute and the Willower Center for the Study of Leadership and Ethics have for the past two years annually sponsored one day moral literacy colloquiums. The 2006 event focused on identifying moral literacy resources to be used by K-12 teachers. The 2007 event shifted the focus to teaching at the university level. The tangible outcomes of these events include several compilations of downloadable resources (see Willower Center website <http://www.ed.psu.edu/UCEACSLE/>), conference papers based on the colloquium delivered by several faculty and students at national conferences, and two special issues of refereed journals. We are proposing the institutionalization of this event as a permanent part of the College of Education program in support of professional ethics.

Existing Funding: No new funds required.

4. Annual Values and Educational Leadership Conference

The annual conference sponsored by the Willower Center for the Study of Leadership and Ethics stands out as the most tangible evidence of our scholarship and creative professional work in this field since 1996. Since the summer of 1996 a considerable amount of intellectual momentum has developed in the field of values and ethics within Canada and the United States. We think our Willower Center can justifiably claim some credit for this phenomenon. Consider that in the thirteen years the center has existed it has annually hosted successful conferences, three that took place in Toronto, three in Charlottesville and two delivered in Barbados, and three at Penn State University and one in Victoria, Canada. Average attendance has been from 100 to 125 participants. More than 70 papers are typically delivered at the conference and, as has become our practice, the conference proceedings were published on a compact disk distributed to all registered participants. This annual conference has become an institution. The 13th annual conference will take place October 1 - 4, 2008, one again in Victoria, British Columbia. The designated location for the 2009 conference is the Nitanny Lion Inn. See the Willower Center web site for further details. <http://www.ed.psu.edu/UCEACSLE/Conference08/index.htm>

Existing Funding: No further funds required.

5. Refereed Publications: Values and Ethics of Educational Administration (VEEA)

VEEA is a refereed journal established in September, 2002. This journal is published quarterly, both in traditional paper format, as well as online. Back issues are archived and readily downloadable by the public. VEEA is published by the Willower Center for the Study of Leadership and Ethics of UCEA, which was established as a University Council for Educational Administration (UCEA) Program Center in June 1996. In 2003, the Rock Ethics Institute at The Pennsylvania State University became affiliated with the journal. VEEA is dedicated to promoting and disseminating a broad range of scholarly inquiry relating to the areas of values and ethics, and their relationship to theory and practice in educational administration.

Existing Funding: No further funds required.

6. Compilation of Resources for Teachers and School Leaders

The websites of both the Willower Center for the Study of Leadership and Ethics and the Rock Ethics Institute have become a repository for resources and reading lists on subjects related to values, ethics, and moral literacy. Most of these resources are produced by graduate students carrying out project work during the summer that is sponsored by the Rock Ethics Institute.

Please see the respective web sites: <http://www.ed.psu.edu/UCEACSLE/> and <http://rocketics.psu.edu/>

Existing Funding: No further funds required.

References

- Begley, P.T. (2006) "Self-knowledge, capacity and sensitivity: Prerequisites to authentic leadership by school principals", *Journal of Educational Administration*. Vol. 44 No. 6,
- Begley, P.T. and Johansson, O. (1998), "The values of school administration: Preferences, ethics and conflicts", *The Journal of School Leadership* Vol. 8 No.4, pp. 399-422.
- Begley, P. T. & Stefkovich, J. (2007) Integrating values and ethics into post secondary teaching for leadership development: Principles, concepts and strategies. *Journal of Educational Administration*. 45,(4), 398-412.
- Branson, C. (2006) "Effects of structured self-reflection on the development of authentic leadership practices among Queensland primary school principals", *Educational Management Administration and Leadership*, Vol. 35 No 2, pp. 227 – 248.
- Brewer, Lynn and Matthew Scott Hansen, 2004, *Confessions of an Enron Executive: A Whistleblower's Story*, AuthorHouse Publishing, Bloomington, IN.
- Feldmann, Linda, 2006, Scandal in Congress: The political fallout of Rep. Foley's Resignation, *The Christian Science Monitor*, October 2. Available at: <http://www.csmonitor.com/2006/1002/p03s02-uspo.html>.
- Furman, G. (2003). "Moral leadership and the ethic of community". *Values and Ethics in Educational Administration*, Vol. 2, No.1, pp. 1-8.
- Hodgkinson, C. (1978), *Towards a Philosophy of Administration*, Basil Blackwell, Oxford, UK.
- Kohlberg, L. and Turiel, E. (1971). "Moral development and moral education." In Lesser, G. (Ed) *Psychology and Educational Practice*. Scott Foresman, New York, NY pp. 530-550.
- Shapiro, J. & Stefkovich, J.A. (2005). *Ethical leadership and decision making in education* (2nd ed.). Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Mahwah, NJ.
- Stefkovich, J.A. (2006). *Best Interests of the Student: Applying Ethical Constructs to Legal Cases in Education*. Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Mahwah, NJ.
- Stefkovich, J. and Shapiro, J (2003), "Deconstructing communities: Educational leaders and their ethical decision-making processes", In Begley, P.T. Johansson, O. (Eds) *The Ethical Dimensions of School Leadership*, Kluwer Academic Press, Dordrecht, pp. 89 – 106.
- Strike, K.A., Haller, E.J., and Soltis, J.F. (1998), *The Ethics of School Administration*, 2nd ed. Teachers College Press, New York, NY.
- Tuana, Nancy (2006) Conceptualizing moral literacy. *Journal of Educational Administration*. 45,(4), 364-378